

Meetings Some Need

Far too much of teachers' time is wasted in staff meetings.

By Don Cropp

Principals frequently attend meetings, preferably far away from their own establishments. Amazingly, the schools run quite efficiently for days in their absence, proving that principals are not vital cogs in the machinery of education.

Alas, principals also run meetings at their own schools. It is possibly the one activity in which all principals have qualified by examination! Typically, to keep their hand in, they hold regular staff meetings at which they exercise their dictatorial prerogatives.

The significance which administrators attach to meetings was driven home to me during my last semester's teaching before retirement. As a pawn in my board of education's set of pieces to be sacrificed, I had been transferred to an unfamiliar school.

Soon after, I was invited to a light lunch with other new teachers and selected senior members of the staff. I anticipated an informal get-together over smoked meat sandwiches and juice — but I got a very formal meeting, called to order and run by one of the department heads.

At first, most of us were scratching their heads and wishing we were free to indulge in our favourite pastime of marking homework. But then it dawned on us: the whole meeting had been set up so that the superintendent could evaluate the meeting-running proficiency of our chair, a 'wannabe' vice-principal.

The mere fact that the superintendent had deigned to grace our meeting with her presence should have tipped us off immediately that this event was of a significance beyond lowly teachers' understanding.

But I digress. Let's take a look at plebeian, non-superintended staff meetings. Here's how they go.

Attendance is compulsory — except for those teachers running football practice. The teachers straggle into the library, picking up a number of documents and a couple of crackers to go with coffee or juice.

The meeting drones on for a hour or two with the staff setting their minds in neutral, carefully eschewing excessive discussion, dispute or debate, lest the meeting be prolonged by one unnecessary minute.

Many a gaze is cast wistfully out on to the football field where a few favoured teachers can be seen actually enjoying themselves. Staff meetings are doubtless one reason why the football coach never lacks for eager helpers.

Not being particularly athletic, I developed my own method of countering the soporific nature of the proceedings. I would fix a pleasant look on my face and proceed to occupy myself by solving Bohr's equations for the classical model of the atom with orbiting electrons.

"Blah, blah ... new copier for the office ..." The trick is to quantize angular momentum, derive an expression for kinetic plus potential energies ... *"The teaching staff will use the old office copier..."* Then, nibbling on a cracker, I remember how Bohr's equation leads to the Ritz Principle. *"... During the next month, both machines will be taken over by office staff..."*

Not all staff meetings are so dull, however, some being enlivened by humour, disconnectedness, and dispute.

At one pre-exam meeting, a teacher who did not set examinations attempted to display some of his expertise with the preliminary comments — "Something has just passed through my mind!" A teacher at the rear responded, *sotto voce*, "Well, it would; there's nothing there to stop it" As might be expected, he of the permeable mind became a vice-principal in due course.

Then there was the principal who decided to broaden our appreciation of the impending destreaming of grade 9 by drawing his brush over the political changes occurring in Eastern Europe, the Berlin Wall, Perestroika, Glasnost, etc. I'm still not sure what this principal's point was, but then who can see into the mind of a former head of guidance?

A frisson of excitement ran through one meeting when someone asked: "What are we going to do about love in the hallways?" At the time, students' locker doors were suffering large concavities at pelvic levels due to the amorous, and very public, extracurricular activities of a number of students.

Since neither the principal nor the vice-principal could find the part of the Education Act which made it the other's responsibility, nothing was ever done. But then why would anyone expect to solve problems at a staff meeting?

After all, Bohr's equations turned out not to work for atoms involving more than one electron.

(Mr. Cropp is a retired high school science teacher who now attends no meetings while living at his cottage in Peterborough, Ont.)