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## The Trade Educators' Syndicate

### Making 10 Retirement Lathes in the Twilight of Australian Manufacturing

*Jesse Adams Stein*

#### Melbourne, Australia, 1978

Peter Williams, 16 years old, has just commenced an apprenticeship in the manufacturing trade of engineering patternmaking. He will train in this trade until 1981. As part of his education, he attends the George Thompson School of Foundry Technology, a department of the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology.

When interviewed in 2017, Williams reflected on his time at the George Thompson School:

It was a *fascinating* place, I *loved* it [...] It was the only purpose-built foundry and patternmaking training facility in the Southern Hemisphere. There was nothing else like it in the Southern Hemisphere. To find a better place for patternmakers and foundrymen to do their technical schooling, you'd have to go to London, or maybe Philadelphia or somewhere like that. [...] Because the school was well staffed you didn't have to wait for help. [...] They would roam the room [...] They would stop and demonstrate, it was all very practical and hands-on. (2017)

In the mid-1990s, Williams became a patternmaking teacher at this very school. We will revisit his story further on.

#### Melbourne, Australia, 1985

A group of trade educators are gathered at a meeting at the George Thompson School. These teachers train apprentices in patternmaking, foundry moulding, metallurgy, woodwork, machining and welding. The mood is grim. Australian manufacturing is just beginning its palpable decline. Like other wealthy capitalist economies in this period, Australian politicians are increasingly embracing globalised free trade, privatisation and cuts to public services and education. It is not a good time to be a manufacturing worker. And it is certainly not a good time to be employed as a public educator of manufacturing apprentices. These teachers gather for a lunchtime talk on the lowering of the retirement age for state government employees. They learn that if they take early retirement at age 55, they could

retire on half-pay through their superannuation. It is not a lot, but it is a little better than the aged-pension.

John Looker, a patternmaking teacher, is 50. While he is passionate about teaching the craft of patternmaking, the institution in which he works has changed in recent years. There are pressures to rationalise the content: to teach more in less time. Everything now has to be configured into a “module”, whatever that means (Looker 2011). Faced with rising paperwork and time constraints, his colleagues grumble that they have become more like “clerks” and less like tradespeople (Walker 2018). Looker knows that the likelihood of finding a patternmaking job in a rapidly deindustrialising Melbourne will become increasingly difficult in the coming years. Retirement seems an increasingly attractive option.

These tradespeople are highly skilled woodworkers. They are forever making something or other, usually to solve a problem: jigs, patterns, furniture and bespoke hand tools. The school’s workshops get a great deal of use, and not just for student training. Looker imagines what his retirement might involve:

One of my first thoughts was the realisation that I would no longer have use of a fully equipped workshop [...] My immediate concern was to have a lathe [...] The thought of retiring and not having a lathe was not acceptable. (2011: 245)

A lathe was an expensive piece of equipment, and given his future would be more financially restricted, Looker was reluctant to buy one.

After some thought I came to the realisation that I was working in the very place where I could produce one. I could make the patterns. The foundry downstairs could produce the castings in iron, and the small machine shop attached to our department was just the place to machine and fit all the components together. (2011: 245)

Looker’s lathe project requires the assistance of others: he needs the foundry staff on board, and the machine shop staff. Word swiftly spreads of Looker’s plans.

The Head of the Patternmaking Department, Jim Walker, is also considering retirement. He too is tired of the rising bureaucracy and is beset by stress.

We had too many teachers for the student numbers, and they were at me to sack some of them. [...] But, you know, I didn’t want to sack them. (Walker 2018)

Walker needed a “Staff Development” project to keep his staff busy, and Looker’s lathe idea fitted the bill. In this way, Looker’s project began “on the sly” – as an unauthorised project – but it emerged with tacit institutional approval from one of the bosses (Smith 2009). Retirement was also on Walker’s mind; he, too, needed a lathe. Looker was asked to “collect money from each syndicate member on a fortnightly basis” (Looker 2011: 246).

Ultimately, nine trade educators joined the Syndicate. They decided to make ten lathes, so as to defray the materials costs by selling the tenth machine. As Walker explains, the project involved the full production of bespoke lathes, from start to finish:

We made the drawings, the patterns, the castings, machined them, and we made the lathes over a period of about eighteen months. (2018)

Looker worked throughout lunchtimes and school holidays to get the lathes finished in time for Christmas. The Syndicate was not without its tensions or difficulties. Looker explained that

When it became obvious that all members would get a lathe as long as people kept up their payments, the majority of the work was done by John Noke, our machine-room supervisor, and myself [...] The tenth lathe was taken by a member of the Syndicate who said he might have a buyer for it. We could have reasonably expected \$1500 for it, but we never saw it again, or any money. (2011: 246)

In the end, Walker was disappointed with his lathe, believing he got the “lemon”, with a fault in the transmission. “You had to hold your hands just right to get it to work properly.” Looker’s lathe was akin to a “Rolls Royce” and worked beautifully (Walker 2018).

This story is shared not so much as a story of ingenuity or skill in Do-It-Yourself, but as an example of the ways in which manufacturing tradespeople have strategised and collectivised, in unpredictable ways, when faced with impending change. These educators did everything they could in order to continue *as makers*, which was more important to them than staying in a job.

## Melbourne, Australia, 1996

Around 10 years after the Syndicate completed their lathes, Peter Williams became a patternmaking educator at the George Thompson School. This time, he was one of only two patternmaking teachers. The department had downsized considerably since Walker’s and Looker’s time.

One day when we were all summoned to a lecture theatre [...] And this fella stood there on the stage [...] and basically said [...] this faculty is overstaffed to the tune of 32 people [...] I suggest you consider your options elsewhere. [...]

I actually became quite depressed about it because it was now clearly evident to me that everything I’d loved previously about my trade, and what I’d learned, the skills I’d developed, the kids that I’d taught, the facility that I was now working in as a teacher [...] I could see that it was all doomed [...] It was all going to go. (Williams 2017)

Unlike the patternmaking educators in the mid-1980s, Williams was too young to retire. A “retirement lathe” would have been welcome, but what he really needed was secure employment. His only option, then, was to retrain. Without the support of a collective of workers experiencing the same thing, Williams was more or less on his own, having to carve an individual pathway amid systems not designed to support worker transition.

## Author’s Note, 2020

These are scraps of experiences that I am still in the process of piecing together, from oral history interviews with twelve Australians who trained as engineering patternmakers. Despite the diverse demographic profile – I interviewed men and women aged between 33 and 90 – there are consistent overlaps in their stories. While the interviews form an incomplete patchwork of experiences, they all attest to a deeply felt commitment to manual skill and creative making. They also speak of a fear of what is to come, in a social and political landscape that does not value industrial makers.

## References

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