Exams – testing times

Unsurprisingly, that examination is generally regarded as a chore and the PhD it awarded, a foregone conclusion.
By contrast to Cambridge of the 1920s, GCSEs and A-levels are supposedly ‘rigorous’ and objective but are they? Had Russell and Moore not been intimidated by Wittgenstein’s reputation, they might not have awarded the doctorate and perhaps philosophy would have lost a character of genius who, arguably, has exerted a far greater influence on philosophy than his predecessors.
However, we might justifiably ask how much talent – or more importantly how much creativity – is lost, or at best hobbled, because of our obsession with paper-thin qualifications and focus on narrow bandwith of capability?
Every teacher will have encountered pupils who showed great ability but failed to perform when faced with formal examinations. Formal testing involves scripts written to answer sets of formalistic questions of more-or-less detail and complexity remain a bedrock activity. Particularly to mark the threshold from statutory school age to the world of adult study or employment. Reforms, such as the introduction of coursework and continuous assessment, have tended to be treated with a suspicion. The brief flurry created by ikke Tomlinson’s 1996 report into reform of the curriculum for 11-14-year-olds fell at the first gust of abolishing the ‘gold standard’ of A-levels (Michael Howard), despite the widespread support among educators for his proposal to introduce national diplomas.
Written examinations have changed little since those ordered by the Emperor Caius during the first century BCE for entry into the Manchu civil service via the Imperial Academy. Although progressive and meritorious in its time, the system has acted as a mechanism by which those who might become the intelligent disaffected into higher status occupations, reinforcing conformity to permitted intellectual norms and a veil between instruction and the world of work.
The Chinese system found its way via European contact with China during the 16th century, and was taken up energetically by the Jesuit Order before being introduced to the nations of Europe during the 18th and 19th centuries. The first national examination system came about through the Prussian unification of Germany in the form of the Abitur, which is still in operation today.
I suggest the fact that high stakes, academic examination has such a long history lends it a spurious methodological credibility, reinforced by a closed circle of thought.
Catechism for higher education and the main professions are, with few exceptions, successful beneficiaries of a traditional system of assessment and the advancement associated with it. Such systems, which are methods of exclusion most obviously related to winners and losers, but they also define which subjects and learning styles will be officially approved.
In the hands of a dictatorship, assessment of this type becomes especially dangerous: a test is likely to be predicted on of ideological purity. In the UK, a classic case of liberal education may have served the past, i.e. when education still had a lingering Christian religious ethos, with little evident vocational purpose. Unfortunately, the fundamental model lingers on, although demonstrably inadequate in a world of increasing diversity and fluidity (see Zygmunt Bauman’s ‘Fluid Times’).
Rapid social and technological change brings with it decay of both stable ethical codes and any hand-me-down cognitive framework.
It is a commonplace tragedy for national education policy, particularly in England, that it is powerfully directed by politicians of every persuasion who, as the ‘successful’ products of the system, appear incapable of thinking, ‘outside [any conventional] box’, lack imagination of emerging futures and, despite using the language of innovation, fight shy of independent educational research, experiment, or creative response.
Unsurprisingly, we end up with conventions that fall the majority of children, leading, in the name of ‘rigour’, to a growing population that has been schooled, without becoming educated, trained but not cultivated. So-called schools increasingly look like those of Einstein’s ‘fool’ – one who performs exactly the same action repeatedly, in the expectation of a different result.
Although Steiner Waldorf schools that provide formal examinations achieve results generally above national averages, they do so while continuing to offer young people a wide cultural and practical curriculum, with emphasis upon the experiential and an incalculable potential in compromise with what is a rich general curriculum that can provide young people with a comprehensive, practical, social, emotional and academic education. As a result, some of their students have adopted a system of Steiner Waldorf curriculum certificates, recognised as equivalent to GCSE and A-levels in New Zealand (with leave) transferable via the Lisbon Convention. Simultaneously, the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) and the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) have been the lead partner in an Erasmus Plus funded project, Acknowledging Creativity in the ways that need to have mastered at least one subject specialization but which, incidentally, he suggests should be assessed with the sort of methods I indicated above. We need to be able to synthesize, or bridge between subject boundaries, transferring skills and identifying fresh solutions to situations that arise out of computing.
We need to develop our intrinsic creativity (indicated in the previous point), without which workers are almost certain to rely on the power of computing.
We need to develop respectful relations with others and the world in general, since the technological advance calls for greater interpersonal recognition of the rights and agency of others.
We need to develop a strong and supple moralism, an ethical sense, to guide our use of the potential that is and will be increasingly at our disposal and without there can be no proper environmental sustainability or responsible humanity.
Education fit for this century is still emerging and national systems have, so far, failed to catch up with that process. However, while countries such as Finland are developing radical and integrated programmes of study and assessment, England remains relatively backward-looking (there are more progressive initiatives in Scotland and, recently, Wales). Whatever shape reform takes, it requires more students to be able to synthesize, or bridge between subject boundaries, transferring skills and identifying fresh solutions to situations that arise out of computing.
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According to anecdote, towards the end of Ludwig Wittgenstein’s decades at St Andrews, conducted by philosophers Bertrand Russell & C. E. Moore, Wittgenstein tapped the two dons on the arm with the words, “Don’t worry, I know you’ll never understand it.”