



Teaching without teachers: A new business plan

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I am concerned that teachers are in danger of losing control of who teaches, what is taught and how we teach, as “edu-businesses” move to directly influence politicians, advisers and policy makers.

Huge global corporations are eyeing off schooling as the last untapped market place, so we need to be wary.

In recent years, concerns have been raised that the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), which has responsibility for the mass testing program NAPLAN, is working closely with corporations as they promote their commercial products to government.

This could explain ACARA’s push, in defiance of the wishes of the teaching profession and largely ignoring the evidence from the NAPLAN Online trials presented last year, to move the national tests online so as to force students to write using keyboards only. It is certainly what the software manufacturers are seeking.

Yet, for all the bleating about the importance of “evidence-based decision making” no research into the consequences of privileging keyboard use over hand writing has been commissioned, even though warnings have been sounded.

Teachers are suspicious: Why is ACARA pushing so hard to move the tests online? Many would answer that it has much to do with removing teachers from the marking process and replacing them with computerised marking software.

Over the past 18 months or so the teaching profession has fought back on this issue, as it became increasingly concerned at ACARA’s behaviour.

In 2015 ACARA, in an attempt to convince policy makers and politicians of the efficacy of computer marking, published An Evaluation of Automated Scoring of NAPLAN Persuasive Writing.

As it turned out, it was a seriously flawed and biased report intended to provide arguments for a

predetermined position, as revealed in a subsequent study in 2017 by Dr Les Perelman, a US-based academic specialising in the assessment of writing.

Dr Perelman's study was commissioned by the NSW Teachers Federation. Soon after, he wrote a significant paper on the inadequacies of the actual test itself, *Towards a New NAPLAN: Testing to the Teaching* (2018).

By late 2017 there was enough momentum, sparked by significant community concern, for politicians to scrap the idea of robo-marking.

Indeed, The Sydney Morning Herald argued in an editorial titled "NAPLAN robo-marking plan does not compute":

"We already know that with NAPLAN, schools have started, unfortunately, to teach to the test. As both Perelman, and Robyn Cox of the Primary English Teaching Association warned, it will not be long before schools and coaches have worked out what the computer marker rates highly, and are teaching children to write what it wants to read. What sort of education is that?"

"But even if these criticisms of the technology are wrong, there is a broader issue. As clever as the technology may be, missing from the process is an essential element: respect.

"Education is fundamentally a social transaction between humans. It may use computers and other digital wizardry, but they are subordinate to the cultivation and nurturing of one mind by another. Assessment is a necessary step in that process. Teachers need to know if a child has learnt what it has been taught.

"A system that removes assessment from human agency and hands it over to a machine shows disrespect to both teacher and pupil. Both are diminished by it, and with them the assessment, and education itself."

As teachers, we have a duty of care to our students and surely this also involves protecting them from powerful technology companies whose first and last motivation is to sell their software and hardware products.

As commercial interests encroach more and more on the public education system and seek to influence government policy, there has never been a more critical time than now for teachers to reclaim the primacy of their role in policy development.

Too many of our agencies have been compromised. The NSW Department must build a strong firewall before it is too late.

Large edu-businesses such as Pearson, so well connected to politicians and well placed to purchase influence, will only ever see education as a market and have much larger plans.

And they are moving fast.

Recent reports from the UK that expose the push by global education companies to have teachers replaced by technology should be of serious concern. As was reported in TES (Times Educational Supplement, 6 April, 2018), corporations are quite candid that their business plan is to remove teachers from the classroom: "A British team is working to develop a method of teaching children without using teachers that could win it a \$10 million global education prize."

Further, TES reported that existing players, such as Bridge International Academies, see that the experiment with untrained "teachers" that they are conducting in their for-profit schools situated in poor communities in the global south could be used in wealthy countries such as England, and presumably exported globally.

"You have to take some lessons from what Bridge do and say 'can we take lesser trained people and use them effectively', and then it comes down to that big conversation about what does technology do better than humans, and what do we have to have with humans? I suspect what you are going to end up with is teachers taking a much more emotional role and leaving the content delivery to the computers," TES reported.

To borrow the language of the Sydney Morning Herald editorial, there is not much respect there for teacher or student, and education itself will be diminished.

Indeed, these wealthy, powerful and influential players are attempting to create an educational dystopia, in

which the essential humanity at the core of teaching and learning could well be destroyed.