

 (Re)Presentations

by Elaine Butler

---

**Adult Learning Commentary, Number 26, 4 October 2000**

'What an extraordinary few weeks it has been.

Last Friday night, I watched the Opening Ceremony of the 27th Olympiad, quite alone, yet conscious of being a very small digit in this MVE (mass viewing event). I was hooked. In this choreographed package was a huge group of community and performing arts members, volunteers, paid performers, technicians from a vast range of specialisations, children, community groups, stars and idols, a few animals performing representations that 'said' all the things our government has either refused to, fudged or belittled in so many ways. Public/global acknowledgment of indigenous histories and cultures; of a prevailing ethos for reconciliation; depictions of 'place'; Captain Cook on his bike, at last. Of industrialisation and of labour; of parochialism and larrikinism; of multiculturalism, and of possible futures. A metaphoric and embodied celebration of women. A fragile and fleeting coming together of a divided and fractious world through sports and spectacle, daring us to make of it what we would.

Almost concurrently, there was another MVE - the World Economic Forum (WEF) in Melbourne. This MVE was preceded by a media and politically orchestrated frenzy different from that of the Olympics. Here were speculations of 'trouble' and 'un-Australian' behaviour, stories of social movements and school children (young adults) being seduced into a polyglot mysterious non-located protest movement (S11), alongside considered stories of the 'world leaders' and 'global visionaries' visiting Australia, and the benefits to flow from this gathering (at the Crown Casino). The MVE held few surprises, and many disappointments - clashes between (brave/brutalising) police and (unruly/peaceful) protestors, as the powerful few were temporarily disrupted in their attempts for a seamless transition from vehicles(public space) to casino security (private space). Suits and ties; casuals and masks, both jostled by cameras and also separated by uniforms and self-interests. The spectacle of two worlds, lacking any kind of shared language or values - those 'inside' the Casino, and those outside, was evident, in the televised coming together of both, and in on-going print and radio media commentaries.

Though the two events appear disassociated, there are connections. Both are about global power, individual privilege and very big money. Both brought together individual passions and commitments, of competing ideological frameworks. Both were major public 'education' events, of high interest to local/global media consortiums, governments and big business and also to individuals and communities. Both challenge our ideas of what it means to 'be' Australian, and how, why and by whom Australia is

(re)presented globally. Both events involved education and training, specifically and generally. The place and time of the WEF meeting was no coincidence. The size (and predominant skin colours) of the various national teams as they marched into the Homebush Olympic Stadium represented vividly the politics associated with access to wealth and privilege, histories of colonialism and migration, opportunity, stability, and so local-global positionings. Sponsorship, not just of the Olympics, but of individual athletes and selected sports, is a story of transnational capitalism. Both events brought the (electronic) world into two Australian cities, and took the cities to 'the world'. Both (re)presented 'Australia'.

Paradoxically, it was expatriate Australian President of the World Bank (and previous Olympic athlete) James Wolfensohn's challenge for education and educators, that links both MVEs overtly with education and training. As reported in *The Age*, Wolfensohn, in Sydney for the Olympics, 'urged Australia to take the initiative in setting up a global education network' as 'a revolutionary foreign aid network to develop programs that would offer millions of people in developing countries education and wide ranging skills training', using a community focused approach.

This (oh so familiar) twist in the story takes me back to something I've been musing on for quite some time. My own unsettled understandings about what it means, to 'learn', and to be an 'educator' are continually being challenged by the fluidity, pace, instabilities, in-your-face demands and brashness of this late modern era and its contradictory mass of selective opportunities and opportunistic politics. Ironically, I think that it is the many versions of these hybridising neo-liberal politics that also 'connect' those of us engaged in education activities, whether as teachers or learners.

And further back, to so much of my own educative work. It highlights the continuity of old stories in new guises, of the possibility for a transformed local/global politics of ethics and pedagogies. But - individually and in our own communities, we are the ones who can shape our own (re)presentations and so realities of what it means to educate, to learn, to teach. Or we can let others do it for us.