HOW THINGS HAVE CHANGED

Looking back over my years of teaching it is interesting to see how things have changed. I started my teaching career in 1969 at Broken Hill High School in the far West of New South Wales. The Canon Canola, a programmable calculator, had made its way into the Mathematics Departments of NSW schools. It was programmed by punch cards and we used it to program every mathematical formula we could find. Students were taught programming within mathematics and this was considered ‘state of the art’. Soon after we got our hands on a Wang computer that was on loan to schools in our region and we repeated the same programming exercises with the students. More mathematical formulae.

In 1974 I moved to Albury North High and continued working with the Canola. By now I was able to run short inservice sessions on this machine. At one such session, a salesman from Sydney brought along an Apple II with cassette drive and demonstrated drill programs for mathematics. We all thought this was a fantastic breakthrough but who could ever afford to buy one?

Then came a move to Nyngan in the centre of the state. Nyngan was to become a test area for computers in schools. The university of New England had been researching the levels of student self esteem across the state and discovered very low self-esteem amongst students in the Nyngan region. It was suggested that by putting computers into these schools that their esteem could be raised. So here we were with the Commonwealth Government giving us Apple computers. They were all originally tape drive as the new disk drives had not arrived. We were given every known extra; graphics tablets, speech cards, light pens and card readers. Chris Bacon was employed to manage the program and train up staff. He was the only one in the area with expertise and he could program in Applesoft Basic.

When Chris left I was deployed part-time to carry on the training of staff and the program spread to other schools in the surrounding area (including Cobar and most points further West). This was a time of experimentation. I considered myself so clever when I had written my first major program, a stock market simulation. Then the direction of computer usage changed. Sandy’s Word processor became available. Suddenly there was a new use for computers. I thought this would change the way we all taught. In five years all teachers would be using computers. The year was 1981.

In 1983 I moved into a consultancy position based in Tamworth and visited schools in the North-West of the state running courses, demonstrating and team-teaching. All the time thinking, ‘in the next five years...’ After nine years of consultancy I was appointed to Lucas Heights Community School in Sydney. This was a new school and the only K–12 government school in Sydney. My position was Technology Coordinator K–12. Here was a chance for me to try to bring about change.

Now the year is 1995. I am still waiting. The machines and software have changed rapidly but what about the teachers? When will we begin to see new teachers arriving at schools with existing computer skills? We are still at a stage where most teachers actively avoid incorporating the use of computers into their classrooms, but ‘in the next five years...’

But I am not despondent as you might think. What I have seen is a change in the way teachers teach. If the only noticeable difference computers have made in the classroom is to support the move to student centred learning and open ended problem solving then the whole journey has been worthwhile. Just wait, in the next five years...

John Morgan
President ACCE
Technology Co-ordinator K–12
Lucas Heights Community School NSW