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School of Arts, Media and Education Conference

Abstract

So, wot is Edukshun?

All of us have tales to tell of our educational experiences, in the author's case now stretching over 52 years. Education has been and presumably remains a significant part of our lives, but what is it? A light hearted approach is taken which includes references to a small number of fictional texts, philosophers and Government reports. A popular political mantra, repeated *ad nauseam* during the election campaigning, is the intent to 'raise standards'. It is argued this is vague and unhelpful and actually only refers to gaining qualifications, the better the school's SATS results the better the school, the more 'firsts' the better the university. The agenda informing such criteria is suggested as education now has moved towards skills and employability and its present definition is therefore linked to training with the aim of such an 'education' as producing a compliant workforce and national economic prosperity. The paper's theme is that such a definition is reductionist and ignores the intrinsic features of the possibility of education to be a process for self emancipation coupled to the simple joyous experience of exploring the unknown. Better to travel than arrive.

Keywords: Education, The Department for Children, Schools and Families, HEfCE, Department for Business, Education and Skills

So, wot is edukashun?

The experience of formal education will have been a significant influence on your life, in my case now stretching over 52 short years. But what is education? English literature has broached the subject many times. Dickens' in *Hard Times* pokes fun at the narrowness of the Victorian educational experience. In the chapter *Murdering the Innocents*, he uses Gradgrind to explain the approach:

“Thomas Gradgrind, sir. A man of realities. A man of fact and calculations. A man who proceeds upon the principle that two and two are four, and nothing over, and who is not to be talked into allowing for anything over. With a rule and a pair of scales, and the multiplication table always in his pocket, sir, ready to weigh and measure any parcel of human nature, and tell you exactly what it comes to.”

Richmal Compton's *William* is concerned that all his schooling will wear out his brain before he grows up. Geoffrey Williams' *Down with Skool*, featuring the downtrodden Molesworth, takes a gentle swipe at the English public school system and contains the wonderful line, 'Reality,' sa Molesworth 2, 'is so unspeakably sordid it make me shudder.' Tom Sharpe's *Wilt* explores the frustrations of further education, Wilt is an assistant lecturer trying to teach literature to plasterers, joiners, butchers and others studying vocational courses with little success. Higher education does not escape scrutiny, perhaps the funniest being David Lodge's *Changing Places* in which academics Philip Swallow (in a thinly disguised reference to the University of Birmingham) is part of an exchange programme with the Californian Morris Zapp. Chaos ensues.

The philosophy of education is unsurprisingly a vast subject too. Socrates in *The Republic*, Book IV suggests, “The bent given by education will determine all that follows”. Jean Jacques Rousseau's (1762) *Emile*, Book II, in what was to become the first tract for humanist education, advised educators to, “Be virtuous and good yourselves, and the examples you set will impress themselves on your pupils' memories, and in due season will enter their hearts. John Locke, 1690-94, in *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, felt that, “Children are to be treated as rational creatures” with the emphasis being learning as a form of recreation to create a virtuous man who obeys reason instead of passion based upon moral education rather than as he saw it the pedantry of facts which at the time and still is a revolutionary stance. John Dewey perhaps the originator of experiential education in *My Pedagogic Creed*, 1897, and *The School and Society*, 1900, believed that learning was active and schooling unnecessarily long and restrictive. The revolutionary Paulo Freire, 1970, emphasised social justice and the emancipation of the oppressed whilst more recently John Gatto (1992) in the provocatively titled *Dumbing Us Down: The Hidden Curriculum of Compulsory Schooling* sees schools as mere extensions of the consumer society offering little more than a robotic experience. There are so many views, too many to list here, though the breadth and huge differences illustrate the complexity of formulating a definition.

My favourite quote is supplied by Mark Twain, "I have never let my schooling interfere with my education." Here he makes a clear distinction, similar to Gatto, of the irrelevance of school but the importance of education.

Education clearly is considered to be extremely important by politicians. *The Department for Children, Schools and Families* (2009: 11) outlining its school funding priorities hint at a common stance adopted by governments:

World class schools and world class standards are central to achieving our ambitions for children. This means having schools that are well resourced; that have excellent leadership and teaching; that utilise a broad mix of staff able to play their part in helping children develop, working effectively with other services as necessary; that have excellent facilities; and are able to provide a wide-ranging and full curriculum offer. The entitlements which we have set out in our pupil and parent guarantees are fundamental to ensuring every child has the opportunity to achieve their potential, which is vital for the economic success of our country.

The statement contains all sort of vagaries but hints at the purpose of school education with its reference to 'economic success.'

For further education, *The Department for Business, Education and Skills* (2009) has as its mission on the website as,

"The Skills Funding Agency's main function is to direct funding quickly and efficiently to further education colleges and other skills providers. It takes an activist approach to deliver the skills that employers and individuals need now and in the future, supporting skills development in areas of strategic importance to the economy."

An emerging political theme therefore is an emphasis on economics.

HEFCE (2009)'s strategic plan for higher education outlines a wider remit than economics and states its intent to promote high quality teaching and learning experiences coupled with research .It too however stresses the important role of promoting economic reform, (HEFCE, 2009:3) for 2006-11:

This year, we have a fifth core strategic aim – employer engagement and skills. This is not a new strand of work, as we and the sector have been doing much in this area for many years. However, we wish to emphasise further the importance of building strong relationships between higher education institutions and employers. This is, of course, all the more important in a time of economic recession, where employers are looking for the skills and knowledge that will see them through difficult times and provide them with new innovations for the future.

All sectors therefore see one imperative of education as being somehow supporting business and enterprise. Education here has a pragmatic purpose aligned to economic sufficiency and is clearly measurable to specific outcomes determined by financial necessities, a pragmatism

which ironically takes us back to where we started with Gradgrind in *Hard Times*, published incidentally in 1854. Does our system mirror the Victorian ethos in that facts are knowledge, knowledge is measurable and measures indicate attainment leading to employment?

My own stance is that education is something overwhelmingly beautiful. Like Peters (1966), I see it as somehow changing a person by engagement, insight, curiosity, exploration and creativity. It is intangible but real, travels but does not arrive, it should surprise, contradict norms and challenge conventions. The following encapsulates its wonder and strangeness:

A young girl is busily painting a picture and is approached by the teacher.

Teacher: That's nice. What is it a picture of?

Young girl: It's God.

Teacher: But no one knows what God looks like.

Young girl: Well they soon will.

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