

Curriculum and Social Class: adventures in pedagogy, engagement and intervention in England and Wales

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Abstract

Brian Simon (1981) argued that the English education system had failed to develop pedagogy because of social class division. This has been enhanced by the failure to address parity of esteem issues between the academic and the vocational curriculum, which makes the absence of a real pedagogy in Further Education (FE) and alternative provision (AP) even more profound than it is perhaps within mainstream compulsory sector. While there have been substantial changes since 1981, Simon's basic contention and the question of why no pedagogy in England remains to be the case.

This article is based on the personal analytical approach of a practitioner regarding pedagogy associated with skills development, and how it may be possible to learn from that history and move forwards with an improved future curriculum. It is largely based on action research and reflective practice. I explore employability and vocational learning along with the skills agenda and place them within a practical application of the theoretical framework discussed in an attempt to create a radical teaching and learning driven by personalisation and learner autonomy and delivered (where the curriculum allows) through project and problem-solving based approaches. These promote a more radical, meaningful and dynamic approach to teaching and learning and offer the

hope of a more personalised approach to pedagogy and curriculum design in the future.

Keywords: *Curriculum, pedagogy, learning, teaching, education, class, skills, post-secondary education, vocational learning, personalised learning, personalisation, engagement, intervention*

Introduction

Nowhere are the inequalities of the class system in England more apparent than in the curriculum. Curriculum design is political and the development of progressive curricula concerned with and driven by three interwoven strands: (i) the development of skills and knowledge, (ii) its relationship with general education and (iii) enrichment fortified by entitlement as its strong backbone. Coupled with a customised, learner-centred model that is committed to the *Every Child Matters* [1] (DCSF, 2003) agenda and other welfare initiatives, that is genuinely personalized, it forms the true heart of all learning and teaching practices.

As Che Guevara said: “The walls of the educational system must come down” (Guevara, 1964) for educators to help transform the world and to enable learners and teachers alike become different kinds of human being.

Pedagogy and social class

As a young teacher reading Paolo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 2005) for the first time I saw his crusade for humanity and educating as an act of love, which enabled me see dehumanization both as a historical reality and as an individual experience in the lives of many of the learners I worked with and later informed my own teaching practices for my entire teaching career. Barriers to learning in the traditional sense or barriers to our current teaching practices,

dominant discourses and neoliberal values we impose upon our education system have all been accentuated by consumerism, competition, globalisation, performance related pay and industrial models of education. These have all added to this notion. Other factors impacting on the development and then entrenchment of this position have been sociological, rooted in the sociology of education, sociolinguistic concern with learner empowerment political with both a large and a small 'p'. Barriers to learning are neither purely educational concerns to be addressed by teachers nor problems to be solved by social workers. In almost all cases they existed and continue to exist at the cusp of education and social care, exacerbated by the collapse of the welfare system in Britain.

Class and class: how working-class pupils are disadvantaged by the current education system: twelve talking points

These talking points are largely taken from my reading on curriculum over the past 40 years and represent a kind of synthesis of that reading filtered through the lens of teaching, management and development over the same period (Duckett, 2020).

1. It is most certainly not an accident that class disadvantage has increased in the past decade. After all, Michael Gove, right-wing Conservative Minister of Education in England and Wales between 2010-2014, was the chief architect.
2. Aside from the pandemic, during which lack of resources - from food to technology - has made matters worse and an already widening divide wider still. Disadvantage has been by design.
3. The biggest influencer on pay in respect of student progression into Higher Education (HE) is family capital / socio-economic class. Even where working class students progress to Russell Group (the elite group of 24 universities in the UK) and achieve the same grades as their peers, they earn less because family capital ensures that others have opportunities to enter higher paid early career employment. In her new book, Selina Todd (Todd, 2021) reminds us that this is nothing new: she shows us how a powerful elite on the top rungs have clung to their perch and prevented others

ascending. It also introduces the unsung heroes who created more room at the top - among them adult educators, feminists and trade unionists, whose achievements unleashed the hidden talents of many thousands of people.

4. There is no real debate about whether this heartless inequality is the case or that is getting wider. The point, as Marx once said, is to change it.
5. The recent OECD international league table (OECD, 2021) places England at the top for routine learning, memorisation and repetition, and near the bottom for critical thinking skills, creativity and deep learning.
6. A more participatory agenda that moves from a focus on facts and content to a focus on process would benefit all children but particularly those from working-class backgrounds.
7. Borrowing from Paulo Freire (Freire, 1990 and 2005): give all children, including those who are working class, a voice. This requires changing pedagogic approaches to more experiential ways of working. Giving children problems to solve in small groups and ensuring no one child dominates the interaction is one strategy.
8. Broaden the curriculum: an inclusive curriculum recognises the cultures, histories and achievements of all groups in society, as well as recognising the discrimination and inequalities some groups face.
9. There should be a much greater emphasis on what have been called ‘working class skills’ and are sometimes known as ‘soft skills’, the more personal and developmental skills that are concerned with performing an action and include skills that are more difficult to measure such as teamwork, problem solving, self-reflection, time-management, networking, project management, creative thinking and conflict resolution.
10. NEU (the National Education Union- the largest teachers’ union in England and Wales) through its Celebrating Education Conference (NEU, 2019) and decolonising the curriculum initiative along with the fallout from the recent pandemic and the likely to disproportionately high impact upon working class students, has provided even more evidence to suggest a further impact on students that are people of colour as far as centre / teacher graded assessments are concerned (unconscious bias) to support claims made by Burgess and Greaves (Burgess and Greaves, 2009) in their work on test scores, subjective assessment and stereotyping of ethnic minorities.

11. Reay (2017 and 2020) shows that what is transformative education is:

- enabling practices that capitalise on the ‘funds of knowledge’ abundant in all children’s families and communities;
- enabling the recognition of students’ culturally grounded experiences as a foundation on which to build knowledge;
- connecting learning with pupils’ lives and contexts outside schools, valuing the knowledge and experiences of all pupils.

12. All this is grist to the mill for a cradle to grave National Health Service NHS style National Education Service (Benn, 2018; Labour Party, 2019), so let us not abandon what was Labour Party policy prior to and during the 2019 general election in the UK (Rea, 2020 *et al*) [2]

Curriculum and class

Human beings need powerful knowledge to understand and interpret the world. Without it they remain dependent upon those who have it. This is both the heart of the debate for academics and theorists and the battleground for teachers and practitioners. The current pandemic has illustrated this with a desperate scramble for information to help other communities and links with the work of Paolo Freire in particular, power imbalance and Marxists in general. Shared and powerful knowledge enables children to grow into active citizens. Adults can understand, cooperate and shape the world together. It is fair and just that all children should have access to this knowledge. Powerful knowledge opens doors: it must be available to all young people. It leads to active citizenship and the promotion of social justice. The curriculum of the future needs to draw together a holistic, inclusive, independent and personalized approach to learning and place assessment in its proper place as the servant of learning (Duckett, 1997). The wider survival skills, that can be seen as working-class street wisdom, seem to be undervalued and undermined by those who decide on what the curriculum is and who it is for. Furthermore, it is difficult to measure skills lie such as teamwork, problem solving, self-reflection, time-management,

networking, project management, creative thinking and conflict resolution; skills that many growing up in working class communities have, arguably, developed to a much higher level than middle-class counterparts, who are much more used to having these things done for them.

Curriculum development has, for me, always been concerned with three interwoven strands: the development of skills and knowledge, and its relationship with general education and enrichment fortified by entitlement as its strong backbone (Duckett, 2010). Coupled with a customised, learner-centred model that is committed to the Every Child Matters (DCSF, 2003) agenda and other welfare initiatives, that is genuinely personalized (Freire, 2005) it forms the true heart of all learning and teaching practices. As educationalists concerned with building a more meaningful curriculum, we have to articulate this loudly and clearly. As Freire said towards the end of his life: “language is the route to the invention of citizenship” (Green, 1997) for educators to help transform the world and to enable learners and teachers alike become different kinds of human being.

In this attempt at what is essentially a pedagogical history and historical pedagogy of the significance of skills since the early 1980s. The term ‘skills’ refers to the various incarnations of government sponsored generic skills initiatives that have emerged, including but not exclusive to ‘Common skills’, ‘Core skills’, key skills a brief dalliance with ‘Essential skills’ and, more recently, ‘Functional skills’ as they relate to mostly a narrow vocational curriculum. Yet at times, there have been attempts to develop a broad and more meaningful curriculum, designed to cross the academic/vocational divide and generate a genuine learning curriculum. These more personal and developmental skills are concerned with specific expertise or performing an action with competence are sometimes called ‘soft skills’ (or even working-

class skills) and include skills that are more difficult to measure such as teamwork, problem solving, self-reflection, time-management, networking, project management, creative thinking and conflict resolution (Holt, 1970 and Robinson, 2018). There is also considerable discussion on the skills and knowledge in a curriculum imposed by neoliberal policies and their consequences.

While skills, such as problem-solving, teamwork and communication have a crucial role to play in the notion of either a knowledge-free curriculum or a content free pedagogy is a manifest absurdity. The distinction between education and training, or academic and vocational learning, likewise remain impediments to parity of esteem for diverse pathways. As the ‘basic skills’ only model of skills development remains the dominant model over a fuller, more developmental version of skills that provides opportunities to improve ones’ own learning, collaboration with others and problem -solving, the need for a core module becomes more pertinent.

Curriculum development, personalisation and pedagogy

As a young teacher influenced by Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 2005), his crusade for humanity and educating, comparable to an act of love, enabled me see dehumanization both as a historical reality and as an individual experience in the lives of many of the learners I worked with and later informed my own teaching practices for my entire teaching career. Barriers to learning in the traditional sense or barriers to our current teaching practices, dominant discourses and neoliberal values we impose upon our education system have all been accentuated by consumerism, competition, globalisation, performance related pay and industrial models of education have all added to this notion (Bernstein, 1972, Edwards, *et al*, 2018 and Hill, 2019). Other factors impacting on the development and then entrenchment of this position have been

sociological (Young, 1998); rooted in the sociology of education (Barnes *et al*, 1974); sociolinguistic (Williams, 1972); concerned with learner empowerment (Lenin, 1978), political with both a large ‘p’ (Simon, 1972) and a small ‘p’ (Hodgson and Spours, 1999 and Spours, 2000) ‘p’, qualification reform (Duckett, 2002) and aspirational (National Commission on Education, 1993).

In 1995 The Royal Society of Arts published *14-19 Education and Training: implementing a unified system of Learning* (Pring *et al*, 1995). This was not the beginning of a demand for a broader and more developmental curriculum 14-19, but it preceded the Tomlinson report (Tomlinson, 2004) and it brought into sharp and clearly defined focus the main issues. In 1995 Pring and others had asked questions about a fast-changing society facing an unpredictable future requires “a learning society – and a genuine one at that’. How will society solve the problems it is facing? How can industry adapt to the increasingly competitive world market? How can people experience fulfilment as human beings, when increased leisure opens up fresh opportunities? For me it was Freire’s antidote to “the learning-teaching disorder in the classroom” placed in a modern capitalist context. In 2004, Tomlinson recommended: the provision of courses which stretch children; that children be entitled to basic literacy and numeracy skills; that the status of vocational qualifications be raised; that the amount of assessment and the number of exams be reduced; the education system be streamlined so that achievements could be carried forward from one course of study to the next and the introduction of an overarching 14–19 diploma.

In 2005 *14-19 Education and Skills*, which represented a watered-down version of Tomlinson, was published and became the basis of 14-19 education policy until the election of the Coalition Government in 2010.

Historical and political context

The context in which skills-based education is, of course, one in which employers wanted cheap labour, but required a workforce who knew their place, yet had sufficient literacy and numeracy skills to follow instructions, and an increasingly important and complex British industry also needed increasing numbers of skilled workers like mechanics, clerks and accountants (Brown, 2018). In terms of a meaningful timeline this period starts pretty much equates with the industrial revolution and goes on until the 1960s. A traditional Marxist perspective on the role of education where the “work objects” argument prevailed and workers were valued only for their ability to perform a task that is pre-defined and not valued for their individual creativity in *The Communist Manifesto* (Marx and Engels, 2015). This has been updated and developed by Rikowski in his work on “labour power” (Rikowski, 2002) and the debunking of the myth of meritocracy and the dangers of neoliberalism in an educational context expounded by Radice (Radice, 2018).

The rebirth of community education in the 1960s and 1970s absorbed more Marxist influence, writings such as those of Gramsci (Gramsci, 1971), Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 2008) and Freire (Freire, 2005) developed what remains of the Marxist tradition (Steele and Taylor, 2004). Marxism still offers a valuable framework of analysis (Hill, 2021) through which educators (Edwards, et al, 2018 and Hill, 2019) may be able to engage in a dialogue with any developing or emergent social movements like Black Lives Mater, climate change or youth for social justice; learning to learn and developing skills to survive, cope with the challenges in their lives and perhaps even, prosper. The importance of critical thinking and an awareness of the social, political and economic factors that influence so much of everyday life is rarely given enough value in formal education and not included within ‘training’ in FE.

Clearly skills, be they termed common, core, key, functional, should relate to either generic learning skills or the specific learning skills relating to a subject and have a major role to play, especially, with students from less traditional backgrounds. Similarly, assessment for learning (in contrast to those that are state-sponsored assessment objectives aimed at perpetuating a system that required the many to fail so that the few can succeed in the system) have fostered a genuine progressive curriculum. Curriculum development and delivery and assessment methodology alike need to be matched with both the appropriate skills, and attitudes and the syllabus aims, objectives and specifications, including an identification of skills and attitudes, the aims of a specification and demystifying the hidden curriculum, highlighted in Bowles and Gintis (Bowles and Gintis, 1976).

The diverse nature of FE, the delivery and acquisition of these ‘skills’ make them difficult to quantify, for example: the former personal, learning and thinking skills (PLTS) embedded within apprenticeship programmes, (knowledge, skills and behaviours) now informs the most recent standard, professional guidelines (DfE, 2016) and are formally embedded within the assessment to meet industry standards. Professions require diverse yet sometimes overlapping skills, however FE is the sector that sweeps up the 16-19 cohort, both “Academic” (under the remit of sixth form colleges) and “Vocational” (Colleges, training providers, employers). Many learners within FE with around 23% in 2017/18 (DfE, 2019) have special educational needs (SEN), despite being heterogeneous, there are plenty of these particular learners who will require the acquisition of a completely different set of skills – highly individualised.

The problematic nature surrounding the assessment of such generic and transferable skills in addition to the general educational aspects of vocational

education such as liberal education, general studies, communication skills, social and life skills and more recently functional skills and place empowering individuals, core knowledge and transferable skills, ethics, values and civic engagement at its heart. The 'core'; 'key'; 'transferable' or 'generic' skills were never able to make more than a lip-service impact on traditional academia in the way that they did on vocational further education.

Social class and the curriculum now

There have certainly been several false starts under the last Labour (1997-2010), Coalition (Lib Dem/Conservative) (2010-2015) and Conservative governments (since 2015) and a general failure to develop and bolster a meaningful skills-based curriculum with transferable skills as its spine and entitlement at its heart (Duckett, 1997).

Arguably an elitist and narrow curriculum, the 2013 GCSE (the General Certificate in Secondary Education - the exam taken around the age of 16 by school students in England and Wales) reforms implemented by then Education Minister Michael Gove, enters its second decade in terms of the skills agenda and continues to present some fresh challenges. 14-19 curricula have been riddled with re-inventions and re-branding (Hodgson and Spours, 2008) since the advent of YTS (the Youth Training Scheme of the Thatcher era) in the 1980s and before, but its emphasis on “common”, “core”, “key” or “essential” skills has played a significant part in the personal, learning and employability potential of many learners during that time enabling them to get a foot on the ladder of employability.

YTS was an early on-the-job training scheme for unemployed for school leavers aged 16 and 17 and was managed by the Manpower Services Commission. Marxists have identified YTS and its forerunner the Youth Opportunities

Programme (YOP) as encroachments of capital on learning and teaching and the social forms assumed by capital in contemporary education (Rikowski, 2004).

More recent versions up to the current apprenticeship programmes have hardly been more progressive.

There is little provision available for children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) in formal (mandatory) education, access arrangements, yet we still expect the children to jump through the same hoops. For example, Robinson's (Robinson, 2010) mainstream expectations of conformity, institutionalise our children are often those who find it most difficult achieve in the UK's targets and standards driven curriculum. As such the most vulnerable in our education system are often those most reliant on the lifeline provided through various skills development programmes, while imperfect. are in their most recent incarnation, known as functional skills. There is, however, the risk of disproportionate impact on the protected characteristics of age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, and sexual orientation is low. The problem often lies with the overall perception of vocational education. Functional skills (FS) need to serve a purpose for employers (be relevant). However, schools, parents, student, wider society often see vocational education as the less important- of lower status- than academic education.

The Department for Education (DfE) claims that where this presents challenges to students with protected characteristics relating to age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, and sexual orientation there are several appropriate and available means of mitigation. The practicalities and logistics of delivery of functional skills – qualifications of practitioners, specialist maths and English tutors are not always readily available – FE does not belong to colleges alone,

such as those with SEN or EAL status. The quality of SEN (Special Education Needs) teaching is central to ensuring pupils with SEN are given the best possible opportunities to achieve results in any of the Functional Skills qualifications considered here. Further means of mitigation are already embedded in legislation or guidance, such as reasonable adjustments. While the FE curriculum has been getting narrower and more functional with each re-write, innovative teachers have found ways of promoting and developing the wider skills of teamwork, problem solving, self-reflection and learning to learn alongside the basic skills of English and Maths.

A bigger, braver and more rounded curriculum that is truly broad and balanced, is a longstanding aim of progressive educationalists (Duckett, 2002), bolstered by a National Education Service (NES) (Benn, 2018) the then aim of a future Labour government, if it were to have the courage to take on the siren voices of the right now embedded in the education establishment and the media, must be exactly that. This means implementing, in the 14 to 19 phase of education, a unified developmental curriculum, where the academic and vocational are equally valued. This was a supposed aim of the Conservative Government in 2016, with a commitment of three million apprenticeships by 2020, a view to embolden vocational studies and remove the stigma as expressed by Plato, who had it that craftsman is not capable of becoming a philosopher. At its heart, it should be developing the skills and knowledge in our young people, necessary to engage fully with the modern world in a critical and reflective way.

Communication in all its facets, problem-solving, collaboration, critical thinking and reflection must feature. Diverse skills often not acquired during compulsory education, those in FE often must pick up the pieces of the broken system. It must also be flexible and personalised, allowing young people to choose courses which suit their aspirations and interests. Finally, the assessment model should recognise the achievements of all learners, including those with

special needs, rather than segregate them through crude pass/fail measures. We have been close to achieving the above on occasion, notably the Tomlinson reforms (Tomlinson, 2004) proposed in 2004 and the short-lived curriculum 2000 agenda. Sadly, as noted, never fully acted on.

Nevertheless, a progressive 14 to 19 curriculum must remain the mission of radical educators and would-be reformers:

- develop the knowledge, skills, attitudes and dispositions to enable young people to be responsible citizens and independent thinkers. Students should be prepared for employment, competent to make choices and learn throughout their lives.
- prepare 19-year olds to progress to employment or continue in education, with useful social and learning skills and qualifications that are valuable and understood by both employers and education institutions;
- be sufficiently engaging to retain young people at risk of leaving education, employment and training .

The governing Conservative Party on the other hand conducted the Sainsbury Review (Sainsbury, 2016) which they have accepted in full. The Sainsbury Review was flawed from the beginning as its terms of reference only included ‘technical education’ as opposed to the academic which would continue its role in selecting the elite to run the establishment, untouched. Although the review was only ever to tackle technical education it serves to illustrate the start of a new narrow vocationalism in the sector. Further it only considered post 16 study and was therefore prevented, unlike Tomlinson, from recommending courses and programmes pre-16 to provide progression onto more vocational routes post 16. It is now the case that pupils at Key Stage 4 [5] have to meet tough entrance criteria based on success in academic GCSEs to be able to study A level. If they do not meet them, they are most often ‘guided’ into vocational courses like BTECs or into apprenticeships. Vocational courses are often not, therefore,

viewed as a positive choice for students but a fall back reluctantly undertaken because they have ‘failed’ in their academic courses. The government’s insistence on ever higher proportions of pupils taking the The English Baccalaureate (EBacc) [6] combination of subjects at GCSE serves to reinforce the perception that vocational courses are only for those unable to succeed academically.

Working class skills

The most recent edition to the commoditisation of skills rises from the Sainsbury review and proposed for post 16 study maintains and reinforces the existing academic / vocational divide. There are many similarities between Conservatives latest offering of T Levels [7] and the ill-fated Diplomas [8] which New Labour (in government between 1997 and 2010, firstly under Tony Blair, and then under Gordon Brown), at great expense, failed to make a permanent feature of 14 to 19 education in the 2000s. The subsequent similar employment areas with minor amendments to their titles will become available for study e.g. Business and Administration. Again, as with the diploma, when students opt to take a T level, they will find there is no room for other options. Like the old diplomas they are all encompassing and will contain elements of English and Maths no doubt ‘relevant to the sector’, taking students to higher skill levels than GCSE. Again, like the diploma, colleges and now some schools, must show they have the expertise and resources to deliver the T levels and must gain approval before offering it.

In New Labour’s case the Diploma [9], which ended up covering vocational subjects only, arose out of a failure to implement the key recommendations of the Tomlinson report which would have incorporated A levels (the exams taken, usually in England and Wales, by 18 year olds who have ‘stayed on at school/college after the statutory school leaving age minimum of 16 yers old) and

GCSEs as well as vocational qualifications into his new diplomas. An imaginative implementation of the Tomlinson Report would have allowed students to mix and match academic and vocational elements. Fear of the right's reaction, as articulated by the right wing, traditionalist conservative newspapers the *Mail* and *Telegraph*, in the lead up to an election to what they chose to present as the abolition of A levels was the reason. Instead, A levels, so strongly rooted in post 16 academic education in the minds of parents and favoured by the Russell Group of elite universities, would simply wither on the vine as diplomas became the qualification of choice. The NUT (National Union of Teachers- precursor of the NEU, the National Education Union) saw the decision as a clear reversal by the government saying the decision to ditch Tomlinson's 14-19 reform proposals was fundamentally wrong. It was wrong because it would perpetuate the academic vocational divide and the low status of vocational education. The proposed new diplomas unlike Tomlinson's originals were not as inclusive either. A foundation diploma was still well beyond the reach of many SEN learners.

In contrast, the day after its publication, the Tories announced that they had accepted the Sainsbury Review (2016) in full. Its recommendations are being progressed via the government's Post-16 Skills Plan (Sainsbury, 2016). Accordingly, there has been no consultation about the merits or otherwise of the Sainsbury recommendations.

While unsurprisingly welcomed by the Association of Colleges (which may well see benefit in the assumption that further education colleges FECs will deliver the new T-level qualifications) there have been wider criticisms including of the implication that certain routes are associated with particular qualifications, the requirement for students to choose routes at 16 and the suggestion that students who want to transfer onto 'academic routes will have to

spend time ‘transitioning’ from one pathway to another a large portion of transferable skills are required.

T-levels have been criticised as being ill-thought out and for which schools, colleges, students and employers are ill-prepared. The simplistic claims made in the Sainsbury Report that T-levels will lead to certain jobs have also been debunked as unrealistic and far-removed from the real world in which vocational qualifications are already studied by many students and where so-called academic routes often include vocational and technical education and vice-versa.

Students, parents and employers will not buy-in to T-levels which are cobbled together and are only targeted at young people. Quite rightly, qualifications in the UK are not age-dependent and need to be fit for study for people of all ages including those who want to return to improve their career options later in life. The challenges of improving the UK’s productivity and skills base will not be met without a lot more work, resources and joined-up thinking.

Present and future

The dangers of excluding this human perspective from vocational education and training as currently proposed means that cultural and scholarly advantage accrues only to the chosen few and perpetuates social inequality. Access not only to the education system itself, but to general education is a prerequisite enhancing the quality of life for those previously excluded. A model whereby students from areas of high social and economic deprivation are denied access and participation name of economic necessity and opportunities is something envisioned in dystopian world views and a cause for alarm now.

At least something of the bluster of the Blairite call for “education, education, education” missed the point as much as did Gove’s “return to basic values” did.

The benefits of language, culture and history which accrue can act as real force, not only for tackling the inequalities of economics, class, gender and race, but also for the promotion of democracy. The development of skills, namely communication, improving own learning and performance, working with others and problem-solving is an important feature of academic writing and academic success generally. Furthermore, a skilled communicator, one whom reflects on their own learning, an effective team member and one with sufficient problem-solving skills becomes an academically more able scholar. The “skills verses scholarship” remains for many, a ‘red herring’.

It can also be argued that is far more useful to possess the skills required to improve a learner’s knowledge base than to have an enormous body of knowledge at one’s disposal that is seen to be finite. Understanding argument, improving learning and developing critical skills are three components of core skills and scholarly habits which together underpin academic success as well as being hugely significant life skills. Those who promote the narrow definition of skills so liked by recent governments at present fail to recognise that these skills cannot be developed in a moral, political or cultural vacuum and that skills, like problem-solving, for example, are about why as much as how. Good teachers, whatever else they are, do recognise those factors and spark learning through imagination and emotion (skills we are taught from the beginning of our formal education to ignore in pursuit of literacy and STEM) and not some dull, narrow or mechanistic pedagogy. For example, the most important thing is finding a topic which fires the imagination of the student and challenges established notions of learning and then hanging a variety of strategies for improving writing skills on the chosen subject. In short, reflective practice is also a contributory core skill. It is within professional practices such as teaching, healthcare and psychology and provides far wider benefits for our children too.

The method is most effective when the ‘Big idea’ is a real problem which means something to the student and generally and provides greater access to the enriching aspects of the curriculum, is a curriculum about real education. These enabling skills, while not yet anything to sing about, must be going beyond the basic skills model which fires their imagination. The problem, for example, race relations in the student common room, or lack of space in the home environment, is a real one and therefore more likely to fire the imagination and provide that crucial spark apparent in the work of many published writers but sadly lacking in much learner work post-Gove’s interference.

The empirical evidence base for this may appear somewhat flimsy, but radical teaching and pedagogical modelling and the practice, which has been dynamic and driven by action research throughout springs from a range of sources. As well as Freire and Guevara, there have been others who have influenced and, in some cases, shaped this practice: class-riven pedagogy, Simon (Simon, 1981); comprehensive in its focus, Chitty (Chitty, 2002); real world and problem-solving based Flower (Flower, 1981); ‘social constructivism’, Vygotsky (Vygotsky, 1978) and ‘dialogic teaching’ (Mercer, 2007 and Alexander, 2008).

In practice

A career-long sharing of effective practice and distillation of some of this practice has provided a model, which is in some demand (Duckett, 1997, 2001 and 2010 and Duckett, 2005) [3].

Phase 1: Early teaching career in further education, characterised by an initial teacher education that was guided by what was then called 'student-centred learning'.

Phase 2: Engagement in curriculum development initiatives and characterised by flexible approaches and open-ended outcomes which explore pedagogical projects through the Technical and Vocational Education Initiative and Extension (TVEI/TVEE).

Phase 3: Developmental work through education action zones (EAZ) and a commitment to the development of generic skills through core learning as a safety net with scaffolding.

Phase 4: Projects developed and managed as a development advisor at the Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA) characterised by a value-added and evidence-based approach and an acceptance that not all assessment models are easily measurable.

Phase 5: A more open-ended approach, with pupil referral units and excluded pupils, developed at Shaftsbury Young People, with the Award Scheme Development and Accreditation Network (ASDAN) and the current Learning and Skills Research Network (LSRN) Ways of Engaging project, which is due to be piloted with Norfolk YMCA in Norwich and is characterised by engagement through personalised objectives and meaningful projects with a negotiated learning framework. An emergency curriculum could and should have been braver and more meaningful. It could easily have been concerned with the development of communication and problem-solving skills and been project-based and allowed learners to explore interests in the things that will change their world, notably, de-colonisation of the curriculum and education for climate change.

Detailed accounts of these approaches have been published every few years from the mid-nineties to the present. Furthermore, as this has been something of a journey of personal discovery, I would like to acknowledge some of the practical guides that have helped me along the way (Flower, 1981 et al) [4].

A new phase

In 2009, the Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA) and Institute of Education University of London (IoE) undertook research in the best ways of supporting young people described as NEET (not in employment, education or training). This was published as *Tackling the NEETs problem Supporting Local Authorities in reducing young people not in employment, education and training* (Duckett and Grainger, 2009). Building on earlier research (Duckett, et al, 2005) the study noted that reducing the amount of 16–18-year-old NEETs is the most popular national indicator among local authorities' Local Area Agreement

targets. It interesting to note the considerable impact that the recent pandemic has had or can have on current and future cohorts of students aged 16-19? .In terms of equality and diversity Black Lives Matter and the work of the National Education Union (NEU) through its Celebrating Education Conference and decolonising the curriculum initiative along with the fallout from the recent pandemic and the likely to disproportionately high impact upon working class students (NEU, 2020) has provided even more evidence to suggest a further impact on students of colour as far as centre / teacher graded assessments are concerned (unconscious bias) to support claims made by Burgess and Greaves (Burgess and Greaves, 2009) in their work on test scores, subjective assessment and stereotyping of ethnic minorities.

Powerful knowledge and the curriculum of the future

Powerful knowledge refers to what the knowledge can do or what intellectual power it gives to those who have access to it. 'Powerful knowledge' (Young and Muller, 2013) is powerful because it provides the best understanding of the natural and social worlds that we have and helps us go beyond our individual experiences.

Young people need powerful knowledge to understand and interpret the world. Without it they remain dependent upon those who have it. As Marx said: "Philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it" (Marx, 1845). The current pandemic has illustrated this with desperate scramble for information to help other communities and links with the work of Freire in particular, power imbalance and Marxists in general. Shared and powerful knowledge enables children to grow into active citizens. Adults can understand, cooperate and shape the world together. It is fair and just that all children should have access to this knowledge. Powerful knowledge opens doors: it must be available to all young people. Powerful knowledge

needs to have a central place in the curriculum? It could play a major role in decolonizing curriculum and climate change education. It leads to active citizenship and the promotion of social justice. Future curriculum design and development need to draw together a holistic, inclusive, independent and personalized approach to learning.

Curriculum development has, for me, always been about the development of skills, knowledge and general education that enriches. Learning to learn takes centre stage in this model. It is concerned with engaging in the real world, yes, the world of work, but also far beyond. Arts and humanities are about being and becoming human and work exists only in the context of human life itself. In short, skills for employment are skills for life. The transferable skills of communication, teamwork, problem-solving and learning to learn are fundamental to entitlement, enrichment, empowerment, vitality and joy and are as significant for learning about ourselves and empowering us all, as they are to the world of work.

Educators have the opportunity to build back different and better with a bigger, broader and braver curriculum. Only then will a pedagogy of skills development that works for a personalized skill, knowledge and enriching entitlement curriculum is within the grasp of all and active citizenship be a concrete feature of human life.

Notes

[1] When the government consulted children, young people and families in 2003, their findings were that they wanted the Government to set out a positive vision of the outcomes we want to achieve. The five outcomes which mattered most to children and young people were:

- being healthy: enjoying good physical and mental health and living a healthy lifestyle
- staying safe: being protected from harm and neglect
- enjoying and achieving: getting the most out of life and developing the skills for adulthood

- making a positive contribution: being involved with the community and society and not engaging in anti-social or offending behaviour
- economic well-being: not being prevented by economic disadvantage from achieving their full potential in life.

[2] The starting point is mined from wide reading on the curriculum spanning a 40 year career in education, principally: Douglas Barnes, James Britton and Harold Rosen (1974), *Language, the Learner and the School*; Basil Bernstein (1972), 'Education cannot compensate for Society' in *Education For Democracy*, David Rubinstein and Colin Stoneman (Eds), Penguin; Burgess, S. and Greaves, E. (2009), Working Paper No. 09/221 Centre for Market and Public Organisation, Bristol Institute of Public Affairs, University of Bristol, September; Darling-Hammond, L; Flook, L; Cook-Harvey, C; Barron, B. & Osher, D. (2020) 'Implications for educational practice of the science of learning and development', *Applied Developmental Science*, 24:2; EEF (Education Endowment Foundation) (2020) *Teaching and Learning Toolkit* educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/evidencesummaries/teaching-learning-toolkit/; Paolo Freire, (2005), *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*; Ernesto Guevara (1964), *Talks to Young People (The Cuban Revolution in World Politics)*; Hempel-Jorgensen, A., Cremin, T., Harris, D., & Chamberlain, L. (2018), Pedagogy for reading for pleasure in low socio-economic primary schools: beyond "pedagogy of poverty"? *Literacy*, 52(2); Dave Hill, (2018) Education and social class: a Marxist response, in Robin Simmons and John Smyth (eds.), *Education and Working Class Youth*; Ann Hodgson and Ken Spours (1999), *New Labour's Educational Agenda: Issues and Policies for Education and Training from 14*; John Holt (1970), *The Underachieving School*; Kohn, A. (2000) *The Hard Evidence in The Schools our Children Deserve: Moving beyond Traditional Classrooms and 'Tougher'*; Lenin (1978) *On Socialist Ideology and Culture*; Lupton, R and Hempel-Jorgensen, A (2012) 'The importance of teaching: pedagogical constraints and possibilities in working-class schools' *Journal of Education Policy*, 27(5); Menzies, L. (2013) *Educational Aspirations: How English Schools can work with Parents to keep them on track*; National Commission on Education (1993), *Learning to Succeed*; NEU (2020), Framework for developing an Anti-racist approach (<https://neu.org.uk/media/11236/view>); Diane Reay, (2020) Addressing working class educational disadvantage, NEU. <https://neu.org.uk/media/11646/view>; Diane Reay, (2017) *Miseducation: Inequality, education and the working-classes*; Diane Reay (2021) 'English Education in the time of Coronavirus', *Forum*, volume 62 issue 3; Ken Robinson (2018), *You, your child and school: Navigate your Way to the Best Education*; Schleicher, A. (2018) *Valuing our Teachers and Raising their Status: How Communities Can Help*; Sennett, R. (1998), *The Corrosion of Character: The Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism*; Sennett, R. (2003), *Respect: The Formation of Character in an Age of Inequality*; Brian Simon (1972), 'Streaming or Unstreaming in the Secondary School' in David Rubinstein and Colin Stoneman (Eds); Ken Spours (2000), Developing a National Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning: England's Unfinished Business, in Ann Hodgson (Ed), *Policies, Politics and the Future of Lifelong Learning*; Selina Todd (2021) *Snakes and Ladders: The great British social mobility myth*; Raymond Williams (1972), The Teaching Relationship: Both sides of the Wall. in David Rubinstein and Colin Stoneman (Eds), *Education for Democracy*; Michael Young (1998), *The Curriculum of the Future: From the New Sociology of Education to a Critical Theory of Learning*.

[3] Detailed accounts of these approaches can be found in Ian Duckett *et al* (2005), *Key skills communication activity pack: communication level 2*, Heinemann, 2005; Ian Duckett (1997), Breadth and the core, *Journal of Further and Higher Education* 21 (3) 335-344; Ian Duckett (2001), Developing a value-added and evidence-based approach to key skills, or, 'measuring the un-measurable', R. Coe (Ed.), *Evidence-Based Policies and Indicator Systems*, 96-114; Ian Duckett

(2010), *Personalized Learning and Vocational Education and Training*, in Penelope Peterson, Eva Baker, Barry McGaw, (Eds), *International Encyclopedia of Education*. Volume 8, pp. 391-396. Oxford: Elsevier

[4] Some of the practical guidance that has been instrumental in terms of the development of this model is listed here:

Linda Flower (1981) *Problem-solving Strategies for Writing*, Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich Inc.,

Eric Luzner and Keith Gardner, (1984) *Learning from the Written Word*, Schools Council;
Christopher Moor (1980) *Answer the Question*, National Extension College:

Rosemary Moor (1987) *Network English: skills for understanding*, Oxford University Press:

Rosemary Moor (1988) *Correct Me If I'm Wrong: A Practical Approach to Improving Written English*, Stanley Thornes;

Andrew Northedge (2005) *The Good Study Guide*, Open University, 2005

Rob Pope (1995) *Textual Intervention: Critical and Creative Strategies for Literary Studies*, Routledge.

[5] Key Stage 4 is the legal term for the two years of school education which incorporate GCSEs, and other examinations, in maintained schools in England normally known as Year 10 and Year 11, when pupils are aged between 14 and 15 by August 31st.

[6] EBACC is a performance measure for any student who achieves good GCSE or accredited Certificate passes in English, mathematics, history or geography, two sciences and a language.

[7] T Levels are courses which follow GCSEs and are alternatives to equivalent to A levels. These 2-year courses, which launched September 2020 following the Sainsbury Review in 2016. They were developed in collaboration with employers and businesses so that the content would meet the needs of industry and prepares students for work, further training or study.

[8] The March 2005 White Paper 14–19 Education and Skills (The Tomlinson Report) announced the introduction of a new 14–19 Diploma. Lines of learning included Construction and the Built Environment; Creative and Media; Engineering; Information Technology; and Social, Development and Health.

[9] The Tomlinson Diploma was abandoned by the Department for Education in August 2013, and is no longer offered to students.

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