Exams – testing times

Kevin Avison, Executive Officer at Steiner Waldorf Schools' Fellowship

Kevin qualified as a state-trained teacher in 1973. He taught for five years in the state sector and then for five further years at a Steiner Waldorf home school. Subsequently, he then spent 11 years at Ringwood Waldorf School.

Kevin was the Steiner Waldorf Schools Fellowship representative at Ringwood from 1984 until he was elected to the Fellowship Steering Group in 1989. In 1993, he was seconded to help establish the Steiner Waldorf Schools Advisory Service. During this time, he wrote a handbook for Steiner Waldorf class teachers.

In 1993, Kevin became the founder teacher at Alder Bridge School while continuing his work for the Steiner Waldorf Schools Fellowship before moving to Stourbridge in 1999. He has been a full-time member of the SWSF Executive since.

According to anecdote, towards the end of Ludwig Wittgenstein's doctoral viva voce, conducted by philosophers Bertrand Russell & G.E. Moore, Wittgenstein tapped the two dons on the arm with the words, "Don't worry. I know you'll never understand it."

Unsurprisingly, that examination is generally regarded as a charade 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 'supervisors'.

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 a narrow bandwidth of capability?

Every teacher will have encountered pupils who showed great ability but failed to perform when faced with formal examinations. Formal testing involving scripts written to answer sets of formulaic questions of more-or-lesser 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 Mike Tomlinson's 1996 report into reform of the curriculum for 16-18-year-olds fell at the first gust of "abolishing the 'gold standard' of A-levels" (Michael Howard), despite the wide support among educators for his proposal to introduce national diplomas.

Written examinations have changed little since those ordered by the Empress Cixi during the first century BCE for entry into the Manchuan civil service via the Imperial Academy. Although progressive and meritocratic in its time, the system has acted as a mechanism to channel those who might become the intelligent disaffected into higher status occupations, reinforcing conformity to permitted intellectual norms and as a weld 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 exam 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. Gatekeepers 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, however, are methods of exclusion: most obviously, they define 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 'pass' is likely be predicted on proof of ideological purity. In the UK, a classics-based 'liberal education' may have served the past, i.e. when education still held 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 fail 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 solutions 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 explorative. This involves considerable 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 our schools have adopted a system of Steiner Waldorf curriculum certificates, recognised as equivalent to GCSE and A-levels in New Zealand (with level 3 transferable via the Lisbon Convention). Simultaneously, the Steiner Waldorf Schools' Fellowship has been the lead partner in an Erasmus Plus funded project, Acknowledging Creative Thinking Skills, working with Steiner Waldorf school associations for Denmark, Finland and Norway.

Our other partners, the Ofqual registered awarding body, Crossfields Institute, has a proven track record in providing validated qualifications that, much as the Tomlinson Report recommended, involve a mix of assessment procedures: course work, specific practical and academic projects, product assessment (including recording, video, etc.), interviews and peer assessment and moderated teacher assessment as well as essays. Our proposed Diploma in Integrated Education allows some subject specialisation but within an overall cross-disciplinary approach that suits the cultural range and depth of the Steiner Waldorf curriculum. Our diploma is designed so that it could be also adopted by non-Waldorf schools.

Our thinking corresponds with that of many other progressive educators. It was partly inspired by the Global Science Initiative (via an Atlantic Monthly article by Michael Barber) and accords with a view set out in Professor Howard Gardner's 2011 book, Five Minds for the Future. In this, he draws on decades of research into education and cognition to set out five essential capabilities for education, training and continued development in work:

The need to have mastered at least one discipline, which, incidentally, he suggests should be assessed with the sort of methods I indicated above

The need to be able to synthesise, or bridge between subject boundaries, transferring skills and identifying fresh solutions to questions through that interface

The need to develop our intrinsic creativity (indicated in the previous point), without which workers are almost certain to replaced by the power of computing

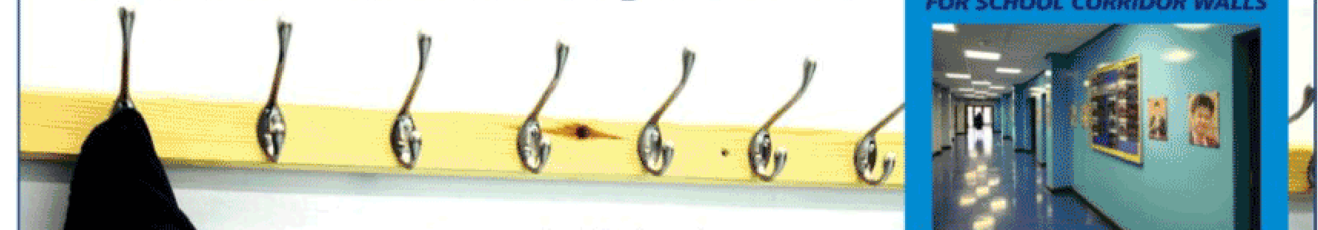
The need to develop respectful relations with others and the world in general, since the technological advance calls for greater interpersonal recognition of the rights and agency of others

The need to develop a strong and supple morality, 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 responsive 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, educators must reckon with helping to remove the obstacles that lame the innate creativity of childhood, supporting a sustainability of human, and humane, potential as well as that of environment. It is no longer adequate or acceptable to learn in the way ancient Manchuan teachers would have done. We need to ask: can students apply what they have learnt in varied situations, can that learning be transferred to real-life and are students able to innovate from that foundation? In short, we need education to promote 'competences' in this, the sense in which our continental neighbours use the term, learning for life and to stimulate life-long interests. To sum up, in the words of mathematician and philosopher Alfred North Whitehead:

'Knowledge treasured as the gift of education is really only useful as a catalyst for the student's creativity. Not used for this purpose, knowledge simply amounts to inert ideas'.

N.B. The views expressed are that of the author.



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