

History and Ethos of the Wooden Boat school.

An Inaugural lecture to new diploma students for Orientation Week, 13 Feb 2001, delivered by John Young.

First of all, congratulations to all of you on two achievements:

- 1) Getting into this course - to do this you had to beat off some very good competition from people all over Australia and overseas. If we had a bigger shed, there were a lot of other applicants we would love to have had. We had a hard time making the choices we did; so you should know that you are the best of a very talented group of people.
- 2) Getting here. This was bad enough for mainland Australians at this time of the year, let alone for Brendan and Sarah, who had to make incredible journeys inside their own country (USA), and deal with bureaucratic problems before they could get on a plane. You've managed too, to find places to live in spite of the worst that the Tasmanian real estate industry could do to you. You've shown a lot of organisational ability in doing all this - and that is something that augurs well for your future as boatbuilders.

What lies ahead is a couple of years of collective as well as individual achievement.

By the end of the year 2002, whatever your present level of skill and experience, you will have built at least five boats between you, including a 30 foot ocean-going cruising yacht, to extremely high standards. And you will have repaired or restored several more.

Joining a group of complete strangers for a period of two years is a bit like setting off on a small boat to sail across an ocean. Once on the way, you can't change the crew. There is an element of risk, but when you get to where you're going, there's a great sense of achievement, and in retrospect it becomes a self-defining experience.

This week will be the start of that voyage, so I want to spend a few minutes giving you the background to where you are now. Then a few more minutes explaining a bit about the educational philosophy of the process you have got yourselves involved with.

Ruth and I came to Tasmania from South Australia in 1991, and started running boatbuilding classes for individuals; a "build your own dinghy" class was the first, taught by Adrian Dean. Then we ran more of them, for local schools, Huon Skillshare, the ancestor organisation of STEPS, and for local teenagers through Huon Valley Council, in our old shed down at Shipwright's Point, which is why the school still has that name. By 1993 we were getting a lot of enquiries from people who wanted to get a recognised qualification in wooden boatbuilding. Then one day, I think it was when we were building the little blue dinghy called Huon Rat with a group of local children, and someone sauntered into the shed, as they do. He turned out to be Bill Cromer, a man without whom there would be no school like this one today.

Bill Cromer is an idealist and he was enthralled by the sight of a group of Geeveston teenagers who had a reputation for leading troublesome lives, working hard and happily on a boat in which they could learn to sail when she was finished. He suddenly asked me if we could build him a 30 foot yacht - which in addition to small boat work, was just the sort of project we needed to include in a worthwhile professional course.

So in 1994 we made the decision to create your course which is based on a succession of increasingly demanding projects, and to get it accredited by the State Training Authority and nationally accredited as well. That year, the State government decided to sell or demolish the town of Tarraleah, built after World War II to house migrant workers who built the hydroelectric dams and power stations in the middle of the island. By 1994, the period of Hydro expansion was over.

This shed was originally the welding shed at Tarraleah. It came to Franklin in five truck loads and we put it up again just in time for our first Diploma students, who we recruited at the first Tasmanian Wooden Boat Festival in November 1994. They began their course in February 1995. Bill Cromer agreed

to fund the materials for his boat, *Lady Franklin*, and provide a full fee-paying scholarship for the best student applicant, Roger Bacon.

The other thing we needed was a range of specialist teachers. This was an opportunity to ensure that the traditional skills of Tasmania's best boatbuilders would be passed on to the next generation, so we employed Bill Foster and Adrian Dean who had both served their apprenticeships with the famous Jock Muir in the early 1950s. These two men took major responsibility for the construction modules, and set the standards which we have to live up to. Our external surveyor, John Lucas, makes sure that we do.

Then we added the diversity and intellectual depth of a full diploma course by asking specialists like Murray Isles, our naval architect, who teaches design and contributed with Ruth to the module on boatyard and financial management. Clive Crossley dealt with the metallic components of wooden boats. Ian Johnston taught fibreglass and epoxy technology. Peter Laidlaw taught a Module on green timber technology and assisted with clinker and carvel construction. I taught the construction of one of the 3 clinker dinghies in each course. Visiting lecturers from the Australian Maritime College taught engine installation, and Ian Doolan taught elementary sailmaking; and we were on our way.

To begin with the people in the Office of Vocational Education and Training were a bit alarmed by our proposal to focus a course around a real boatbuilding project, from lofting to launching, that would take up half the teaching time, instead of a series of exercises. They also needed persuading that there was a need, or even a place for a course that concentrated on traditional methods, using real wood rather than fibreglass, aluminium, or steel.

They were a bit surprised too, by Module titles like "The Wooden Boat in English Literature" and "Economics and the Environment in the Huon Valley." But the people who mattered did come to understand the holistic context for which our students would be prepared. They gave us a lot of help in fitting our educational ideas into the VET framework, and into the jargon which is based on a different idea of what good education is all about.

One of the major problems of Australian education in the last 20 years has been the assumption that economists, who have been elevated to the status of prophets, can forecast the future, and in spite of the repeated failure of their predictions, we continue to believe them.

So it has become the job of schools, universities, and technical colleges to prepare people for a future which turns out to be very different from the future we were led to expect. We were told by John Dawkins, the Minister for Education in the 1980s, that if we allowed industry to determine our educational priorities, then a better trained workforce would increase national productivity. This would stimulate economic growth so that unemployment would be reduced and we would all be better off. Australia has followed this policy, regardless of changes in government, for 15 years. So things should be pretty good by now.

But in fact the "trickle- down effect" has not worked. We were famously told by Bob Hawke, in 1987 that "By 1990 no Australian child will live in poverty" But in 1990 there were more children living in poverty than three years before, and the number continued to increase. Unemployment of 8% is now regarded as acceptable, and the target is 6%, and the range of income inequality is now about the same as it was a hundred years ago.¹

At the same time educational funding has been cut, especially to courses like English, foreign languages, pure science, philosophy, history, classics and fine art, because they are not seen as direct employment qualifications.

Educators, from infant schools to universities, are encouraged to interpret their task narrowly. The aim is to prepare people for the work force, and thus enable them to become servants of "The economy", rather than to provide a service to the students themselves, or to society.

The effect of all this is to separate the concepts of education and training. They do have different meanings. Training is about practical skills needed for specific purposes. It's what you do with plants that you want to train to grow the way you want. Education has more to do with enabling people to discover what

¹ Since this lecture was delivered more work on the expansion of inequality has been done. Thomas Pickety, author of *Capital in the 21st Century*, Harvard University Press 2014, has shown that levels of inequality have now reached the same as those which immediately preceded the French Revolution.

they are good at and want they want to do with their lives, and to provide support and leadership to enable them to fulfil their own ambitions. Under our present Governments, good education is likely to become the preserve of the financially well off, who can afford to go to the already wealthy private schools, which the Government will subsidise.

Training for service to the economy will become the task of state schools and the poorest church and private schools. Vocational training will compete for funds with education, and less time will be spent on education: on learning how to think critically and creatively and things like that. Rapid technological change means that the preferred model is no longer a combination of education and training, of theory and experience, in which skill, knowledge, and understanding are developed together. Instead we are encouraged to believe that a period of relatively shallow re-training every few years - learning new processes, or "competencies" as we have to call them, will give the economy the flexibility to remain competitive.

If we could be sure that this process was guaranteed to improve the quality of lives and the health of Australian society, it would be worth believing in it, but the record so far is not a good one. Our cities have a new underclass, and our rural communities are disintegrating.

One way to deal with these problems is through the political process, however limited the choices may seem to be. Another way is to attempt something different, however insignificant it may be, and see if it works. So what we have tried to do here in Franklin is to re-unite the concepts of "education" and "training", with the aim of providing different students with different pathways to solutions which enable them to fulfil their dreams and achieve their different ambitions. This course is designed to provide, on one hand, a form of education which includes an appreciation and analysis of the context in which interesting and self-fulfilling work can be created; a form of education which develops the intellectual qualities, practical skills, and communication skills which are needed to make the most of changing opportunities.

One of the problems we've inherited in Australia, from the English class system is the notion of a natural division between those who are academically capable, and those who are only good with their hands. These assumptions

often do become self-fulfilling prophecies, but my experience of 48 years of teaching, in schools, universities and right here in Franklin, is that things are not that simple.

A lot of people with good minds are good with their hands too, if they get a chance. People with good hands are often good thinkers too, while people who are truly hopeless at practical things are often hopeless in other ways as well. The trouble is that if we deny academic students the opportunity to be physically creative, and deny "trainees" the opportunity to become intellectually rigorous, we deprive society of talents we can't afford to be without.

So in our successful application for national accreditation of this course we said that what we were aiming for was the kind of educational experience that might remove the need for repetitive bursts of re-training, but enable students to continue to educate themselves in response to the unforeseen changes of the future. We said we thought that "competencies", or actually being able to do things, were essential, but they were not enough. We hoped to develop qualities as well; qualities like initiative, critical thought, ability to think ahead, care and honesty, aesthetic sense and confidence. I'm certain now, after the past ten years, that building boats from natural materials using traditional methods is an excellent means for the development of these qualities. Carvel and clinker construction, in which the skill and care of the builder is all that keeps the water out, are the most demanding, and at the same time, the most satisfying ways to build a boat. This is not to say there is anything wrong with other methods or materials. For some purposes they are superior, except that they are not renewable. But just as a grounding in classical Greek and Latin makes it easier to learn modern European languages, the classic ways of building boats will give you a foundation of skill and confidence for self-directed learning, and in other practical fields.

We have done our best to encourage diversity, including a diversity of teaching methods and messages, with the aim of helping you to develop your own philosophy and practice. You can select from the options and ways of doing things that you will be presented with, in the next two years. We also welcome your ideas and the fruits of your experience. This is a place in which everyone is learning, and we don't encourage the idea you sometimes find in old

boatyards, that knowledge is a secret, or the newer idea that knowledge is power and should be hoarded in a dog and bone fashion for individual advancement or advantage.

The boats you build are assessed externally, by professional marine surveyors, so while you are working you will be contributing to the qualifications which your colleagues will get as well as your own, and they will all be contributing to yours.

Detailed daily records are kept of your individual contributions, but the quality of the vessels you build will depend ultimately on how well you have learnt to co-operate with each other as well as your teachers.

However, we don't presume to provide a self-contained alternative to other kinds of education. For some of you this will be a first step in tertiary education, but most of you already have an extensive combination of tertiary education and life experience, and one of the most constant questions in your mind will be how this experience will add to your options for future employment.

The first thing to say is that there are no guarantees. You don't see many ads which say, "Wanted, Wooden Boatbuilder" and it's not likely that you will. This generation of wooden boatbuilders began almost from scratch in Australia, getting work doing repairs, and doing them better than the house carpenters and amateurs who kept the old wooden boats afloat towards the end of the last century.

But the global revival in wooden boatbuilding had begun in the 1970s with the launch of the American *WoodenBoat* magazine, which probably unintentionally fitted with the public disenchantment with the outcomes of the Vietnam war and the ideas of the Green movement in its early stages. The first edition of September/October 1974 included the advertisement,

"Re-Cycle *The WoodenBoat*. If you don't want to keep it, give it to a friend. If you can't find a friend, let us know. We'll find you one."

Volume 1 no.5 contains a letter by a reader who evidently understood the values behind the new movement.

My compliments! It's mighty refreshing to find an effort as obviously straight thinking as yours. I would offer you a passage you have doubtless committed to memory, from the New Testament:

Whatsoever things are true

Whatsoever things are honest

Whatsoever things are just

Whatsoever things are pure

Whatsoever things are lovely

Whatsoever things are of good report

If there be any virtue and if there be any praise

think of these things.

With best wishes for your health and happiness and prosperity for The WoodenBoat .²

For the young Australian men and women who found employment building replicas and sail training ships and restoring the heritage craft of Australia in the years leading up to the First Fleet re- enactment of 1988, this provided great encouragement, and *WoodenBoat* began to be sold in all of the Australian states and New Zealand. By 1991 the demand for professional training in many countries was well established, and wooden boat festivals began to be supported by governments as tourist attractions. The time was ripe. and Tasmania's wooden boat festival was our opportunity to take advantage of it.

Our students have gone on not only to running their own wooden boatbuilding businesses, but also working for established boatbuilders or undertaking further education in related or unrelated areas. Ned Trewartha, Adrian Phillips, Mark Singleton, Adam Cosic, Tim Ingham, Simon McCracken and Chris Burke have established their own boatbuilding businesses. In spite of the fact that the boatbuilding industry as such was not exactly screaming out for wooden

²St Paul to the Philippians, Ch4 v 8

boatbuilders. Mark Cooper, Cody Horgan, Nick Hocking and David Bugg are working for boatbuilding businesses. Mark Cooper has also begun a shipwright's course. Chris Burke and his partner, Pip Gowan have started a not-for-profit organisation, The Living Boat Trust, in Franklin. Chris, Jim Brooke-Jones and Ned Trewartha have all taught wooden boatbuilding within the School. Les Crawley has a job teaching wooden boatbuilding at a TAFE college in Albany, WA. Kat Edghill is restoring antique furniture in Canberra. Since 1992, 46 boats have been built at the School, including three ocean-going cruising yachts, *Lady Franklin*, *Atlas* and *Wild Honey*. We seem to have been instrumental in reviving an Australian wooden boat industry.

The other statement we have made about our educational philosophy is that it is "centred on the theme of ecological sustainability". I want to explain what we mean by this, and what it implies about the way we do things, in case you thought we put it in the prospectus just to sound generally high-minded.

Most of you will remember how the term "Ecologically Sustainable Development", or ESD, became a kind of mantra in the corridors of power in the late 1980s, following the publication of a United Nations work entitled "Our Common Future".

I've always thought that ESD was a good example of what George Orwell, the futurist of the 1940s, described as "doublethink", or "The power of holding two contradictory beliefs in your mind simultaneously and believing in both of them". Orwell said this would be a characteristic habit of mind by the end of the century.

It wasn't long before the full blown phrase began to be shortened to the tautology of "Sustainable Development" because people had begun to start thinking about what ecological sustainability actually means. Some politicians say that words "sustainable development" simply defy definition, so it's best not to worry about it and just get on with development. This is intellectually lazy, as well as convenient when you depend on the big industries and corporations for financial support. Ecological sustainability means the preservation of ecosystems, the relationships between soils, microbes, plants, climate and animals, including humans, so that they are mutually supportive, and will continue to be so indefinitely.

Another popular way of fudging the language is to assume that ecological sustainability means the same as environmental sensitivity. But there is an important difference. You can have degrees of environmental sensitivity. The Tasmanian Forest Practices Code, for example, prescribes how to take a bulldozer across a creek as close to right angles as possible. It says you mustn't clearfell forest on the crest of a hill, and it protects the habitats of endangered species and places of aboriginal cultural significance. This slightly ameliorates the enormous ecological damage of the clear-felling, burn and areal sowing of pines and Eucalypts after the mixed wet forests have been destroyed. But the concept of ecological sustainability is an absolute. You can't be more or less sustainable. You either leave the ecosystem in a condition which enables it to deliver the same services to all its member species indefinitely, or its ability to provide the same services to future generations is diminished. To put it in language which economists will understand, ecological sustainability is like living off the interest which is produced by the life forces of the planet, depending largely on the reaction of the sun with the materials which the earth is made of. Most development now though, is achieved by drawing on the capital of the earth's finite resources.

So long as you keep your capital intact, if you have enough, the interest will continue to support you, but if you use up your capital the time eventually comes when you will have nothing left to live on.

At the moment wooden boat building is far from being an ecologically sustainable activity. In the past it has been one of the main causes of the destruction of Tasmania's old growth forests, but it can be ecologically sustainable for the simple reason that timber is a renewable resource, and that evolution works by enabling species to reproduce themselves just beyond the level needed to maintain the *status quo*, so as to ensure healthy competition. So the single truckload of timber that we need every two years to deliver this course, for example, can come from the interest. In practice we depend, at present, on a lot of non-renewable resources as well as timber, but they can often be re-cycled. To be honest, real ecological sustainability is incompatible with modern industrial society, as long as it is possible for economic fundamentalists to manipulate the political process.

Changing the world for this generation may be a lost cause, but the local scale is a good setting in which to try to improve it, because at a local level, change becomes obvious fairly quickly, and lessons can be learned. So far the influence of the School and its students and of its offspring, the Living Boat Trust, on the fortunes of Franklin has been and will be very positive.

We can continue to work *towards* ecological sustainability by using resources carefully, avoiding waste, re-cycling as much timber as we can, and by emphasising the quality of what we do rather than the quantity of what we produce.

It buys time too, which we need to solve the real problems, of politics, economics and ethics which got us into this mess in the first place. But to have a significant impact we need to maintain evidence of consistency with our stated principles. So we want you to visualise the context in which you are going to be working and living as a series of concentric personal, local, regional and national environments. And this week we want you to become familiar with the first two of those, and the ways in which they are connected. We'll start with the shed and then we'll move on to the valley bioregion.

On Friday, Chris Burke and Peter Laidlaw are going to take you on a tour of the shed so you can make the best and most economical use of it over the next two years. It's a recycled building, partly because of ideological consistency, but also because it was cheaper than building a new one. Re-erecting it was a messy process at times, and it was an encouraging moment when a local person, newly conscious of Franklin's heritage value, complained to the Huon Valley Council that we were demolishing some historic building rather than putting it up.

It's a small shed for what you will be doing in it. Working here is a bit like living on a small boat with other people, and consideration and good manners towards each other are important. It's important to keep the shed tidy so as to work efficiently and enjoyably. We'll separate rubbish so as to be able to re-cycle it conveniently. We'll re-use timber as much as possible. The timbers you will use in the next two years cost between one and ten dollars a super foot, depending on their species, so we'll re-use off-cuts of planking as marking battens. We'll fuel the steam-box fire with unsuccessful efforts to steam ribs.

We'll use and re-use knotty timber to make moulds from. Bits of wood too small to use for building will go into the steam box fires or you'll take them home with you to keep you warm. Bits of wood that don't leave the shed as part of a boat should be used 2 or 3 times before they get burnt. That way you will maximise the value and minimise the cost of the whole project, and set an example of the wise use of resources for the tourists. Keeping the shed tidy saves time so it's always the School's policy to clean up the shed at the end of each day and put tools away in their proper places. That makes sure that everyone learns and remembers where everything is kept, and hours are saved by finding things in the right place rather than under a pile of shavings.

In the kitchen there are ten lockers underneath the seats and they are all exactly the same and they are there for you to keep your personal gear in.

I expect Lloyd Griffiths will have more to say about kitchen rosters and managing the site as a whole and I'll leave that to him, but I want to fill in the gap between your first enquiries to me or Ruth, over a year ago in most cases, and the sale of the School to STEPS, which is nearly complete, and which will enable the School to continue and improve beyond our own retirement.

I came to Tasmania from Adelaide in 1987 to take part in a conference on Environmental Politics, and when it was over I had time on my hands to take advantage of a cheap air fare on condition that I stayed for a week. So I borrowed a car and followed my nose down here at a time when Franklin was not looking at its best. The graffiti around the place provided some explanation of its depressed appearance. At Port Huon there was a sign, Crims of Port Huon, Cops can't catch us", and another read "Tourists Get Out". In Franklin paint was peeling from the houses, shop fronts were closed and boarded up to prevent them from vandalism and there was a slogan on the outside wall of the public toilets which read, "How will I laugh tomorrow when I can't even smile today". At this end of the town, on this side of the road, a row of timber cottages was being demolished in order to widen the road, and the verandah over the barber's shop was being demolished so that the log trucks wouldn't take it with them as they drove past. I later discovered that the Tasmanian Urban Areas Study had recommended, in 1978, that the town of Franklin was worthy of "Recorded" listing by the National Trust. This advice and other similar advice in 1983 had been swept aside in favour of removing the

impediments between the southern forests and the woodchip mill at Triabunna, 150 kilometres away. This left a barren ugly piece of waterfront land where we are now, covered with old bits of pipe and overgrown with weeds. It was still like that in 1994 when we put this shed up, but by then other things had begun to happen. The Franklin Progress Association decided in 1991 to rebuild the old wharf alongside the Franklin Evaporators, so that people would have somewhere to tie up their boats. Then they made a proposal to build a community boat harbour. That got built two years ago. Forestry Tasmania donated the blue gum piles, and the forest Industries Council donated \$38,000 for sawn timber and fastenings.

Ruth and I started looking for an organisation that could buy the School from us so that we could retire. Skillshare, the organisation that had worked with us in the early days down at Port Huon had by this time become STEPS, (Southern Tasmanian Employment and Placement Solutions Inc), and in 1999 they had appointed Lloyd Griffith as their manager of a Work for the Dole project for the restoration of the century old Palais Theatre, with support from Franklin Progress Association. After that they made successful joint grant applications with Franklin Progress Association to build the decking of the two jetties of the Boat Harbour.

Franklin was changing rapidly into a more desirable place to live, but there were some serious setbacks. Eighteen months after the piles for the harbour were driven, the first of them fell into the water and we discovered that many of them were infested with teredo worm. The only remedy was an expensive process of sheathing the piles with concrete. STEPS agreed to pay for this in return for ownership of the harbour.

The Progress Association agreed with that because STEPS was a community organisation governed by an honorary Board, and which existed for the purpose of facilitating community development. It seemed also to make sense for me and Ruth to sell the School to them, as it offered an opportunity to consolidate the renewal of the waterfront for the benefit of the local community.

Ruth and I knew from talking to you on the phone over the past 12 months, and seeing some of you from time to time, that you have particular

expectations of this course, based to considerable extent on the ethos that I have been talking about. And we are aware that though we can trust the individual people in charge of administration and teaching at this moment, an incorporated body has a legal life of its own, and the people in it can change. So we included, as a condition of sale, that the board of management should pass a resolution in favour of managing the school in accordance with a "Statement of Ethos", which we wrote, and that an advisory committee would be formed, with the responsibility of assisting the manager and his staff to implement the Statement of Ethos.³

So I am now confident that the School is in good hands. As a member of the Advisory Committee I look forward to helping its future development.

John Young.

³ The advisory committee held only one meeting that I know of and I was not told about any others. The course was replaced in 2002/3 by a Cert 3 course in Carvel construction. The school was sold in 2010 to Andy Gamlin, a co-founder of the Hobart Wooden Boat Festival. The centre delivered recreational boatbuilding courses and was re-named the Wooden Boat Centre Tasmania. It became a successful tourist destination and was sold again to a new organisation, Franklin Working Waterfront Association Inc in October 2014.