

So . . .

You don't like school . . .

Don't like a teacher . . .

School sucks!

*Well, let me tell you a story – about me.*

Yes, I was definitely something of a rebel! A “pig-headed b-----!” as one journeyman told me shortly after I was first apprenticed.

My problems started in 4th class (about year 5 to you) when my music teacher told me to stop singing because I was “flat”! He was happy for me not to sing again in his class that year.

However, when I went up to 5th class the next year I refused to sing saying: “If I was not good enough to sing in 4th class I wasn't good enough for 5th class.”

My punishment was to get 6 cuts of the cane every afternoon and the same question: “Are you going to sing tomorrow?” Answer: “No!”

Corporal punishment was the norm in those days, although it had been changed so that only the headmaster of the school could carry it out.

This punishment went on daily for two years until the end of 6th class when I went into 1st year of High School.

In High School we had different teachers for every subject.

My first music class looked like becoming a repeat of my Primary School years. However, the Headmaster looked at my record and said: “You are not going to sing, are you?” Answer: “No!”

He didn't cane me, just told the Music Master that I didn't have too as it was not a necessary subject for my future (much to the Music Master's chagrin).

This tended to set the pattern for me. I was not going to be pushed around by teachers I did not like.

Sound familiar?

We moved from Tamworth to Goulburn (NSW) later that year only to find each year was divided into years A, B and C.

As year 1A did two language courses – French and Latin – and I had only been doing French, I was placed in 1B where we did Technical Drawing instead of Latin. This was a subject in which I excelled. The French? Ah, mon ami . . . no!

Anyway, I was only in 1B for the last term of the year and managed to pass all subjects without major problems (they didn't worry about music, either).

The next year, second year, I was in 2B.

This is where my problems really started.

First, let me explain a little of how schools worked in those years.

All exams were marked in percentages. Total possible being 100%. Some subjects, such as maths, would be divided into several sub-categories with the total of all still 100%. A minimum pass was 50%. To be allowed to go up to the next year you had to have a total of 50% of all 8 subjects combined. Fail this and you repeated the class – no options. I believe this should still be the case. It was also a good incentive to not be left behind with younger kids.

I was the opposite in my classes, being always the youngest as I had been so good in my early years I had skipped a class and was therefore a year younger than the rest.

The other thing to note is that classes were mixed – boys and girls – but divided to each side of the room. Boys on the right, girls on the left (and never the twain should meet!).

Our first day in 2nd year and our new English teacher marched (and I mean marched) into the class room and fired a question at the class.

I was sitting in the row against the wall on his left and, as he appeared to be looking directly at me, I answered him.

He screamed at me to “shut up” as he was not talking to me.

Turned out his question was aimed at a girl on the other side of the room.

We were not to know (and had not been warned) that his eyes had been badly damaged when he crashed his second fighter plane in the Second World War.

To explain a little of how things worked in those days following the war, ex-servicemen had priority of jobs. Once de-mobbed they could apply for (and expect to get) whatever jobs were available. As many of them had not worked before going into the armed services, they quickly put their hands up for whatever took their fancy, regardless of their qualifications, as they knew that the job markets would soon fill up with returned servicemen. Being a teacher seemed to be a common preference.

Hence we finished up with a lot of teachers who were neither qualified to be teachers nor, worse, had the necessary temperament to be so.

Our English teacher was a prime example of this misplaced policy.

From that day on he was totally set against myself and the girl to whom he had fired the question.

The real problem was that I was still the pig-headed so-and-so who would not tolerate this sort of treatment.

Why should I work for him when he could not treat me with any courtesy?

Well, this was the beginning of my down-fall education-wise. I simply decided I was not going to work for him. (My immature outlook on why I was at school.)

This caused me to spend much time with the Headmaster who was quite an “odd-ball” in his own right. A very amusing guy to watch in action.

He did not believe in corporal punishment, especially the cane.

He, rightfully, considered it counter-productive.

So, instead of being in English class, I spent much of the next two years sitting in his office and following him around the halls (it was a 2-storey complex with 2 long corridors, one above the other with stairs at each end).

To indicate what I mean by an amusing “odd-ball”, we were walking down the top corridor one day when we heard a lot of crash-banging coming from one of the class-rooms. Sounded like all-out-war had broken out again. 4th year (your year 11) students were hurling chairs at each other across the room.

He simply stuck his head in the door, looked around, and then, without saying anything to them, continued down the corridor and said: “Boys will be boys!” I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. He obviously didn’t like confrontation.

Then there was our History teacher who just happened to be the English Master to the school (high schools had a number of subject teachers with a master over them).

He was a very likable, middle-aged, guy who promptly told us that he “was not all there”, having suffered brain damage in a racing car accident. I guess he got the job because he was unfit for military service. However, he was a trained teacher.

Anyway, knowing the problem I had with my English “teacher”, he would spend more of the history class time arguing English with me than teaching history. As the other kids got bored they would start talking and invariably be sent to stand against the wall out in the corridor.

So, many a time there would only be him and I left in the room when the lesson-ending bell went.

Oh, well, maybe the others didn’t like history anyway!

My other problem came from art. I was quite good as a portrait artist – loved sitting in class sketching some of the kids – girls, naturally – instead of listening to the teachers.

This invariably found me back in the Headmaster’s office.

To me this was highly unfair as we had another artist in the class who was a magnificent cartoonist. Only he concentrated on caricature cartoons of the various teachers and they lapped it up. Class distinction, I called it!

To rub salt in our wounds, our English teacher was also the Sports Master (all teachers had to take two subjects). Should sport be called a subject?

Well, you guessed it; I was again in big trouble.

He was as bad at being a Sports Master as he was an English teacher. The best exercise we got was at the start of school each morning. All schools had a quadrangle (parade ground) where students were called to assembly each morning to be given any update needed and followed by a half hour of calisthenics before being dismissed to our various classes. This should be re-introduced.

As for me? Any excuse he could dream up (and I do mean dream up) I received his signature punishment of “write out a thousand lines: I will not etc, etc.”

Naturally, for this “pig-headed sod” (me), I never once complied. By the time I finished 3rd year (year 10 to you) I must have owed him 10’s of thousands of lines.

By the way, the girl who was supposed to answer him at the start of 2nd year got the same sort of treatment, but as she was a little more compliant than I was, she simply got a constant frosty reception and bad marks, even though she was a good student.

I did anything I could to upset his day. One time he had us for the last period of the day and insisted I follow him to the staff room after class. To make sure I did he followed me up the stairs to the top corridor and along. However, about half way along, he was accosted by another teacher so told me to wait for him at the staff room door. This was around the corner at the end with stairs going down the back.

You guessed it! I went around the corner and down the stairs and home.

Chalk one up for me!

The next day he did not say a thing about it, but as we were sitting down at our desks he came up behind me, bashed my head into the desk with a stack of books he had in his hands (think 2 large phone books for size). My face hit the desk in shock and when I asked what that was for, he said: "You slammed your books down on the desk." Of course, I hadn't.

Chalk one up for him!

These days of "no touchy students" he would have been charged with assault. After all, there were about 30 witnesses.

I would like to say here that all our other teachers were good at their job. Not all were ex-servicemen and not all ex-servicemen made bad teachers. Example, if our Science teacher saw a student down town he would cross the road to say hello and ask how you were going. He would also make his time available after school for students who were struggling. A real teacher. Hence I managed quite well in science.

At the end of 3rd year (in NSW) we sat for what was called an Intermediate Certificate. This consisted of an "internal exam" that included all 8 subjects, and an "external exam" of 3 subjects (one of which had to be English). To sit the external you had to pass the internal. (until about 1970, English was a compulsory subject in all schools and, judging by what I see today, still should be.)

I passed all subjects in the "internal" – just scraping through in English and History – but failed English in the "external" by 1%, thereby failing to achieve my Intermediate Certificate. (As the English paper was marked by our English teacher, I believe he deliberately failed me as all my previous English marks were in the 70-75% area. His way of getting back at me.)

At the time, I was only 14½ and thought "no big deal" as, like most growing up in a tradesman's home, I simply expected to be a tradesman like my Dad. (University was considered for the kids of Professionals and the wealthy – class distinction.)

Also, apprenticeships were easily available in a fast growing country.

So I left, spent 6 months working in a garage, and then switched to the newspaper business.

Six months later we moved to Sydney and I was apprenticed to a typesetting firm owned by a man who had been taught the trade by my grandfather many years before.

At school I had aspirations of a career as a commercial artist.

When I was 12 I entered an Australia-wide art competition and won a scholarship to a leading Art College of the time.

However, when I left school and applied to take up the scholarship they were horrified. I was too young. They did not take anyone in under 17. Come back when you are 17.

They had never mentioned anything about age on the application.

However, this was an ambition never to be achieved as, 3 months after arriving in Sydney, I was diagnosed with polio, spending the next 6-7 months mostly paralysed and on my back in bed.

Among the many problems left from the polio was the damage to muscles and nerves. I was left with poor control of my right hand and this meant the dream of becoming a commercial artist was a thing of the past.

I can honestly say I excelled as a tradesman, even though I was declared “a pig-headed b-----!” by that journeyman mentioned earlier.

After he said that I went away and thought about it and then went back and said: “I am, aren’t I!” So I tried not to be and got on well with him after that. He taught me a lot.

However, I did manage to fall foul of teachers again.

I had only just started my Tech Training (half a day a week in those times) when I went down with the polio so that, when I returned later in the year, I only had about 2 months to try and catch up on 7 month’s work.

One of the first jobs I had to do was lay out a newspaper advert. This included setting up the type, making up the ad and included using a block (image) of the shirt they supplied. The block of the shirt was a photo reproduction with the shirt at an angle and needed to be shown that way.

When I presented the finished work the teacher told me the shirt should be straight up. I said: “Rubbish! It is photographed at an angle.” He said if I didn’t straighten it up I would be marked down. I told him “it was staying my way, that I was not going to spoil good work because he didn’t have an eye for what was right”.

When I got back to my works place I explained to the owner what had happened, telling him they were too useless to teach me anything! (Sounds like me, doesn’t it?)

He laughed and said they were mostly failed tradesmen employed by the government and he was happy for me not to waste my time there. (Things were different in those days.)

An interesting adjunct to that is that, by the time I was 18, I finished up responsible for much of the major department store advertising accounts in Sydney (and the firm I worked for lost most of them after I left a few years later).

That was the last of my teacher problems.

Oh! Except for refusing to swear allegiance to the Queen of England when I was called up for National Service.

I told them “my allegiance was only to Australia, not the head of a foreign country!”

After many hours of threats and huffing and blowing with all the top brass called in, they agreed to me swearing allegiance only to Australia.

I believe I was the first inductee into the armed services to swear allegiance only to Australia.

A hollow victory, perhaps, but one I am still proud of to this day. (I have always been an anti-royalist.)

Ever the rebel! Or maybe the Irish coming out in me!

So, you say, what has all this to do with “not liking school”, “school sucks, so why don’t I leave?”

Well, here comes the punch lines.

By the time I was 19 I realized that what I wanted was to go to university and study psychology.

Travelling to and from work at all hours of the day and night I had discovered a “hobby” of mentally analyzing the people who frequently rode the same trams with me.

It became a passion of mine, working them out and sometimes being able to follow up on what I had deduced in my mind. To me, the mind is the most fascinating part of anyone.

In those days, when you reached the age of 21, you could apply for what was called a “mature age

matriculation". That consisted of sitting 3 subjects (one of which had to be English). By this time my trade had made me quite the expert in English, so that held no worries. I opted for English, Maths and Science.

Then came the blow!

You were required to have, at least, an Intermediate Certificate.

Didn't, did I? Never finished my schooling.

I suddenly started to realize what I had done. In working at making things hard for teachers I did not like, I had thrown away my options to be able to change and do what I wanted.

Worse was to come.

The damage from the polio was starting to impact on everything I did. My work as a typesetter became a constant battle with debilitating pain.

But what else could I do? I didn't have the schooling, did I?

At the age of 33 I was told I would be in a nursing home within a couple a years.

Me? With a wife, a mortgage and a child on the way? No way!

But what could I do? I didn't have the schooling, did I?

I finally made a major change by buying an orchard. The plan being that, as the pain got to great doing one thing, I could switch to something else while it settled down.

However, the demands of farming didn't let this happen as often as I needed and I frequently found myself crawling on hands and knees up the aisles between the fruit trees.

But what else could I do? I didn't have the schooling, did I?

After 6 years I was left with no choice but to pull the pin.

Fortunately, we had turned the orchard into a show place and did quite well financially when selling out.

Without the schooling I had little (call that no) chance of breaking into the professional ranks on any business in Sydney, so made the decision to move to Western Australia in the hope that, as WA was so young business-wise, I may be able to move into the sales side of printing.

This I achieved on probation and successfully carried on for the next 17 years until my health became too bad to continue the pressure the job entailed.

I was also lucky in finding a GP who was great in helping control the pain when I would do something to badly set it off.

Now comes your time.

Western Australia has grown up and now looks for the things that Sydney did all those years ago.

Business looks first at your school reports with its story of your school work ethics then they look at you second.

Leave before year 12 and most will not want to look at you unless your current results show good potential.

Some will be lucky and find an apprenticeship . . . most will finish up on the dole . . . no job prospects . . . not got the "schooling".

Not having the schooling . . . the worst mistake I made in my life.

Not being able to pursue my art career I could accept – that was due to an uncontrolled physical disability.

Not being able to go to university and study psychology was my fault and is something I have regretted to this day.

All for not having the “schooling”!

Do not repeat my mistakes.

Do not get me wrong. Not all students will be good academics. Not all academically good students will want to follow academic preferences.

The same applies to those who appear, on the surface (such as I did), not to be good material academically. They often end up becoming excellent academics (or professionals). Look at Winston Churchill; he was classified as a school flop!

We will always need good tradesmen. Society cannot function without them.

However, without the “schooling” there are no options for future change.

Why change?

Well, I believe we don't really know what we want in life until we are around 20 or so. You often meet people in their 30's who have returned to university. Also we may find hurdles that become difficult to cross and require change.

Mine was polio, but just look around you and see what does happen so easily to change someone's life. Just a simple fall can do nerve damage that interferes with whatever job you may be involved in.

So change becomes necessary.

But do you have the “schooling”?

What is the Scouts motto? “Be prepared!” Make sure you have options.

Education is for your benefit – not that of your teachers. They are there to give you options in life. They are not there to just take up your time or molly-coddle your foibles.

They are not there to be your friends. Some will have easier personalities to get along with while some of the best may not have this attribute.

If you don't like one, for any reason, think to yourself: “I am going to use him to further my options.” Don't do what I did.

If you don't make use of your school time you will be the loser, not the school, not the teacher.

In most cases if you show teachers respect they will return that respect.

As the AFL footballer, Ben Cousins, has tattooed across his stomach – “Such is Life!”

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Stuart Oliver". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Stuart Oliver

## THIS STORY HAD A SUCCESSFUL CONCLUSION

***Although this story was written for a troubled boy, I think it is relevant to all kids, especially young teenagers who often start to kick over the traces at around 13.***

I wrote this for one of my nephews. A boy who had lost his dad a few years before; was angry at the world but didn't know why; rebelled against authority; didn't see the need to go to school so would turn up mid-morning or, often, not at all.

He and his mother and sister lived 5000 kms from here so I knew nothing of what was going on until his mother contacted me and asked for help.

At that time he was about 13 and had no intention of going past year 10. (The schools today seem to send kids up to the next year regardless of grades.)

I started by flying him and his sister west for school holidays where I could get to talk to him one-on-one. He wouldn't say much, but I quickly realized he was a very intelligent boy; that despite his lack of schooling he had amassed an enormous amount of knowledge – just didn't realize it or know how to apply it.

By the second visit west I had learned to understand the anger and was able to make him realize it for what it was. This was a turning point. The next time he was over he told me he no longer felt angry.

Not being able to talk to him face to face on a regular basis (only regular phone calls which would be quickly forgotten) I wrote this story, "So School Sucks!", that I knew he would read, partly out of curiosity and partly out of the respect he had developed for me.

It took some time for his approach to school to change but it did, very slowly. He was trying.

I spoke to his school principals who were willing to be patient and give me time to work on it.

So every now and then I would tell him to pull out this story and read it again.

He finished up going on to Year 12 and was quietly delighted and surprised to be congratulated by the headmaster for the hard work he had put in over the previous two years.

It was too late to make up all the lost work to achieve university required results, but he did have his Year 12 Certificate.

He went on to finish a trade apprenticeship and then went back to TAFE and achieved his business licence. He later told me a number of times how I was right in that he finds the repetitive work at times boring and would like to pursue his love of music and to do something in that field.

Unlike me, he does have his school certificate and can go back to TAFE or University to pursue his dreams once he plucks up the courage to make the next step up – which he will.

At the time of writing this he is 22 and talking about going back to TAFE to work towards an engineering degree.



Stuart Oliver