NOT SO OLD SCHOOL

A radical 1950s project designed to educate children stranded in remote Australian cattle stations is now thriving – and its success has a lot to teach us about homeschooling in lockdown, says Jonathan Margolis

If there is one thing about the past few months on which there is near global consensus, it is that remotely educating children online has not been a great success.

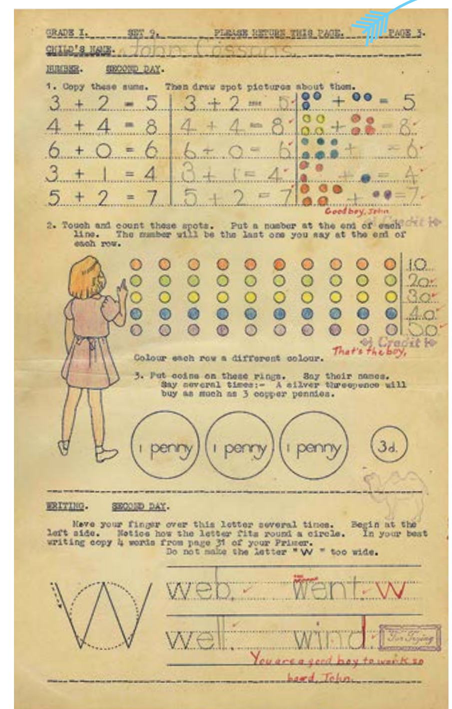
A viral YouTube rant in March by one Israeli mother of four, on only the second day of schools being closed, perhaps summed it up best. 'Listen,' she said. 'It's not working… this distance-learning thing. It's impossible… If we don't die of corona, we'll die of distance learning… Please, turn it down. Foot off the gas. Leave them be.'

But there is emerging concern that right up to university level, today's young people could be the generation whose education was trashed, or at least held back, by Covid-19. Professor Alan Smithers, director of the Centre for Education and Employment Research at the University of Buckingham, has written of the future of the UK's children 'hanging by a thread' – especially those from poorer families. 'The damage inflicted will be, quite literally, beyond repair for a generation of children.'

And while social-media users and newspaper columnists continue to howl about the homeschooling 'nightmare', and even as last week saw the phased reopening of some primary schools, children of all ages, and not just the swots, admit that they long to go back to school.

However, online schooling could be the norm for many for a while yet. In one part of the world, such remote schooling is nothing new. Since 1951, tens of thousands of children on isolated sheep and cattle stations in the Australian outback have been educated remotely.

John Cossons' schoolwork, 1960; Cossons now



GRADE I. SET 9. PLEASE RETURN THIS PAGE. PAGE 3.
CHILD'S NAME. John Cossons
NUMBER. SECOND DAY.
1. Copy these sums. Then draw spot pictures about them.
3 + 2 = 5 | 3 + 2 = 5
4 + 4 = 8 | 4 + 4 = 8
6 + 0 = 6 | 6 + 0 = 6
3 + 1 = 4 | 3 + 1 = 4
5 + 2 = 7 | 5 + 2 = 7
Good boy, John
2. Touch and count these spots. Put a number at the end of each line. The number will be the last one you say at the end of each row.
10 20 30 40 50
Credit
That's the boy,
Colour each row a different colour.
3. Put coins on these rings. Say their names. Say several times:- A silver threepence will buy as much as 3 copper pennies.
1 penny 1 penny 1 penny 3d.
WRITING. SECOND DAY.
Move your finger over this letter several times. Begin at the left side. Notice how the letter fits round a circle. In your best writing copy 4 words from page 31 of your Primer.
Do not make the letter "W" too wide.
web went
well wind
For Trying
You are a good boy to work so hard, John.

Until 2003, this wasn't even done on the internet, but on shortwave radio. What's more, in the 1950s, pioneering pupils of School of the Air, as the system is called, often lived on properties with limited electricity, so took part in live lessons using Australian-made pedal radios. If children stopped pumping bicycle pedals underneath their desk as they learnt, the connection to their schoolroom, powered by a generator, died.

The empty schoolrooms where School of the Air teachers took virtual classes – and do to this day – could be thousands of miles from the children. A School of the Air class is typically peopled by pupils on farms the size of a British county, scattered across a state many times bigger than France.

So how effective was an outback virtual education for people now in middle age? How did School of the Air pupils, socially distanced to an unimaginable extent, fare when they grew up? And what advice can they offer to today's struggling online learners?

Tanya Heaslip, 57, is well known in Australia for books on her outback childhood. Between 1968 and 1974, she was a pupil of the country's first School of the Air, set up in Alice Springs in 1951 by educationalists who had the idea of using the Royal Flying Doctor Service's established radio network. Children on remote stations previously had only correspondence lessons, and the gap between being sent work on a mail train or plane and receiving it back marked could be months.

Heaslip describes her family's property north of Alice Springs as '700 square miles of scrub, hills, creeks and silence with trips to Alice for supplies often taking a day'. Her parents were prosperous, her father often mustering cattle in his Cessna, 'ducking and diving like a war pilot'. Her mother would be cooking almost full-time for 20 or more stockmen, so, like a lot of cattle-station children, she had a governess to muster her and her siblings. The 'govie' was usually an untrained girl of 18 or so who had come to the bush for an adventurous gap year.

A TYPICAL DAY AT SCHOOL OF THE AIR
(year 8, age 12-13)

8.10am–8.25am
Physical activity

8.30am–9am
My HG
(Middle years home group: years 7, 8 and 9 all log in at the same time. Teachers use this for announcements and upskilling in general knowledge)

9am–10am
Maths

10am–10.30am
Morning tea

11am–12 midday
Geography

12 midday–1pm
English (years 8 and 9)

1pm–1.30pm
Lunch

1.30pm–2.30pm
Science

'As for how being homeschooled equipped me for life,' Tanya says, 'it set me up so well. Admittedly, it didn't offer social skills or art or games, so we bush kids were desperately shy, but my three Rs were well and truly covered. Most importantly, it fostered in me a great love for learning. I went to boarding school 1,000 miles away for secondary school, which I hated, but I was academically equivalent to all those in my class, and I went on to study and practise law for many years.

'School of the Air was also so much fun. We were isolated and didn't have any other children in our lives, but in this way we got to hear voices, put faces to them in our imagination, and listen to our beloved teacher, Mrs Hodder, for half an hour each day. Mrs Hodder had the brightest, warmest voice and we loved her. Monday was assembly day and news day. Every other day of the week was a different lesson like English, social studies or maths.'

Friendships with other children were almost impossible, but Heaslip forged one with a girl next door – well, 700 miles away – called Janie. After school, she and Janie, who she didn't meet in person for years, would sneak some extra radio time and made what turned out to be a lifelong friendship. They finally met when Heaslip's father, worn down by her pleading, flew her to Janie's station for what would be a week's sleepover.

Today, Heaslip still lives in Alice, while her friend, now Janie Joseland Bennett, is in Aspen, Colorado, having worked in New York. She became a photographers' agent and also worked on documentaries, one of which won an Oscar. 'I didn't get to go to the Academy Awards dinner, but made the *Vanity Fair* after-party, which was way more fun,' she says, acknowledging that this was quite a contrast from her childhood in the bush.

Joseland Bennett's parents had settled in the remote north-western corner of South Australia to fulfil a romantic dream. Her parents were Sydney people. But her father had studied agriculture with a mind to owning a cattle station, while her mother, a successful child actor, Helen Grieve, had fallen in love with the red interior of Australia in 1945, during months filming *The Overlanders*, an Aussie classic.

'I wasn't a great student. I was more interested in riding horses, hunting with my Aboriginal friends and eating witchetty grubs we found. But I'm wildly passionate about this whole question of remote education,' she says. 'We loved our teachers. Those relationships that were built up over the radio were astoundingly powerful in our lives. I recently reconnected with a teacher, David Ashton, and after 50 years, the first thing he did was mimic my voice over the radio back then. He remembered it. It seems so tenuous, doesn't it, building up a relationship just with a voice? But it worked.'

Janie Joseland Bennett calling into school via radio in the 1970s; and today

Tanya Heaslip with her siblings and 'govie', 1970s

Joseland Bennett's advice to today's Covid kids, forced to learn remotely? 'Make the most of this experience because for the rest of your life you will never forget your period of isolated learning. I feel School of the Air shaped me for the rest of my life, especially in the times that I have drawn heavily on my resilience, curiosity and grit. Isolated learning nurtured all these aspects of myself.'

If a picture is building of children from well-to-do, if geographically isolated, families thriving in adult life despite – or because of – their eccentric education, 66-year-old John Cossons, now living in Darwin, perhaps demonstrates that School of the Air worked for less well-off families, too.

While Heaslip and Joseland Bennett lived in comfortable properties, home for Cossons, his parents and sister was little more than a shack in the desert. 'It was basically canvas sheeting with galvanised iron to keep the sand out,' he says. 'If it was 40 degrees outside it was 45 inside. Most of his play was spent hunting with Aboriginal children who laughed at him having to spend from 8am to 5pm learning by the radio.

Cossons' father was a policeman, and the police-supplied radio was ancient and often failed. A govie was also out of the question. Yet when he went to a regular school after his father was posted to Alice Springs, he was notably advanced and, he admits, coasted. He later dropped out of a law course at university, but still loved it. Today, when he's not travelling the world, he sits as an independent chairman on company and government agency boards.

Cossons has a folder his parents kept of his marked schoolwork, and the 1,000-mile-distant teacher's dedication beams out from it 60 years on. 'You have sent another lovely set, John,' says a comment in red ink from 1960. 'You are a good boy to work so hard and you are doing your colouring beautifully, dear. I must say you wrote your diary stories very well indeed. There was one little sum wrong, and you do not make your letter W quite wide enough. Just practise it on home paper, John.'

Joseland Bennett with friends

'I have no regrets at all about my upbringing,' Cossons says. 'I'd be happy to do the same again. I wouldn't be the person I am now without it and I'm happy with who I am.'

Another of Alice's School of the Air alumni, Kate McMaster, is now a teacher in Darwin, having recently moved from the family property in the bush. McMaster, her father and her two teenage sons were all educated by School of the Air. Her great- grandfather was one of the school's founders.

When she started school in 1976, she remembers waiting excitedly on the cattle station's airstrip for the mail plane with her homework on board. Like Cossons much earlier, it was the teachers' extra effort that inspired her. 'They couldn't see your face, but they put time and effort in and marked

PREVIOUS PAGE: THE AGE/GETTY IMAGES

beautifully with so much feedback and written comments, stickers and little gifts. It was like Christmas when your work came back.' Even though she now marks her face-to-face students digitally, she tries to replicate the same level of communication.

Her own children did School of the Air online with video, which led to new considerations. When her youngest rebelled against being on camera, she tempted him back by suggesting he wear his toy Viking helmet for school.

McMaster, who has also spent time teaching in School of the Air's Alice 'studio', argues that far from being a curious sideshow, remote outback education has lessons for the present time. And in the age of Covid, she explains, 'not only are you teaching the children, you're teaching the parents because they deliver the learning. So if the child is struggling, you have to then support them as a home tutor.

'My message for parents, though, is that love and fun come first. As soon as the education is not fun, stop. Do something fun, have a brain break and laugh. And admit it if you don't know the answer. It's really good that your kids can see that sometimes Mum doesn't know it either. You have to instil a love of learning in these kids because they are the future and they are going to be the ones trying to beat the next virus.'

The internet has been the advance that could, as McMaster suggests, make the kind of quirky and convoluted remote education that outback Australians know part of the new normal. A startling change already in motion is that expat Aussies are now being educated by School of the Air. 'We've had students in Papua New Guinea, in the Seychelles, in Saudi Arabia and one joined in the past few weeks in England,' says School of the Air teacher Dr William Newman.

Really? Dr Newman's comment leads to the door of Australian solicitor Linda Gregory, and her 13-year-old son Matthew, in a modern semi in Winchester, Hampshire. When the local comprehensive Matthew attends closed in March, Linda had an idea. 'I'm from Melbourne, but having grown up with stories of School of the Air, I wondered if Matthew could join for a while and learn a bit about his Australian roots.'

The answer was yes, so Matthew now lives his day on Alice Springs time, waking late each afternoon and attending school all night along with classmates on cattle stations. 'At 4.30am, during school lunch break, he wakes me up and we have breakfast together before he heads off to finish his day at school and then sleep, and I start to get ready for my day of working from home,' says Gregory. 'They know how to engage pupils from afar as well as support parents.

> 'It was like Christmas when your homework came back on the plane'

'The neighbours all know that Matthew is doing School of the Air and ask him about it if they see him around – and try hard to stay quiet during the day while he sleeps.' His UK school, she explains, is aware of his temporary outback adventure and supportive.

How is this working for Matthew? 'Surprisingly, yeah, it does quite feel quite a lot like school,' he says. 'They've really mastered the technology and the timetable is quite similar.'

In an interesting generational split, he says his outback classmates don't show any surprise about him being on the other side of the planet – only his teachers mention it. But he is aware of cultural differences. He remarks, a little ruefully, that a lot of his classmates ride motorbikes.

As for his friends in the same time zone, he stays in touch as well as any youngster can, playing online games.

Dr Newman, back at the school in Alice, says teaching in what can claim to be the world's biggest classroom has its problems – it can be hard to engage a 14-year-old boy working on his own with a PlayStation temptingly close by. But he finds the relationships with the children and their families are strong, and the kids motivated, mature, well-behaved, polite and respectful.

Matthew, 13, in Winchester, works 10,000 miles from his classroom; the McMaster boys 'at school'

'They're not necessarily angels all the time,' he says, 'but we don't get any of the bickering or silliness that you might get in a face-to-face school. We organise trips for them to go away together and wherever we go, people say these are the best-behaved students that they've ever had.'

So is School of the Air, conceived 70 years ago in an absurdly hostile geographical environment, the template for the future of education, especially in a world tipped off balance by a pandemic?

A researcher at the University of Western Australia in 1987 showed that radio-educated children's results were better than those of students in regular rural schools. But until the internet, it remained an arcane subject for research. Today, John Pascarella, a professor of education at the University of Southern California, is convinced that remote, or partly remote, education is the way forward. 'There have been several big studies in the last 10 years on online learning and, consistently, they find that the students perform slightly better than those receiving the face-to-face instruction.'

There are caveats, he says. 'You can't teach online the way that you teach on campus. Teachers need to adopt an online instructional persona. But the phenomenal thing is the instantaneous sharing of information, video and documents, whereas in the regular brick-and-mortar classrooms, you're, "Oh, I should have printed out that handout, sorry."'

Some business people also see it as the future. Rupert Murdoch, perhaps with School of the Air in his home country in mind, gave a speech on remote education at the 2011 e-G8 forum in Paris.

'Our schools remain the last holdout from the digital revolution,' he said. 'Today's classroom looks almost exactly the same as it did in the Victorian age.' He saw particular potential in remote learning giving poor people far from a school access to great teaching. 'Is this the future, actually better than school?' he concluded.

Very possibly. In the meantime, however, some old-world challenges will persist that no amount of technology can address. Recently Matthew, the remote learner in Winchester, was given a project to design and build a solar oven and fry an egg in it. He constructed it with great care during his graveyard school shift. The problem came when he tried to fry the egg. The temperature, even in the outback winter, was nudging 33C. In the Hampshire spring, it was a chilly 11C, and the solar oven struggled to hit 65C.

The weedy sun in southern England, Matthew realised, couldn't even produce a lightly scrambled egg.