

JOHN COWL: CRAFT AND GRAPHICS TEACHER 1968-1998



Background

I am of Australian background going back about eight generations, and the family origins are from England and Scotland. One of my first ancestors to Australia was a warder on one of the convict sailing ships. I grew up in Brunswick and then went to Coburg High School. In those days there were a few secondary schools around Melbourne, such as Melbourne High, MacRob, Northcote, and Coburg with entrance exams. After high school I could have gone into any faculty at Melbourne University, including medicine because there was no competition for those places.

Introduction to Teaching

I wanted to become a teacher because I was very impressed by the teachers at Coburg High. They had a huge influence on me and, I suspect, on my teaching qualities. I learnt so much from those excellent teachers. I hope I've been able to carry on that tradition during my teaching career. They loved their teaching and were very good teachers. I was impressed by the art teacher and decided I would go into art-craft teaching because I had success at Matric (Year 12) and decided to have a go at that, knowing that if I didn't like it I could do something else. I loved the training.

My first school was in Traralgon for three years, then I came back to Niddrie and married. I have been a widower for the past twelve years. I have two children who have their own families.

I moved to Niddrie because I started working at Niddrie High. I taught at Niddrie for 3 years then for 15 years at St Albans. I transferred to Maribyrnong High when the principal was ready to leave, and stayed for 3 years. The faculties and staff were divided and isolated. It was a time of South Americans coming in as well as the Vietnamese refugees from Midway Hostel, so it was a challenging time. There were 1,300 kids at the school making it the second-biggest high school in Victoria. At this stage I was thinking of starting my own business, because, even though teaching has been my main career, I had done some things on the side (coaching and a chemical business). I had requests from St Albans High School to come back, so I spent another 15 years at the school. I loved that second appointment as much as I had the first.

Teaching at St Albans

I started teaching at St Albans High School in 1968 and have taught there for about 30 years, in two stints each of 15 years. I am a trained art and crafts teacher and was teaching craft and graphics. During my first stint at St Albans I was also studying part-time for an Industrial Diploma in Arts in gold and silver smithing. After that I did an education administration course. Those were the days when the Education Department allowed you to take on further teacher studies as part of your employment arrangements, most of it part-time study leave on full pay.

I taught art and graphics from Year 7 to Year 12, and was pleased that I didn't have any failure in Year 12 for the first 23 years of my teaching career at Traralgon, Niddrie, and St Albans. One of the best successes was when six students from the one class went on to become art and craft teachers.

I taught some jewellery-making skills in metalwork, but we played around with copper and brass rather than silver and gold. I'd write to mining companies asking for donations. Some of them were quite generous and send us amethyst, which the students would surface, polish, and set on a base - pretty basic stuff, but it was encouraging to see the kids developing their skills. We also did enamelling but it became expensive. In those days we had trouble buying equipment and even quality paper. I was envious of some of my mates because some of their schools in other regions could afford quality

products that we missed out on so we had to try extra hard to balance things. I did many trips to factories trying to collect materials. We didn't paint on canvas because we couldn't afford it. For my senior art classes, I'd go cap in hand to cardboard manufacturers to get quality card off cuts. I didn't mind doing that. I'd cry poor and explain the situation: "There are some pretty talented kids there and they are missing out because the school doesn't have the funds."

The school has been classified as a disadvantaged school, so it has had considerable extra support from state and commonwealth governments over the years. The school couldn't raise the tens of thousands of dollars through raffles and other fund raising activities that you might get in other wealthier communities. We just don't have the socio-economic background to allow that sort of success.

The Teaching Staff

In the 30 years I've been teaching at St Albans the school has survived because of its terrific senior staff plus the fabulous commitment from the migrant people who supported the school. I had 30 years of being a level coordinator at the school, and the two major reasons I stayed for that long is the support I received from the parents and the teaching staff, particularly the senior staff. I am retiring this year.

I've been a senior member of staff for many years and did years as acting principal and acting deputy principal. They would go on leave (sick, long service, extended, etc.) and in those days the most senior position filled the spot. I found myself doing that over decades.

When I first started they were having trouble getting staff. The idea of teaching in a school with a 93% migrant population frightened a lot of experienced teachers. When you have the ethnic groups we've had over all those decades, people's preconceived ideas – and in many cases wrong attitudes – about ethnic friction and St Albans as a community - turned many teachers from applying. As a result, a lot of young teachers were sent to the school as a first year experience. That's not isolated to St Albans as most of the schools in the western suburbs are still faced with that problem. That diversity in the community is what makes the school so strong, even today.

I looked with interest at this year's student profile and again about 93% of the students are going home to parents of non-English-speaking background. Over 40% of the kids have gone on to tertiary education and that is far above most of the other public schools in the western suburbs. When you consider the backgrounds some of these kids have come from it's a fantastic statistic.

Didn't we have our experiences in those early days when I was getting to know the parents? Sometimes I'd even go with them to search for kids along the Maribyrnong River. The parents put a lot of hope in you and sometimes expected so much, for example, the number of court cases that senior teachers are asked to attend because they know the kids and can give a reference. I've had a lot to do with police because I've been a Rotarian for over 25 years and come across the police who are members of such organisations. They're wonderful people to have for advice and assistance and to help parents and solicitors. Victor Mahorin was a local solicitor who was very helpful with kids who were having some difficulties. I had a lot to do with him in the early days. He opened his doors and we had kids with their parents there for advice when they needed it. He was a former student of the St Albans High School and he was most helpful.

Adapting to Changes

I've seen huge changes at the school since I started. Students would stand behind chairs when I walked in, I would say "good morning" or "good afternoon" and they would respond and sit when they were told to. It was then chalk and talk, even for an art and craft teacher. Now teachers have had to adapt. I love classroom teaching because I enjoy giving information and I love the smile on the faces and the success stories about some of the kids who've struggled. I teach practical subjects and it's very rewarding because most of the kids are able to attempt those practical subjects and get a very good result. Over the years I've had to adapt to new techniques and the introduction of new curricula that have been adopted by the Education Department, by society, and just the social pressures on the kids, and technology of course. Change has been necessary from teachers. The teacher who hasn't been able to change has dropped out. They've got out of the classroom because they haven't coped, because the kids act unfavourably to that teacher who hasn't been able to relate to students and respect them. The kids will always respond to good teaching.

'Streaming' of classes has not existed for decades. Different levels of ability remains the biggest challenge to the teachers of today. Those migrant kids who are struggling with English respect that little extra effort that the teachers at St Albans Secondary College give them. The teachers who gave a little more got so much back, not just from the kids in the class, but from the parents and the community. In the early days it was the displaced people and refugee communities, such as the Russians, then came the Maltese, while an Asian or African was not to be seen in a school of 1,000 kids. Now you have it all: we have Africans such as Sudanese, Eritreans and Ethiopians, we have South Americans, Europeans, and we have Asians; we've seen all that. The teachers have to change to the different groups and become familiar with some of their customs and we have to be tolerant. Those who aren't don't cope and they're out. I've done a lot of travelling and I've found that to be a wonderful connection with some at St Albans. I don't speak another language but I only have to mention some of the cities and towns I have visited to have an influence.

The second obvious change is young teachers being criticised, I think unfairly, because I believe they're better trained than ever. The school has always provided an opportunity for teachers to get involved: it might be with sport, administration, assisting with time tables, or with committees for curriculum development. Everybody is welcome and anybody can apply for the those positions. They've had lots and lots of encouragement from the senior staff at the school. There's a stack of those who've been at the school for 20 to 30 years; and they are the ones who've held the school together.

In the first years there were three principals who between them covered quite a number of years. Then we had a stint of about twelve years with eight principals or acting principals. That lack of stability at the top level contributed to an inability to make decisions over the long term – they were there only to retire. The school survived because of the senior staff, some of whom were young but experienced, conducted themselves well and contributed to the success of the school.

In the early days teachers could smoke as they walked down the corridors and some would even be smoking in the classroom between classes. There was no rule against that. That sort of thing was acceptable. Now there are lots of rules on acceptable behaviour from students, teachers, administration and communities and this has challenged a few.

The School Camp



I helped start the school camp during my first years at St Albans. Mr Carmody, the English teacher, was the main one responsible for this, and he was helped by two people: Victor Mahorin and me. We were the first to dig the holes and put in the stumps for the army platforms and tents. At first we had several different styles and quality of tents and then we brought in some old train carriages for the accommodation. I used the camp frequently in the early years and consequently would go up there every term and do the maintenance. It was a wonderful experience. The only disappointment with that was that a lot of parents would not let their children attend the camp, so, instead of a full class of Year 7 going up there for socialisation, or art kids going up there to do their prac or theory work, you'd have half a class. Some couldn't afford to go. Even though it was quite cheap, students were charged about \$20 for three days at the camp. For decades it was \$30 to \$40 to go to camp. Some couldn't even afford that. So we tried to cover some of that as well.



I did the school demographic statistics, so I know that 19% of the kids were on maintenance over the years. That's one quarter of the kids were from a home trying to survive on a pension or benefit, often from a single parent family, unemployment beneficiaries, pensioners, or just low income earners. To be asking these people for extra fees was difficult. Even shorter excursions to the city were costly, and, as a coordinator, I would get phone calls from parents explaining why they couldn't afford to pay. There is not a large proportion of professional people connected with the school. It is mainly blue collar workers and tradespeople, many of whom have done well.

Some of the students weren't permitted to go, I presume because the parents felt uneasy about supervision. We always showed parents photographs of the camp to show what it was like. It's a safe camp, a wonderful camp. We'd combine classes and it worked well. The kids, especially the juniors, loved the camp, the outdoors, and the opportunity to experience some of the Australian bush as they went on bus excursions and walks into the surrounding countryside.

The camp is still going and still popular. We have a staff member working on camp duties part time and doing Phys Ed for the rest of the time. The train carriages were eventually replaced by a new building at a cost of \$140,000+. It's bigger with small dormitory rooms around a central living, entertainment, and eating area; very impressive. The whole idea was to get kids out to socialise and experience some of the outback.

School Assembly

For years I was responsible for a weekly assembly. What a thankless task that was. A weekly assembly. The entire school, 1,000 kids from Year 7 to Year 12, was lumped into the hall to listen to announcements and guest speakers. We were very successful in getting speakers from just about everywhere, but they were challenging times. It took a 40 minute session and that went on for decades. It finally stopped because of the pressure of the curriculum. We were being asked to do everything from driver education to sex education. Over the years teachers were expected to do more and more and it got to the stage where talking to the whole school for one period a week in the assembly hall became a luxury for which there wasn't time. Our pastoral care sessions suffered the same fate.

Driver Education

Driver education was developed by Peter Hanrahan who was a art-craft teacher with an interest in cars. He offered that subject and quickly got a class together. Before we knew it we had two classes for driver education. The students didn't actually do formal driving lessons, but they did class work in road rules and practical experience. They had an old car and would work on that. Some of the older kids got into the more detailed "nuts and bolts" of the mechanical side. We tried for about four years to get a vehicle from some of the manufacturers but didn't succeed. The subject had been prompted by the Education Department because those were the days of terrible road statistics.

School Demographics

The school was successful in a variety of ways. Last year we had a 99% pass rate in the VCE exams. In the early days there was a cut off point that was adjusted so that one-third of students had to fail. What a terrible view of education.

I've kept good friends with former St Albans teachers and we are all amazed how we got through considering what we had to put up with. It's interesting for me the experience the different types of government schools. The country school had some real problems in a rural community with a mainly Anglo-Saxon background. Niddrie Secondary College was also Anglo-Saxon predominantly of professionals, including pilots, and a few tradespeople. Maribyrnong had the two big ethnic groupings when I was there: the South Americans and the Vietnamese. At one stage 30% of the school was of Vietnamese background.

That experience prepared me for coming back to St Albans because those Vietnamese families from Maribyrnong were moving out to Footscray, Deer Park, Kings Park, and St Albans.

Generally speaking, the Vietnamese have been wonderful for the school and the community. They are very hard working and in the early days were a real settling influence on the classes. The pressures on these kids to succeed is enormous. The parents gave as much support as they could because the emigrants and the refugees were in Australia for one main reason, to give their children an opportunity.

The school was noted for its friendly students, especially how friendly they were to the staff and that was true for many years. In recent years I sometimes doubt that the sincerity that was there decades ago still exists, i.e. I'm not sure it is still there in the same quantity it used to be. I think it relates to the customs and beliefs of the people who come to the school. Some may not be used to being overtly friendly with teachers and may expect more of a formal relationship with teachers. They are not used to the sort of casual behaviour that teachers exhibit these days, such as calling each other by their first names in front of the kids. I think these are fairly new teacher behaviours in front of students. Students tend to challenge more and are a little more suspicious.

School Council



I was on the School Council for about 8 years in my first stint at the school. Some of that was a good learning experience for a young teacher. The composition of the Council at that time was 5 teachers, 5 parents, and up to 5 community reps (later we had 5 students as well). We struggled to get 5 parents all the time, because we didn't have the level of professionals or the language competency that occurs in other communities. It's a gutsy effort for people with limited English to go to meetings and have their say. We'd approach people to nominate for vacancies. Our Council meetings earlier on were challenging in more ways than one but it was rewarding to see things being done around the school and the grounds. We appreciated the efforts of the school council because community

support was sometimes hard to get. We got there eventually, though it was very hard work in the early days.

I have respected three administrators at the school in particular over the years. They have been leaders, decision makers, educational advisors and socially competent: John Brooke, Nick Thornton, and Karen Moore.

John Cowl, 2005

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