

## Learning and Education as if Our Humanity Mattered: Some Personal Reflections

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### On the State of Education We're in

For the last 40 years or so, I have felt that state education and all its tributaries have been aimed at creating robotic and compliant adults. In fact, this goes back to the Prussian militaristic approach to developing children each as a homunculus from his/her earliest years. On this view, there is no need for childhood since being a child is childish, and therefore worthless in the eyes of us intelligent capitalist grown ups.

What we do to our children in today's school is nothing short of obliterating their most natural and most powerful quality: 'imagination'. In my educational and pedagogical work, I have tried hard to use the inculcation of a love of literature to enhance and, where dormant, awaken natural imagination. I was deeply impressed in my teenage years by Rousseau and Piaget. I hold Jean Piaget partly responsible for creating the idea that developmentally, children go through normative stages as if all were the same. That was not Piaget's fault, however. It was, as often happens, the teachers and parents who find it easier to pigeon-hole our children. Each child is an individual unique to him/herself. No one model fits all, as OfSTED (England's Office for Standards in Education) has often implied by its highly misguided approach to holding all

professionals accountable for not producing fodder for the future.

In the English education system, I believe there has been a politically driven agenda that has done, and is doing, serious damage to our children. All one needs to do is to take a walk anywhere where there are children, or to visit a holiday activity club, or a school to see that most of our children have been very badly done by. Learning in its real and profitable sense is now virtually non-existent. There is virtually *no* focus at all on nurturing imagination, encouraging self-belief, promoting the confidence to become a courageous critical thinker, acquiring the long-term patience required to acquire the desired results, or to be eventually gratified, teaching the real benefits of altruism or creating independent, self-sufficient, imaginative, creative and happy adults.

The state of university education is also highly concerning. A brief conversation with recent graduates shows the frightening deficiency in qualities such as imagination, creativity, independence and critical thinking. Many find it hard to get off the monorail on to which they have been hooked for life – monotonously moving on and on and on, and getting nowhere with any sense of fulfilment or satisfaction. Indeed, the human condition described in

Charles Dickens' *David Copperfield*, of an overwhelming feeling of 'something missing' / 'a want of something', has now become almost the norm amongst our youngsters as they grow up. They have been conditioned to comply with that which is not under their control. Consequently, they move through life feeling alienated and wondering what might be missing. As a result, they make decisions that cause them yet more problems, hence the breakdown in relationships, the financial mishaps, and so on. It is a truly parlous state of affairs.

Many university lecturers and professors have also been rendered terrifyingly self-engrossed and, often, quite depressed because of the imperatives that rule their lives: fund raising, PR promotional activities, writing endless policy papers, writing to suit Research Excellence Framework in order to get their meagre funding, responding to student demands as their paying 'clients' ('I pay you over nine thousand a year – so what do I get?'). I recently visited a university where a student mentor told me that 'failure' was not even possible; given that these students were paying clients! In short, the joy of learning has been replaced with utilitarianism and with self-serving outcomes.

The onerous tasks imposed on teachers also take them away from promoting learning – the real core business of their professional lives. I can never forget observing lessons as an OfSTED Lead Inspector with teachers teaching to a tick-list. I can bring to mind many who kept going back to their desk, bending down and ticking as they proceeded on to act out the next box. The list was one of the qualities deemed to indicate good teaching, e.g. marking, assessment, challenge of inappropriate behaviour, varying activities, asking the same number of question of both genders and of all races....

What a tragically hilarious approach by frightened professionals who have been put in the position of focusing on teaching to the complete exclusion of learning!

## **Educating the Future**

### **A teacher's journey**

I am not a scientist although I often like to delude myself into believing that I think like one. In my years of teaching experience, and as I have developed my craft, I have always reflected consciously on my practice in the classroom in as objective a way as possible. So, what worked? Why? What *didn't* work? Why? What could I do to enhance the outcome? How?

Evaluation has long been a habit without which there could be little movement forward, and less improvement in practice. Over the years, I've developed the fortunate ability (now a habit) of not being distressed when things did not work – but rather to investigate why they did not work and determine what I could do next to meet with success.

Blame, guilt, pity, upset and all their friends were deemed to be useless emotions, although they fairly regularly reared their ugly little heads. If a lesson went badly, then there were reasons and, as always, there were solutions. As I gained in confidence, my most useful interlocutors on how a lesson went were my students, since theirs was first-hand experience of how I facilitated their learning – or didn't, as the case might have been; they deserved to be given the respect of listening to them. Learning, after all, was their experience, and my job was to turn learning into a lifelong habit that would affect everything in their lives. Observation and reflection are a teacher's most useful tools. They are the bases of discovery (Salzberger-Wittenberg et al., 1999).

### **Towards a (Darwinian?) scientific theory of life-long learning**

Learning is an evolutionary habit – nothing more and nothing less. Charles Darwin offers a powerful and, to many, disturbing, theory of evolution. I believe him – and, more significantly, I have observed a great deal around me that validates his principles of selection and its effects. Observations accompanied by reflection are our most powerful tools as thinking professionals. Albert Einstein's idea of using conceptual experiments ('gedankenexperiment') to formulate theories is as apt today as it was so long ago. Close observation

and careful reflection are the ingredients of every teacher's 'thought experiment' (Einstein, 1949).

Hidden amidst Darwin's *The Origin of Species* is a little gem that I find fascinating (and which also fits in with the parallel work that was carried out by Alfred Russell Wallace's own researches into natural selection). Darwin says:

Let us now briefly consider the steps by which domestic races have been produced, either from one or from several allied species. Some effect may be attributed to the direct and definite action of the external conditions of life, and some to habit.... The key is man's power of accumulative selection: nature gives successive variations; man adds them up in certain directions useful to him. In this sense he may be said to have made for himself useful breeds.

Darwin continues to argue that 'the inheritance of good and bad qualities is so obvious', and he further argues that, with reference to, for example, race horses, selection may be influenced by 'careful training'.

I first read Darwin during my teacher training years, and I was profoundly affected. Note, however, that I did not, and do not, have any pretensions to deep scientific understanding per se. My development led me to accept Darwin's argument that something as simple as training can affect natural selection. This led me to ask the obvious question as to whether this theory can be applied to learning.

I will take and 'play with' the following words from the above extract from Darwin: 'external conditions of life', 'habit' and 'careful training'. For the student, we adults are part of the 'external conditions of life', whether as parents, teachers, health workers or just ordinary members of the community. We make a huge difference to developing the child's attitude to learning. We do so by what we say and do – as well as by what we do not say and don't do. We are the ones who help the child to adopt the habits that are most useful to him/her. Many of these habits are created through 'careful training'. Over time, as the child grows and develops, learning does become a lifelong

habit (assuming, that is, that we have succeeded in 'training' the child and helping him/her inculcate a healthy and productive attitude to learning).

Lifelong learning never goes away, never dissipates – even when, occasionally, it goes to sleep. Those who acquire the habit of lifelong learning invariably succeed and, more significantly, pass on their habit and success to future generations. They do well for themselves and for their community. Their children replicate this success. And their children's children do so... – ad infinitum. This is why, as a teacher, I despair when I hear endless nonsense about equalising opportunities through artificial means, or when I read yet another piece of research that tells us that children brought up in a home with books are likely to be more literate than those brought up in soulless homes with no books.

For over 50 years we have had the annual breast beating in August when secondary school results come out showing that the same group of students do less well than their peers: white working-class boys, students from low socio-economic backgrounds, students subjected to discriminatory attitudes and assumptions, girls taught mathematics by impatient sexist teachers.... The list is endless. And, of course, each new government tells us that it would do everything that it can to equalise opportunities by doing all kinds of zany things that do not work – rather than addressing the causes of failure – which are parental, societal, and peer-led within an anti-learning culture.

If there is indeed an evolutionary natural selection within education, it is here to stay unless we focus entirely on learning and on ensuring that learning becomes a lifelong habit so deeply embedded that it is passed on from one generation to the next – in the same way that Darwin claims that 'external conditions of life', 'habit' and 'careful training' do.

I can hear you say that this is more of a discursive than scientific approach to my subject – that its link to Darwin's theories is so tentative. Try re-reading the previous few paragraphs, and you will see that I am deploying Darwin as *a metaphor* in order to throw a strong light on learning and its effects.

And for those who are more comfortable with a purely scientific approach, I would cite Asch testing conformity under non-ambiguous conditions (1951, 1952 and 1956 – see Asch, 1955) which supports the theory that getting our students to ‘conform’ is not difficult – despite the obvious dangers that teachers are fully aware of. I would also cite Milgram’s study of obedience (1963) leading to Arendt’s ‘banality of evil’ (1963) – turning it on its head, and thus making the process virtuous, creating the ‘power of learning’ through trust. Gladwell’s ‘power of thinking without thinking’ is a perfect example of embedding learning so deeply that ‘thin slicing’ takes place where the unconscious mind is continuously carrying out rapid analyses (Gladwell, 2005).

Indeed, the concept of the ‘survival of the fittest’ was applied to learning well before I thought of applying it. As far back as 1964, Donald Winnicott suggested that the ‘fittest’ were those children whose early experiences were good and who, consequently, ‘developed the emotional and social capacity and resources to manage the challenges of the secondary phase’ (Perry, 2009). Those children, who are not given an adequate or, preferably, good, start, can, and do, often get ‘left behind, misunderstood, and, at worst, excluded’ (ibid.). Let me emphasise that the students in front of us are not horses. They are us when we were young. Furthermore, at the outset they trust us for a short period, before our failures and the failures of many adults around them render them suspicious and distrusting. Very early on in the child’s life, let us build on the child’s curiosity and on its natural desire to learn. Once embedded, the urge to learn becomes the most powerful tool that we have in our life, covering everything that we do in every sphere of our lives.

Let us help our children take charge of their development, their futures and their lives. Let them learn, early on, what Cassius means when he urges on Brutus to remember that every fault of our lives ‘is not in our stars, but in ourselves, that we are underlings’.

## Some Concluding Thoughts

In this short article, I have attempted to show the central importance of learning in the formation of critical thinking, independent, confident and self-reliant adults. I have also tried to show that these qualities are given little or no priority in the current obsessive focus on teaching as the mechanism for developing young persons.

If I were writing a last article before shuffling off this mortal coil, I would end by urging all young persons still in touch with their inner child to do one thing to the exclusion of much else. ‘Let your imagination run wild so that you can see beyond the self-evident, so that you can learn to deal with life’s tortuous entanglements and uncertainties and so that you can live beyond the accepted three dimensions of space-time and reach that fourth dimension emanating from your “inner spark of divine fire” that no one can take away from you.’

In life, there is only learning. All else is bunkum calculated to control our behaviour for the benefit of those with power.

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