The last word
Copy that

MICK WILKINSON GETS ALL NOSTALGIC FOR THAT TRIUMPH OF EDUCATIONAL EQUIPMENT FROM THE OLDEN DAYS, THE FORDIGRAPH MACHINE, AKA THE SPIRIT DUPLICATOR.

Remember the Fordigraph machine? Readers who can will probably be recalling the experience: the Fordigraph in a little unventilated room off the staffroom, fixing your stencil onto the roller drum of the machine, the purple ink on your hands, the overwhelming feeling that your head is swimming with the intoxicating smell of the solvent.

Readers who can't remember these things will probably have an equally glazed-over look, of ignorance, that is.

Either way, you're likely to be in a school filled with randomly-functional printers and walls of photocopiers the length of the Great Wall of China – who cares about departmental quotas when we have to get the mock-exams printed, right?

In truth, the humble Fordigraph, or spirit duplicator, for those of you who tend to correct the misuse of brand names like Sellotape – 'It's "adhesive tape," okay' – was the most democratic of office equipment available for the budding educator decades ago.

Anyone could use one, needing only the amount of training it takes to learn to open

a band-aid. It used less paper than photocopiers, generated no greenhouse gases and put your teachers in a great frame of mind for an afternoon worksheet lesson in Maths – particularly if the room had ventilation issues. In fact, I now realise how disorganised my own primary teachers must have been since we, as students, used to enjoy sniffing the leftover solvent off the pages in our lessons. You see, it's rare that the smell lasts for more than five minutes after duplication.

Of course, even in the harshest white light of government-issue fluorescents, these purple worksheets were often barely visible and would fade markedly over time – all the more reason to do your revision early, kids!

Then there were the more over-enthusiastic moments when the roller drum and loose ties led to you awkwardly calling for an ambulance with 20 kilos of cold steel pressed against your purple cheek. Younger teachers still wonder why wearing ties went out of vogue in the '70s.

Fordigraph technology all but eliminated the potential for teachers to be 'passengers,' endlessly scrounging resources and downloading irrelevant activities from the internet while generating nothing of pedagogical benefit themselves. Why? Firstly, Fordigraph stencils usually only did about 60 copies before you had to throw them out. This was barely enough to share with even one other class and still guarantee extras for the kids that sat up the back aimlessly chewing on their worksheets when they ran out of lead pencils. Secondly, they didn't store well, so next year, you'd be hand-printing the suckers all over again for a new class, just that little bit better than the one last year, one would hope.

I digress, however. You see, the real value of the Fordigraph was that it forged solidarity among comrades in the teaching fraternity. Anyone could use one and you could use them as much as you liked. The ricepaper-thin sheets that rolled out of them – my record, 30 copies in 13 seconds! – apparently did not grow on trees and were not counted in copying quotas. Each purple-inked, hand-drawn masterpiece was a professional badge that marked your work at the coal-face, and no leader, however callous or tight-fisted, could ever deny you doing a class set.

The Fordigraph worksheet was a lilac-hued educational mayfly with a moderate workplace-health-and-safety flammability risk that made you feel like a real teacher every day, regardless of whether the computer network was down.

This month's Last Word was written and duplicated 60 times by Mick Wilkinson, the Student Activities Coordinator, Student Services, at Northside Christian College, Brisbane. Next month, he explains his conspiracy theory as to why we've never been able to invent a photocopier that reliably does anything like photograph and make a copy of stuff.

Photo by Elvis Santana courtesy of stock.xchng