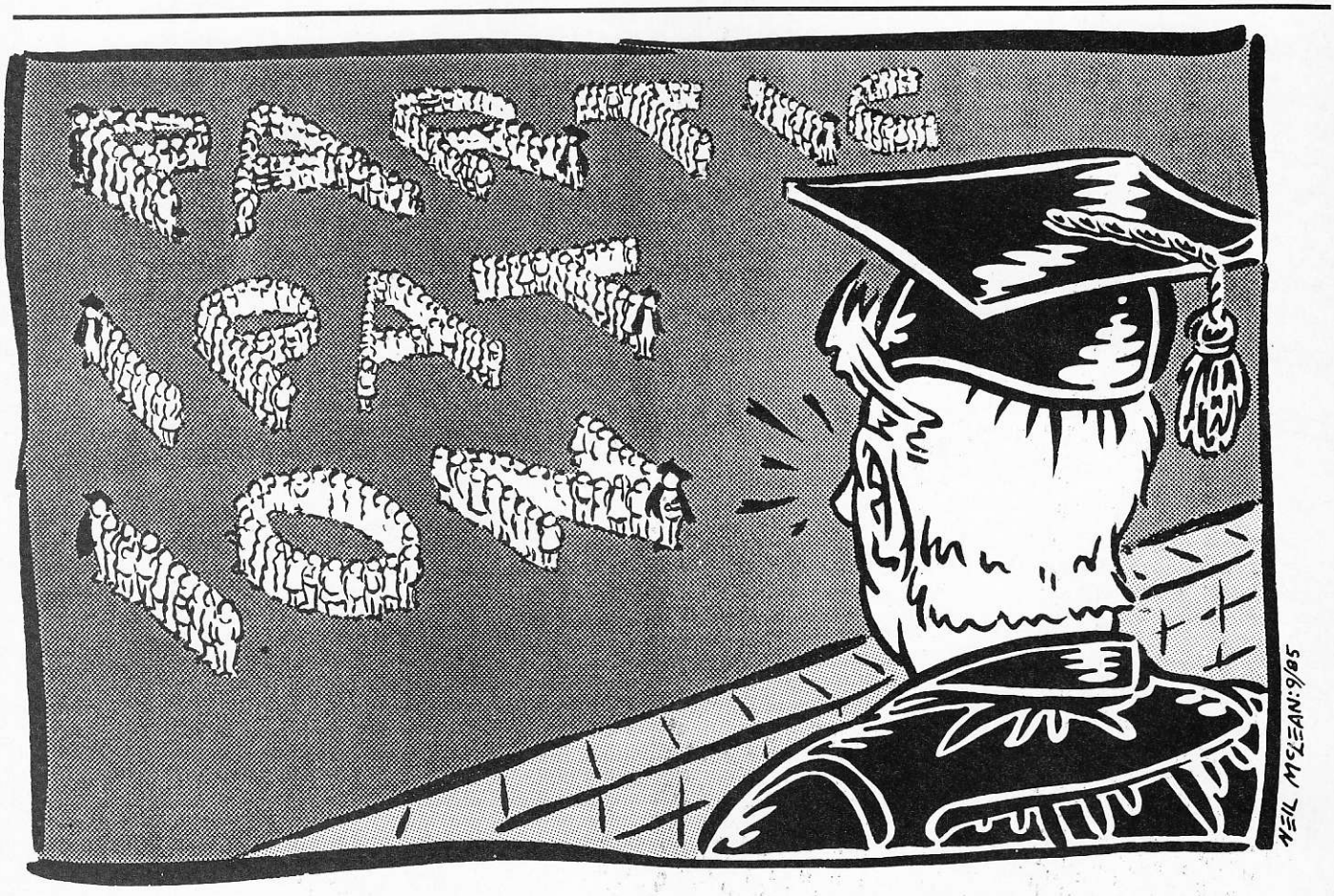
Issues in
STUDENT PARTICIPATION

Roger Holdsworth offers advice on how teachers can encourage student participaton in decision making at school, regional and State levels.



Student participation – the new buzz words!

"Oh yes, I've got this great project planned out for the kids to participate in next term . . ."

Or a temporary diversion aimed at pacification!

". . . a bit of an "ease-off" before they get down to the serious stuff leading to the Year 10 exams."

Or maybe something to be outlived!

"It's just the latest trendy rubbish. I remember when it was parent participation . . . see, that didn't change much."

All right, so that's not you (You bet?)

You're really serious about encouraging students to be involved in making decisions on the issues that affect them, about valuing their contributions, about letting them learn by making mistakes, about getting into arguments with them on curriculum issues. In short, you're room, tackling vital issues.

Not easy, is it?

To start with, how about putting together a list of the critical issues you face or will have to face. At those times of desperation, I always find list-making a great source of satisfaction. It gets it out there in black and white. Ordered. You can see what it looks like. See what proposals you can make. Most importantly, see what the traps are.

Here's a list, with brief comments, of some of my concerns. But seriously,

it would be better if you were to write down your own list before reading on.

SRCs, projects and all that

> If any initiative is taken in a way that perpetuates activities done *to* students, then it changes nothing. Rather, it must support approaches done *with* students.
>
> - Craig Kyte, Bendigo High School Council student member

There are many exciting projects you can dream up to involve the active participation of students in your classroom. Some may even force students to take part in important decision making. But is it really student participation?

The best sounding classroom program can founder on many points. Here are some basic ones:

- *Imposition* of a teacher's fantasy on the group – no student participation in the decision to implement the program.
- *Paternalism* as the teacher maintains careful and effective control over how far the program can go.
- *Restriction* of the influence of the program to that classroom, so that it remains a strange and beleaguered island within an unchanging school.

And so on.

The program needs not only the effective leadership and advocacy of staff, but also a committed and organised student body. The base of that body must be in the natural learning units of the school (the class, the home group, the year level, the subschool) so that realistic collaboration can occur there on common interests, but it must also extend to the whole school's recognition of the role of a student representative council (or similar group) in the existing or developing decision-making structures of the school, that is, the SRC should be representing students on curriculum and administration committees, discipline policy working parties and so on.

Thus from the classroom to the school council, students are involved in *proposing* curriculum action, *reacting* to propositions, making *counter-proposals*, *representing* views and *sharing* in decision making. Curriculum change cannot occur without an organised student voice in the partnership.

Equally, starting from the point of view of the student organisation, we are led to the question: What does an SRC make decisions about?

> We have an active student council in this school, which annually raises funds for a variety of charities and organises the annual school dance.
>
> - Almost any school's prospectus

Too often we find the SRC concerned with socials, fund-raising, uniforms and discipline enforcement. (For some, the $500 from PEP has become a further embarrassment to an already swollen bank balance – but that's not an argument for stopping the payment.)

Too seldom do we find an SRC extending its activities to consider curriculum principles and practices, assessment and discipline policies and so on.

To be an effective voice for students, an SRC must share in making decisions that affect the everyday life of students. And this is largely *what* is taught and learned and *how* it is taught and learned.

So the two walk hand in hand: a collaborative introduction of programs that encourage and support student participation, with an effective and active student representative body. We cannot have one of those and expect it to be ultimately effective. That is a set-up for conflict, a set-up for failure or a set-up for insignificance.

So what's it possible to do?

> ... some of today's "reformers" are advocating a somewhat more tangible and less ambitious restructuring of the school experiences of young people. This restructuring can be evidenced by the growing network of youth participation projects in schools.
>
> - Peter Cole in *AdVISE* No. 29, May 1982

Over the last ten years, there has been a rapid growth in projects that actively involve students in real decision making in schools. The range of possible areas is bounded only by the imagination of the proposers and participants. Here are brief outlines of some of those areas that have become reasonably widespread and established. We're interested to hear of more ideas.

Tutoring. This involves students working collaboratively in a structured setting to design, and assist each other, with some part of the curriculum. The most common example is that of cross-age tutoring, where an older student assists a younger one. That might involve a postprimary school student visiting a primary school regularly or involve groups of students working within a school.

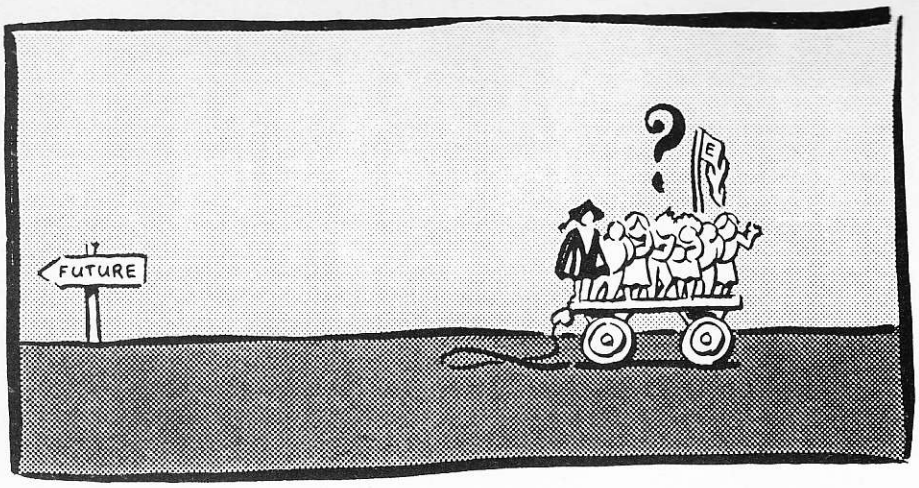
Successful programs operate within both primary and postprimary schools. Tutors may design a whole learning strategy or work within a teacher-designed setting. They may tutor in language, mathematics, social science, integrated studies and so on. They may work one to one, with small groups or in various partnership combinations.

In a typical example, Year 6 students visit a Year 2 classroom three times a week for a half-hour to assist in reading and comprehension activities. The tutors are prepared by a previous class discussion and by having developed a range of curriculum materials. They work one to one with the Year 2 students, reading a book together, talking about the story, initiating writing or art activities. Afterwards, in their own classroom or at home, tutors write a brief report on the session, reflecting upon their own performance and the suitability of the materials, the progress of their "student" and on the next steps to be taken. They talk about their approaches and their plans with the group and with the teachers.

Evidence both in Australia and elsewhere points to the gains being made by both tutors and "tutees". If you wish to read more of such programs, the best source is a collection of articles published by the Participation and Equity Program under the title *Tutoring*. It also contains a wide list for further reading as well as potential school contacts.

"The decisions that students make affect not only the project on which they're working but more broadly influence them in approaches to their control over future and present life choices."

Communication. A number of projects make a response to the question:

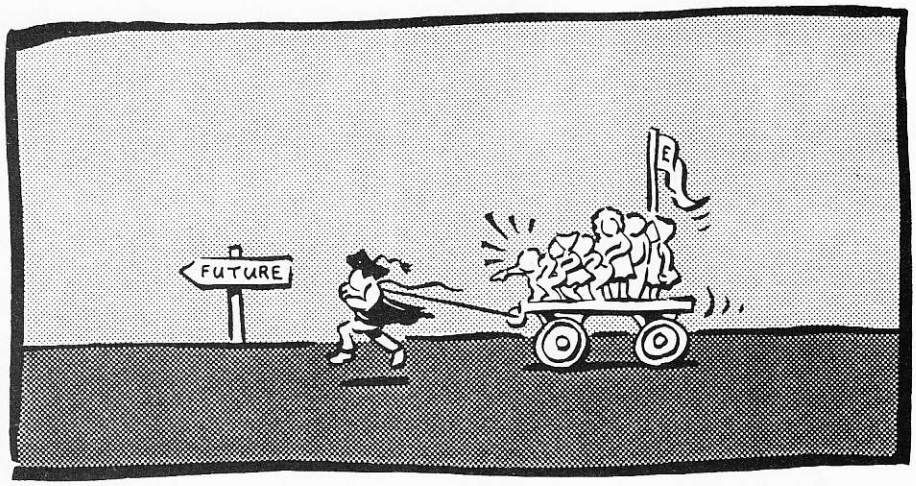


For whom does a student write? Does that essay languish in a teacher's folder, unseen by anyone else?

Rather, this approach acknowledges that writing involves communication about concerns important to both writer and reader. It acknowledges, too, that students have strongly held views and a desire to talk to others about their views. It provides a challenge to students to go wider in expressing these views and to find the most stimulating way to convey them to others. It makes writing live.

So students produce newspapers, ranging from photocopied or duplicated sheets, to professional-looking tabloids. While many are extremely parochial in their content (who beyond the school world would want to identify the teachers in the "beautfil knees competition" or read two pages of poems about botanical gardens), other actively seek to create or serve their wider community. The long-surviving *Ascolta* in Brunswick is produced multilingually by seven schools. For more than eleven years now it has reported on community issues (elections, freeways, train-line closures) and community images.

Students also make radio programs to be broadcast over the school's PA system or through public radio stations. Again, the Ascolta Radio Group has a weekly program on 3CR. Express Australia is involved with pilot programs for a Melbourne commercial station. Topics dealt with range from popular culture (a half-hour on Australian heavy-metal bands) through school topics and issues (a primary school grade together producing a program on animals, complete with jokes, stories, impersonations and an interview with a worker at the Zoo) to community concerns (a report on the PND rally). The Ascolta Radio Group has produced two substantial reports on its operation, available either from Moreland High School or from PEP.



Students exercise a large amount of control over content and production as they present information, argue cases and invite responses.

Research. Another question faces students and teachers: "Go to the library and carry out some research on the topic!"

The best topics encourage students to tackle issues that concern them, carry out research and present recommendations to bodies that have power to make changes. Vandalism, truancy, TV licence renewals and use of railway stations have all been topics dealt with recently. Some of these have been discussed previously in this magazine.

Professor Art Pearl tells the story of the Canadian group of students who were granted funds by their provincial government to investigate the source of pollution in a river. Halfway through the study, they discovered that an agency of the government was the pollutor. They cashed in the remainder of the grant to hire a lawyer to prosecute the government.

But here too there are issues to be tackled. Whose issues are being researched? Who designs the study and controls the research approach? Are the students researchers or research assistants? Can one propose action from the study without being willing or able to follow up the implementation?

Work creation. Faced with the depression expressed by students at their prospects for future employment, some projects have responded by working with those students to develop areas of work generation. A number of principles underlie these projects:

- Investigation of community need - what work is needed to be done in this community?
- Design of a proposal - creation of jobs that can be financially self-sufficient, dependent on grants or community service.
- Development of skills - both within the work area itself and in associated areas such as application for and administration of funds.
- Problem solving - meeting new concerns and designing strategies to overcome them.

In various schools, students have run catering groups; designed and built facilities for community use; created products for the disabled; carried out bicycle repair, maintenance and hire; grown trees for specific agricultural needs and so on.

The decisions that students make affect not only the project on which they're working but more broadly

influence them in approaches to their control over future and present life choices.

For more information and examples of these, contact the Mixes of School and Work School's Resource Program within PEP, or contact "Trees Galore" at Moreland High School.

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So, in summary, many types of projects are available, ranging from cautious one-room steps to ambitious whole-school approaches. Some words of wisdom? Pick what's possible. Pick what has the broadest implications. That's why I like tutoring programs, for they can start requiring little organisational disruptions but have an effect which profoundly challenges relationships.

How about my maths class?

A negotiated mathematics course allows the class, with the teacher, to design a course which enables the students to learn mathematics that they can own and so develop confidence.

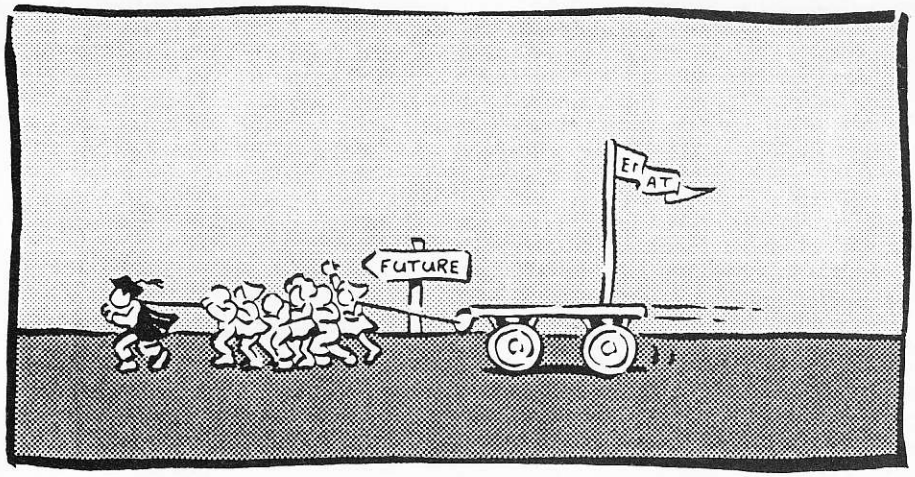
- Colleen Vale in *The Victorian Teacher*
4 November 1984

Where do you start? It may not be possible to invent something or to start a spectacular project in the school. And how about the requirements of those everyday teaching experiences? Is it possible to transform one's whole approach to teaching in subtle ways in order to encourage all students to participate there too?

Approaches have been developed (pioneered through such areas as the STC course, but extending to other year levels) that involve students in sharing decisions on -

- the aims of the course - aims which may be commonly agreed, allow diversity, recognise different backgrounds and needs;
- the content studied to achieve those aims;
- the methods by which learning is to occur;
- the criteria and ways in which to assess students' learning and future needs; and
- continuous evaluation of the progress of the course.

All very well, but what might that mean in practice? (How about my maths class?) Colleen Vale gives a clear account of her class in the article "Teaching maths so it adds up" referred to above.



My own experience with a middle-school group of students in maths was essentially the same. We spent some time at the beginning of the year talking about the various experiences of maths in the group - what could be done well, what caused problems and so on - and about hopes and personal objectives.

The course was broken down into shorter and more plannable lengths of time - we focused on a half-term period and talked about what we could achieve in that time.

While there were some areas that we were able to agree upon as able to be studied as a group, other areas caused immense concerns. We could not agree on the capability of the group to tackle one approach or on their desire or need to do so. The only way we could resolve that was by grouping students within the class around topics, approaches and similarities of background knowledge. This, in turn, encouraged collaboration within the classroom (I couldn't be with all groups every moment they needed me) and some students took on regular roles in "tutoring" a small group. One positive aspect of this was that I did little to structure it.

My role as a teacher was varied. I ran small subclass lessons in a corner, I worked out deadlines for the completion of assignments and made myself unpopular by insisting on those deadlines, I worked one to one sorting out individuals' problems and so on. Probably I didn't do that part of my job terribly differently to ways I'd always taught maths.

At the end of the set period of time, we paused to reflect upon our progress. Where possible, this was relatively informal. Usually both I and the students wrote short statements looking at the goals agreed upon earlier. Sometimes these were shared with the group (but we all found this threatening at times). We then swapped our comments and wrote responses. In a smaller group, this was able to be exchanged through personal face-to-face discussions.

To obtain a more formal assessment for purposes of reporting, the two statements and their responses were discussed by me and the student and an attempt was made to write a

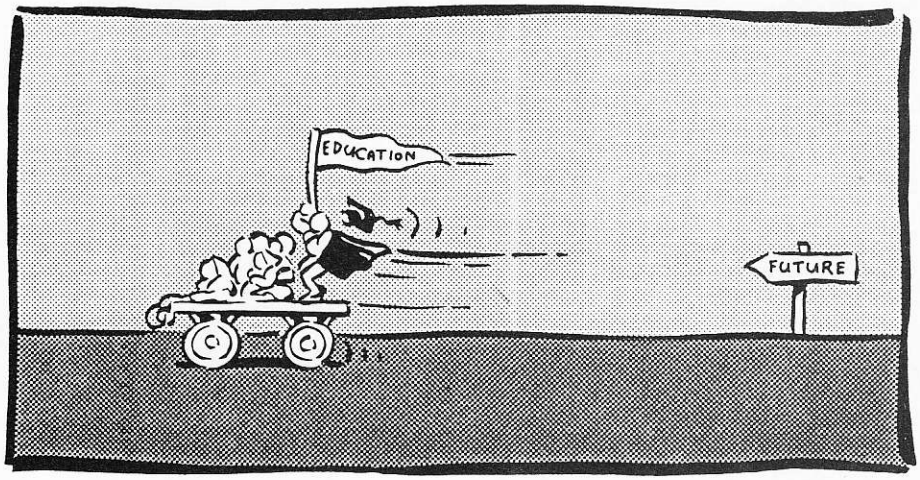


Illustration by Neil McLean.

joint statement we could agree upon. In the few cases where agreement was not possible, we included the two comments, being specific about the areas where we disagreed, why and upon what evidence we based our comments.

At the same time, class discussions formalised occasional comments about the progress of the course and enabled us to plan directions for the next six weeks. At all times we documented decisions.

Necessarily that is the briefest summary of my class. It wasn't always as smooth as I've suggested. We shouted at each other, slacked off, failed to see the point of it all at times and so on. But we persisted and, together, learned much about how to do it.

And, at the same time, we learned a lot of mathematics and a lot about mathematics.

> Part of the evidence of learning is the evolution of the course, the directions the students choose to follow, their readiness to share their understanding with others, to talk and teach others and to produce their own mathematics.
>
> - Colleen Vale in *The Victorian Teacher* 4 November 1984

And I've got the SRC this year!

> Our past experience has taught us much about our SRC and our school. The SRC has a long way to go until it can be happy with its role in the school. As yet it has little say in real decision making."
>
> - Genni Capell, Port Hacking High School

That's been a common experience. In a collection of articles about SRCs (soon to be published by the Participation and Equity Program), we find again and again explicit or implicit statements of the failure of SRCs to come to grips with the central issue of the school. Both students and staff advisers write in depression and despair: "What can we do about it?"

The first step might be to brainstorm the reasons why the SRC has been ineffective. Perhaps the group would come up with ideas like: there's been a history of outside restriction or failure; the SRC actively involves only a few students; students are inexperienced in formal decision making; those meeting skills are not built into the curriculum as a learning experience (no time is given for reflection); the organisational structures of the SRC (its size, the nature of the representation, and so on) make its operations difficult; representatives are not elected seriously; no time is given for students to prepare or meet or follow-up meetings. And so on.

All these items have been listed by students in conferences, forum days and seminars.

I've found it useful to separate this analysis into steps or to sort these responses into two groups. First, what do we see as signs or symptoms that the SRC is not operating well (what would a fly on the wall observe)? Second, what are the causes of these signs? Then as a third step, we can ask: what action can we take that will be effective in overcoming these causes.

And students have again suggested actions to try, actions that match their own circumstances, that are *feasible* and *effective*:

- Hold a special day for the SRC members to work through issues that face them and to decide on processes and actions.
- Discuss and decide upon the important issues to be tackled in the school.
- Break the size of the SRC down by holding your level forums - the SRC then becomes a smaller executive body.
- Alter meeting times so that the SRC can meet as part of the curriculum.
- Invite the principal to occasional meetings so that discussion can happen with the whole SRC (not just an executive).
- Organise a curriculum discussion day between staff and students.

And, again, so on.

"We're truly at the frontier. All we can do is to begin to try things and to share what we try and what we find out."

Most importantly, these suggestions are not implemented in isolation. Rather they're part of a strategy by the SRC to monitor its own operation, to try an action, to collect information on its effect, to reflect upon what has happened - "What do we learn? What does this tell us about what to do next?" rather than "What went wrong?" - and to continue planning.

In other words, participation becomes part of the school's learning strategy. Which leads us to the next issue . . .

How can they pass in participation?

> Students, it must be understood, are at school firstly to pass and progress. They hold this responsibility to themselves and often to their parents. If involvement has to happen at the expense of academic or scholastic achievement, then it is an oppressive system which will not allow equality for students in decision-making processes.
>
> - Greg Thorpe, St Albans High School student

Or to put it another way: "Absent due to school council and regional board of education commitments - failed politics!"

The issue of accreditation of non-classroom experiences, including participation on councils and committees, emerges as one of the most significant ones to be faced by students and teachers. Not only does it directly affect and oppress those students working on committees, but it also acts to limit who can be a representative, who gets involved, who can "afford the time".

Participation in decision making, both in school programs and on formal structures, is a valid and valuable learning experience. It must be accessible to all; it must be recognised within the overall teaching/learning strategy of the school. Participation cannot become an extra-curricular burden that distracts attention from the unchanged "academic" requirements.

Are there alternatives to "having to catch up the work you missed?" What should students be required to do to "have their participation counted"? Who will supervise this? What structures are required? How will this be reported?

An article "Towards Accreditation" in *Connect* (No. 31, February 1985) outlines proposals within these areas. It's exploring the frontiers of student

participation and there are no simple answers. We need to document what people are trying and publicise possible case studies.

Here are some starting points:

- Students need time, formal recognition and reporting methods to encourage and support their participation.
- This can most flexibly be operated if all teachers seek ways in which the normal evidence of participation (reports, budgets, speeches, motions, minutes etc) can be acknowledged as part of the "regular" subjects' requirements.
- Attendance at a meeting is not enough, just as attendance at a class is not enough. There must be agreement on what tangible evidence of learning is to be presented. But it is possible to be imaginative.
- The student should work out ways (e.g. a diary) to be reflective upon personal progress. This can also be incorporated within the school's reporting system.
- There is an essential need to clearly negotiate and write down the procedures at the start of the student's involvement. "I didn't say I would recognise it . . ." and "You know all those classes I missed . . ." equally lead to undesirable and unresolvable conflict.

But those are only starting points. What will you work out?

What is clear, however, is that it is difficult or impossible to mark or grade participation. That might cause a serious reassessment of the school's assessment policy.

What do I do while they're participating?

> You have to propose. You don't get together and say in any group of youth: "What do we do now?" or "What should we do?" and not expect it to be a disaster. You propose something. And that's an invitation to a counter proposal.
>
> – Art Pearl in *Connect* No. 19, February 1983

Participation is not capitulation.

Participation does not mean that a teacher sits in a classroom and waits on the students to propose something or ask something. Rather, the teacher maintains a leadership role that encompasses –

- an intellectual presence;
- the ability to propose and accept counterproposals;
- the willingness to enter into debate discussion;
- avoidance of domination;
- preparedness (following debate) to go along with a counterproposition if there isn't overwhelming evidence it could be a serious disaster; and
- support for the proposals and actions of young people, both personally and with resources and contacts.

That role is, of course, not easy. In the same talk quoted above, Art Pearl points to some areas where conflicts arise:

> Youth will not participate in the continuous ongoing activity without strong leadership. And strong leadership is not one that is unwilling to challenge youth – you always have to challenge! . . .
>
> If it's only going to be a small disaster, they should be allowed to do it and then reflect on it and analyse it. The one thing to get out of your vocabulary is: "I told you so" and put in your vocabulary "What did we learn from that?" and "How do we now do it better?" . . .
>
> If the system of youth participation operates as a really oppressive system and it's really being used for the lowest level of political power for some of the youth to take advantage of other youth, to exploit, manipulate, oppress, for whatever ego or other factors (there may even be economic reasons) – you intercede. You say, "I don't like what I see going on here. Let's see what we can do about it." . . .
>
> And the other thing that you have to understand in every effective youth participation where you play that role of challenging and suggesting, you open yourself up to criticism. And you have to accept that. And students will call you a lot of things. They'll call you a phone: "Here you want us to participate and you're doing all the proposing" and you have to be able to defend that . . .
>
> They will also get angry with you if you choose, for example, to point out that they're manipulating and exploiting people in that group and you don't like it. And you have to accept that . . .
>
> The issue in domination has always been either that you control the votes, legally or illegally, or that your position has so much power and status in it that they have no ability to function. Young people may accuse you of that. That's something that only comes about when they're not yet prepared to defend their own arguments. All you say is, "OK, what have you got to propose that's better? This is a proposal – it's an invitation to a counterproposal. You propose something better." But sitting around doing nothing isn't youth participation.
>
> And finally:
> You're always pushing and you're backing off.

What support exists?

"Where's the textbook?"

Slowly, slowly, there are resources appearing. Not that they're ultimately going to be of much help to those hunting for the textbook. They say, in the words of Brian of Nazareth: "You've got to think for yourself . . . You've all got to work it out for yourselves . . ."

What they will do is to give you access to other people's experiences and to material that will be useful to you in starting.

So . . .

Written material

Connect is the newsletter of youth participation in education projects. It provides a network for people to share their experiences. Each issue carries articles about what is happening in schools (throughout Australia) together with outlines of other resources available. It appears six times a year and subscriptions ($5 p.a.) are available from 12 Brooke Street, Northcote 3070.

PEP is publishing four booklets consisting of collected reprints from *Connect*. They are on the themes of *Tutoring, Students Publishing, Students and Radio* and *Students and School Governance*. They will be available from PEP.

Take a Part is a student handbook put together by the Student Action Project at West Education Centre with support from PEP. A copy will be made available to every secondary school in Victoria.

The Hitch-hiker's Guide to Student Government was published by the Regional Association of Student Governments in the Western Region of New South Wales. It was compiled by Charles Kingston and Les Vozzo from West Wyalong High School. It is available ($5) from Kelso High School, Bathurst NSW 2795.

Youth Participation Projects: A Rationale For and Guide to Youth Participation Projects by Peter Cole, was published by the Advisory Services and Guidance Branch of VISE in 1981 (Occasional Paper No 3). It is still available free on request. It outlines a rationale for involving youth, a series of program elements or statements and then briefly documents a wide range of projects in schools.

In the area of radio, the *Ascolta Radio Group Report* of 1983 (Coyle and Holdsworth) is available from

PEP and the *1984 Report* is available from the Group at Moreland High School ($2 for postage). Both are substantial and detailed documents. Derek Holmes at 3RRR-FM (telephone: (03) 419 2066) is trialling material in schools towards production of a book, study guide or kit on radio in schools.

Videos

A list in *Connect* No. 32 provides a starting point for a comprehensive list of videotapes available about or in support of student participation. A couple of recent and notable examples outlined there are:

Seen and Heard - processes for students seeking to create change in school; includes outline of meeting procedures. Available from PEP or regional offices.

Girls Speak Up - part of a student forum in 1984 in the Western Metropolitan Region, attended by approximately 200 girls. Available from West Education Centre and Equal Opportunity Resource Centre.

People

In general, PEP regional consultants have been charged with the responsibility for supporting student participation in their regions. There are also other consultants and school council liaison officers who work specifically to assist student networks and encourage activities in schools.

In particular, the Student Action Project at West Education Centre works to develop and support student participation in the Western Metropolitan Region and to consult with and advise other groups throughout the State. PEP's Student Participation Officer works with central student networks (see below), with students on the PEP Committee and administers the PEP grants to student councils.

Sharing

Students have come together through cluster groups, PEP's schools reference groups and regional networks to share experiences, support each other and to represent students on Departmental committees, boards and so on. The most established group is again in the Western Metropolitan Region but active regional networks have formed in Northern, Eastern, South Central and Maroondah Regions.

At a State level, students are represented on various committees. Support is provided by the Student Advisory Group. Established at the end of 1984, this body will consist of four representatives from each regional student group. PEP funds have been made available for it to meet monthly to advise students on committees and to discuss and advocate issues that arise.

Inservice education activities and forum days are being held in several regions, either by individual schools or by groups of schools. These enable students to work together to define issues, to hear of activities and to design strategies. In other areas, students learn from each other by visits from one school to another.

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So that's my annotated list of issues. How about your list? Are there issues on it that I've not addressed? Probably. What will you do about them? What will you try? How will you make sure that students are brought into the discussion and action on these issues? How will you learn from your action? How will you enable students to learn?

Let me stress that there are no correct answers to this quiz. We're truly at the frontier. All we can do is to begin to try things and to share what we try and what we find out. After all, "if it hasn't been written, it hasn't happened".

ROGER HOLDSWORTH is Editor of Connect.