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# **Management, skills and creativity: the purpose and value of instrumental reasoning in education discourse**

["Instrumental reasoning in education discourses: finding purpose and value in managerialism, skills and creativity in education" - draft title]

## **Abstract**

Reason is a heterogeneous word with many meanings and functions. Instrumental reasoning is the 'useful but blind' variant that, for Horkheimer, presupposes 'the adequacy of procedures for purposes more or less taken for granted and supposedly self-explanatory'. The paper argues that the root of instrumental reasoning is to be found in Hume and Weber and suggests that the problems associated with portraying reason as 'inert' or 'formal' underpin many areas of education policy today. A scrutiny of discourses on managerialism, skills and creativity suggests that they are not only bound by instrumental reasoning but tied to unacknowledged purposes associated with what Marcuse called 'capitalist rationality'. The paper concludes by reflecting upon Habermas' notion of substantive reasoning that offers education a way forward.

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## 1. Introduction

Reason has been cast in many moulds. From its useful but apparently purposeless wanderings in its instrumental form, to its attachment in Hegel to the Logos and a 'cunning' alignment to world history (Hegel, 1956, p.33); from its a-historical, culturally indifferent rendition in classical liberal epistemology, to its critical, ironic detachment in postmodernism, where some would accuse it of relativism or nihilistic indifference. The word is heterogeneous, a homonym, and its meanings have served different functions. Instrumental reason, the 'useful but blind' variant (McGuigan, 2006, p.171), is the one of interest here.

It is a term that has been widely used in educational discourses. Skemp used it to make a distinction between 'relational and instrumental understanding' in pupil's learning of mathematics (Skemp, 1976); Lankshear and Knobel to contrast new literacies with those of conventional or 'instrumental value' (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006); and Pickering to draw attention to 'a highly instrumentalist approach to teaching' as the profession adapts to the government's programme for Masters qualifications in teaching and learning (Pickering, 2009). Too often, however, the term has been used as if it were unproblematic. At times it has been used literally: 'Instrumentalism implies looking upon both school subjects and humans as instruments, as tools or means for reaching another goal or end' (Varkø, 2007), while at others it has been used incomprehensibly, at least to those outside the domain (e.g. Van Detta, 2004). The paper contends that literal and obscure renditions of instrumental reasoning foreclose upon more subtle issues associated with purpose and value and that its seemingly self-explanatory employment in areas of education policy has coincided with the ascendancy of neo-liberal economic practices within the UK and that this needs explaining.

Horkheimer is a key figure in the emergence of the term. In *Eclipse of Reason* he described it in terms of 'the adequacy of procedures for purposes more or less taken for granted and supposedly self-explanatory. It attaches little importance to the question whether the purposes as such are reasonable' (Horkheimer, 2004, p.3). Here he implies a distinction between reason as a content-free, value-neutral instrument, a tool that Schopenhauer cast as having 'no material but only a formal content' (Schopenhauer, 1974, p.171), and reason as having purposes and consequences within the world where actions and behaviours convey a normative component inextricably bound to its instrumental function. This is clearly Horkheimer's position, for whom the purposes and ends of reasoning were an intimate guiding component of reasoning itself. An analogy makes the point: 'Instrumental reasoners may show that it is necessary to break eggs if one wants to make an omelette, but they have nothing but 'subjective' or 'arbitrary' preferences to cite as reasons for making or not making omelettes' (O'Neill, 1998). For O'Neill instrumental reasoners retreat to the 'personal' or 'subjective' domain when verifying decisions and deny the significance of wider purposes in deciding between issues of choice and value. Thus, to extend her analogy, while instrumental reasoning may be essential for the skilful and efficient preparation of omelettes, that the purpose is to embarrass a vegan or kill a cholesterol-laden diner, or connected with *any* explicit purpose apart from the 'subjective', is deemed unrelated and extraneous. Procedures are fundamental. Purposes are disconnected from or considered irrelevant to this form of reason.

The next section examines the nature of instrumental reasoning in the philosophy of Hume while the subsequent one looks at its emergence in the social theory of Weber. The sections that follow use tensions that emerge to reflect upon three current educational discourses that employ reason instrumentally, namely, managerialism, skills and creativity. Section four argues that managerialism uses phrases like 'the pursuit of excellence' while failing to suggest what content or purpose such terms might serve as a

standard to judge the quality of a new Headteacher (DfES, 2004). Section five looks at the nature of communication as an instrumental skill that attempts to secrete a normative agenda. And section six looks at creativity as an ambiguous term used by central government to make inroads into education policy for the purposes of market innovation, and clearly tied to questionable instrumental-economic purposes. Section seven, on capitalism and instrumentalism, seeks to draw these strands together and account for the use of instrumental reasoning in current education policy, and concludes by suggesting that in Habermas' notion of substantive rationality alternatives might be found.

## **2. Hume's instrumentalism**

Hume is renowned for his sceptical doubt about the limits of human reason and for his epistemological modesty: 'Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them' (Hume, 1973, p.458). If the function of reason is to serve an individual's passions, and 'since a passion can never, in any sense, be call'd unreasonable', Hume surmised that 'tis impossible that reason and passion can ever oppose each other...' (ibid. p.416). If these non-cognitive desires cannot be contrary to reason then, he concluded, 'Tis not contrary to reason to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of my finger...' (ibid. p.416). Because of this portrayal of reason, as a tool that discovers the best action to achieve a subject's purposes, underpinned by a profound scepticism regarding the possibility of the rational deliberation of those purposes, some have concluded that "'Humean" now serves as a virtual synonym for "instrumentalist"' (Setiya, 2004, p.365; see also Audi, 2002, p.236).

Some loyal Humeans have acknowledged pitfalls and lacunae within the master's original account of reason but have sought to explain how it might be profitably reshaped (e.g. Baier, 1991, p.161; Setiya, 2004, p.370; Garrett, 1997, p.95. See also Raz, 1986; Hubin, 2001; Audi, 2002; Lillehammer, 2007). While they have proffered arguments favouring modifications of the original depiction of reason, others have warned against tenuous reinterpretations. Hampton (1996, 1998) and Korsgaard (1997) for example have argued that such notions may sequester more fundamental problems at the heart of his instrumentalism. Their proposals are detailed, convoluted and distinct but both try to show how Humean reason is untenable precisely *because* it omits an explicit conception of what is right or just. They have argued that normativity is inescapable in a conception of instrumental reasoning and that this omission is sufficient to unravel the fallacy that reason can serve as an inert tool. Thus, they argue, in identifying passions considered important to a subject, instrumental reasoners still need to address the problem of *coherence* and the likelihood that subjective preferences may compete with each other; or that judgements will still need to be made about whether, in the *longer term*, passions could be best maximised by temporary postponement now; or whether planning for the *future* could involve reason speculating about currently unfelt, but rationally perceivable, preferences. Thus, says Korsgaard, 'in order to distinguish rational desire from actual desire, it looks as if we need to have some rational principles determining which ends are worthy of preference or pursuit' (Korsgaard, 1997, p.230). Such rational principles, says Hampton, entail values that are in Hume assumed: '...any theory of instrumental reason is just as hip-deep in normativity as any moral theory, and therefore just as metaphysically problematic as any moral theory' (Hampton, 1998, p.206). In short, if reason cannot deliver straightforward attachments to subjective preferences without making judgments between purposes and possible ends, Hume's notion 'that reason is perfectly inert' (Hume, 1973, p.458) is untenable. Any moral theory based upon it faces an insuperable dilemma: '...the authority of this instrumental form has to be

understood non-instrumentally... understood as an imperative, it is categorical and not hypothetical' (Hampton, 1998, p.140, note 22).

Three observations are worth making. First, Hampton and Korsgaard's critique has been accepted in part by a number of prominent Humeans (e.g. Millgram, 2000; Hubin, 2001; Beardman, 2007; Lillehammer, 2007). Second, despite the tendency for instrumentalists to 'dislike the inclusion of norms in their theory' (Hampton, 1998, p.198), there are good arguments to show that the purpose of reasoning beyond its instrumental function is *inescapably* tied to a normative agenda. And third, when Hume's philosophy merges with social theory the problems associated with instrumentalism become more apparent. At the start of the *Enquiry* he acknowledged that his philosophical arguments bore no 'direct reference to action and society' (Hume, 1996, p.9). While latter parts of the *Treatise* contain discussion of what philosophy can do for society, Hume's scepticism regarding the remit of reason prevented him from making clear connections between his philosophical ideas and the values that emerged in his musings on social, political and economic matters. Like his conservative companions Burke and Oakeshott, for Hume it was custom and tradition that would provide the appropriate guide to practical action.

Others, however, are more sceptical of Hume's philosophical legacy in social practice. Horkheimer described him as 'the father of modern positivism' for the way he 'eliminated' the visionary, transcendent qualities of reasoning prevalent in Greek and liberal epistemologies: 'The acceptability of ideas, the criteria for our actions and beliefs, the leading principles of ethics and politics, all our ultimate decisions are made to depend upon factors other than reason' (Horkheimer, 1974, p.6). Hampton has pointed to the way contemporary Humeans have often bypassed social and political questions by focussing on what she calls 'trivial and whimsical' preferences for inconsequential subject matter when discussing the vicissitudes of reason (Hampton, 1998, p.193).

Above we saw how Hume drove home his point about the limits of reason by equating the destruction of the world to the scratching of his finger. So too with contemporary Humeans where wanting to watch a film, go to a spa, play the piano, put parsley on the moon, have a drink or contemplate its prevention should a wasp fly into a vending machine's coin slot, are the sorts of examples chosen to illustrate seemingly socially inconsequential discussions of reason (see Nagel, 1970; Hubin, 2001; Raz, 2005; Beardman, 2007). Hampton's accusation of triviality is an outcome of the prohibition of reason in the adjudication of more significant issues than these, permitted to deal with nothing more complex than the efficacy of solutions to everyday 'personal' choices. Some have argued, however, that when instrumental reasoning is used to condone certain socio-economic practices, the consequences of a philosophy of 'arbitrary preference' (O'Neill, 1998) are less easy to ignore, and here Weber has been a target.

### 3. Weber's instrumentalism

Weber's reflections on the meaning of reason and rationality are scattered and unmethodical. They have been described as 'confusing' (Levine, 1981, p.13), 'fragmentary' (Habermas, 1984, p.143, 170) or 'ambiguous' (Swidler, 1973, p.35). In *The Protestant Ethic* he acknowledged he had difficulty with the term (Weber, 1930 p.194, note 9) and in *The Economic Ethics of the World Religions* considered the 'very different things' that "rationalism' can mean' (Weber, 1948, p.293-4; see Levine, 1981, p.23). However, in *Economy and Society* he wrote more clearly of four types: 'traditional', 'affectual', 'instrumental/formal' (*Zweckrationalität*) and 'value/substantive' (*Wertrationalität*) rationality (Weber, 1968, p.24-5):

The term "formal rationality of economic action" will be used to designate the extent of quantitative calculation... The concept of "substantive rationality", on the other hand, is full of ambiguities. It



conveys ... certain criteria of ultimate ends, whether they be ethical, political, utilitarian, hedonistic, feudal, egalitarian or whatever... (ibid., p.85-6).

It is only Weber's notion of 'formal rationality' that is of interest here.

In *The Protestant Ethic* he reflected upon the portentous expansion of market forces under capitalism but concluded that they would do so anyway for humanity was entrapped by the laws of modernity. In the context of inexorable economic forces and the growing disenchantment with religion, human reason was denuded of any vestige of its former qualities in pre-capitalist times:

Man is dominated by the making of money, by acquisition as the ultimate purpose of his life. Economic acquisition is no longer subordinated to man as the means for the satisfaction of his material needs. This reversal of what we should call the natural relationship, so irrational from a naïve point of view, is evidently as definitely a leading principle of capitalism as it is foreign to all people not under capitalistic influence. (Weber, 1930, p.53)

With the constant expansion of science and technology that fed the rise of capitalism, along with adjudicating and administrative procedures at hand to establish the dependable regulation of business, Weber prophesied that 'progress' towards the bureaucratic state was imminent. The rationalisation of society was leading to an ever increasing growth of a social and economic system whose values, ends and goals were irrational but unchangeable: 'The capitalist economy of the present day is an immense cosmos into which the individual is born, and which presents itself to him ... as an unalterable order of things in which he must live' (ibid., p.54). Instrumental rationality had taken hold of the world and presented itself to humans as a necessary system where functional imperatives dominated. Weber described entrapment within this 'iron cage' (ibid. p.181-2) as 'relentless' (Weber, 1978, p.1156, 731), 'irresistible' (Weber, 1978 p.1403), 'unalterable' (Weber, 1930, p.54), 'escape

proof' (ibid., p.1401-02) and 'unavoidable' (Weber, 1958, p.60). It was the structural condition of humanity in industrial nations that rationalisation would forever emend its efficiency and scope until 'the last ton of fossilized coal is burnt' (Weber, 1930, p.181).

It was the universality of Weber's depiction of the effects of instrumental reason upon the social fabric that raised the ire of Frankfurt School theorists. While they concurred with his analysis that Protestantism had been an important precursor for the development of capitalism and that capitalism had provided a matrix in which instrumental reason could flourish, Marcuse condemned him for presenting it in terms of historical fate:

Who decrees the fate? ... Weber's concept of fate is construed 'after the fact' of such coercion: he generalizes the blindness of a society which reproduces itself behind the back of individuals, of a society in which the law of domination appears as objective technological law.

However, in fact, this law is neither "fatal" nor "formal". The context of Weber's analysis is the historical context in which economic reason became the reason of domination. (Marcuse, 1972, p.213-4)

For Marcuse the rise of instrumental reason was not to blame *per se* for the 'chaotic, frightening and evil aspects of technological civilisation' but the way in which the process of rationalization was organised under capitalism that accounted for the 'irrationality of this rationalization'. Horkheimer similarly fought against the reduction of reason to a tool that fore-grounded means rather than ends and, in a *Critique of Instrumental Reason*, sought 'to rescue thought from this fate':

'Reason' for a long period meant the activity of understanding and assimilating the eternal ideas which were to function as goals for men. Today, on the contrary, it is not only the business but the essential work of reason to find means for the goals one adopts at any given time... Reason is considered to come into its own when it rejects any

status as an absolute...and accepts itself simply as a tool...

(Horkheimer, 1974, p.vii-viii)

In short, Weber stood accused of fusing the apparent inexorable growth of instrumental reasoning with the progress of capitalism and by so doing arriving at the ideologically unacceptable position of foreclosure upon the possible emergence of historical and political alternatives.

For Habermas, however, Marcuse and Horkheimer presented their 'unrelenting critique from the ironically distanced perspective of an objective reason that had fallen irreparably into ruin' (Habermas, 1984, p.377). While their critique of Weber was valid, their explanatory model of rationality was flawed (Habermas, 1987, p.350). For Habermas a more convincing way was to redefine Weber's *Wertrationalität* while retaining *Zweckrationalität* as a distinct but essential component of human reasoning (Habermas, 1971). Thus instrumental rationality was described as that which considered means and consequences in a quantifiable and calculable way, a form of rationality where actions were judged by the ultimate goal of maximum efficiency. In contrast, substantive (or 'communicative') rationality was said to be based upon principles of justice, fairness and truthfulness. This form of rationality entered people's lives through their culture and community and was thus subject to the vagaries of particular customs and traditions of power. Thus whereas instrumental rationality had technical rules, substantive rationality rested upon social norms. Whereas instrumental rationality used context-free language, the language of mathematics, measurement and replication, substantive rationality rested upon inter-subjectively shared, everyday language. Whereas systems of instrumental rationality involved learning skills and manifesting formal qualifications to demonstrate scientific and technical prowess, substantive action drew upon internalised roles gained from convention and tradition: 'skills put us in a position to solve problems', traditions motivate us 'to follow norms'. Transgressing the rules of instrumental rationality led to inefficiency while the failure of substantive

action involved the reprisal of authority. And whereas the rationalisation of systems of instrumental action involved the growth of productive or capitalist forces through the incessant, quasi-autonomous expansion of scientific and technical control, in communicative interactions there was the possibility of what Habermas called, albeit vaguely, emancipation.

To sum up so far. First, the roots of instrumental reasoning can be found in elements of empiricist philosophy and social theory. Second, critics of instrumentalism in Hume (Korsgaard and Hampton) and in Weber (Marcuse and Horkheimer) have argued against the pretence that reason can be conceived as a means-seeking activity that presupposes human purposes that are 'taken for granted and supposedly self-explanatory'. They are accused of secreting normative assumptions (in Hume) or ideological dispositions (in Weber) that go unacknowledged. Third, Habermas' development of two forms of rationality provides a valuable model that extends Weber's *Wertrationalität* while retaining *Zweckrationalität* as distinct components of human reasoning. The next three sections explain the rise of instrumental reasoning in current educational discourses.

#### **4. Managerialism and instrumentalism**

Ball has argued that 'new public management' (NPM) has become 'the key mechanism in the political reform and cultural re-engineering of public sectors for the last 20 years' (Ball, 2008, p.47). One of the key terms in NPM has been 'effective', as in 'effective school leadership' (e.g. Teddlie and Reynolds, 2000). For some, however, the term is controversial. Bottery has suggested that 'effective' is a word normally taken to be a neutral term, something that simply describes a relationship between means and ends, and so has argued that the School Effectiveness Movement has facilitated the spurious belief that there was nothing problematic in their declarations. This,

he says, has enticed researchers to think of the study of the 'effective school' as a matter of mere empirical investigation: '...if there are no values involved, or if it is so evidently good, then all we need to do is get on and investigate it' (Bottery, 2000, p.115). Similarly Blake et.al. have argued: 'It is the notion of effectiveness, and its close relation efficiency, that have above all replaced proper consideration of ends' (Blake, et.al., 1998, p132). Pring has likewise proposed that the effectiveness debate has severed educational from moral discourses resulting in 'a theory of effectiveness which ignores the question "Effective for what?" ' (Pring, 2005, p.13). Again Wrigley has argued that research surrounding school effectiveness 'avoids a debate about the *purposes* of education' (Wrigley, 2006, p.35 my emphasis), that he also attributes to its successor, the School Improvement Movement, which is 'virtually silent about the purpose of schooling' and 'gives rise to some very strange writing. Dozens of books are published every year about styles of leadership but few even consider where they are leading to' (Wrigley, 2006, p.38). Managerialism is part of a culture where the devising of means has become a dominant activity and where 'consideration of values, of the ends to which means lead, no longer takes pace to any significant extent...' (Blake, et.al., 1998, p.133):

Managers themselves and most writers about management conceive of themselves as morally neutral characters whose skills enable them to devise the most efficient means of achieving whatever end is proposed. Whether a given manager is effective or not is on the dominant view a quite different question from that of the morality of the ends which his effectiveness serves or fails to serve. Nonetheless there are strong grounds for rejecting the claim that effectiveness is a morally neutral value. (MacIntyre, 2007, p.74)

In short, many observers are united in their judgement that the term 'effective' has been used instrumentally as a means for excluding issues that might call into doubt the neutrality or self-evident goodness of desired changes in public policy, in this case management structures.

Since 2004 those wishing to become senior managers in state schools in England must hold, or be working towards, National Professional Qualifications for Headship (NPQH) for which they will be assessed against government determined Standards: 'The Standards recognise the key role that headteachers play in engaging in the development and delivery of government policy and in raising and maintaining levels of attainment in schools in order to meet the needs of every child' (DfES, 2004). The *National Standards for Headteachers* lists the qualities, activities and attributes necessary for the job:

- 'maintaining effective partnerships'
- 'shaping the future'
- 'create a productive learning community'
- 'ensuring that the school moves forward'
- 'carry the vision forward'
- 'the pursuit of excellence'
- 'develops and maintains effective strategies'

What is missing here is acknowledgement of the normative or substantive domain that would give meaning to implied purposes. For example, there are thirty eight references to the word effective but no explicit discussion of what the *content* of an 'effective partnership' might be. Similarly, there is no discussion about the values underlying disparate 'visions' Headteachers might have. Some may argue that a school 'moving forward' should 'shape the future' in one direction rather than another, driven, on the one hand, by a radical concern for the ecological catastrophe a Headteacher may think now faces the planet, or, on the other, by the need to create more students primed with qualities and skills to duplicate the existing trajectory. How these disparate 'visions' are to be evaluated goes unmentioned. In avoiding underlying purposes the *National Standards for Headteachers* employ a technical language that contains values that are indefinite or sustain an instrumental discourse that dodges issues of a substantive nature. These remain implicit and unstated. Together with NPM it gives the appearance of providing

technical solutions to educational problems and for some is clearly ideological: 'New managerialism...is very clearly an ideological rather than simply a technical reform of higher education and one that is firmly based on interests concerning relations of power and dominance' (Deem & Brehony, 2005, p.231-2). For others it is a procedure for 'keeping silent about human values' and for strengthening an ideological position while reinforcing 'the sense of inevitability and fatalism that neo-liberal politicians use to quell dissent' (Wrigley, 2006 p.38).

## **5. Skills and instrumentalism**

Under Fagin's tutelage Oliver Twist was taught five skills for efficient pick-pocketing. These were 'nimbleness', retreating from sight when closing upon a victim, the need for 'extraordinary rapidity of movement', the knack of accurate timing and developing appropriate reactions for 'accidental stumbling' (Dickens, 1966, page 54-5). But the skills revolve in a paradigm that is unquestioned. The substantive issue of thieving *per se* is placed outside the frame and Fagin's reasoning appears instrumental because his education of Oliver involved merely the teaching of efficient methods of thieving bound to unquestioned purposes.

In educational policy unstated assumptions about purposes are less convincing. Skills have always been an outcome of education but were conventionally viewed as its by-product. Today not only does the National Curriculum enshrine them in law (DfEE, 2000) but until recently the Department for Education and Skills championed the very term in its title. This has coincided with an anxiety about whether education 'prepares young people adequately for the challenges of the new global economy' (DfES, 2005a) and the push to create a flexible, team-thinking, workforce suitably

equipped to sustain the nation's economic future within an unpredictable global context:

Skills are fundamental to achieving our ambitions, as individuals, for our families and for our communities. They help businesses create wealth, and they help people realise their potential. So they serve the twin goals of social justice and economic success' (DfES, 2005a, para 1; see also DfES, 2005b).

Whether skills divorced from specific bodies of knowledge or physical challenges *are* transferable is a debate that has gone on elsewhere. The concern here is merely to establish how skills are linked with instrumental reasoning.

Take 'communication skills', the first of the Key Skills in the National Curriculum (DfEE, 2000, p.20-1). Communication skills are commonly presented as a conduit devoid of content, that is to say, not communication about an *issue* or the *substance* of something but, rather, about the transferable, *content-less* skill of communication. The substantive issues contained in communication are often assumed to reside elsewhere. British Telecom, for example, in its education initiative *Communication Skills for Life* (BT, 2006), claim that its aims are: 'To help everyone in the UK understand and enjoy the benefits of improved communication skills'. What it omits to explain is how such understanding, benefit and improvements might be measured in terms of political or moral criteria. It aims 'to make a difference', but *to whom* and *why* are issues not raised. BT aspires to get communicators 'constantly engaged' but refuses to explain for *what reason*, nor that the contested nature of engagement is often highly problematic. It values communicators who are 'open to ideas, opinions and questions', but whether this openness would extend to *argument* about poor ideas or merely to the *reception* of any ideas, no matter what their content, remains highly ambiguous. In short, BT's portrayal of communication skills proffers no epistemological concern for the content of ideas and, in the absence of a position about how contested values might be



communicated, mechanisms to ensure politeness and tolerance substitute for a complex explanation of how substantive disputes might be resolved. It is, in short, an instrumental view of communication that contains, in both senses, a normative agenda.

In fact the proximity of 'communication' with 'skill' overflows with values embedded in political and cultural practices:

...the phrase 'communication skill' names a cultural construct, not a natural phenomenon with an objective existence in the world. Whether some person, or group of people, has good, bad or indifferent communication skills is entirely dependent on what 'communication' is taken to be, and what is thought to constitute 'skill' in it. (Cameron, 2000, p.128)

Thus the *same* discursive features of communication could be seen as a skill in one historical period or culture but as pathological in another. Argument, for example, in a primary classroom in Russia is currently assumed to be a valuable skill (Alexander, 2001) but less so in English primary schools today where non-judgementalism has emerged as culturally more valuable in practices like 'circle time' (Middlesbrough EiC Partnership, 2006) and 'peer mediation': 'One of the most crucial components of the mediation process is that it remains non-judgemental' (Holmes, 2006; see also Teachernet, 2006). In short, the content of communication skills varies from age to age and from culture to culture, and the façade of neutrality is revealed by historical evidence of shifts in content and by a comparison of assumptions from different contemporary practices.

Moreover, the contemporary preference for non-judgementalism as a communicative skill in education in England is itself both revealing and problematic. On the one hand, such a skill in, say, peer mentoring could be seen as replicating therapy-like discourses that resolve everyday conflicts in school without the construction of winners or losers, where questions of right

and wrong are deemed unimportant in the quest to move forward in pragmatic and effective response. On the other hand, such practices could be seen as examples of discourses structured to undermine or bypass the search for the truth about particular instances of bullying and, in refusing to isolate culprits, gloss over issues of social justice in the haste for closure.

These problems are mirrored in contemporary advice about classroom discussion concerning the teaching of financial skills. DfEE guidance suggests that teachers should 'listen carefully to what everyone has to say, valuing all contributions non-judgementally so that young people from different financial backgrounds are able to contribute to discussions on an equal footing and with equal confidence' (DfEE, 2000, p.12). Such pedagogical advice could be seen as appropriate and sensitive and avoid the embarrassment that a pupil may feel when encountering other pupils from 'different financial circumstances' (ibid. p.9&11). Equally it could be seen as serving to preclude discussion of structural inequalities where the values associated with comparative wealth are placed beyond enquiry and judgement. Moreover, it places the broader political agenda underpinning the introduction of financial skills in English schools in recent years beyond question (see Gibson, 2008) **and runs counters the broader** liberal justification for reasoning by presupposing that the world is already wise, fair and just (see Cameron, 2000).

## **6. Creativity and instrumentalism**

A distinction can be made between an individualised, romantic notion of creativity, to which teachers have recently turned as a tonic for years of national over-governance of the school curriculum in England (see Roling, 2004), and an instrumental one, that binds it to the economic needs of the

nation. PM Blair, in his Forward to *Culture and Creativity*, drew upon both these strands:

This Government knows that culture and creativity matter. They matter because they can enrich all our lives, and everyone deserves the opportunity to develop their own creative talents and to benefit from those of others... They also matter because creative talent will be crucial to our individual and national economic success in the economy of the future.

(Blair, 2001. See also Miliband, 2003; Smith, 2003; Holden, 2004)

While both depictions of creativity are controversial (see Gibson, 2005) it is merely the latter that is of concern here.

Harnessing the word creativity to the needs of the economy means that it is being employed instrumentally. The problem with the instrumentalisation of creativity is that it can be filled with any content and used to support any political purpose, agenda or vision of the future, or rather, presumes one that then becomes second-order and unsubstantiated:

Our system of education is predicated on old assumptions about the supply and demand for labour. New models of education for the post-industrial economies are struggling to emerge in many parts of the world. These models are being shaped by new patterns of work, by the accelerated impact of technologies and by new ways of living.

(Robinson, 2004)

Seltzer & Bentley in *The Creative Age: Knowledge and skills for the new economy* (1999) made a similar case for creativity in education. Taking Unipart as the exemplar of modernisation since its apparent turn to creative ways of engaging the workforce, we are told that profits rose substantially:

In 1998, Unipart had its seventh consecutive year of record breaking growth with sales exceeding £1.1 billion... At Unipart, creativity seems to come naturally – not because employees are expected to take a

course on creativity and problem-solving, but because there is virtually nowhere in the life of the firm where creative learning is set aside...

(Seltzer & Bentley, 1999)

In short, the politico-economist's concern for creativity lies in the way it bridges financial and educational policy, while less well-disguised texts link creativity openly with profit.

However, if Habermas is right in theorising how advanced capitalist societies are too often governed by instrumental actions associated with science and technology augmented way beyond their appropriate domain, then use of creativity to support that project throws its validity into question. If Blair, Miliband, Smith, Holden, Selzer & Bentley, et al. link creativity to the future needs of the economy in the absence of a substantive debate about the 'rightness of norms', to use Habermas' term, their view is at best ambivalent and at worse verifies Hertz's Weberian view of the takeover of democracy by capitalism (Hertz, 2001). This is not to imply that instrumental reasoning is improper or un-useful. In its apparent inertness it realises defined goals under given conditions. It ensures the efficient construction of runways, the technical smartness of identity cards, the scientific possibility of genetically modified crops, manages the effective deployment of troops in combat, and so on. But while instrumental action organises the means that are appropriate according to the effective control of predetermined purposes, substantive action demands the reasoned appraisal of normatively valued alternatives, namely, the *appetite* for runways, identity cards, GM crops or war. Creativity can serve both forms of rationality. It can serve the technical sophistication of solutions to preordained crises of a personal, technical, military or profitable nature. But it can also serve the inter-subjective reasoning about complex goals and the search for the rightness of underlying values.

## **7. Capitalism and instrumentalism**

These educational discourses on managerialism, skills and creativity exemplify instrumental reasoning in practice. The paper has suggested that their current presentation sidelines reflection upon substantive assumptions by disengagement from epistemic and normative realms that underpin and sustain them. Issues of purpose and value are presented as unproblematic, 'taken for granted and supposedly self-explanatory' (Horkheimer, 2004, p.3), and consensus and agreement too often feigned or contrived. The paper has argued that beyond their instrumental function they are *necessarily* tied to a normative agenda, are 'hip-deep in normativity' to use Hampton's phrase, but are reticent to acknowledge their moral or political *a priori*.

In 1972 Marcuse proposed that Weber's instrumental rationality coincided with what he termed 'capitalist rationality' in so far as its purpose was calculable efficiency and profit:

...its rationality organizes and controls things and men, factory and bureaucracy, work and leisure. But *to what purpose* does it control them? Up to this point, Weber's concept of reason has been 'formal' ... But now the limits of formal reason emerge: neither the specific purpose of the scientific-technical construction nor its materials (its subjects and objects) can be deduced from the concept of reason; they explode from the start this formal, 'value-free' concept. (Marcuse, 1972, p.205-6. See also McGuigan, 2006, p.14; Habermas, 1971, p.82; Lyotard, 1984, p.12)

Capitalist rationality can help explain the emergence of instrumental reasoning in managerialism, skills and creativity. In managerial discourses the paper has suggested that 'talk of effectiveness is not so agnostic about ends as it pretends' (Blake et.al., 1998, p.132) and that substantive values are imported under the guise of ethical neutrality. Arguably, these sequestered ends are associated with compliance and efficiency and the crucial requirement of capitalism to minimise cost is in part secured by efficiency gains through the

effective management, surveillance and social adjustment of the labour market. For some this would help explain the de-politicisation of the public sphere as a site of potential instability as well as the associated fragmentation of communities and crises of political legitimation (see Taylor, 1992; Habermas, 1988). For others managerialism is a facet of capitalism that is 'inseparable from a mode of human existence in which the contrivance of means is in central part the manipulation of human beings into compliant patterns of behaviour' (MacIntyre, 2007 p.74). This, for MacIntyre, is the moral and political *a priori* underpinning managerialism, its unclaimed purpose.

Capitalist rationality also underpins skill development and is evidenced when accounting for historical shifts in content. The paper has argued that 'good communication skills' today preference linguistic behaviours commonly associated with girls, whereas boys in the past were thought 'more likely to argue openly and to voice strong opinions' (see OFSTED, 1993; QCA, 1998). But the transformation over the past two decades, of enabling female students to become more assertive to today's dominant paradigm were boys are required to become 'better' communicators by becoming less judgemental, can also be linked with labour and employability. The current content of communication skills may not simply be associated with 'feminised language' but reflect a more general cultural shift concerning the manufacturing of the flexible worker and the responsible citizen (see Cameron, 2000; Cameron, 2008). In other words, the instrumental take on communication skills in education may actually be part of a broader response to an employability agenda where members of either sex are required not only to be economically creative and technically skilled but compliant 'team players', collegiate in their outlook and predisposed to communicative compromise, rather than argue a case or contest assumed values. Capitalist rationality demands it: 'Employers are usually best placed to judge how to develop their business, and what skills their current and future employees will need. Training is more likely to have an impact if the employer is engaged in its design and

delivery, and is motivated to deploy the new skills effectively' (DfES, 2005a, para.52-3; see also CBI/Universities UK, 2009).

The political *a priori* underlying government initiatives on creativity are also explicable in terms of capitalist rationality. What is curious is that they have consistently advocated the need to identify value and purpose. The definition found in *All Our Futures* (DfEE, 1999) and repeated in OFSTED's *Expecting the Unexpected* (2003), links creativity with value quite explicitly. Creativity is 'imaginative activity fashioned so as to produce outcomes that are both original and of value'. But discussion of what *is* of value is omitted. The *purpose* is left free-floating. Selzer and Bentley too see the importance of linking creativity with value: 'Creativity is the application of knowledge and skills in new ways to achieve a valued goal'. But, in the absence of any sustained epistemological or ethical discussion of what *are* valued goals, creativity appears supine to the needs of the economy with education policy at heel: '...to boost competitiveness in the knowledge economy, we must make radical changes to the educational system' (Selzer & Bentley, 1999).

## **8. Conclusion**

Habermas has argued that 'in modern societies, economic and bureaucratic spheres emerge in which social relations are regulated only via money and power' (Habermas, 1987, p.154). This he has explained in terms of the uncoupling of the economic and bureaucratic 'system' from the 'lifeworld', the place where substantive rationality should mediate norms, identities and social traditions. This has led to a withering of the sphere in which liberal notions of reasoning were meant to operate, the domain where contestation, refutation and argument were to intended to judge between competing purposes. He has not written extensively about the way education is involved in ratifying or opposing this trend. Others, however, have suggested that his

idea of the colonization of the *Lebenswelt* can help explain how education has increasingly become 'a vehicle for maintaining or enhancing the nation's economy' and how 'teaching, learning and the curriculum are ...themselves increasingly shaped by the model of economic exchange' (Deakin Crick & Joldersma, 2007, p.82. See also Young, 1989). Others have argued that his idea of procedural rationality and participatory democracy could provide a basis for restructuring the prevalent tradition of teacher/pupil interaction in England and for transforming pupil voice into the 'unforced reciprocal recognition of students-as-fellow-inquirers' (Young, 2000, p.541. See also Englund, 2010). This would involve a shift from a tradition where individuals expressed 'personal' opinions to one that prepared them for informed and committed contestation within inter-subjective contexts through 'the improvement of the methods and conditions for debate, discussion and persuasion' (Habermas, 1996, p.304). Again, others have focussed on the normative core within substantive rationality and the need for education to shift from its current preoccupation with the development of skills and cognitive abilities in preparation for employment, to the development of students' preparedness to make value-judgements about the world (see Habermas, 1979, p.84-5. See also Carleheden, 2006). In these sorts of ways education would help engender what Habermas has called the epistemic need for the 'persistent critique' of latent purposes that exposed the *substance* of human reasoning (Habermas, 1984, p.345), reversing a trend that has today 'reduced reason to a potential for knowledge that has lost, together with its critical sting, its commitment, its moral decisiveness and has been separated from such a decision as from an alien element' (Habermas, 1974, p.258).

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