## Edited Interview with Oliver Deacon

Introduction:

This edited summary is based on an interview with Oliver Deacon, held on 2 February 2023. In response to the question “How did you come to work at Mount Lawley” Oliver’s reply focused on his early education, his wide range of practical experience in primary and secondary schools, TAFE college and the Publication’s Branch of the Western Australian Department of Education. His thoughts emphasised the importance of on-the-job classroom experience, so valued by the MLTC principal, Bob Peter, in selecting the quality of his staff. These are Oliver’s reminiscences:

Early life:

For various reasons I didn't like school very much myself. I was still 14 years of age when I left school. Because at school, with a boxing day birthday, I was always the youngest in the class. And I wasn't very big. So in sport and things I wasn’t very good, but I liked hockey.

So, I went into a bank. The Bank of New South Wales, Margaret River. I had just turned 15 and still a novice in the banking environment. Well, I enjoyed it down there at Margaret. In those days there wasn't a vineyard in sight, not anywhere.! I was there for nine months.

Then I was transferred to 899 Hay Street in Perth. A bigger branch. And while I was there, the accountant would call me in and ask me to help out in different sections of the bank or to relieve staff at other branches. One day he called me and said “Oliver, the teller in the Dumbleyung Branch is going on holidays. Get yourself down to the Dumbleyung as fast as you can. You go for three weeks”.

I loved doing that. You know, staying in the hotels. And I was only a little boy. Still quite young at seventeen years of age. Dumbleyung was great! Only one pub there. It was the social centre of the place. You socialise there and there was only one other bank in the town. The R&I, The Rural and Industry Bank.

While at Dumbleyung I would go into the pub there. And there three or four people along from me would be the local copper, and I was drinking beer. And in those days it was 21 years of age [when you were allowed to drink alcohol], and if you were 18, you were allowed in -- but I wasn't 18. But even the local copper just didn’t worry, and I didn’t! I wasn't going in to fight anybody or make a nuisance of myself. That was it. I didn't want to drink lemonade thanks.

And then, when I was relieving down in Brookton, one time. My father rang up and said, “Oliver they are very short of teachers. There's a special course going for ‘odds and sods’ like you who don't have a leaving certificate, and you might be interested!” And I said “OK”.

Special entry program:

So when I finished at Brookton, I enrolled in the special course. It was a month of hard work, 30 days. We were a mixed, mixed bag of people. Some had left school with a leaving certificate, one of them was an air hostess, another a milkman -- and all sorts of people.

And that was hell! It was stinking hot, and in the Christmas holidays. and Con Coroneos was one of the lecturers. He took us for English, and there's somebody else taking us for maths. And then they threw in economics, because they thought that none of us would have done any economics. And at the end of each week, we had a test. They wanted to see whether or not we were able to learn new stuff like economics or whatever. And 30 out of 40 of us passed! And that got me into Graylands Teachers College. And then at the end [of the 2 year course] we received the Teacher's Certificate TC4, if you passed all your things.

University education:

The Teacher’s Certificate also gave me a conditional matriculation! I could go to Uni! Yeah! Because I didn't have a leaving certificate or whatever, I now could to go to UWA. Well I tried to go in there. And on enrolment you have to say what you want. And I said “I want to major in English”. Because my English was very good. I didn't have any math or chemistry or physics or any of those things. And the guy said, "You can’t!” ”Have you got any other languages”, and I said “no”! I didn’t have any French or Latin or anything like that.

And he said, "We will not allow you to major in English unless you got another language." I looked a bit sad about that. And he said, "However, we do have a special one year course in Greek! Ethic Greek!.” Oh, great, I enrolled in that! Well there weren’t lectures, it was a teaching class that I went into. It nearly killed me doing Greek! The alphabet itself is nothing, but I learnt more about English grammar, conventions and conjugations, and gender and all of those things in there. So it wasn't wasted.

And the other units I did? There is one called classical art and archaeology, which was a good one. And a lot of pictures, pictorial stuff, of the buildings in Greece and going into Rome, and into the coinage, and wall paintings and things like that. Fascinating things. I did Philosophy 1. I think everybody who went to uni should do Philosophy 1. And then you have the history of Plato, Socrates and so on. But also, methods of argument, fallacies and things like that.

Over the subsequent years I enrolled in part-time and external university units in English 1, English 2 and two 3rd year units, one in Poetry and the other was Drama.

Early teaching career:

And after that I started teaching down at Albany. My father wasn't very keen about my being tied up to a girl too early. And so I was sent to Albany and my girlfriend was then made sure that she was sent to Geraldton. However, she had an uncle and he thought we were a good pair. So he counter marked the appointment. So she came down to Albany as well. And we were there for two years. Two years teaching down there. I enjoyed it!

I had 50 kids in the class. You know, as one did. I think I had a 4B. And my girlfriend had 4C classes. And we'd give the same test each Friday. Her class was always better than mine. She was a very good reading, writing, and arithmetic teacher.

And from there, we still had to do more years of teaching in the country [to complete our required service for receiving a teacher training bursary]. So we then came to Byford primary school. That was regarded as country. We had two years at Byford. And then Roy Grace, author of Grace’s “Living English”, rang me up. He said “Oliver, if it's okay with you, I'd like you to come into the Publications’ Branch. And write stories for the school paper”.

Publication’s Branch:

And why not? So I accepted the position. There were about four other writers, we had an office in Subiaco. When I was introduced to the others, I thought they might give me some instructions or whatever. However all I got was: “There’s your table and paper, and pad, and pen over there. You may start!” So I commenced my work writing stories for the school paper. Actually, I remember the first story I wrote. I sat down. I wrote a title "The New Boy.” It was a story very much based on my own experiences.

I've been to quite a number of primary schools where my dad [John Deacon] was the headmaster. At Bridgetown and York and Nannup. And I was the new boy in the class. When I was at York, we were on the playground and we used to have ‘clod’ fights with Guildford grass. You can pull it up with a chunk of earth. And throw it at each other. I enjoyed it then. But then, just when the bell was about to ring, bang! I was smacked in the face with one. So the boy who shot me and had done that, he thought he would be in all sorts of strife. I washed my face off and acted as if nothing had happened. And you didn't pimp on anybody in those days. Or whatever. And he and I became close friends. In my writing I made use of those short stories, just added some plot to it and characters and you have the bones for a story in the school paper.

I was there for four years. We were not allowed to have our own names attached to the stories we wrote. We were not permitted to have a byline. I found that rather sad, because we were not recognised as the authors of the stories. Thousands of children across the state were reading stories by Oliver Deacon, and I would have liked them to know that it was by Oliver Deacon, because sometimes your story figured out a plot and whatever, an idea that’s come out well and you would like the reader to know who wrote it.

The typist who transcribed the story would compliment you on it, but little other recognition. Also the story would then go to Roy Grace for him to have a look at it and he would make any sort of corrections if there were any grammatical errors or what ever. Mine came back almost untouched, but other writers had many corrections, almost red marks on every second line.

I was regarded as quite a good writer, but vanity got the better of me and I thought if I can’t have a byline, then I get out of there.

High school and technical college:

I don’t think I had finished my university degree at that stage, but I had done enough and applied for a position at Bentley High School. I thought that Bentley High School was very tough — until I was transferred to Mirrabooka. I did not like it there! The lower grade classes always took pride in making a new female teacher cry. If someone was away sick, you hated to go into the staffroom and get someone to go in there for relief. And when a relief teacher went in there — the noise from the classroom would even go higher. And when you came out to drive home, you would make sure there wasn’t a 4 inch nail propped up against the tire for you to back into. Not good! I was there for 2 years, as well as the 2 years at Bentley.

A job came up at Bentley Technical College. So I applied for that and got the job. And what a joy it was as if you had been out in a storm and you got out of the wind and the rain. There was warmth and all of the students were there, because they wanted to be there. They hung onto every word. I was their great white hope to get them through Leaving English! I was teaching English and business writing.

The pay was good, the conditions were 24 confrontation hours and 6 DOT [Duties other than teaching]. If you had no classes in the afternoon, you went home, or you may start at 1:00 pm and take the morning off. Also all of us could wrangle one day a week off. The senior lecturer and head of department would make sure they got either a Monday or Friday off. That gave me the tech experience and I enjoyed it thoroughly!

Mount Lawley Teachers College:

Then there was an advertisement for a position in the English Department at Mount Lawley Teachers College. They wanted someone with a Major in English and a knowledge of children’s literature and years of service. I had written so many stories and they liked what I had done so I was appointed. I was 14 years at Mount Lawley. It was a good job, the students were really good and treated you well and with respect.

While I was there we used to go to a lot of book launches of poetry books, novels etc. I was not heavily involved in programming but concentrated on the practical aspects of teaching — teaching method. One of the subjects I really enjoyed at Mount Lawley was teaching and writing poetry. That appealed to me a lot and I got the students to write poetry themselves and if I expected them to write poetry I should write some myself. I often told classroom teachers who were teaching writing and poetry that they should do some writing themselves. You sit down yourself and write one yourself to show the kids what can be done.

After 14 years at Mount Lawley, the Vice-Chancellor, Doug Jecks, wanted me in the Publications section to write promotional magazine for high schools. I said to my last class that I was in that “this may be the last lecture that I have to give”. They looked surprised and one of the mature aged women there came out that she was “very angry about that every time we get a very good lecturer they get shunted off into administration”. I was very flattered about that.