

Biochemical Education

Graham Parslow

The seminal year was 1989 – the Gold Coast meeting of the Australian Biochemical Society. The meeting, held in the surrounds of Jupiter's Casino and the Conrad Hotel, had an air of professionalism that was distinct from the long ABS tradition of hopping between lecture theatres at universities. Lubert Stryer was there to present a talk titled *Biochemical Education: Challenges and Prospects*. In 1975 Stryer had arguably written the first biochemistry textbook that students could read and understand, with pictures making a substantial contribution. The novelty of the Stryer text, and wide adoption, made Stryer a multimillionaire and heralded the age of tertiary teaching as a professional business.

University teaching in Australia was approaching the end of an era of teaching in the traditional British manner of a remote professor and humble students taking the role of passive recipients. My Honours supervisor Leigh Burgoyne was twice evicted from lectures by Professor R.K. Morton in 1962, for not wearing a tie. An incredulous new generation might consider this incident as illustrative of an era that ended relatively recently.

The current widespread surveys of students to determine quality of teaching is almost entirely a phenomenon of the last decade. The textbooks were changing to become more visual and students were changing to expect more than stolid texts plus chalk and talk. The widely adopted, highly visual, *Biochemistry* textbook by Don and Judy Voet was written in 1989. Personal computers in the 1980s were rarely networked and had low graphic capability, but several Australian biochemistry departments in a pioneering spirit had substantially applied computer teaching to extend learning. It is probably more accurate to say that in most cases certain individuals, inspired by the new technology, were taking their departments along with them.

Joining with Lubert Stryer, the Australians who contributed to the very first formal ABS Biochemical Education symposium in 1989 were Philip Kuchel, Rob Learmonth, Brian Shanley, Bob Gerdes and myself. After two millennia of didactic teaching there was a widespread novel sense of excitement and challenge to the practice of teaching. We held an inaugural meeting in 1989 of around 30 interested delegates at the Gold Coast conference and thus ABS's first Special Interest Group (SIG), the Biochemical Education Group was born. I chaired the Group for the first four years and subsequent chairs have been Rob Learmonth, Tony Dawson, Gareth Denyer, Susan Hamilton and Irene Stanley.

In 1988 Ted McMurchie had inherited the editorship of the *ABS Newsletter* from Mick Gould and was intent on introducing articles to add genuine reading value to supplement the house-keeping notices that had been the standard fare. Ted approached me to write the first article for the new format *ABS Newsletter* of February 1989, entitled 'Biochemical Education – an Emerging Priority'. Ted continued to include contributed articles on education in most of his issues of the *ABS Newsletter*.

The introduction of new technologies to teaching, and the recognition of teaching as a worthy contribution to

the business of universities, is now so much advanced that it seems surreal to think that they needed to be deliberately fostered only a decade ago. The elevation of the value of teaching activities is still a challenge of course, but the nature of the challenge has changed.

At the time of its formation, the Biochemical Education Group adopted five main aims: organising thematic symposia at ABS conferences; sponsoring distinguished biochemical educators to share their experiences; making regular contributions to the *ABS Newsletter*; sharing and developing resources in print, computer, video and audio media; promoting awareness of careers in biochemistry and science.

A labour of significant magnitude was the surveying, collation and publishing of a report titled 'Computer Assisted Instruction in Biochemistry 1991' based on answers from Australian universities. The editors of this report were Peter Towns, Bruce Livett and myself. The Biochemical Education Group sponsored contributions at ABS conferences by overseas guests Frank Vella (Canada) in 1991, Janet Carrington (New Zealand) in 1992 and Andrew Booth (UK) in 1996. A highlight was the first Australian Workshop on Biochemical Education held at the Melbourne Zoo in October 1992, organised by myself and Bruce Livett. With additional sponsorship from the IUBMB the overseas presenters were Ed Wood (UK), Frank Vella (Canada) and Alan Mehler (USA). The majority of the talks given in Biochemical Education Symposia at the Society's conferences have, however, been by Australian contributors, thereby acknowledging the commendable zeal and initiative of our own home-grown educators.

In the words of Frank Vella, "We should perhaps cover less in our courses while uncovering more."

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Ed Wood (UK), Graham Parslow, Judy and Donald Voet (USA) – Education Workshop participants at the FAOBMB meeting in Bangkok, 2004. The inclusion of a section on education has become common in international and local conferences as a relatively recent trend.