

Sustainable learning

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Everything is good as it leaves the hands of the author of things, everything degenerates in the hands of man. He forces one soil to nourish the products of another, one tree to bear the fruits of another. He mixes and confuses the climates, the elements, the seasons. He mutilates his dog, his horse, his slave. He turns everything upside down, he disfigures everything, he loves deformities, monsters. He wants nothing as nature made it, not even man himself. For him man must be trained like a saddle-horse; he must be shaped according to the fashion, like trees in his garden.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau: *Émile*¹

It is instructive to take a walk around a Primary school. Start with the cloak-room, where each child has a hook for her coat, with her name by the hook and, perhaps if she is small, a picture — here a cow, there a penguin. In the classroom, where of course the teacher knows all the children by name, there is colour and light. The children wear bright clothes in what are appropriately called primary colours. They have placed their hands on tissue paper of various hues, drawn around them, written their names on them, cut them out and pasted them onto the windows. This is *their* classroom, the display declares. The light that enters the room (contrast the stained-glass of the cathedral, depicting Biblical scenes) is thus mediated by the children themselves: this is child-centeredness indeed. Examples of children's work are also displayed on the walls: good work, work that shows signs of effort, perhaps a piece of work from every child to show that what each does is valued. Despite the demands of the literacy hour and the numeracy hour and whatever other hours have become mandatory, there is a nature table where the children can touch and smell conkers, acorns, leaves, turnips. Perhaps there is even a gerbil in a cage, the responsibility of a pair of children each week. While it patrols its wheel

the children take part in circle-time, sitting on the carpet and listening to each other respectfully as Ina, Paul, and Winston describe their week-end or talk about how they feel about walking to school among the traffic.

It is instructive to take a tour around a secondary school. Do not look for the cloakroom, for it became a place of anarchy and is now used to store furniture. Hence the children heave heavy bags around with them all day, filled with books, sports equipment, and mobile phones. These bags make it difficult to negotiate the stairs and narrow corridors and are a source of friction as pupils move between lessons, for, of course, they no longer have their own classroom as in the primary school. Instead they go from the English teacher's room to the math teacher's or to nobody's room in particular, just A47. There are few pictures and no work displayed, not least because such things only attract graffiti. I once walked every inch of corridor in a comprehensive school and saw only one interruption to the grey expanse of walls: a notice that said, "Please keep this school tidy." Where children's bodies were an object of care in their earlier schooling, now they seem to be denied. The uniform (perhaps grey, like the walls) is not designed to show it off to advantage. So many children for the RE teacher, the music teacher, and the rest to cope with, that they never learn their names — and some children seem to manage it so that there is hardly a teacher who *does* know their name.

It is well known that something goes dreadfully wrong between primary and secondary schooling. Those lively, engaged children turn, within months, into surly adolescents whose greatest fear is that they will be thought uncool and become ostracized, that another pupil will scrawl "boffin" on their exercise-book. This change of attitude is a mystery, and the object of much research.

On to the university, where the students have neither bodies nor names. An exaggeration, of course: but we are only concerned with our students' intellectual development here, and no-one could be expected to know the names of the 200 young people taking Psychology of Recognition; students report that the postgraduate uncomfortably in charge of the seminar never told them his name, seldom tries to learn theirs, and if he does he forgets them by the next seminar three weeks later. One department has replaced first-year tutorials with an on-line learning package. Anonymization of examination scripts and course assignments has naturally led to more anonymity. The History department recently gave up allocating each student a personal tutor: the logic of modularization was against it, they said, not to mention the demands of research; and anyway, wasn't that what the Counselling Service was for? The idea of displaying students' work is absurd, the idea of any kind of exhibition of posters or pictures around the Economics department or in the lecture theatres hardly less so.

It is familiar that two (at least: but I shall be schematic) educational traditions have come down to us. One can be thought of as the Rousseau-Crusoe tradition. The child is an active learner, for whom the teacher does best, as *Émile's* does

in the book named after him, to put him in the way of learning *experiences*. The more these are vivid, embodied, and above all *real*, the better he (there is indeed something gendered about this: the child is, like Robinson Crusoe, in “the age of primitive man”) will learn. The philosophy is often distilled into such saws as “I am told and I forget; I do and I remember” (remarkably, such stuff re-emerges in the literature of management education as if it were quite unproblematic). It is a Romantic philosophy, and if the sketch of the primary school above has a Romantic flavour, it is not wholly of my own making. Of course, the Romantic tradition in education has been anathematized in the last twenty years.

The other tradition has recognizable roots in Plato. In our learning odyssey we move from loving boys to the more cerebral love of vases and sculpture. If we travel far enough we come to love Beauty itself, the eternal and abstract Form. What we took, in our benighted existence in the cave, for real things were in any case only shadows. When, freed from our bonds, we recognize their unreality and pass out of the cave, we become aware of the sovereign and supreme good, the guarantor of all other Forms, whose image is the Sun. There are no Forms of mud or hair, Plato tells us; nor, doubtless, of conkers, leaves, or acorns. Of course there is another Plato, who wrote the marvellous early and early-ish dialogues (*Theaetetus*, *Phaedrus*) in which embodied persons, prone to *eros*, love, drink, war, and disease, have their prejudices challenged and their ideas changed, are thrown into *aporia*, are offered inspiring and thought-provoking visions. “Theaetetus” is not just a convenient name for a character in a piece of philosophy put into dialogue form to make its timeless, abstract truths more palatable to the reader. Plato’s dialogues, though, became the victims of *academic* philosophy which then contrived to ignore the powerful element in those dialogues of engagement between the Socratic teacher and the taught as someone with a fleshed-out and contextualized *life*. Thus those elements in this tradition that could have challenged its emphasis on the abstract, the remote-from-experience, were emasculated. Of course, there are powerful influences from the ascetic end of the Judaeo-Christian religious tradition, too many and too complex to go into here, which have joined forces with this Platonic strain.

I turn now to the connection between these remarks on education and the idea of sustainable development. That phrase is understood in many ways. At its heart, I take it, is the perception that humankind’s attitude to the natural world is essentially one of plunder: of taking with no thought for the morrow. Sometimes there is a faith that nature will be endlessly bountiful, miraculously repairing herself for further depredations: that “nature is never spent / There lives the dearest freshness deep down things,” as Gerard Manley Hopkins put it. Sometimes there is no particular thought at all behind our treatment of the planet, or no thought uncoloured by selfishness. This kind of behaviour cannot continue: it cannot be sustained. It is entirely short-term and profligate. We need instead attitudes to the natural world and to natural resources (revealingly so called: Heidegger’s *Bestand*) that allow us to live in harmony with them into

the foreseeable future. That would be sustainable development. And we are trying to discover what frames of mind need to be developed to make those attitudes possible. My suggestion in this paper is that, to a considerable extent, the ways of thinking that are doing the damage are those characteristic of, or even central to, formal education in our time. Of course they do not come only from there: if they were not more widely prevalent they could not have infected what passes for educational thinking. Nevertheless it is in such thinking that they are found at perhaps their most virulent.

Most obvious, first, is the instrumentalism, the techno-rationalism that runs through education at all levels. Everywhere the talk is of effectiveness and what works: effective use of language, as if all language aspired to the status of promotional literature for double-glazing, effective university teaching, as if the outcomes of a particular course of study were wholly known in advance, the only question being to reach them as economically as possible. In Jean-François Lyotard's often-quoted words, "In matters of social justice and of scientific truth alike, the legitimation of \hat{A} power is based on its optimizing the system's performance — efficiency."² Performativity is the dominant value: the maximizing of outputs (examination passes, throughput of students) and the minimizing of inputs (staff time, and of course staff — or human resources — themselves). We have become lulled into thinking of effectiveness and its siblings as neutral, commonsensical values. But as MacIntyre wrote:

The whole concept of effectiveness is \hat{A} 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 \hat{A} ³

MacIntyre equates this with managerialism and notions of social control operating downwards from above. It is an attitude that is disrespectful of persons as ends in themselves.

Worst of all, when educationalists turn to thinking about learning itself, effectiveness and performativity are, for the most part, deified rather than critiqued. A whole "school effectiveness movement" of researchers and consultants proclaims that there is no limit to the speed with which the educational bus may career down the road, never mind the potholes and the fuel gauge showing empty. No school is so bad, the orthodoxy goes, but that a good headteacher cannot improve it via the effective management of change (again we see effectiveness and managerialism in partnership).⁴ An eight-page glossy publication from The National School Improvement Network's bulletin (NSIN/London University Institute of Education, 2001) talks of how, in recent years, there has been increasing attention paid to higher order processes of understanding: to thinking about thinking, learning to think, learning about learning, and several other near-cognates all subsumed under the notion of metacognition. We read:

Notwithstanding the differences between these terms, their broad focus is of great importance for learning. Indeed, an earlier review in this series, “*Effective Learning*,” highlighted such higher-order processes as a key ingredient in the definition of effective learning. “Effective learners have gained understanding of the processes necessary to become effective learners” [sic], and effective learning “is that which actively involves the student in metacognitive processes of planning, monitoring and reflecting.”⁵

Whatever has become — talk of reflection notwithstanding — of the possibility that learning may involve time, day-dreaming, serendipitous connection of items from extensive reading or experience; that learning often requires a slow attunement to what is studied, involves unlearning, coming to terms with fears and prejudices? In what sense other than the most banal might coming to understand *Antony and Cleopatra* (or any other moderately demanding text, not excluding *Harry Potter*), or learning to appreciate Van Gogh’s pictures “involve the student in metacognitive processes of planning, monitoring and reflecting”? (Perhaps: “I set aside half an hour to read Act 2, then I checked on how much I’d got through \hat{A} ”)

Second, education has become dominated by short-termism. The National Curriculum test results in the primary school are required to rise steadily, irrespective of whether children’s love of books and interest in mathematics is actually diminished in the longer term. First-year sixth-formers cram in extra AS-levels alongside Duke of Edinburgh and spending Wednesday afternoons with Alzheimer’s patients: their eyes are on the UCAS (university entrance) form, section 10, after the completion of which perhaps these extra-curricular activities tail off. Undergraduate students find their modularized courses packed with continual assessment (assignments, presentations, seminars at which they must be present and at least minimally vocal, on-line readings their accessing of which can be monitored⁶) with the entirely predictable result (cp. Crook, forthcoming) that they do virtually no work or reading unless it is to be assessed. There is a fragmentation of their experience of learning here, as well as short-termism.

Third, I suggest education displays a fatal tendency to split mind from body, and to ignore the latter. As I sketched at the beginning of this paper, education progressively loses sight of the fact that learners *have* bodies. Beyond the Primary school there is a quite astonishing blindness to the importance of physical *space* in education. It is as though, education’s purpose being the transmission of knowledge, it is a matter of indifference under what conditions the transmission takes place. There is even a tendency to glory in that indifference (we are no upstart school or university, this is all part of the educational heritage experience): the ascetic/Platonic strain has much to answer for. The consequences can be seen everywhere. The secondary school often offers its pupils virtually no space that is welcoming, safe, and identifiable as their own. How

often is the conventional (redbrick or more recent) university designed to provide informal places where students can gather and talk, except of course the bar? (Loud music and fruit machines: no, perhaps not the bar.) This despite evidence of the educational value of “short and serendipitous exchanges as they move about the university environment.”⁷ As for formal teaching spaces, the newly-built satellite campus of one northern university contains hardly a single teaching room that can be used for any purpose (seminar, tutorial, discussion) other than lecturing from the front (there are exceptions: rooms full of computers for individual use). Its central and established campus has a number of seminar rooms, but hardly any that allow for any other arrangement than sitting in rows facing the lecturer or tutor.

Fourth, education now permits little discussion of *ends*. A centrally determined National Curriculum enshrines the common-sense assumption that schooling is simply English, mathematics, science, geography, et cetera: until recently no overarching justification for such a view of education was offered at all. Discussion of ends and purposes has been declared redundant: a primitive practice which we have finally grown out of.⁸ This is to be expected where the triumph of the market has made individual subjective choice sovereign and deliberation therefore pointless. Where the consumer is supreme, educational values are simply what the consumer happens to want. Values conceived in this way lend themselves neither to deliberation in their formation nor to thoughtfulness in their analysis. Between them the educational league tables, which announce the score or position as the supreme good (your department is a 22 in Subject Review: no more to be said), and the market assures us that philosophy is for the dream-time.

Consider, too, the way that consideration of what *university* education is for has largely disappeared. The Dearing Report of 1997 contains barely any real reflection about the aims or point of university education. Instead there is vacuous talk of the learning society, which in turn is conceived primarily in instrumental and economic terms. The Dearing Report, para. 1. 10, is worth careful reading:

The expansion of higher education in the last ten years has contributed greatly to the creation of a learning society, that is, a society in which people in all walks of life recognise the need to continue in education and training throughout their working lives and who see learning as enhancing the quality of life throughout all its stages. But, looking twenty years ahead, the UK must progress further and faster in the creation of such a society to sustain a competitive economy.⁹

Here higher education is justified in terms of the creation of a learning society that, despite mention of enhancement of the quality of life, is clearly conjured into life for the sake of the competitive economy, which it is supposed to sustain.

And we are familiar, of course, with the way in which all debate about the aims of higher education seems recently to have been reduced to argument about how to fund it: means-end reasoning *par excellence*.

Nor are these trends peculiar to the UK. In the 1995 European White Paper, “Teaching and Learning: Towards the Learning Society,” there is a ringing declaration on the question of what education is for:

Everyone is convinced of the need for change, the proof being the demise of the major ideological disputes on the objectives of education.¹⁰

Elsewhere a section is entitled “The end of debate on educational principles.”¹¹ The question of what higher education is for has been abolished by decree: bureaucratic hemlock for the Socratic spirit.¹²

Instrumentalism, techno-rationalism, short-term thinking, managerialism, a refusal to think about what, after all, education is *for*, a neglect of, or indifference towards, the embodied *experience* of the pupil or learner; not just a failure to nurture in him or her a love of the things of this world, but an encouragement to disdain them: how, under these circumstances, could we ever foster the frame of mind sympathetic to sustainable development? Can we avoid the conclusion that much of the problem here is rooted in the soil of formal education? Rousseau, whose opening words in *Émile* prefix this paper, complains of a similar tendency in his own time to force and hurry the young learner in ways that go against his larger well-being, and he makes explicit there the connection he sees between such perversions of education and humankind’s abuse of the nature world. “He mutilates his dog, his horse, his slave,” Rousseau writes: so too, we are to understand, the pupil and the student.

Rousseau’s diagnosis and prescription have of course inspired much of the strand of educational thinking called “progressivism.” That strand in my view deserves better than the execration to which it has been subjected in recent years, but techno-rationalism can be countered in other and perhaps more fruitful ways. There is no space here to do more than indicate one possible direction. My own preference¹³ would be to develop the Aristotelian notion of *phronesis* or practical judgement as, in Flyvbjerg’s words “an applied ethics for sustainable development.”¹⁴ Phronetic thinking foregrounds, in Flyvbjerg’s terms, questions of power and of value; it focuses on the particular and the concrete, the contextual and the embedded. It offers us, in the contexts of both education and the environment, an alternative to the patterns of thinking that science and technology have made pervasive: thinking that is harming the natural world, and that I have argued here is continually being reinforced in the rat-runs of our formal education systems.

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Endnotes

1. Rousseau , J.-J., Émile, trans. Barbara Foxley. London : Dent. (1969)
2. Lyotard. J.-F. 1984. p. xxiv
3. MacIntyre, A. 1981. p. 71
4. More on this in Blake et al. 2000
5. National School Improvement Network .2001.
6. This is no exaggeration. On-line facilities at my own university make this possible.
7. Crook, C. forthcoming.
8. Blake et al. 1998a. Cp ch. 9, “Folly, words, wigs, rags.”
National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education. 1997.
9. European Commission. 1995.
10. Ibid. p. 24.
11. cp. Blake N., R. Smith, and P. Standish. 1998b. esp. ch. 3, “Aims, purposes and principles.”
12. cp. Smith, R. 1999.
13. Flyvbjerg, B. 1993; 2001