

THE SHARING OF LIGHT

BY NICHOLAS SAMPSON



Moving into our new facilities at Bellevue Hill has been a joyous process. The whole community has worked hard to bring into reality an ambitious and complex plan to re-engineer our campus from within: of course, we could not cease operation whilst the largest development in the history of the School took place, but we were asked to adapt, to demonstrate resilience and patience and to uphold community spirit throughout the period of construction. All of these tasks, daunting in themselves, were complicated by the further restrictions imposed by the pandemic. All in all, the School underwent three years of challenge, and a period of three years represents a major portion of a student's journey through School.

THERE HAVE BEEN significant consequences from this period, more from the pandemic than from construction: the loss of face-to-face interactions deprived our students of some of the important experiences and processes which build awareness, empathy, character and destiny. In America, Pew research has found that 72% of parents of children in grades K-12 say that their children are spending more time on screens compared with before the outbreak. Studies have found that internet-based addictive behaviours intensified throughout the Covid lockdowns.

The pandemic has led to an inevitable surge in the use of digital technologies due to social distancing norms and nationwide lockdowns. People and organisations all over the world have had to adjust to new ways of work and life. Video calls and conferencing have become a part of everyday living. However, technology can be a useful tool but a terrible master. Digital interactions can only do so much as a substitute for in-person communication.

Building humane connections is at the heart of a liberal education.

Renaissance humanism was born in the Middle Ages out of crisis. This was not just a political crisis, a crisis of legitimacy, as the Holy Roman Empire and the papacy battled for supremacy. It was also a crisis of education, a realisation that the "narrow pedantry" of entrenched scholasticism was not enough.

This was a new educational programme variously referred to as the *studia humanitatis*, *bonae litterae*, *litterae Humaniores*. Under the influence and inspiration provided by rediscovery of the classics, humanists developed a new rhetoric and new learning. The *studia humanitatis* widened the curriculum, including the study of grammar, rhetoric, poetry, history, and moral philosophy based on the reading of classical Greek and Latin authors. Scholar Jennifer Summit writes that humanists who taught the *studia humanitatis* had both idealistic and practical goals: to build character through liberal learning and "to prepare their students for a new world of massively expanded literacy and immense complexity, where the skills of communication, interpretation, and negotiation of practical ethical problems were of paramount importance."

WE ARE NOT DOING our children any favours if we allow them to depend upon their devices. We are not helping them if they are left to form the majority of their views and understandings of the world, and of other people, through secondary sources, through entertainment, through technology and through screens. Writer Andy Crouch notes that technology is

good at expressing, amplifying, or distributing the fruits of human capacities, but what it is not good at is forming human capacities — it is not good at actually making us into the kind of people who have something worth expressing.

This is why the role of education is essential. John Dewey wrote that the business of education "might be defined as an emancipation and enlargement of experience." Last year's UNESCO report on education, *Reimagining our Futures Together*, sees education as "the foundation for the renewal and transformation of our societies," mobilising knowledge to help us navigate a transforming and uncertain world, connecting us with the world and others, "to move us beyond the spaces we already inhabit, and to expose us to new possibilities."

At Cranbrook, we are determined to make a conscious effort to recover this loss through powerful, consistent messaging in assemblies, through external addresses and by restoring high expectations with regard to personal encounters. Incidental conversations are so vital to the health of our community: inter-generational exchanges are a vital component within our desire to promote civility, self-belief and share confidence. Young people need to be noticed, at least, and, preferably, to be known: they light up when they are engaged with, particularly when the person taking an interest in them is senior to the them.

CENTRAL TO THIS IS THE VOCATION of our teachers. They have a powerful and invaluable part to play in this elevation of contact and communication. UNESCO's *Reimagining our Futures Together* states that teachers need to be "recognised for their work as knowledge producers and key figures in educational and social transformation." Teaching is not just a job: it is a high calling. As a society this is a topic we should take seriously as Australia and other countries around the world face an emerging teacher shortage. May there be an increased respect, and increased resources, put towards this most critical, difficult and fulfilling role.

And of course, building a strong community for our children also involves the vital role of members of our support staff and older students and alumni. Only connect!

We, therefore, look at the past year with a mixture of relief and gratitude. We are relieved that the worst of the pandemic seems to be over and that the unglamorous and testing business of constructions has brought an uplifting and transformative range of outstanding educational facilities, and possibilities, into being. We give thanks for the gifts, talents and drive of benefactors, architects, builders and planners whose faith in, and commitment to, the project have illuminated our futures and strengthened this distinctive, liberal and expansively humane School. ■