

# Working in Parallel

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## Biography

Alex has been teaching and researching driver education since 1979. In 1985, he was awarded a Churchill Fellowship to study in the United Kingdom, Germany, Japan and the United States. He taught driver education at the Tasmania Police Academy for twelve years. In 1991 he became Chief Instructor for the New South Wales Traffic Education Centre. Since 1995 he has managed Driver Improvement Consultancy. The company designs management systems and produces resources that aim to help others improve driver behaviour.

## Abstract

Driver training and education still flounders in a world of wishful and woolly thinking. It does not appear to be effective in reducing participant's crash risk. Traffic safety research does not appear to be effective in helping us understand why this is the case. The traffic safety community may benefit from communicating more constructively and thinking more creatively. What or who will change the situation?

## 1. THE SITUATION

The research evidence suggests that driver training of a traditional and conventional nature contributes little to reductions in accident involvement or risk among drivers of all age and experience groups (Christie, 2001, p. 35). This is the case despite several decades of traffic safety research, sincere attempts on the part of trainers to improve their training, and various activities initiated by traffic safety administrators.

Is the ineffectiveness of driver education a consequence of poor teaching, poor research, or poor traffic safety administration? Or is it not as simple as that? Is it actually possible for training and education, in isolation, to change behaviour?

A simple exercise in validating a curriculum will demonstrate that it is highly unlikely that a 'dose' of training or education could ever have a significant, positive, and long-lasting effect on a participant's behaviour. Such expectations would defy what we know of learning theory. However, learning theory would also suggest training and education should be able to make a powerful *contribution* to influencing driver behaviour.

Possible or not, we need to discover more about the role that formalised learning experiences *may* play in traffic safety if we are to act with greater purpose. However, if we maintain our current behaviour we will probably remain ignorant for some time to come. Researchers, teachers, and managers of traffic safety, may benefit greatly from introspection.

Our culture is not renowned for its willingness to look inwards. Rather, we argue in unconstructive, and sometimes destructive, ways (see Tannen, 1999). We take sides and fight for what we believe in. In the process we reinforce our assumptions and ignorance. Thus we see battles and enemies we must fight and *gaps that must be bridged* rather than people we can work in parallel with in order to achieve our goal.

I propose that to move forward, to act with meaning, we need to 'reflect deeply and honestly and subject our actions to thoughtful examination' (McCarthy, 1996, p.45). This is easier said than done. First, we must accept that our own view of the world (the facts and experiences we hold to be true) might be flawed in some way. Second, we must intercept and break habits of thought because the way we think and argue is subject to automatic responses like everything else we do. We need to be consciously aware of our behaviour to avoid unproductive argument. Finally, we must learn to act creatively and see driver education through the lens of opportunity. Christie's suggestion (2001, p.22) 'that one should be sceptical until the actual effect [of new approaches to driver education] on crashes and violations is known', is unlikely to accelerate our learning.

In this brief paper I describe behaviours and activities of traffic safety professionals that *may* be holding the learning agenda back. You may read these and have an immediate and negative reaction. You may want to resist such notion, find faults in my assertions, or argue an opposing position. As a first step in moving forward, I challenge you not to. I encourage you to place contradiction on hold and see to the possibilities that may emerge from viewing the ideas constructively.

Measure your emotional and intellectual reaction. The greater the negative reaction you have, the more you are likely to benefit from self-examination. Reactions that are grounded in emotions go to the heart of what you believe to be true and important. Ask questions of these beliefs and you grow your understanding of the world (read Brookfield, 1995). Emotions can be tyrants when it comes to constructive and productive behaviour. We need to manage these well to move forward (read Goleman, 1996 and 1999).

What follows are a list of general 'assertions' and questions that may stimulate productive debate.

## **2. IDEAS TO CONSIDER**

Driver training and education research is trapped in an unproductive cycle. Driver training and education must be based on rigorous research; rigorous research is conducted on the basis of cost effectiveness (and the probability of immediate economic, social and political benefit); research has shown that driver training and education has limited potential and needs more rigorous research; driver training and education must be based on rigorous research... and so on. What can be done to break this cycle? What are the assumptions that help to sustain this cycle? Do we actually need more research to move forward? Why are we not making good use of the vast body of knowledge that exists now?

Rigorous research consumes vast resources. The De Kalb County study—the definitive evaluation of Driver Training in the United States—cost over US\$4m and spanned over a decade (from concept to the last analysis). From this we learn driver training of a conventional nature is ineffective. It may equally be argued that research of a conventional nature is ineffective. We learned surprisingly little from the De Kalb study and the three decades of research into driver training and education that surround it. Worse still, such research has done nothing to promote pedagogical (matters relating to teaching) enquiry. Rather it has served to gag the few remaining optimists. How can research into driver training and education become more fruitful?

We may be assuming that those who research driver behaviour are the ones best suited, and perhaps best able, to see the pedagogical opportunities in their work and provide the necessary educational translation. There is little evidence that they are the ones best suited. What can we do to help researchers convert their work into educational innovations?

Researchers reside in a publish-or-perish world and they, like all of us, have political masters and personal needs. This environment exerts a complex range of influences over

researchers' behaviour. These influences do little to accelerate our learning, they appear to condemn intuition despite it being able to lead to better understanding, they offer no reward for creative excellence, and they alienate nonconformists. (For an example, read Evans, 1991, pp. 299-300, on Wilde). Researchers wield power through the social positions they hold and the language that they have created and protect (see Smail, 1993). Whether intentional or not, people who may benefit from researchers' work are, in the main, unable to access this knowledge, test it in their own way, and share their interpretations of it. What in this situation can we change?

Traffic safety (including driver performance and behaviour) is a chaotic and multi dimensional construct. It crosses many academic disciplines. Within each discipline exists much knowledge. We cannot rely on one discipline or the traditional '3 Es' road safety paradigm to find the solution (discussed in detail by Rothe, 2002). We lack a mechanism to extract, combine, and assimilate this knowledge to create new understandings. The RTA in the early 1990's, partly in response to STAYSAFE 18, made an attempt at this through its Driver Education Unit in New England, but the original vision does not seem to have been realised. What can we do to change this situation?

Researchers are attracted to problems. Novice driver safety, or lack of it, is perceived by the community to be a problem worthy of attention. Thus, researchers have become preoccupied with studying, in a very narrow way, 'the novice driver problem'. The guiding assumptions behind this work do not appear to have been well examined. There is little evidence of researchers' assumptions being examined in the literature. What are these assumptions? What possibilities emerge when we challenge these?

Traffic researchers, like all drivers, have a personal construct (mental model) of what constitutes safe driving. They may be more knowledgeable in some specific areas of traffic safety, but their own research tells us that increased knowledge does not necessarily translate into safer behaviour. They think and behave like typical drivers (Evans 1991, p. 310). There is no obvious reason why traffic administrators should not equally fall into the category of typical drivers. In what ways is this holding back our understanding of safe driving and how to teach it?

Traffic safety administrators have not made good use of the driver instructor industry. In principle professional driving instructors can play an important, and potentially potent, role in a graduated licensing system. For example, they could conduct pre learner knowledge tests on-road adding validity to the assessment (which it currently does not have). Driving instructors could also more validly facilitate training and assessment in cognitive skills. The licensing system could be developed such that it *motivated* supervisors to work and learn collaboratively with driving instructors to ensure learners had appropriate experiences at each stage of licensing. Currently it does not do this. There are many ways this could be achieved. While some of these ideas have been debated in traffic safety circles, most people only see problems in such ideas. How can we get traffic administrators to think more creatively and see through the problems created by social, political and economic constraints?

Driving instructors, in the main, have had little exposure to the post-secondary academic environment. They have little formal theory upon which to construct their personal and informal theories. 'Educational literature can help us investigate the hunches, instincts and tacit knowledge that shape our practice. It can suggest different possibilities for practice, as well as helping us understand better what we already do and think' (Brookfield, 1995, p.185). The present nationally accredited driving courses deliver little in the way of formal theory of teaching and road user behaviour. How can driving instructors be helped to access and use formal theory?

Driving instructors, in the main, teach with innocence. They appear to assume that the meanings and significance they place on their actions are the ones that students take from them. They seem to think that being sincere guarantees the purity of their practice. They appear to believe that they understand exactly what they are doing and what effect they are having. At best, teaching this way is naïve. At worst, it invites feelings of frustration and produces an unproductive learning environment. It may also contribute to learners taking a harmful message from the experience. Critically reflective thinking is a tool that will help people move beyond innocence. It's a skill that drivers can use to help them become safer and driving instructors can use to help them teach with greater purpose. (See van Gelder, 2001; Vermunt, 1995; Yaxley, 1991; Bailey, 2003; Siegrist, 1999.) How can driving instructors be helped to acquire these skills? How can they be helped to develop these skills in drivers and their supervisors? How can 'the system' be developed to motivate such learning?

### 3. CONCLUSION

Formalised driver education and training does not currently contribute in significant ways to road safety. Formal learning and teaching theory suggests it has the potential to.

Our understanding of the role driver education and training can play in road safety is being held back by the way we think and communicate. Rather than see gaps that need to be bridged, our thinking should be expanded and aligned. Serious and honest introspection may help change the situation.

Change needs a driver. Australia would benefit from the creation of a body with a mission to extract understanding and see possibility in the accumulated knowledge and know-how of road safety professionals. While ever we remain slaves to the sceptics and subject to the doctrines of our own dogma, we will continue to live in a world of wishful and woolly thinking.

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