

T H E  
A U S T R A L I A N  
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## EDUCATIONAL TECHNOLOGY

### **The role of the ABC in educational radio broadcasting**

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This Department was formed after the old Education Department was media split. It was given the field of Adult Education for the first time as well as a responsibility for Primary School programs; programs for Secondary schools as such were discontinued because of low usage, although programs for adults were to be made, where possible, with upper-secondary students in mind.

In the best of all possible worlds it would have been desirable for the new department to have spent the next six to twelve months in research, policy making and then producing and testing pilot programs, especially in the adult area, but given the situation that confronted us this could not be a serious option. In order to maintain a serious claim to resources, facilities and timeslots we had to get series to air quickly. As there is an ABC Education Radio unit in every state capital this resulted in an interesting valuable diversity of program styles and philosophies, and we certainly learned a lot about our capacities and our potential audiences in the process. While we want to retain this diversity we also need to develop a policy which expresses the aims of the department as a whole and which can be related to by listeners who want to use radio as a part of a learning experience. So, as this article is going to press we are meeting in Melbourne to do just that.

As well as policy we are also looking at priorities in terms of audience needs and the potential of the ABC Radio to fulfil them. I must stress that Education, if it is to flourish, it must do so as an integral part of the overall sound of ABC Networks and in particular Radio National. At the same time we are anxious to emphasise the uniqueness of Education Radio vis a

vis other program departments. The highly praised 'Science Show' can rightly be conceived as being useful in both formal and informal learning situations so, as a department, we have to describe and lay claim to a type of program which is designed to produce discernible educational outcomes, programs in other words which are different from the more journalistic, descriptive, current affairs modes of other ABC Radio specialist departments. If we do not do this properly then we will weaken our claim for an adequate share of ABC resources. We are, therefore, performing a delicate balancing act between educational needs and the overall strategies and requirements of ABC Radio. The fact that we belong to the wider stream of ABC Radio is an asset not a liability. We have access to a national audience and the facilities, resources and program styles of the ABC as a whole. This means that we are also involved with colleagues in other departments in constant discussion about what makes good radio as such and good radio is the basic aim in everything we do. I suspect that it is this emphasis that distinguishes us as educational broadcasters from producers in public university educational stations who can be more course and subject oriented with a specific audience in mind and which in turn has very specific expectations from the broadcasts.

### **Current programs**

Our programs are as much for the casual listeners as they are for the student. What follows is a description of series made this year and these indicate the department's present direction - long standing in the Schools area but completely new for adults. Some of these programs are currently in production so they won't be heard till early next year. What ought to be stressed is the different styles of program reflecting a concern for establishing the best relationship with the audience. Uppermost in many producers minds is the obligation to make Educational programs as accessible as possible.

*Offspring* - Weekdays 9.02 - 9.30 am Radio National in Sydney Melbourne, Brisbane. Hobart, Perth 11.00 - 11.30 am Adelaide and Regional Stations. Producer/Presenter Peter Clarke, Producer Wendy McLeod. *Offspring* is a paradigm of much of our thinking and philosophies. As a smoothly presented, highly professional, live-to-air daily program it sits very well between the sequences of the Breakfast program and the morning program. As it deals with the whole process of care giving to children, it is universal in its appeal. While many programs in the series are of primary interest to parents, the producers deliberately do not exclude other listeners. because the program advocates the well-being of children as a matter of concern to the whole community. Issues like foster parenting child sexuality, learning problems and family therapy are dealt with in a way which is both sensitive and authoritative - authoritative because the program relies heavily on good expert research. The producers see the

effect of the programs as cumulative, resulting in the listeners becoming better parents. The outcomes of *Offspring* can be evaluated from the amount of mail the show receives from all over Australia, as well as from calls to Wednesday's talkback show.

The same is true for *Take Time*, a program for the over fifty-fives produced by Roger Penny and Jane Stapleton in Hobart. The show is accessible both by telephone and letter and it is this contact with the audience that enables producers and talent to make items which will be of interest and value. *Take Time* is about the world of retirement, and ranges from items on leisure to advice on money management, health and self-defence. Once again it combines an informality of sound with a developmental approach so that the listener is not only stimulated and entertained but develops knowledge and understanding in a number of areas.

As I write this I'm aware that to specialists in educational technology these programs might seem to lack the sharp cutting edge of the true, specifically honed, information dense, specialist, needs-based education program (I'm exaggerating to make the distinction clear). And it's true that the ABC will rarely, if ever, put that kind of material to air. Perhaps it isn't the ABC's job to do that in any case. For education of any kind to succeed there has to be a supportive social environment, so as the national broadcaster the ABC could be said to have a basic responsibility to stimulate, endorse and approve adult learning of all kinds, and perhaps this role is at least as important as the learning experiences our programs offer.

All of this does not mean to say that we are putting all of our faith in long running, open ended, live to air programs. If you listened to Gillian Berry's *Happy Families* you'll remember a deftly produced series with people talking about their family lives and how relationships have evolved and changed in this century. Points about changing attitudes and roles within the family were made with carefully edited bursts of talk interspersed with music from the period concerned. It was fun to listen to but it was also carefully structured and researched so that a serious student would have found the programs useful as source material. In addition there was a specially written study guide by Professor Geoffrey Bolton of Murdoch University which contained valuable specialised commentary for those listeners wishing to learn more, and in a more permanent mode. Thus again the needs and interests of both the casual listener and the serious student were equally attended to. It's clear from the enthusiastic response to Study Guides that we'll be refining and developing them further together with other associated materials.

*Talking Point* (Thursdays Radio National 7.15 pm), producer Margaret Coffey is an ongoing series begun in 1984. It is, as the name implies, a discussion program and it deals with serious, important concepts such as fundamentalism, the making of political attitudes, human rights and many others. Terry Lane (together with guest comperes) talks with experts on each subject giving the listener, over a period of time, the experience of listening to structured, complex discussions in a number of disciplines. *Talking Point* differs from other similar talk shows in that it tends not to thrive on topicality, rather it develops an awareness of the basic truths and values underlying most of intellectual activity.

We also make programs about Education. *On Course* - Tuesdays 9.00 - 9.30 (producer Neil Mudge), is a program made in collaboration with the Public Broadcasting Association of Australia and features news from campuses around the country, mainly about new developments in research. Many of the items are edited versions of longer talks and discussions on university radio stations while some are made specifically for the program. Special programs are also made as the occasion warrants, such as on Alan Bond's proposal for a new 'private' university.

*Education Issues* Thursdays 7.15 - 8.00, producer Lyndall Jones. This program alternates every two months with *Talking Point* and uses a similar discussion format. The program registers the enormous changes currently taking place in education at all levels and the debates accompanying them. We plan to make parts of this series in other states so the format could change as different producers bring different perspectives. As *Education Issues* evolves we are very aware that the audience includes more and more parents who are increasingly becoming involved in schools and, in Victoria, even in the curriculum making process itself. so we are aware that we mustn't address ourselves to professionals alone.

There is a series of programs in production at the moment called *How to Make a Play* and it is being produced by Helen Bowden of the University of New South Wales Continuing Education Unit. Executive production rests with the ABC but all the production is being done at the university. I'm pleased about this kind of initiative because, although we won't be able to do this too often, we'll find in co-productions an alternative to any emerging 'house style'.

This program and thirteen others, some repeats, some new, will form the first ABC Radio National Summer School and details of this will be available to all Adult Education Institutions and Universities or in copies of the ABC magazine 'Twenty Four Hours'. We have a regular brochure too which is distributed in the same way and comes out every three months.

## Radio for Children

We also make programs for children. I stress the word "children" rather than schools because although it is teachers in a school situation who turn the set on it is the children who listen to, and participate in, the programs and they are a very challenging audience. This is because they are exposed to a great deal of television of all kinds, films on video cassette, computer games, stereo discs and tapes, and printed material of all kinds. This means that, to succeed, radio for children has to be very well produced indeed. So the days of programs which were virtually lessons on air are over, and our best programs are easy and attractive to listen to. Both for the target and the casual audience.

Listen to *Sing 86*, our Upper-primary music program, and discover how we not only encourage children to sing but involve them in the wilder world of music, through interviews with musicians of all kinds, and a varied selection of companionable and stimulating music ranging from rock to folk to classical and contemporary. Not of course that the program isn't immediately recognisable as being for schools. We still want teachers to turn their sets on - most schools use programs live - so we don't want to make our product so laid back that its real purpose isn't immediately apparent.

*Lets Join In* (Producers Roger Penny and Jane Stapleton) is still going strong, a favourite series for many years with Infant grades. And the title might evocatively conjure up a lady sounding vaguely like Joyce Grenfell exhorting children to be bees or mushrooms. It hasn't sounded like that for a long time, but his year's series is the best sounding yet, with Australian voices and a low key directness that is involving without coyness or talking down.

Yet of course in any serious consideration about children and education there is no doubt at all that a great deal of learning goes on outside school, and in the days when radio was King the Argonauts Club was a perfect example of how children could be let into all kinds of creative activities - within the context of a paternalistic Anglo-Celtic culture that is. Those times and that culture have gone too. Nevertheless we are looking at ways of making programs which re-invent the medium for today's five to eight year olds, and the timeslot under discussion is 7.00 - 7.30 am on Sunday mornings with a provisional title of "Burnt Toast". What exactly the program will contain is being worked on at the moment. It will certainly be entertaining.

I'm aware that one program is suspiciously like a token, but it is a start. Reinventing children's radio is going to be a long haul. Fortunately we are not alone, Jule-Anne Ford, Head of ABC Radio Drama is commissioning

and producing plays for children. There is a growing awareness in the organisation as a whole that, in terms of our future welfare as an organisation, we neglect the young audience at our peril.

### **ABC and the Australian Culture**

Any discussion about the relationship between an ABC specialist department and its audience cannot avoid the larger context of the ABC's relationship with Australian culture as a whole. We are, it would seem, the country's main cultural institution. No other organisation comes anywhere near our coverage of all aspects of national life. And yet no one seems totally satisfied - certainly in the last decade - with what we are doing. It hardly needs stressing that every move the ABC makes produces an immediate response from the Press ranging from mock bewilderment to outright criticism. Just occasionally we get reviews of the 'Aunty gets it right for once' variety.

I don't think that this indifferent press indicates failure. It is rather an indicator of the enormous and growing pressure put on the organisation from many sections of society. These pressures take the form of highly organised, well articulated views as to what we ought to be doing with our airtime. This is especially true of adult education which is a large and complex interlocking network of interest groups. Each interest group, quite properly, sees itself as playing an important role and stakes its claim for the best possible resources - broadcasting being one. Most of these claims are reasonable and valid but a high proportion of them won't be met because the whole field of education is so big that ABC Education can only be expected to cover one part of it. So at our conference we must choose our major priorities fully aware that we are not going to please everybody. That's part of the explanation where a department like ours is concerned but it doesn't explain the intensity with which our moves are scrutinised. This has to do with two factors: firstly, as funds for important projects become scarce so radio is seen as a cheap and efficient delivery system and secondly, like most educational institutions, we are having to cope with great social and cultural changes.

Large questions about the future nag us all constantly, questions about the economic future of the country, about the future of work, about the future of the planet itself. Ways of escaping the force and the complexity of such questions range from escapism, to cynicism, to political conservatism, to environmental radicalism, to born again religion, to existential despair. But there are, I believe, a significant number of people who want complex answers and they look to the culture in general to provide them and the ABC, in particular, to refine, explain and express them.

Some older Australians will remember the so called 'radical' ABC of the late sixties when being left of centre generated a fair amount of social hope, a hope which in radio terms led to a sureness and authenticity of tone and style. Younger Australians will find that tone, that authenticity in bands like "Midnight Oil" or Bob Geldorf's work for Africa, but in the fragmented, questioning cultural world of the eighties it is going to be hard to make ABC radio once more the oracle it was for many in the early seventies.

But we are trying. All specialist departments in the ABC are looking carefully at the values and assumptions underlying their own work; and we are listening to a great deal of advice. In the case of Education we have held Special Interest Seminars in every state except NSW (which is in early November) and we've been heartened by great good will and people's eagerness to help. But radical change in broadcasting means radical experiments which cost money, so in the current economic climate change is going to be slow. It is also going to be modest. I cannot, alas, see the Federal Government in the near future promoting an Open University with all that would need by the way of support. Yet I don't want to lose sight of the bigger goals. ABC Education Radio's current involvement with the area of human relationships is a strong indicator that we are, as a department, not working dully through a limited range of options but are as educators and broadcasters sustained by a sense of commitment and a breadth of vision.

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