

**'Dumbing Down'**  
**Some Thoughts on a Phrase of our Time**

by **Don Aitkin**  
**Vice-Chancellor**  
**University of Canberra**

'Dumbing down' has a fine ring to it, the result of percussive alliteration reinforced with energetic direction. The term has interested me for some time, partly because of its novelty, partly because I wondered what had brought it forth, and partly because intuitively I rejected what I thought was its message. What follows is an essay on these themes, with a commentary on what seems to me to have happened in Australian education over the past fifty years.

It is plain at once that 'dumbing down' is a critical term: someone is doing something bad to someone else. What is happening, and who are the actors? While my first encounter with the phrase a year or two ago was Australian, the term has an American ring. The Internet is a great source for American catch phrases, but my search engine produced a truly embarrassing richness: more than 32,000 references. The first hundred of them, however, made clear what further search was only to confirm. The phrase is amazingly popular, but the stock of arguments is quite small. The positions and arguments are interconnected, and all of them possess sadness, nostalgia and a kind of bitterness or anger. I set them out in the order of descending generality.

The first is a strong critique of contemporary Western civilisation, whose people live in a 'moronic inferno' characterised by trivia, sensation-seeking and drugs. Problems are too hard, and people have retreated from trying to solve them into a kind of numbness. The system can be described as a 'dumbocracy', the rule of cleverness without wisdom, and its evils can be seen in all walks of life (see Ivo Mosley [ed.], *Dumbing Down. Culture, Politics and the Mass Media*, 2000).

The second is a version of this position that excoriates the mass media and finds them wanting and therefore responsible. According to critics in this domain, television, radio and the newspapers have abandoned serious news and challenging artistic programs for a safe, sugary 'infotainment' world that does not offend advertisers and keeps viewers/listeners/readers in a mentally dormant condition. Movies are similarly dumb, because they're made for dumb moviegoers who get restless if they are asked to see anything challenging. Museums are becoming dumb because the interactive and digital accompaniments designed to attract people actually inhibit thinking.

The third provides the 'design' of this state of affairs. Charlotte Iserbyt's *The Deliberate Dumbing Down of America* points the way. Here the plotters are 'reformists' and do-gooders who have interfered with the American education system, replacing rigour with warm, fuzzy and mushy stuff. She is not alone. Similar critiques abound, though not all the plotters are seen to be on the left. There is a strain of anti-capitalist, anti-corporation sentiment in all this, too, the argument being that corporations simply want a nation of docile consumers, and

the deplored changes to the education system are intended to achieve such an outcome. Another group thinks that it is governments who are responsible, because they want to regulate everyone, and are therefore interested in people not being able to make decisions for themselves.

The fourth provides particular contexts for such a general attack. Teachers don't have 'real' learning to acquire any more, but are fed courses on 'diversity'. Widening access (to schools, colleges, universities, professions) must lead to a decline in quality. Sermons in church are now soft and mushy, and congregations are not forced to think and reflect. Fewer Americans are able to converse in other languages, or to count, or to undertake physics, or to do whatever the critic thinks is important. More people believe in the healing power of crystals, pyramids, copper bands, and so on and fewer in real medicine (or in God's word).

The fifth is a specific attack on what are seen as falling standards, the cause or root of the changes already referred to. Any example of a new standard is likely to be attacked as a 'fallen' standard, and to be an example of dumbing down. In a splendid British example, a slight increase in the proportion of A-level results in high school exit examinations was seen as a disaster by critics (an obvious sign that standards had slipped) and as a great success by defenders (an obvious sign that standards were rising).

The sixth is about the decline of skill, and is reminiscent of Harry Braverman's lament in *Labour and Monopoly Capital. The Degradation of Work in the 20th Century*. What makes this theme most interesting is that the skill being highlighted is computing. There are continuing debates about the cost in skill utilisation of so-called 'user friendly' personal computers, continued exposure to which is said to lead to a loss of programming skills. How dumb does a web-site have to be to attract sufficient hits to make it worthwhile, asks a complainant in an adjacent field of endeavour. No one wants to have to do hard work any more, a lament echoed elsewhere in these conversations.

Australian references appear from time to time, and by adding 'Australia' as a descriptor you can find them all together. By doing so you lose much of the paranoid flavour, and of course the plainly American material. There's nothing about UFOs, either. (For those who don't immediately see the connection, it is claimed that governments have dumbed down the population so that they don't ask about unidentified flying objects, preferring to believe government reassurances that there aren't aliens, UFOs and the like.) A striking characteristic of the Australian material is the frequency with which 'dumbing down' appears in the sub-head or title of the article or story, even though it was not a major element in the text. My guess is that sub-editors find it a catchy phrase to use, and employ it even when the main message is about something else.

One Australian example deserves fuller attention, because it illustrates well what is involved in so much of this critique. The article, 'The Dumbing Down of Australian Professions', by Padraic P. McGuinness, appeared in the *Sydney Morning Herald* on 15 April 2000. It begins 'Why are our teachers so stupid?

Why are our doctors so silly?' These opening questions are not followed, as you might expect, by examples of stupidity or silliness; that is simply taken for granted. The explanation offered by McGuinness is the democratisation of tertiary education started by R. G. Menzies in the 1950s, which produced the first great wave of expansion in higher education, and the indifference of the Whitlam Government to quality control, which took the brakes off thereafter. Once upon a time teaching 'creamed off the best of the working-class and poor school students, and for some time we had what was probably one of the best teaching services in the world'. Now what we have are 'tenured mediocrities and failures' in our schools and universities, and 'a medical profession full of academically intelligent but ill-educated, ill-read and bored GPs'.

I would agree that this is not Paddy McGuinness at his best, but the article exemplifies a good deal of the material that appears under the heading of 'dumbing down'. To begin with, there is no evidence or example of the failings being criticised. It is as though it is all so obvious that there is no need to do anything other than utter the magic words. (In fact, McGuinness does not use the phrase 'dumbing down' in the body of his text; its use in the title may well be the work of a sub-editor.) In none of the articles that I have read has there been any worked-out account of the process through which a society is supposed to have become dumbed down. The argument is rarely more than 'Once that, now this. Woe!' And of course the decline is usually somebody's fault.

Next is a firm assumption, or set of assumptions, about the way the world really is or ought to be. Such assumptions usually have to be inferred, because they too are not spelled out. In McGuinness's case what we see is the old IQ assertion: only a small proportion of the community is intelligent enough to benefit from high school or university education. Any expansion of the system must reduce quality, because there aren't enough 'bright' people to do the work that only such bright people can do.

A partner of this assumption is the view that life is tough, and that education systems should reflect this reality. Charles Sykes's *Dumbing Down Our Kids* contains a set of rules for life that have been widely circulated by fax and email. Some of them are:

- |        |   |
|--------|---|
| Rule 1 | Life is not fair; get used to it.   |
| Rule 2 | The world won't care about your self-esteem. The world will expect you to accomplish something before you feel good about yourself...   |
| Rule 4 | If you think your teacher is tough, wait till you get a boss. He doesn't have tenure...   |
| Rule 8 | Your school may have done away with winners and losers but life has not. In some schools they have abolished failing grades, they'll give you as many times as you want to get the right answer. This, of course, bears not the slightest resemblance to anything in real life. |

The McGuinness piece also lacks much sense of time or any sense of scale. Yes, he does refer to a past and describes it. To be fair to him, the great majority of the articles I've read did not — it was assumed that we all knew about that. It is not obvious from the article, however, that McGuinness thinks it important that the Australia of 1947 contained 7.5 million people, that of 1982 had 15 million, and that of today has passed 19 million. Wouldn't these increases have had an effect? Was no expansion of education necessary? It's as though societies are static, or frozen.

I don't really need to defend Australia (or the USA or Britain) from the charge that it is dumber than it used to be, and/or that some named or nameless persons have accomplished such an outcome or are endeavouring to do so. A few minutes' thought, and some comparison with the past, will make such a proposition implausible if not preposterous. *The Guardian* (London) devoted three issues to the proposition in November 2000 and came to the conclusion that it was simply rubbish. The reverse was true: society was 'clevering up', and if this was a problem to 'the angry old men of the dumbing down debate' (Madeleine Bunting, *Guardian*, 13 November 2000), they would just have to get used to it.

Yet it does seem to me to be worth trying to understand what is being assailed, and why, and what can be said about it. I can remember taking my youngest child to a parent-teacher night for kindergarten in 1987 and discovering myself in a fight between the tough-minded and the tender-minded about what school was really for. These are matters about which people do feel strongly, and about which Ministers inevitably have to form views. Not only that, people who have invested a lot of time and effort in something expected to get a return for it: if you are a programmer, for example, user-friendly machines may well make you feel that your livelihood is imperilled.

Let me set out the educational expansion of the last fifty years or so in Australia as factually as I can, and then reflect what meanings may be derived from it all. At the end of the second world war most Australian children did not complete high school, and only a very small proportion (2 per cent of my age group in 1954) went to university. High schools were relatively scarce, and staffed for the most part by teachers who had university degrees in the areas they professed. Those schools were also highly disciplined, teachers had authority and status within their communities, not simply in the classroom, and pupils wore uniforms prescribed by the school, whether they were in public, Catholic or Protestant schools.

Today the university system is twenty times larger than it was; there is a high school in almost every Australian town, a little more than 70 per cent of children complete high school, which is not as disciplined an environment as it once was, and most Year 12 students expect to go to university. Three engines drove the expansion of tertiary education. The first was the need to increase skill levels in the workforce. The second was political pressure from parents wishing their children to have a more enjoyable working life than the one they knew (and reasoning that education was the necessary escalator). Third, and not least, was

the outsourcing of professional training by the professions and the highly skilled white-collar occupations from the workplace to the university. Human knowledge (that is to say, what academics define as 'knowledge') has multiplied around fifty times since the end of the second world war. Specialism abounds. There is a continual cry for a new breed of generalists and synthesisers, but it is vastly more difficult to be a generalist in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century than it was in the early 20<sup>th</sup>. There is just so much more to know and more to synthesise.

These broad changes have led to others at the more personal level. For example, today's children can expect to spend most of the first thirty years of their lives in serious education. There is just so much more to learn. Most of the occupations that people have today did not exist in 1947, and most of the occupations people had in 1947 no longer exist or have been radically transformed. The school curriculum is actually rather more conservative than the workplace, but it too has undergone great change. Today's young women will on average have their first babies at 27, and will have only 1.7 of them. The generation of 1947 was more fecund and started baby production earlier. Divorce was difficult and uncommon in 1947; it is neither today. The churches were much more powerful in 1947, there was much more of a single morality, at least in public, and Australia was a much more solidary, ethnically homogenous society. Not everyone liked this latter state of affairs. Some left Australia altogether because of what they saw as intolerance and an excessive need for conformity. Others became rebels. Others worked hard to push society's norms into a more progressive stance.

It should not be surprising that some people find not to their taste the changes from then to now (and the counterpart changes in the USA and Britain). It should be no less surprising that some people will find today's society and its context more threatening than the earlier society that they remember. I would generally agree with those who argue that today's Australia lacks a sense of purpose or mission comparable with that of the 1950s and 1960s, and I think that missing element does affect the attitudes of many young people to life. The urge to condemn, and to construct a 'decline and fall' picture, will for some people be a strong one. I could construct one myself if I let go of my historian's feeling for balance. I could, for example, complain that no one these days seems to know how to use the apostrophe properly, whereas in my day we were taught the parsing and analysis of English sentences and exactly when and where to use the apostrophe. What on earth has happened to language, I could thunder. What do the schools think they're doing? And so on.

But balance reminds me that only the A classes gave much attention to the niceties of English grammar and syntax, and that we (I include Paddy McGuinness here, much my age and no less well educated) made up a small proportion of a small proportion. I need to remind myself that around half of the Australian people today were either born overseas or are the children of parents, one of whom at least was born overseas. English is a second language for many of them, and the English language is itself evolving. I would be prepared to wager that most people in my days didn't know where to put the apostrophe either, but they did not have to use written English much in their jobs, so they

weren't caught out. Maybe the apostrophe is on the way out. The Germans use a final 's' as a possessive, as we do, but they don't use an apostrophe to separate it from the noun. Whatever else has happened in the last fifty years, there is no doubt that much greater proportions of Australians communicate within our society than was once the case, in text as well as in pictures.

If I return to the themes at the beginning of this essay, I have to say that I thought that the expansion of education would have had a much more powerful beneficial effect than it appears to have had in the areas of radio and television. Parents today worry about the evil effects of television; mine were adamant that comics would rot our minds. On the bright side, Newspapers are a lot better than they were in the 1950s, and having around 3 million university-educated people in our population has raised the general levels of discussion, argument and confidence of public debate. If you don't think so, I invite you to read the Hansards of the early 1950s or the newspapers of that time. Nonetheless, there is still a good deal of the 'bread and circuses' mentality in our culture. I wish there wasn't as much as there is, but I balance against it the wonderful advances there are in music, the creative arts, theatre and literature.

Like the critics, there are times when I want to argue that it is time that people accepted that hard work generally precedes lasting success and achievement. When I say such things I have to avert my eyes from the people who make lots of money by pushing other money around, or by owning companies that exploit a monopoly situation of one kind or another. There are times when I want the acceptance of responsibility rather than the demand for rights. And there are times when I wonder whose fault it is that Australia is not the way I would like it to be, and who allowed it to get this way. I don't go far down this track because I can see that it is the generation of my parents and the generation of which I am a part (and indeed Paddy McGuinness is a part), to which much of the blame has to be levelled for whatever shortcomings are seen.

So I look at the brighter side, the sheer exuberance, curiosity, tolerance, creativity and hard work of contemporary Australia, and reflect that maybe we didn't do so bad a job, all things considered. Because I work in the education business, I know quite a lot about changes in curricula, the entry into the university of new professions, like medicine in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and education in the early 20<sup>th</sup>, and law finally becoming respectable by sidelining the admission boards, and accounting making it in, and then nursing, and computing and tourism and public relations; even journalism. There'll be new professions as the new century advances, and people will sneer about them too.

There are those who argue that today's nurses don't know how to fluff a pillow, or that today's journalism graduates don't know how to make it in the real world, or that today's doctors are over-trained, or that those who can do and those who can't teach. 'Twas ever thus. One of my tasks for the Leaving Certificate in 1953 was to work my way through Cicero's *De Senectute*, a reflection on old age written by Cicero in his last years. I don't recall the Latin now, and couldn't translate it, but Cicero knew a thing or two. One wise observation of his was that life was always better some time ago, and another

that sooner or later people told you as great discoveries things that you had known when you were young. Reading about dumbing down reminded me that I did get something of substance from all those long periods in Latin.

And that takes me to standards. I'm actually glad that I learned Latin, because I became a writer, and Latin (along with the French and German I learned at the same time) has been very useful to me as a writer of English. But I couldn't suggest that because it was good for me it should be compulsory for everyone else. It once was, of course. It was the basis of entrance into university. Once any writer of quality would quote from the Bible and expect his readers to recognise the reference. At another time writers would interrupt their flow with a bow to 'the immortal Bard/the poet/the blind singer' and put down a couplet. Again, they knew their readers would know whom they meant and why it was relevant. Do that today and no one much would know what you were talking about. That is not because standards have slipped, but because each generation has its own canons, icons and reference points, and their status changes all the time.

University campuses echo with the laments of falling standards. I can remember Henry Rosovsky telling us in the late 1970s that the proportion of A grades in Harvard College had doubled since 1945. The inference was that standards had slipped. But maybe the students of the 1970s worked harder. I'd be prepared to bet that the students of today do. In any case, Howard Gardiner's powerful *Frames of Mind* (1983 and many later editions) gave me the neurophysiological and educational explanation of why it was that all my life I had seen the numbers of people going to university increase and labour there successfully. The truth is that we are all intelligent, across a number of dimensions (Gardiner says 8 1/2), and it is love, encouragement, motivation and preparation that distinguish us in the ways we benefit from our native gifts. Those who see dumbing down around them need to read Gardiner, but it is a fair bet that they haven't and won't.

Entering students aren't prepared as well as they used, to be in mathematics, or physics, or English, or history, or whatever, comes another complaint. Built into this lament is the assumption that schools are there to prepare students for university. I used to think so too, but now I see that outcome as just one of the tasks schools are expected to undertake. My father, a maths teacher in high school for much of his working life, once pointed out to me that there were just so many hours in the school day, and if I wanted something inserted into the curriculum I would need to suggest what should be dropped. Some of the critics of dumbing down have a ready answer: 'Concentrate on the three Rs!' they will cry. Every now and then, looking at yet another poorly spelled sign or an advertisement with an 'it's' horribly rendered, I sympathise. But we're long past that.

The schools have to fit into the curriculum a lot that wasn't there in my day. I went to good high schools and was well taught in them, but I learned no Australian history and no social science of any kind, my history stopped at 1900, computing skills were unheard of, we did virtually no oral work at all except in

languages, we knew nothing about the world, and learned nothing at all about sex save behind the dunnies (and that was in parts ludicrously incorrect). Preparation for work? You're joking. We were streamed at an early age, and the choices were final and exclusive. Once you were on the science side or the arts side that was that, and streaming started at about age 12. Today's schools have an unenviable job, because apart from everything else they have become the dumping place for the education that children used to get (or not get) at home but for which today's busy parents do not have time. But in 2002 we have a lot more choice. Not only do kids have much more choice than was once the case, but so do their parents. There is a much greater variety of schooling contexts available today than there ever used to be. If you want it, it's there somewhere.

To insist that there are defined standards and that everyone must abide by them is a fine piece of arrogance, one that assumes the standards preferred by the speaker must be those chosen by any right-thinking person. In fact, the diversity of our society and the increased levels of confidence possessed by its citizens mean that there is considerable diversity in the standards preferred by them. I would agree that if there is too much diversity then it may be hard to see what holds our society together other than propinquity. But a single set of standards is a cast back to the kind of totalitarian regimes that the great majority of those opposed to dumbing down would reject at once. I'm afraid that diversity rules, OK?

Finally, there is the worry about de-skilling, the dumbing down of the workforce, and the loss of knowledge. Braverman saw the Taylorist mode of industrial production as having denuded craft workers of their skills and created an unskilled working class that was alienated and without pride. But in industry after industry, most notably the automobile industry, robots are replacing the workers who knew only how many wheel nuts to screw on and how quickly to perform that task. Today's workforce is all about skill, and the investment in workers is many times what it used to be. One consequence is that there are fewer workers in industry, another that hardly won skills do not have the shelf life they once had. The flight engineer who monitored the four propeller-driving engines of the DC-6 and the Constellation had only a fifteen-year career. Jet engines, simple and reliable, replaced the old radials, and they required no engineers or monitoring. The shift from the large mainframe to the desktop PC displaced thousands of skilled workers, and the shift from the PC to the pocket-sized Palm and its counterparts will displace thousands more. My guess is that any serious study of skills and deskilling over time would show that the process of de-skilling and re-skilling is one that all human societies have known. There are more or less humane ways of controlling the process, but the notion that we can somehow prevent it seems almost ludicrous to me.

There seems to be no end to the technological changes to which we are subject, and all of them mean that we have to keep on refining our knowledge and learning new skills. To do so all the time is tiring and frustrating, but it can also be stimulating and a continued affirmation of life. Of course, there is an alternative. We can sit on our little pile of accumulated knowledge, pretend that

it's everything, and cry 'dumbing down!' about the others when we see ourselves being passed by. That seems pretty sad to me.