Missed Opportunities

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Over the last couple of months I have read two documents that forced me to pause, take a longer look, and develop a considered view about them. Both of them have roots in Pearson, the multinational publishing and education company.

The first emerged as a 'leak' that hit the headlines and was reported by the BBC news concerning the Spelling, Punctuation and Grammar (SPAG) test for 10/11 year olds.

> A "rogue marker" leaked a test the day before it was taken on Tuesday by children aged 10 and 11 in England, the Department for Education has said. …The test was valid and had gone ahead as planned, Mr Gibb told MPs in response to an urgent question on the matter. He said the spelling, punctuation and grammar (SPAG) test had been "mistakenly uploaded" by the test supplier, Pearson, onto a secure website, and that an individual with access to the site had then leaked the test to the media.
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> The SPAG test was taken by 600,000 children in their final year of state primary school in England on Tuesday morning.
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> (BBC News 10th May 2016)

I was sufficiently intrigued by this story to go to the website and work my way through a sample paper that replicated the demands made by the SPAG test. And I kept having to remind myself that this test is designed for 10-11 year olds. The government has said it is determined to raise standards and the tests reflect the "more rigorous curriculum". It would be hypocritical of me – having spent most of my professional life at Goldsmiths developing approaches to assessment – to throw up my hands in horror and declare the whole process of tests and assessments wrong or improper. It is not, since good assessment is an absolutely essential tool for teachers.

Any worthwhile field of endeavour (and the English language is certainly that) provides plenty of scope for imaginative test developers to demonstrate their art, and it is – in my opinion – a poor show when they are reduced to right-answer memory testing. But that, largely, is what the test involves. As an example, *subordinating conjunctions* are (apparently) the joining words between main and subordinate clauses in a sentence.

*Keep your hand on the wound **until** the nurse asks you to take it off.*

So words like 'once' 'whenever' 'whereas' 'while' ' whether or not' 'after' can all play that role. An imaginative test constructor could come up with some lovely test items that would be interesting and fun to explore a 10 yr old's understanding and capability with subordinating conjunctions. But not in this test. The right-answer mentality demands only that they memorise the label.

Another example of the same ethic is based on prefixes.

Draw a line to match each prefix to the correct word so that it makes a new word.

Prefix	Word
re	frost
de	do
mis	legible
im	mature
il	understood

Note particularly the use of '*the correct word*'. In each case, as far as the test constructors are concerned, there is only one correct answer and your job is to find it. What an unimaginative way to put the question. Think of it as a creative opportunity and all sorts of other possibilities pop up.

Misfrost: My potatoes were frosted this year. But more than that – they shouldn't have been. There was nothing wrong with my timing of their planting, but it was an unfortunate late frost that got them. They were not just frosted but were *misfrosted*.

Reunderstood: Every time we take a learning step we have to *reunderstand* the world. From an early age I understood about tides being driven by the moon. But when it was drawn to my attention that there is only one moon pass in 24 hours, but two high tides, then I had to reunderstand the idea. And then when I heard that Southampton has four high tides every 24 hours I had to *reunderstand* it all over again. Reunderstanding is a synonym for learning.

Just in case you think that this is all a bit fanciful on my part, you may recall Alan Bennett's wonderful play/film The History Boys. At one point, the teacher (brilliantly played by the late 'Pie-in-the-sky' Richard Griffiths) has a tutorial with the most studious of the 6th formers who presented a Thomas Hardy piece about the 1st World War trench slaughter. Some of their subsequent discussion turned on the word *uncoffined* – which the teacher enthused about as a classic piece of Hardy. The word does not exist in my Oxford Concise, but that does not seem to have bothered Hardy or Bennett. But it would certainly not do for the age 11 SATs.

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My point is that it is not only legitimate to have alternative views about the prefix/word question, but moreover it would provide far more insight into a child's understanding and literary prowess if they were invited to speculate on combinations and provide appropriate definitions or illustrations of a proposed new word. The test designers' fixation with 'correctness' is not only narrow-minded pedantry but is also deeply counterproductive.

So, to the second offering; *"The Problem Solvers"*. This new book was released amid much fanfare from Pearson. Written by Charles Leadbetter it's an interesting text, the central argument of which is that schooling needs to create a breed of problem solvers…not rule-followers.

> Schooling has become a way to instruct young people so that they, in turn, become good at following instructions…. Yet in a more volatile, uncertain world, increasingly driven by innovation and entrepreneurship, we now also need to equip young people to find and solve problems of all shapes and sizes.   (p 29)

The book discusses curriculum innovation and assessment innovation, and both in the cause of creating a problem-solving ethic throughout schools. As an example of the thinking, Leadbetter makes the obvious point the when learning is routine, mechanistic, or disconnected from life, it becomes dull and boring. But he then goes on to argue the inverse problem, that learning becomes chaotic when it stretches students too far with too much unstructured information. As he says, the net result is that "The first leaves students bored, the second leaves them feeling lost." (p24).

This was *exactly* the argument that preoccupied us in design & technology when design courses began to replace the old craft courses in the 1970s and 1980s. The danger of too much dull repetitive skill acquisition on one hand – and the inverse danger of too much 'free' exploratory design on the other. The art of great teaching in design & technology has always been to walk a tightrope, struggling to avoid falling one way (too much control/instruction) or the other (too much unsupported freedom). One hundred years ago John Dewey in *Democracy and Education* analysed in detail exactly the same issue, and my first book in 1982 had as its central theme the "...conflict over whether one should teach by direct instruction or through the setting and solving of problems" (p12). It was the time-warp phenomenon that alternately delighted and frustrated me with the Leadbetter book. I was delighted that the argument was being newly made, and frustrated that it appeared to be presented as a new set of issues. There is barely a reference to anything before 2010, and yet since design & technology was a 1960s/1970s/1980s creation, we have been struggling with

and finding ways to deal with this stuff for decades, and mostly against the grain of traditional school requirements.

The book is full of great case studies drawn from many nations, and one can only agree with Leadbetter's claim that curriculum development is unlikely to be the biggest obstacle in creating dynamic education systems. The problem lies elsewhere. And it's not about assessment, since we know that – given appropriate political support – solutions to that are readily available.

The single biggest difficulty that has beset d&t over the last 40 years is not to do with any lack of dynamic vision for how it *might* be. And nor has it been about curriculum development since we have had a whole raft of great curriculum development initiatives that have created some really outstanding learning opportunities for teachers and schools.

The problem for large-scale curriculum reform is how to develop a truly HUGE cohort of teachers to be able to do it. Not tens…or hundreds…in interesting curriculum development exercises, but hundreds of thousands of stressed teachers whose immediate priority is often just to keep their heads above water with their current concerns. There is no getting around the fact that the pedagogy of design teaching is far more sophisticated than simple instruction, and the greater the gap between current practice and proposed practice, the more critical the teacher-development process becomes. Now that teacher education has virtually disappeared from universities, and the advisory service has virtually disappeared from Local Education Authorities, the tools available to create and sustain significant curriculum change have to be re-invented. There is only the barest recognition of this problem in Leadbetter's book…. "Regimes change only when a significant body of insiders decide to switch sides …" (p82) And sadly, but perhaps not surprisingly, there is nothing in the book that tackles this fundamental problem. As he acknowledges, the matter "…needs work".

References

Dewey, J (1916). *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education*. New York: Macmillan

Kimbell, R (1982) *Design education; the foundation years* London: Routledge

Leadbetter, C (2016) *The Problem Solvers* London: Pearson