The Wounded Land:
Learning in the age of Gestell and (not) asking the question

Uncle, what is it that troubles you?
Wolfram von Eschenbach, Parzival, (p.415)

… flight from the mystery toward what is readily available… this is erring…
Martin Heidegger, On the Essence of Truth, (p.133)

In Wolfram’s story the land is wounded because Anfortas, the King, has been immoderate in his pursuit of knightly deeds. Parzival, raised in happy ignorance by his grieving mother, comes upon the mysterious castle of Muntsalvaesche by fated chance. Here, he witnesses the strange ceremony of the Grail – the wounded king, the bleeding lance and the stone itself. All wait for him to ask ‘the question’ that will heal both king and land, but he fails. As a consequence he is cast into the wilderness and it is only after many years of trial and quest that he is finally able to return to ask the question he did not know to ask on his first visit.

Parzival is all ignorance and an abundance of vital energy. He rampages through a world that is seemingly there to give him experience. His mother’s advice is to ‘win a good woman’s ring’ and to ‘make haste to kiss her and clasp her tight in your embrace’ and so he blunders into the tent of the Duchess Jeschute and ruins her. Then, coming upon the grieving Sigune, he besieges her with questions about the dead knight in her lap (‘Who shot him? Was it done with a javelot? I think he is dead, Lady.’) (pp.72-77). At this stage Parzival, like the tabula rasa, is a shallow and shadowless surface. He doesn’t have a sense of historicity; he isn’t really capable of intention. It is only after he has done quite a bit of damage that he begins to understand that his actions make an impact on the world around him and that he is implicated in the matter of the healing of the land. Until doubt is cast on the value of his deeds, he is really only raw action, gathering experience for his inevitable, illustrious, future career as king.

When Parzival leaves Muntsalvaesche that first time, having failed to ask the question, its inhabitants are left reeling. They are astounded by his obtuseness: that he fails to see the state of things; that he can see the suffering around him and consider it to be a ‘normal’ state of affairs; that he can fail to question why it should be so. The inhabitants of Muntsalvaesche know that the king, and the land, may never ever recover.

We ourselves are living in the wounded land. The polar ice caps are melting at twice the rate predicted; water is increasingly in short supply; cereal production is down; we are losing plant and animal species at an alarming rate; and there are indications that the incidence of extreme weather conditions on our planet is already increasing. Through the same kind of

1 ‘His youth and power brought grief to all around him, and his desire for love beyond all restraint and bounds.’ (p.153)
rampant enthusiasm to experience life and conquer the world that we see in Parzival, we too fail to respond to our wounded land, a land which may never recover. Our response to the current environmental crisis is centred on the survival of the human race. We think only in terms of rationing our ‘natural resources’ in the way that will best serve the survival of the planet for the use of human beings.

Re the water crisis:
‘…we should treat the solution like a share portfolio and balance our risks by pursuing a range of options rather than looking for a single solution.’ (Peter Cullen, The Australian, 14-15/10/06)
‘Our task is to get more bang out of every drop of water. This means that water has to go to the highest value and most efficient users.’ (Malcolm Turnbull, The Australian, 11-12/11/06)
‘…when government-owned water utilities have been faced with an excess of demand over supply they have protected cash flow and dividends by introducing water restrictions’ (The Age, 14/04/07)

In 1953, when Heidegger wrote ‘The Question Concerning Technology’, he predicted just such an eventuality. Heidegger’s essay is not specifically concerned with technological machines per se: what he is writing about is a frame of Being that is so encompassing that not only can we not see outside it, but we cannot even imagine that there is any outside. Heidegger holds that we are enframed in a certain time/place/culture. He holds that our epoche2 ‘destines’ us to a particular ‘mode of revealing’ that has us see/understand the world in particular ways. This is not a considered understanding, but a way that the world reveals itself to us that we think is how it occurs for every human being, across every time and place. He writes that ‘Dasein [Being] grows into a customary interpretation of itself and grows up in that interpretation’ (B&T, p. 63). Later in his writing he uses the term Seinsgeschick to describe this blind, unexamined kind of revealing of Being that is handed to us in our language and culture, so that we cannot even imagine that there is any other.3

Standish (2002) quotes Cavell: I am destined for ‘the life my culture’s words may imagine for me’ (Note, p. 168). We know (it is a basic tenet of post-structuralism) that we are shaped/constituted by our language and culture. In education we try to redress this. At the simplest level, for example, we set in place programs designed to expand the experience and articulation of ‘at-risk’ students, because we know that when we expand their grammar and vocabulary, we expand their worlds. This is what the Lord Gurnemanz does when he takes Parzival under his wing and teaches him the skills and manners of a knight. By learning the grammar of the knightly classes, the deficient boy is able to rise from Fool to King.

But in taking such a course of action we are only dealing, so to speak, with a certain superficial veneer. We are only gaining mastery for our particular epoche. Mastering the language of his culture made Parzival the king, but it

2 Heidegger does not simply mean an era or span of time, but rather ‘the fundamental characteristic of sending…” (See ‘On Time & Being’, p. 9)
3 Derrida took up this theme when he wrote ‘Il n’y a pas de hors-texte’, which is usually translated, ‘There is nothing outside the text’, though I prefer the Usher & Edwards translation, ‘There is no outside text’ (1994, p.144)
did nothing to heal Anfortas and the land. Sterling (2001) has a way of expressing this that I find useful. Adapting Koestler’s idea of ‘holons’, he has modelled ‘reality’ as a hierarchy of nesting systems. Each system rests inside a bigger one, which shapes, limits and gives it its meaning and context (p.31).

In Sterling’s model we can see how movements for educational change are subsumed inside the larger education system, which itself is subsumed by the social, economic and cultural system. Sterling argues (and I agree with him) that for a long time we have been able to ignore the biophysical system. We’ve been able to believe that the social, economic and cultural is all there is. (Reference again, Derrida and post-structuralism: ‘There is no outside text.’) Suddenly, however, we have been made painfully aware of other realities that are pressing in on us – the uncomfortable fact that our ‘represented’ world, our ‘world as text’ has been blind to a larger reality, and that the biophysical system we have long regarded as a resource for human benefit is about to deconstruct us (literally).

**Living in the Age of Gestell: World as object**

‘Since then, a knight did come…He would better have stayed away. Only shame did he win there, for he saw the real sorrow and yet did not say to his host, “Sir, why is it you suffer so?” Since his stupidity bade him not to ask, he lost, being slow, great happiness.’

*Parzival, p.259*

Heidegger’s name for our current *epoche* is *Gestell*. The word itself combines *ge* – totalising, *stell* – position, and *stellen* – to set upon or hunt down, to describe a certain attitude, or viewpoint, or ‘mode of revealing’ that understands the world as a resource for a relentless, unbounded progress. In ‘The Question Concerning Technology’ Heidegger pays attention to the kind
of thinking that has made technology possible. This is the kind of thinking that
moved Britain from a pastoral society to what we now call the Industrial Age.

The thinking that made the Industrial Age possible can be traced far into the
past, and still persists into our future. This is the kind of thinking that can
imagine money (as accumulation and exchange); that can understand
measurement and invent systems of commensuration; that can then envision
a corresponding notion of *men* as equal; that can claim the victory of reason
over faith and so see *men* as autonomous and ‘self-made’ (as opposed to
‘born to’); that can as a result put forward the idea of progress and expansion
as something natural and good; and that can consequently appropriate the
non-human world as a resource for this expansion. These ideas we see taking
shape during the Renaissance, long before industrialism emerged. In the
notion of *Seinsgeschick*, it is epistemological and ontological understanding
that shapes the world, not vice versa.

In fact Heidegger traces technological thinking back to Plato, who originated
the notion of ‘idea’ or conceptual thought, and Aristotle, with his study of
*beings* as accessible through attributes and properties, as opposed to *Being*
which is more of an event. He argues that a shift in the understanding of truth
from one of unconcealment [αληθεία] to one of correspondence, laid the
ground for a mathematical/objective/calculative understanding of the world
that matured in Newton and Descartes. In ‘Modern Science, Metaphysics and
Mathematics’, Heidegger argues that it was Newton who, in his ‘First Law’,
made the movement of bodies through space theoretical. Whereas the
Greeks understood motion as having its source in the inner nature of a thing
(heavenly things move in circles; earthly things fall), Newton isolated bodies
from their surroundings, and saw motion as a matter of external force. The
Greek understanding of *physica*, the spontaneous arising of inner nature, was
replaced by the understanding of nature as a problem of position and order.
This in turn laid the way for a *measured* world, and a *measured* world must
inevitably be *objectified*.

Moreover, measurement by its very nature pre-supposes materiality. Heidegger
argues that it was the Latin language that transposed the Greek
understanding of a thingly essence into one of mere substance, thus laying
the way not only for measurement, but for the ‘distance’ required for
conceptual thinking as well. Heidegger points out that the major flaw in
Newton’s theory is that the body is actually never alone in space. Autonomy is
actually a theoretical construction, but the establishment of mathematical
axioms bypasses the need to go back to the things themselves and so we
have forgotten that we are ‘in-the-world’. Our thinking presupposes axiomatic
truths and so knowledge has become theoretical: it has shifted from a moving,
contingent ‘event’, to something that is fixed; that can be stored and
measured. And it can be *anticipated* – cast out into the future to predict. As
such, it has *value*. Even as we now think conceptually, our concepts contain
the illusion of materiality. Pre-occupied with measurement, we tend to think of
everything in terms of form and matter, and so at the same time that we are
building abstract theories, we are also fixed in the idea that only the
measurable (either in actuality or theoretically) is real. Thus our world-
understanding slips yet further into one of calculation and measurement, order and position, expenditure and consumption. (pp. 283 – 294)

This mathematical thinking grounds us in rationalism and frees us from religious law, but it demands in return a place as the ground of all knowledge. (pp. 295 – 296) Descartes pursued the *mathesis universalis* that established Reason as this ground. Heidegger interprets the famous phrase *ego cogito sum*, not as, ‘I think, therefore I am’, but as, ‘I think’. The *sum* is not the consequence of thinking, but its very ground. Whereas in the past the subject was that which was at hand (interestingly we still call our school disciplinary studies, ‘subjects’) it now becomes the ‘I’ and the things themselves become ‘objects’. The ‘I think’ becomes the ground of truth (and so paves the way for relativity in the future); man becomes the *animal rationale*, and, as the I who reasons, takes a special place in the world, doubly because it is now thoroughly objectified (pp. 302 – 303). As Heidegger puts it, ‘Man places before himself the world as the whole of everything objective, and he places himself before the world’ (WPF, p. 107)

Heidegger points out that this way of viewing the world is apparent even in our sentence structure. ‘A simple propositional statement consists of the subject…and the predicate, in which the thing’s traits are stated of it’ (WOA p. 149). We transpose our way of understanding things into the things themselves. We correlate form/subject/self with the rational, and matter/object/Other with the irrational (WOA p.153). We begin to ‘view’ the world. Distanced, measured, ordered, the world becomes understood as *representation* and it is not so very long before we begin to understand it only as individually perceived and imagined, not as solid at all. ‘In this way,’ Heidegger writes, ‘the illusion comes to prevail that everything man encounters exists only insofar as it is his construct. This illusion gives rise in turn to one final delusion: it seems as though man everywhere and always encounters only himself’ (QCT, p. 332). Our ‘view’ of the world becomes anthropocentric and solipsistic. We think that we invent it, or, conversely, we think that it invents us.

**Tools, building blocks & a metaphysics of presence: Education in the Age of Gestell**

‘We spread his wound with whatever we could to soothe it, with the good salve nard and other salves mixed with theriac, and we smoked it with lign aloe. Still he was always in pain.’

*Parzival*, p.259

This calculative, object view of the world has us think of everything (even ourselves) as ‘resources’ for the great Enlightenment project of progress. Things are no longer *Beings* unto themselves, but are instead the measured, ordered, priced, raw material for manufacture, if not in use then stored and at hand. *Gestell* reveals the world as something to be mastered and put to use, and, Heidegger argues, we are so accustomed to it that we do not know we are its prisoners. For example, even as postmodernism rejects the modernist project of progress through manufacture, it becomes increasingly fascinated
with the notion of desire, yet the pursuit of the desired (whether it be desire for power, sex, knowledge, wealth, possessions) can itself be seen as an even more insidious manifestation of Ge-stell, in which everything around us is standing-reserve for the manufacture of self. In this way Gestell appropriates for itself even that which begins as insurrection. Plurality is subsumed into a consumerist notion of choice; ‘creativity’ is subsumed into a machine-ordered, mathematically delimited understanding called ‘design’; ‘thinking’ becomes an expression of mastery – the manipulation of concepts and the making of arguments.

The enframed world is one in which presence reigns. A world in which all is measurable and orderable cannot tolerate absence, so it is obsessed with deficit. Any deviation, any absence, must be brought to order, meaning that it be brought under the umbrella of the norm. But as Lambeir (2002, p.112) points out, everything is ultimately expendable. When something is worn out or no longer of use, it loses its meaning and is thrown away. In the age of Gestell, efficiency and progress become the measure of all value. Seeking ever more efficient solutions to problems of efficiency, we are caught on the treadmill of production. We are, as Smeyers (2002, p.90) contends, caught up in a frenetic search for improved means in which even the ends themselves become forgotten. Every exposed ‘niche’ must be filled (so filling the ‘niche market’); every crack in the system leads to reform, not in the sense of renewal, but merely as re-form.

So, in education, we are being compelled/propelled (at increasing velocity) by/onto the treadmill of constant improvement: bigger institutions that expand overseas; ever more courses that must be audited and accredited; more and more emphasis on measurement (and a consequent pre-occupation with commensurability); constant pressure to re-form; constant pressure to progress; constant pressure to prove greater efficiency (measured by ordering, counting, and inserting information into ever greater numbers of data bases). We hardly question any more, the oft-espoused purpose of education as the production of students (and knowledge in the form of innovation and novelty) for the (economic) benefit of society.

And even as we fail to heed Heidegger’s warnings about our oblivion, Gestell is everywhere before us in our language. It seems that we accept terms such as ‘human resources’ and ‘knowledge economy’ and ‘social capital’ without any consideration for the underlying assumptions that such terms hold. We have come to think of knowledge as ‘information’ which must be ‘located’, ‘acquired’, ‘ordered’, ‘classified’, ‘applied’ – in short, used. ‘Knowledge’, like money, has become an end, a thing in itself, rather than an act of interchange,
and ‘learning’ has become the means of acquiring, ordering, storing and making use of our knowledge ‘capital’.

If we examine the metaphors embedded in edu-speak, we find a proliferation of terms related to building: foundations, tools, building blocks; constitution, constructionism, constructivism. We ‘acquire’ what is needed to ‘build’ the perfect human for our Utopian ‘knowledge economy’. In such a system, all of us – students, teachers, community, environment, academics, policy makers, even government ministers – have become ‘standing reserve’ [Bestand], resources which lose their own Being and become mere things, only relevant in-so-far as they can meet the ‘needs’ of the system. Humans become ‘…mere material…’ where the danger is that we will ‘…lose…selfhood to unconditional production’ (WPF, p.113). In the age of Gestell, when we remove the quality of usefulness from person or thing, ‘It remains doubtful whether the thingly character comes to view at all…’ (WOA, p.156), and it is this that we experience as an assault or violence, because it is a denial of our Being.

Being standardised; fitting the norm: Schooling in the Age of Gestell

Sir Parzival, why don’t you speak and tell me why, as the sorrowful fisherman sat there, joyless and comfortless, you did not release him from his sighs? He showed you his burden of grief. Oh faithless guest. You should have taken pity on his distress.

Parzival, p. 170

We can say much (much has been said) about the violence of education. I fear that it has never been more violent than now. As Fitzsimons argues (2002, p.184) we are destined to see ourselves as exploitable. By the very act of seeing ourselves as constituted and self-constituting, we fall in thrall to Gestell. Gestell pervades everything. It persuades us that if we put the right things in (the latest metaphor seems to be ‘into the mix’) then we’ll get the right thing out, and if we don’t, we will be brought to order.

VELS-speak
‘They [i.e. the standards] give parents and the community confidence.’
‘At the same time they recognise the responsibilities of principals and teachers…’
‘The standards identify what is important for students to achieve…’

And Minister-speak:
‘…the new Opposition Leader said yesterday he would not allow the commonwealth to shovel billions of dollars in education funding to the states without schools performing to adequate standards.’ (The Australian, 9-10/12/06)
‘If schools want money for capital works they must first prove to the education department they have a plan to lift student results…’ (Kosky’s Capital Investment & Access Planning Policy’, reported in The Age)
‘Rejecting Ms Bishop’s model [for performance pay for teachers] may have placed at risk up to $9 billion in school funding.’ (The Age, 14/04/07)

Yet it is only by strict delimitation that we are able to maintain the illusion of mastery over our worlds. Anything that fails to ‘measure up’ in the world of Gestell, is subjected to discipline and normalisation. It is audited, re-formed, case-managed, re-educated, quality-improved. If it still fails to meet the requirements of Bestand, it is rejected. For years we have seen this enacted
upon students who cannot or will not comply. (We tell them to ‘shape up or ship out’.) Now, teachers, principals, whole schools and even State education systems exist under the constant threat of being brought to order. We are all measured by the one measure, and we are so very busy measuring, preparing to measure, and ordering and recording the measures, that we fail to notice the consequences of our actions. We fail to notice that our world has become one of objectified representation. We fail to notice that we ‘use’ rather than engage with the world. We think that a depersonalised, detached life is a ‘professional’ one.

Heard on talk-back radio:
What would we think of a farmer who spends all his time weighing and measuring his pigs instead of feeding them?

The trackless waste & the pursuit of the unthought: (Hopelessly) seeking an outside text

_The hero bade farewell, and turned to the fresh hoof track, the way Cundrie’s mule had gone. But misfortune and the pathless woods prevented him from pursuing the track he had seen._

*Parzival*, p.238

As Heidegger puts it, ‘Enframing disguises even this, its disguising, just as the forgetting of something forgets itself and is drawn away in the wake of forgetful oblivion’ (The Turning, p.46). Language leads us along a certain way of *Being*. Parzival masters chivalry and becomes a celebrated hero until Cundrie exposes him as a sham because he failed to ask the question that would heal Anfortas and the land. Now, personally implicated in tragedy, he is _touched_ by a larger world in which there are no easy answers or well-trodden paths. So too, the classroom functions perfectly well as a resource for the global economy so long as everyone ‘shares similar beliefs and understandings’; and the nation does the same.

We, too, are stopped in our tracks by breaches in our everyday lives: birth, death, love, grief give rise to our own questions about what is real and what is worthwhile. It is said that 9/11 changed the ‘Western’ worldview. It may be said that the melting of the ice-caps is currently doing so too. Like Parzival we do not even know that there is a question to ask until the walls of our seeming autonomy are breached and we see that all our measurement and mastery comes to nothing against forces we cannot control. Yet, says Heidegger, it is when we are most discomforted that we begin to question and think, not in the sense of seeking for answers that are somewhere known, but in the sense of stepping into a space in which, having no answers, we become truly authentic seekers and listeners.

This is to think the unthinkable, yet in the age of *Gestell*, we are compelled to _design_ the future. Heidegger, however, warns us against such an attempt: ‘All mere chasing after the future so as to work out a picture of it through

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4 ‘What help now was his brave heart, his manliness and true breeding?’ (Parzival, p.172)
calculation in order to extend what is present and half-thought into what, now veiled, is yet to come, itself moves within the prevailing attitude belonging to technological, calculating representation’ (The Turning, p.48). The very notion that we can manipulate the future belongs to Gestell. The acts of predicting, planning, listing, strategising, are technological.

This, I argue, is where we currently stand in the matter of the national curriculum vs. objectives based models. The whole discussion, revolving as it does around commensuration and implementation, convinces us that the two are different, whereas in fact both are strongly anchored in the understanding of education as economic. And our understanding of ‘educating for a sustainable world’ is much the same. Our attempts to create a new language that includes such words as ‘integrative’, ‘collaborative’, ‘ecological’, put into the service of Gestell, become a mockery and a violence.

* …the surmounting of Enframing – each time comes to pass out of the arrival of another destining, a destining that does not allow itself either to be logically or historiographically predicted or to be metaphysically construed as a sequence belonging to a process of history.

Martin Heidegger, The Turning, p.39

I want to bring to this story now, the work of McDonough and Braungart (2002). Like the adult Parzival, McDonough and Braungart are masters of their worlds. McDonough is an award winning architect/designer and Braungart is an industrial chemist. But like Parzival, they too, have asked the question. The question they ask is about the rightful place of humans on Earth.

McDonough and Braungart point out that all the ants in the world have a biomass greater than humans. Ants are industrious creatures too, and like humans, they inhabit a multiplicity of territories, yet they are able to construct their homes, harvest their food, dispose of their waste (including their most deadly chemical weapons) and at the same time contribute to the ecosystems of which they are a part. Humans, on the other hand, with an industry that has been in full swing for only two centuries or so, ‘have brought about a decline in almost every ecosystem on the planet’ (p.16).

Arguing that ‘efficiency’ has no value in itself (‘An efficient Nazi…is a terrifying thing’, ‘And what about efficient sex?’ p.65) McDonough and Braungart suggest that notions of eco-efficiency only do ‘less harm’. ‘It’s not the solution itself that is necessarily radical but the shift in perspective with which we begin, from the old view of nature as something to be controlled to a stance of engagement’ (p.84). They argue that the goal of the zero ecological footprint is a dour, life-denying, depressing vision. Further, ‘…to be less bad is to accept things as they are, to believe that poorly designed, dishonourable, destructive systems are the best humans can do’ (p.67) is a failure of the human imagination.
They ask instead what it would mean for humans to be, rather than ‘fittest’, *fitting-est*, meaning that we have ‘…an energetic and material engagement with place, and an interdependent relation to it’ (p.120). For McDonough and Braungart, this has meant that human activities, far from *using* and *limiting* those of the non-human world, actually contribute to it. So, for example, a building, like a cherry tree, can produce much more than it needs for its immediate survival or enjoyment. A building may, for example, accrue solar energy, purify water, provide animal habitat, as well as meet the needs of its human occupants. ‘Imagine a building like a tree, a city like a forest’ (p.139).

McDonough and Braungart think the unthinkable. By asking, ‘what kind of soap does the river want?’ (p.145) they turn on its head the *Gestell*ian thinking that assumes man as master of his world and instead regard humanity as being in service to the non-human world. Seen from this point of view we can understand that we already *have* the knowledge and skills (the things that *Gestell* demands that education should produce for some Utopian future) to get under way towards an *inviting co-existence* between human and non-human worlds.

What we don’t have though, is a world-understanding that makes care of Earth and *all* of her inhabitants automatic. Instead, in the age of *Gestell*, we have a worldview that guarantees the destruction of the non-human world. Sustainability thinks amelioration: cleaning rivers and expanding public transport. McDonough and Braungart suggest instead, ‘recasting the design assignment: not “design a car” but “design a nutrivehicle”’ (pp.178-179).

Clearly what we need is a value change, but what does that mean, and what is the place of education in having humans reveal themselves as ‘fitting’ rather than ‘fittest’?

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We do not intentionally educate children to grow up to destroy Earth. It is our language of world as representation, as object, as *Bestand*, that gives us no choice but to do so. Traditionally we have regarded the purpose of education as, variously, to *mould* or *initiate* or *lure* the child with the express intention of ‘making’ a human being ‘fit’ for society. We would never, for example, intentionally educate a child to be a social ‘misfit’. Our understanding of knowledge as a noun, as wealth, and of ourselves as social capital, secures us in the known world. It gives us certainty about our place. All educational pedagogy, from the neo-conservative to the critical, argues for this – education as a means to achieve what we want in the world (for self and/or Others). We tell our students that if they work hard they can be Kings – they can have whatever they want. Yet whilst our attention is often drawn to the factory-like methods of production sometimes used in education, it is rarely remarked upon that the more essential current that runs through all these seemingly different streams is that of *production itself*. 
For Heidegger there is little distinction to be made between teacher, student, and what is taught.\(^5\) This, I think, is crucial if we are to understand what he means by poïësis. Parzival comes to Muntsalvaesche as to a clearing in the forest. He comes there unexpectedly and unexpectantly, and the Grail castle ‘springs up’ as it were, from the dark background of his known world. This is how Heidegger describes poïësis; it is a coming into Being that is more akin to birth than it is to constructing. Poïësis is a creative process of bringing into Being that draws everyone and everything involved into engaged interrelationship. As such, it ‘lets be’, it allows of humans and non-humans that they disclose who or what they are as they are, not as something for the use of something else. Such an ‘allowing’ opens an ethic of care that cannot be stipulated or catalogued by policies and regulation: rather, it is a kind of co-arising between all involved.

Heidegger (QCT pp.313-316) contends that, since the time of Newton, we have understood cause, in only one sense: as causa efficiens – that which produces or brings about the effect. He argues that, for the Greeks, there were three more causes: causa materialis, being the matter out of which something is created; causa formalis, being the form or shape the material enters; and causa finalis, the purpose or vision which determines the creation. For Heidegger, then, the creation of a work of art is not a simple combination of skills and intention put to work on some object for human use. Rather it is a spontaneous co-arising out of the inter-relationship between material, form, purpose and the artist, which ‘sets up a world’ (WOA, p.170). This is poïësis. No one cause is privileged over another. All meet together in this event, which is not so much an act of will, as one of engagement. This is the ‘that it is’ of createdness (WOA, p.190), an act of respectful letting be, in which each thing in its ‘shines forth’; and it is ‘preserved’ (i.e. it lives on as what it is) in the appreciation of those who receive it - audiences, readers and viewers.

In this sense the artist arises out of the work of art, and vice versa\(^6\), an understanding that thereby renders ‘art’ ‘nothing more than a word to which nothing actual any longer corresponds’ (WOA, p. 143). This in turn gives us the understanding that in education the titles given to participants are empty of meaning. Rather, we can understand that ‘teacher’, ‘student’, ‘curriculum’ and all the other terms associated with education, arise only out of learning/teaching. This is a view very different from the one of making.

‘I saw great marvels there…’
Parzival, p.137

If he is to become a true cabinetmaker, he makes himself answer and respond above all to the different kinds of wood and to the shapes slumbering within the wood – to wood as it enters into

\(^5\) He cites the Greek ta mathēmata – what can be learned and what can be taught, and mathēsis – the teaching, in the sense of studying and learning as well as what is taught. (MSMM, p.274)

\(^6\) Heidegger reminds us that Gestell finds the circularity of such understandings intolerable. (See WOA p. 144)
man’s dwelling with all the hidden riches of its essence. In fact, this relatedness to wood is what maintains the whole craft. Without that relatedness, the craft will never be anything but empty busywork, any occupation with it will be determined exclusively by business concerns. Every handicraft, all human dealings, are constantly in that danger. The writing of poetry is no more exempt from it than is thinking.’

*Martin Heidegger, What Calls for Thinking? p.379*

Still, whether we are debating national curriculum or global warming, the question remains as to what should be taught, and we must examine the vexed question of thinking, which has well and truly been put to order by *Gestell* in the last decade. In Victoria, where we are now required to grade a child’s capacity to think, the purpose of thinking is rarely discussed. It is assumed that thinking involves observing, classifying, clarifying, solving problems - ‘skills’ that maintain a performative system.

For Heidegger, however, ‘what is to be thought turns away from man’ (WCFT p.372). Authentic thinking follows after that which withdraws. This requires that we are prepared to step into emptiness. Indeed, ‘…we must let ourselves be admitted into questions that seek what no *inventiveness* can find’ (WCFT, p.374, my italics). The Grail castle is an inexplicable mystery. It is hidden. We may not even know that it exists. Directions given to it may be non-existent, may not make sense to us, or may even lead us astray. We may search for it our whole lives and never find it, or we may stumble across it in youth. We do not know what it will look like and certainly if we can ever get back there (which is rare) it will appear differently the next time.

This is to suggest that instrumental, innovative thinking may make us masters of the known world, but it will not heal the land. It is only from ‘not knowing’, a kind of ‘no place’ that we dis-cover new worlds.

Here are two stories about teaching and *Bestand*.

The first is about the difficulty I had teaching the basic operations to Western Australian desert children. The ‘thinking’ maths teacher, we assume, introduces number and the basic operations by the use of manipulables: blocks, plastic beads and so on. Being innovative, and a Steiner teacher, I used stones and seed pods with my Indigenous students, but still they seemed to have at best only a shallow understanding of number and mathematical processes.

It wasn’t until one of my smallest students spent a whole day wandering around the classroom asking plaintively, ‘But what is one?’ that I came to understand Lakoff’s proposition that metaphor, deeply embedded in culture, is particularly invisible in mathematics. I understood at last that manipulables too, are symbols and that one might just as well ask what is a block, as what is one. Ascher (1991) points out that some cultures still use numbers as classifiers which give qualitative information about the nouns they are attached to. What I began to see was that when we view curriculum merely as information for the purpose of manipulation, we very quickly decontextualise it. As Heidegger points out, when the axiom is our foundation, we fail to go back to ‘the things themselves’.
Searching for context, I began to conceive of our food gathering trips as mathematical. When we started to draw Jaja (grandma) with four gurlibi (bush bananas) in her basket and Nungurrayi with four in hers, it was both logical and meaningful to understand that there were eight gurlibi altogether (which could also be $2 \times 4$) that could then be divided up or given away to explain the other basic operations. Only after several months during which we daily drew many such stories, were students ready to move on to more symbolic expressions. Interestingly, when I returned to Melbourne and started working with middle school students who had a history of numeracy difficulty, they too took very quickly to the same kind of ‘in-the-world’ mathematics.\footnote{For a fuller description, see Beer, 1998.}

My second story is about my friend Ian and his incredulity about the arbitrariness of the alphabet. Ian is a successful artist. When he looks at the letter ‘e’ he sees a lovely curly line, but he doesn’t understand how that could possibly have any logical connection with the sound ‘e’. Ian has spent his whole life (he’s now 50) thinking that reading is a matter of memory and educated guess-work. Whenever I’ve mentioned de-coding to him (over about three years of conversations about reading) he remarks that that’s a really interesting idea, as if he’s never thought about it before.

Ian is the only person I know of who has seriously analysed the look of the alphabet. The capital ‘R’ he says, looks robust and stable, but the lower case ‘r’ is just the opposite: ‘delicate and impossibly balanced’. He has come, with some reluctance, to accept that ‘The letter “R” is just a visible representation of a sound’, though he finds the idea that ‘ar’ is its name, and that its sound is actually ‘rr’ quite peculiar. He also notes that ‘There are more sounds this letter makes, according to the placement of other letters held together by double spaces’, which he finds ‘quite cumbersome and complicated’.

When we fund ‘intervention’ programs, they are usually of several months in length. They assume that something is missing and that if it is ‘supplied’ and ‘applied’, the student will be made ‘fit’. What I am arguing here, is that for those involved in both my stories (and I include myself here) Gestell would move very quickly to ‘bring to order’. In the flurry of instruction, Gestell doesn’t have any room for difference, or even for asking questions, or for getting interested in the thing itself, be it student or content. How often do we consider that we are giving a ‘failing’ middle years student six months to ‘shape up’ (meaning to unlearn, relearn, and change both ontological and epistemological understandings of the world) before we fail them, ourselves, their parents and ‘the program’ once again and move onto the next, ‘better’ one?

When we consider the harm we do to our children by not recognising them for who they are, we can begin to see what we do to our environment, too. It is nonsense. It has to stop.

**Finding the clearing: Learning/teaching as the event of Love**

*Why are you so slow, Parzival, to think of her who is chaste and beautiful – I mean your wife – if you want to save your life?*

*Parzival, p. 387*

Gestell would have us believe that ‘not knowing’ means teachers walk into the classroom unprepared and that there is no curriculum. As Heidegger never
tired of pointing out, there is a place for everything. Quantifying and calculating have their place, as does programming and policy-making. Parzival became a skilled and valiant knight. What Heidegger is arguing, however, is that we are in trouble when we think that the world is constituted only by quantifying and calculating, and every other possibility is subsumed into this one view.

As Reg Allen (2006) points out, there is an assumption that ‘we develop the curriculum and then it automatically happens...’ (p.5). Yet no ‘curriculum’ could have given me ready instructions for teaching the basic operations to those desert children, and Ian, never having been invited into a space in which to describe what writing means to him, has therefore never been given a choice about how he sees print. What Heidegger is talking about is opening up the space or clearing in which learning can occur, and this is a space of struggle and uncertainty. Again, we see here the lack of distinction between teacher, student and content. It was our struggle together that had us ‘forge a world’, a struggle that called for a receptive listening rather than for moulding, initiating or luring. And in the current climate it takes courage to, as Standish (2002) puts it, negotiate the veils of lēthē so as to move along paths ‘...of hiddenness and forgetting’ (p.153).

At the last ACSA conference, there was a panel discussion with teachers from three, quite different schools. Each had great success in teaching what have traditionally been difficult students, yet all three had very different approaches. This gave rise to much discussion about the ethical/political and practical implications for replication. What I didn’t hear people discussing, however, was how these communities, being gifted with larger than usual numbers of families that would not ‘fit’ into the ordered and calculative world of mainstream education, had each been through a process of struggle that engaged the whole community. These communities had choices: they could have tried to force a ‘fit’ with the ordered and measured, but instead, each chose to ask questions about the assumed world, and those questions led them into the unthought. There wasn’t a blueprint for these communities to fit into. They each made a ‘world’ in which individuals and community could show up as who they are, rather than as Bestand.

Since I began writing this paper in March, Minister Bishop’s proposal that schools should literally weigh and measure all Australian children makes even more absurd the spectre of the farmer and his pigs. That we are forced to consider it seriously indicates the extent of our predicament. We can see that, indeed, everything, even our children, is put to the unreasonable demand ‘that nature report itself in some way or other that is identifiable through calculation and that it remain orderable as a system of information’ (QCT, p.328).

I find it absurd that we must ‘teach’ and ‘assess’, ‘thinking’ and ‘values’, as if they are objective phenomena that do not touch us personally. One has to wonder what is happening in our classrooms if thinking and valuing only come

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8 Issues Forum involving panel members: Colleen Mitrow, Lisa Jane O’Connor & Geoff Holt, at the ACSA Biennial Conference, at the University of the Sunshine Coast, Queensland, on Thursday September 22nd, 2005.
packaged and programmed. Does this mean that life in the classroom is now so distanced, so ‘private’, so ‘level’, that we ‘tolerate’ rather than struggle with our fellow human beings, denying them and us the opportunity of embracing Other in all its oddity and endearing difference? And isn’t this also indicative of our attitude to the non-human world?

Good teaching/learning is not ‘professional’. It isn’t the placement of desks or working in groups or the study of a particular topic that has good teaching/learning occur. It is not about competence. Authentic teaching/learning is about struggle: laughter and tears; triumph and failure; looking really foolish and being brilliant: most of all, it is about entering into the deepest intimacy with others by exposing one’s biggest vulnerability – not knowing. I also call it Love; and Love is an event of deep, moral engagement, respect, and responsibility.

Heidegger remarks that in these times in which we think of cause only in relation to effect, we understand responsibility moralistically. Yet in his conception of teaching/learning as poiēsis, all are co-responsible. This is why Heidegger calls authentic learning a self-giving as opposed to a taking. (MSMM, p.275) The act of teaching/learning is one of Care [Sorge], not in the sense of keeping a distance and sticking to moral rules, but in the sense that Parzival approaches the wounded Anfortas: with a deep concern, awareness, attunement, that reaches not only beyond conceptual thinking into ‘questioning that experiences’ (LOH, p. 246), but also moves fluidly out of the past, through the present, and into the future of all involved.

In the space we create together, learning/teaching arises as a world. We say it: ‘A world opened up that I didn’t know existed’. In that world, there is room for all beings. We do not reject people because they don’t measure up; nor do we use things up. In his essay, ‘The Thing’, Heidegger talks about a jug, not as a form that makes a void to hold liquid for our use, but as a vessel shaped by hands, clay and spirit, that gives us the gift of water from the spring or wine from the fields. This responsible, responsive respect, allows the jug to be more than a barely acknowledged piece of equipment that is discarded when it no longer meets a need. I argue that teaching/learning undertaken in this Way, would release human and non-human worlds alike, into a Way of Being that would not need to teach ‘sustainability’, but that would extend man’s inventiveness as a gift to all of Earth’s inhabitants.

When Parzival comes to Muntsalvaesche as to a clearing in the forest, it is as to a homecoming – and when we turn away from Gestell, we too know this world that is near. All of us have stood in the clearing and felt the lightening … we all know that when the door to the classroom is shut and we are given one blessed, uninterrupted hour, we can, together with our students, forge a world. We have only forgotten that, even if there is no outside text, there is something more than the ordered and programmed world, and that it is not ‘out there’, to be pursued and ordered and standardised, but rather that it is near, in the space inside and between all of us.
REFERENCES


TALK

Acknowledge the traditional custodians of this land.

THE STORY OF (WOLFRAM’S) PARZIVAL

Beginning of 13th century
The boy P is brought up in isolation & ignorance by his grieving mother, who has lost husband & sons to knightly life (he doesn’t even know his name – bon fils, cher fils).
He comes across knights riding through his mother’s lands and vows to go to Arthur’s court.
His mother sends him dressed as a fool, on a draft horse, with the instructions, ‘Be polite & give people your greetings’, and ‘Follow the advice of grey-haired men’, and ‘Whenever you can win a good woman’s ring, take it and make haste to kiss her’.
Parzival sets out and very quickly ruins a woman’s reputation, offends everyone he meets, kills a knight who is playing knightly games, and ends up under the tutelage of Gurnemanz, an aging knight who teaches him the language and skills of knighthood.
Thereafter he sets out on many quests and proves his mastery: he wins the favours of ladies, sends dozens of knights in servitude to Arthur and is well on the way to becoming a King when he comes upon the mysterious Grail Castle.
There he witnesses the strange procession of the Grail, which keeps the King alive and in pain (he cannot die and he cannot be healed), but he fails to ask the question he is fated to ask. In the morning he wakes to a deserted castle, and he wanders in the wilderness for years before he is able to return to redress the wrong he has done in complete ignorance. The question he is fated to ask, is, ‘Uncle, what is it that ails you?’ When Parzival leaves Muntsalvaesche that first time, its inhabitants are astounded by his obtuseness – that he fails to see the state of things…that he can see the suffering around him and fail to be concerned…that he fails to question why it should be so. The inhabitants of Muntsalvaesche know that the King, and the land, may never recover.

THE AGE OF GESTELL
The Grail King was wounded through an act of excess and it isn’t only he who is wounded. The land too, is laid waste, in much the same way that our Lands are being destroyed by our acts of excess. What I want to explore in this talk today, is how this treatment of the land is inextricably embedded in our language, and how we perpetuate this destruction in the language and culture of education. We are familiar with the poststructural idea that our world is bounded by our language and culture: in the words of Cavell, I am destined for ‘the life my culture’s words may imagine for me’. What I particularly want to explore is that it isn’t only the words out language privileges that make our world, but what is left out or as yet unimagined, and so doesn’t live in our language. In this sense, our language may give us mastery of our world, but our world is also a cage. We cannot see what our language doesn’t tell us.

We can see this in the Parzival story. First, his mother’s world is all he knows but Gurnemanz broadens this world. We too, as educators, act the part of Gurnemanz. We ready our students for the world by teaching them mastery of it. But the language for healing the King is different from the language of mastery. As yet, for Parzival, it is unknown – in a sense unmade.

In his 1953 essay, ‘The Question Concerning Technology’, Heidegger described a ‘way of Being in the world’ that maintains is the prevailing ‘mindset’ of these times, and he called this ‘cage’ Gestell. He described Gestell as the essence of technological thinking – not technology itself, but the thinking that invents technology, which then of course, consolidates and furthers itself in such a way that it creates a world. We don’t have much time now, but I want to outline a few of the main characteristics of Gestell and look at how they drive our understanding of education.

1. Objectified world – characterised by the term ‘worldview’, which essentially has as its assumed understanding, the world as representation. From this we get, subject and object; self and Other; form and matter …

   In education we see this in the understanding of knowledge as a noun rather than an event – we talk of knowledge banks, knowledge economy; we have a huge range of construction metaphors for learning – constructivism; tools; building; domains; foundations. Recently, we have come to see even thinking and values as objectified – nouns – this brings us to the second closely related characteristic…

2. Measurement. The objectified world is measured. What is placed before us can be calculated, measured, ordered…it is then stored and can be
assigned a value. This in turn leads to a culture of expenditure and consumption.

In education we see this in the current obsession with testing. We wouldn’t do it if we didn’t have the technology, which allows of all of these processes on a grand scale, and…

3. Metaphysics of presence. This measuring expertise won’t tolerate what is absent, or can’t be measured. (Football story – what can’t be measured doesn’t exist) Gestell is obsessed with deficit. What doesn’t measure up is audited, re-formed, case managed, quality improved. Research must be ‘evidence-based’, every gap is filled – niche markets.

We see this in the re-form from CSF to VELS. VELS first of all purports to ‘re-form’ education in the light of ‘recent research into how people learn…’ It also purports to simplify the curriculum, whilst at the same time including things that were left out of the CSF. So it starts off with 3 strands (2 new - thinking, social & personal development) – expands to 17 domains – expands to 37 dimensions. Here’s a typical planning document – every cell must be completed. But then each of which is divided into knowledge, skills and behaviours. For assessment, these components are then further broken down into norms, and students are ranked against each other, and the rankings stored, etc, etc.

4. And so the vicious combination of all these characteristics leads us to value as the fundamental tenet of Gestell – we have to get maximum value out of everything. There mustn’t be any waste. In fact, H points out that in this objectified, measured world, everything becomes Bestand, which is to say, a resource, for use. Things (and people) lose their own Being and are cast in terms of their value to the project at hand. H remarks that when we remove the quality of usefulness from a thing ‘it remains doubtful whether the thingly character comes into view at all’.

We see this in the terms, human resources; natural resources. In the Report from the Literacy Inquiry, it is stated that teachers are a school’s most valuable ‘resource’. We also see it in the assumed purpose of education being to further the economic development of the individual and the country. Steve Bracks: ‘Building human capital is vital to Victoria’s future…’ With regard to the environment we see it in the calculation and ranking of environment according to value to human progress and survival. Malcolm Turnbull: ‘We have to get more bang out of every drop of water.’ And Peter Cullen: We have to treat the environment like a share portfolio…’ (This is much deeper than politics!)

So….we’ve been led along a certain way, and, as teachers, (I’m speaking today, as a teacher) we put up with it and put up with it, and I have always said that so long as I could shut the class-room door and do some real teaching/learning with my students, then it would be a worthwhile thing to do, but the day I could no longer do that, I would leave teaching, and now that day has come and so I recently resigned. And it seems to me that the environment has reached the point of resigning too. We’ve eaten away at it and burdened it and exhausted it and it has retreated and retreated until there is nowhere for it to retreat to anymore, and it is seriously looking like collapsing under its burden.
Now of course we don’t intentionally set out to destroy the environment, any more than we set out to destroy teachers, or students. Yet our language leads us that way. And it doesn’t make any difference whether we overlay education with words like collaborative and cooperative or whether we have a state or national system, Gestell eats up and subverts language into itself. If we are really to create a new language, we need to have a new perspective.

GOOD NEWS – THERE IS A BIT
William McDonough and Richard Braungart are, like Parzival, masterful human beings, but they’ve asked the question. These are the gentlemen who transformed a fabric factory that used to send its toxic tailings to Africa for disposal, so that its effluent was cleaner than its influent. They say, ‘Let’s build a house like a cherry tree, so that it produces more than it could possibly need – energy, clean water, animal and human habitat’. They ask, ‘What kind of soap does the river want?’ They say, ‘Instead of design a car, design a nutrivehicle’

Mc D & B argue that efficiency in and of itself is highly over-rated - efficient sex, isn’t so great. They argue that the notion of eco-efficiency is a failure of human imagination. They argue that the place of humans on Earth is to be ‘fitting’ rather than ‘fittest’; that human ingenuity can be used to make a bountiful planet rather than a bereft one, and….that we already have the technology to do it! It is only a change in perspective that is needed…only.

EDUCATION & POIESIS
Now the other major characteristic of Gestell, is the idea of the autonomous entity. H argues that when Newton said that all bodies move in a straight line until force is exerted from outside, this was a theoretical proposition. Bodies are not alone in space. So what we have ended up with, is axiomatic/conceptual thinking that isn’t actually ‘in-the-world’, as the basis of our civilisation. Strategic planning, policies, blue-prints, outcomes etc are all theoretical and are based on common units of commensuration that relate to use/value/efficiency. (You can see how all these go together…it’s not just one thing on it’s own that has an effect) Whether it’s education or environment, we’re using the same language…seeing the world in the same way.

This is where H’s interpretation of poiesis comes into play. When we think of the creation of a work of art, we tend to think of it as the artist creating the work. But if we really think about it, we can see, for example, that this figure is a kind of co-arising between the material (the clay); the form (in this case quite archetypal, so it has a whole history of its own); the shaper of the material (in this case, lacking skill); the intention of the maker (why did she choose to make the form?) and then with the audience, who keep it in existence. No one of these is privileged. All are co-responsible. In this way of understanding, art and artist cannot exist alone – they arise from the act of making the work of art.

Now, if we deeply consider education, of course we can see that this is the case in education too. We can understand that ‘teacher’, ‘student’, ‘curriculum’, and all the other names for the participants in education arise only out of learning/teaching, which is a view very different from that of use, acting upon, making, development, and progress (the prevailing language not just of education but of our times). This brings back into the light, what goes
on between the participants in learning/teaching, instead of the current ridiculous nonsense about blueprints and PoLTs and VELS and national tests and so on being what has teaching/learning occur. (‘They’ – the standards – ‘identify what is important’; ‘give parents and community confidence’; recognise the responsibility of principals and teachers’…)

I want to read to you now, a piece that one of my co-researchers wrote about what he understands when he looks at print….He’s a fifty year old artist who has struggled with reading all his life and you will hear that he ‘sees’ print…he doesn’t ‘hear’ it. (READ)

What I’m arguing here, is that the plight of the environment and the plight of the marginalised, are the same, and their immanent loss endangers us all. In the system, this person is seen as sadly lacking. As a teacher, I would be required to ‘fail’ that kind of thinking, that way of seeing the world, because it simply doesn’t measure up on the scale of things. I would be required to (somehow) fill in the gaps/plug up the deficit, and if I didn’t, I would be the failure. A child who thinks this way is a burden to the system… This has become our job – to allot value to humans and non-humans alike, and to deal with them accordingly. This is what we do to children every day. This is what we do to the environment every day. (Wil and Columbus – endangered species)

In March, preparing this paper, I wrote about a snippet I heard on talkback radio that went, ‘What would you think of a farmer who only ever weighed and measured his pigs, and neglected to feed them.’ At the time I thought it was really funny and sadly pertinent and I imagined that I might make a nice visual for this session of a child on the scales. A few weeks later, Minister Bishop seriously suggested that all Australian children should be weighed and measured. Soon it will be possible to fail by your physical appearance, too. We can see that, as Heidegger warned, everything, even our children, is put to the unreasonable demand ‘that nature report itself in some way or other that is identifiable through calculation and that it remain orderable as a system of information’ (QCT, p.328). In the Age of Gestell, we can abort ‘defective’ children, so that we don’t have to deal with Other.

At the last ACSA conference, there was a panel discussion with teachers from three, quite different schools in so-called ‘difficult’ communities. Each had great success in teaching what have traditionally been difficult students, yet all three had very different approaches. I notice that these days there’s a lot of funding around for teachers to tramp around the countryside looking at ‘model’ schools and coming home and trying to replicate what they’ve done…Glen Waverley transposed to Dandenong and Carey in Collingwood. The point is that these communities didn’t follow the blueprint. They each went through a process of struggle that engaged the whole community. They went into the unknown and made their own language. They didn’t try to force a ‘fit’ with the ordered and measured, but instead, they asked questions about the assumed world, and then made a ‘world’ in which individuals and community could show up as who they are, rather than as Bestand.

This is the kind of thinking that is able to stand in the space of not knowing; to go down the path of the unthought and make a language for itself. It has a totally different perspective from that of Gestell: the kind of perspective of
McD and B, or of Parzival when he returns to Muntsalvaesche. It is generous, care-full thinking that allows Other (to Be). It is imaginative, generative thinking and being. It’s harder and involves struggle, and real interaction (can’t hide behind policies). It’s the kind of engaged struggle that regards values as relations between people, not something you teach in a neatly packaged program.

This is, I think, a kind of sacred love at work. When we love someone, we allow them to Be who they are, without letting them get away with being too much less than who they are. In Love, we step into a space between us, in which we show up. When we ask the question, ‘Uncle, what is it that ails you?’, we are returned to the best of our humanity – we are returned to a life of participation (not busyness) – the joys of community and the non-human world and the realisation of agape.