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# Beating Around the Bush: Reflections on the Theme

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The editors (Geoff Danaher, Beverley Moriarty, and Patrick Alan Danaher) of this special issue have chosen to draw attention to the rural/urban dualism and to provide a critique of its consequences in terms of our conceptualization of societies in general and of education in particular. They argue that this dualism is, in effect, a modernist/essentialist distinction. It is also seen that such binaries are flawed in practice: it is easy to say what is urban and what is rural, but a lot of geography and humanity exists in between and beyond. (Just where does the outback start in Australia?). This flawed binary between urban and rural also positions the rural as the negative (poor, unsophisticated, undeveloped) corollary of the urban (rich, sophisticated, developed). For me, there are echoes here of the equally problematic binary of developed/developing nations (Evans, 2003).

The editors' argument is basically sound and it serves to foreground important concerns for all educators and educational policy makers, not just those with a concern for education in rural or remote areas. However, I sense that the editors' critique is not without its own contradictions. There are two that I would like to pursue in this reflection on the special issue. I do so in the spirit of constructive dialogue.

One contradiction is that, notwithstanding the flaws of the rural/urban binary, it is not the case that the rural is always, even in education, positioned negatively and the urban positively. Indeed, urban dwellers are often accused of being overly sentimental or romantic about rural life: grassy meadows, grazing cows, fresh air, and frolicking lambs. The tourist industry encourages urban dwellers to 'get away from it all' and relax in some bucolic nook in the hills or forests. The urban in this sense is often portrayed negatively in terms of its pollution, crime, crowding, pace, and stress. The rural is constructed as a place of peace, rest, fresh air, and general well-being. It is interesting to note how declining rural communities are actively encouraged, and even aided by government, to develop a tourist and/or recreation industry or events to exploit these features in order to avert their social and economic decline (see Moriarty, Danaher, & Danaher, 2003).

In education, too, the rural may also be viewed positively. Elite private schools have their rural retreats, camps, or campuses. At least one Australian elite private school has most of its students spend a year living and studying at its rural campus. Other schools have excursions and camping trips as part of their curricula. Some parents drive or move to rural communities so their children can attend smaller rural primary (elementary) schools, rather than larger urban ones. Again the rural is positioned, in such circumstances, as educationally positive. We also see that, in the area of management education and company training, often a rural setting is seen as ideal for facilitating the sort of creativity, teamwork, and bonding that the organization requires.

Perhaps ironically, this contradiction illustrates the editors' thesis that dualisms cannot be taken too far, but it also applies to their assertions about rural being seen solely as the negative corollary of the urban. I emphasize that this is not to dispute the central thesis of the editors that the rural is usually positioned negatively in relation to the urban. As several of the authors in this special issue attest, there are real hardships and difficulties to be endured or overcome in the provision of good education to people in rural areas.

The second contradiction with the editors' position that I would like to pursue occurs within the issue itself. This is that, while the editors argue that their intention through this issue is to alter the negative views of rurality and rural education, many of the articles in the issue seem to perpetuate it. That is, they seem to make their contributions from a position that rural education is some kind of struggle against adversity. Perhaps the most obvious examples are the articles by Lucy Jarzabkowski (2003) and by Carmen Mills and Trevor Gale (2003). The former deals with how teachers in a remote school in an Aboriginal community construct a form of collegiality to help them survive; the other deals with the transience of teachers in/through rural communities. Both convey information that some/many teachers see the rural/remote contexts as negative. They have developed collegial strategies to cope with these or they have to endure teaching in such contexts for a short time as part of their career development.

The editors' position of not wishing to render rurality or ruralness as the negative other to the urban, therefore, seems not to be reflected in some of the articles in the issue. However, they do express the view that there are differences, and even contradictions, evident among the articles. This is good in my view as it leaves the readers to think things through for themselves. Allied to this is the editors' assertion that rural education is a site for educational innovation itself, and for innovations that may well have not occurred

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in urban areas. This may well be true, but it is difficult to think of innovations in education that cannot be viewed as examples of rural-urban reflexivity and collaboration. It seems to me to be a key point about understanding rural education, whether it is innovative or conservative. That is, rural educational provision is reflexively connected to urban educational provision. This reflexivity may lead to, or contribute to, a specific educational innovation or enterprise that is identifiably inspired and developed by rural people, so, in this sense, the innovation could not have occurred elsewhere. However, my view is that a forensic analysis of the causes and agents of the innovation will show considerable rural-urban interconnectivity (see also Moriarty & Gray, 2003).

Two examples may help. Adelaide Meithke, in 1945, used her position as South Australian Vice-President of the Royal Flying Doctor Service to solve the various technical difficulties leading to trial lessons for children going to air from Alice Springs in 1949. In this way she built the foundations for what was to become the Alice Springs School of the Air and its followers. It is important here to recognize that the origin of the Schools of the Air sprang from both understanding the educational needs of children in remote areas and the capacities of available technologies to help educators and others serve those needs. Indeed, it was based on the realization that the communications and transport equipment being used for the Royal Flying Doctor Service and the postal service could be used to help educate children in the bush. It is reported that the Reverend Doctor John Flynn, the founder of the Royal Flying Doctor Service, "as early as 1926 had expressed the opinion that there should be some way a two-way radio could be used to help children of the Inland with their schooling" (Gibb, 1986, p. 44). Following the promise which was evident at the trial, the first School of the Air was established at Alice Springs in 1951. (This school is now a tourist attraction for visitors from around the world who include it on their Central Australian itineraries!)

Meithke's vision was arguably fuelled by the possibilities of distance education that had emanated from the state governments of the day (in their state metropolises) needing to respond to the needs of rural people. Correspondence schooling was the bedrock of the Schools of the Air; in effect, the Schools of the Air were the tutors for the students of their metropolitan or regional city correspondence schools.

Another example is more recent. Interactive television (ITV) has also been used in open and distance schooling, for example by the Alice Springs and Katherine Schools of the Air using the Imparja television station, to teach students in remote locations. In Victoria, ITV—with satellite broadcast television and live talkback by telephone, or other forms of interaction by fax or mail—was made available to all Victorian government (and nongovernment) schools. This statewide system grew out of a rural schools ITV network which was used principally for teachers' professional development transmitted from the state capital, Melbourne. Evans, Stacey, and Tregenza (2001) have studied its use and development in Victoria.

These examples illustrate the complexity of rural-urban relations, technologies, and infrastructures that underpin innovative provision in rural (and other) education. This interplay appears to me to be comparable with the global/local interrelationships that the editors argue are at the forefront of challenges faced by rural and remote communities (and others). I have argued elsewhere (Evans, 2003) that the term *globalization* used in everyday discussion typically connotes international business and markets. Usually what are portrayed are the negative consequences of the practices of some global corporations and also their support, or lack of control, by political and business leaders in the host nation states. The reduction of manufacturing in some developed nations and its relocation to developing nations with cheaper labour costs and fewer controls over companies' business, environmental, social, and other activities are some of several (apparently inevitable) negative consequences of globalization that are conveyed through the news media. The relationship between these economic shifts and the decline/demise of many rural communities is probably well-known to readers of this special issue. However, as Daryl Nation and I have argued, globalization can be viewed much more generally (Evans & Nation, 2001, p. 242):

> [T]he origins of globalisation can be traced to the first endeavours of human societies to venture beyond their lands and shores to find and explore (and maybe, often to occupy, conquer and colonise) other places and peoples. The growth of transport and communications (and military) technology has aided the exploration and 'occupations' of the world. Not just in the relatively permanent sense of migration, but also in the sense of temporary incursions by business people, sportspeople, tourists and others. In their different ways they leave their 'footprints' on the local places, peoples and societies they visit. Each of these footprints can be seen as steps on the journey to what has been conceptualised as globalisation.

It seems that much the same sorts of points can be made about rural education, especially when forms of distance education are included. As the European settler societies pushed into new territories—in effect, constructing the new rural (and later industrial) areas—the establishment of the new communities required education for both the children and the adult population. As Bolton (1986, pp. 10-13) explains, it was the emerging democratic societies in the

colonial outposts of Australasia and North America which pioneered distance education in its earliest correspondence forms. For these societies, education was at the heart of both democracy and development, and people in the remote areas away from the major towns and cities needed to have forms of education available to them in order to be members of their democracy and to contribute to rural development. For example, primary school teachers were often placed in isolated primary schools with little or no training and then were required to complete their courses by part-time study at a distance. From as early as 1910 Australian education systems provided correspondence courses to enable teachers in remote areas to complete their qualifications at a distance. At about the same time—1909 in Victoria seems to be the earliest example—correspondence schooling was established to provide an education for children who were remote from primary schools. Nowadays, teachers use distance education for their professional development, regardless of whether they are in the rural and remote areas of new world societies or in the towns and cities of the old world.

The advent of the new information and communication technologies has contributed to what has been described by Giddens (1994) as a time-space compression which contributes to an intensified reflexivity of social life. In this sense, rural and remote education has never been more interconnected with the nonrural/remote world. This special issue is evidence of this as people from different parts of Australia, some of which are rural and maybe remote, come together to share ideas, arguments, and research on education. As was noted above, the editors argue that the rural/urban binary is highly problematic. It seems that the notion of remote is even more problematic in an era of globalization. Who is remote from whom? What place is remote and what is not? Maybe we are all able to be both remote and present in the virtual world?

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