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## Enquiring Minds: *a radical curriculum project?*

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**ABSTRACT** This article focuses on Enquiring Minds, a three-year curriculum development project funded by Microsoft as part of its Partners in Learning programme and run by Futurelab. The article suggests that the project is best understood as an example of a new type of 'curriculum entrepreneurialism' that is impatient with the traditional structures of curriculum and pedagogy and which seeks to pave the way for 'radical' transformation of education systems. The article locates this curriculum innovation in three broad contexts of educational cultures in Britain. These concern the question of the relationship between formal and informal cultures of learning, the relationship between knowledge, social class and curriculum, and the emergence of ideas about the economic value of schooling and the role of technology in young people's lives. These 'cultures of schooling' invariably affect any attempt to introduce radical change. Finally, the article poses the question of what is 'radical' about projects such as Enquiring Minds, and suggests that they might best be interpreted as moves to realign the practices of schooling with the requirements of a mobile and global capitalism.

### **Introduction**

Since the 1960s there have been a whole series of attempts to initiate and sustain curriculum reform in England. This was a response to a complex variety of educational, technological and cultural pressures (Ross, 2000). It is possible to identify a series of distinctive 'waves' of curriculum reform. Thus, Douglas Holly (1973) characterised the 1960s and early 1970s as a period of 'educational Keynesianism' in which the state sought to broker curriculum reform, and a whole series of state-sponsored curriculum projects led to what some have suggested was a 'golden age' of teacher-led curriculum development (e.g. Rawling, 2000). In part as a response to this, and in part a response to

changed economic and social conditions, the late 1980s and 1990s saw a retrenchment of these approaches and the reassertion of curriculum centralisation or nationalisation (Coulby, 2000). More recently, the 'noughties' saw a flourishing of curriculum entrepreneurialism as a series of curriculum 'brokers', including corporations, think-tanks, charities and influential organisations have embarked on a series of curriculum 'experiments', many of which announce themselves as attempts to bring about radical innovation (e.g. the RSAs' Opening Minds, the Paul Hamlyn Foundation's Learning Futures, Futurelab's Enquiring Minds). It is this last group of curriculum innovations that I am concerned with in this article. Though each project has developed its own distinctive 'brand', they share a number of characteristics, the most important of which include:

- An explicit intent to offer a radical approach to teaching and learning in schools;
- A well-developed critique of existing models of schooling, largely based on an analysis of the development of a 'knowledge economy';
- Attempts to reorganise the curriculum to break the hold of the 'traditional' subject-based curriculum;
- A focus on the transformative role of technology in bringing about curriculum and pedagogical change;
- A method that involves experimenting in schools and producing evidence of impact that may be used to influence educational policy makers and encourage the transformation of schooling and curriculum.

This article is occasioned by my experience as a researcher on one of these projects, Enquiring Minds, which, between 2005 and 2009 was funded by Microsoft as part of its worldwide Partners in Learning programme and run by Futurelab, a not-for-profit organisation concerned with promoting educational change.

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Enquiring Minds started from a simple notion. It sought to ask what might schools and learning look like if they started from the interests, concerns and passions of young people rather than seek to offer them a standard product of subjects and knowledge. The aims of the project were quite straightforward, if also idealistic and ambitious. As researchers, we sought to work with teachers and students in schools to develop 'learning spaces' in which students were supported to inquire into the questions and topics that interested and motivated them. We hoped to develop ways of working that could be of use to teachers in other schools seeking to develop more student-focused approaches.

In the first instance, the project was based in two schools, where we did intensive work with teachers to develop a curriculum experience that sought to elicit, engage with and support children's own knowledge and interest. On the basis of this work, we produced

an Enquiring Minds guide which explained the 'philosophy' and approach of the project, which was disseminated to schools in England and Wales, and which formed the basis for three 'teacher workshops' which attracted teachers from approximately 100 schools. Though the project was set to run for three years, Microsoft extended funding for a fourth year in order for researchers to track and understand the progress of the 'innovation' in schools.

In writing this brief summary of the Enquiring Minds project, I think it is important to avoid the temptation to offer a heroic and celebratory account of the work we did. Indeed, although as researchers we were quite comfortable with the inevitable existence of the 'rhetoric–reality gap', our real concerns were about the type of 'subject' that the project was in the process of constructing. As the project developed it became increasingly clear that we had been involved in the production of a particular version of the 'schooled child' (Austin et al, 2003), one with which we were not entirely comfortable. In the final report of the project we posed the question, to what extent has Enquiring Minds simply served to reproduce (or indeed celebrate) the existing social and economic order, one premised on individualism, self-responsibility, and enterprising knowledge work? To ask this question is not to dismiss the work of researchers, teachers and students involved in the project (all of whom had different experiences and took away different meanings from the project), but to recognise that projects such as this, which employ the language of innovation, transformation and radical change, are often caught up with wider social and cultural logics. These are the explored in the remainder of this article.

Details of the Enquiring Minds project and project papers and reports are available at [www.enquiringminds.org.uk](http://www.enquiringminds.org.uk)

The remainder of this article is one attempt to locate Enquiring Minds in the broader streams of the 'cultures of schooling' in Britain. There are three important aspects here:

- the continuing question of the correct balance between the formal cultures of schooling and curriculum and the informal cultures of young people;
- the issue of power and knowledge as reflected in schools;
- the increasing dominance of an economic discourse in education which argues that the main purpose of schooling is provide human capital for success in a knowledge economy, and the role that technology plays in this future-oriented education system.

### **The Formal and Informal Cultures of Learning**

The Enquiring Minds project was predicated on the idea that there were significant shifts taking place in young people's cultures as the result of the rise of new digital cultures. These shifts, it was posited, rendered older forms of curriculum and learning outmoded and out of touch with the skills and

dispositions of young people. The project set out to explore with teachers how they and schools might respond to these changes and, as such, was embroiled in the question about the relationship between formal and informal cultures.

As we started to work on the Enquiring Minds project – to take its grand and ambitious aims and transform them into meaningful practices in schools and classrooms – it became clear that the historical antecedents of the project were based in the ‘child-centred’ or progressive educational developments of the late 1960s and early 1970s. This tradition of education, which reached its apogee in the 1970s, was bounded by three official reports: the Newsom Report of 1963 which expressed official concern that a half the children in schools were missing out; the Plowden Report on primary education of 1967 which enshrined the importance of child-centred approaches; and the Bullock Report, *A Language for Life* (1975) which was a reaction to the realisation that educational attainment was closely linked to the types of language available to children and how these were received and validated in schools. In relation to Enquiring Minds, these developments were important in that they reflected a period in which the school curriculum was widely understood ‘holistically’ and curriculum planners and teachers sought to ensure that school subjects were relevant and meaningful to pupils. Edwards & Kelly (1998) argue that the new approaches to the curriculum that developed in this period were part of the process in which the school curriculum was freeing itself from the ‘shackles’ of tradition and moving into the twentieth century. They state that the ‘general climate of educational thinking was one in which the superior importance of the pupil to the content of the curriculum was beginning to be recognised’.

These developments (which lasted from the early 1950s to the mid 1970s) in state schooling were concerned with resolving the ‘cultural’ question in British schooling. They were driven by concerns about how to incorporate social groups and classes who had traditionally been excluded to meet the demand for labour in an economy undergoing modernisation, and to develop a citizenry that allowed for the extension of rights in social and cultural life. This was a period of educational expansion, and entailed the provision of state schooling for groups of children who were previously excluded, the development of new types of schools and the raising of the school-leaving age. Though it is tempting to see this as a process of inexorable progress, the gradual expansion of mass schooling was not accomplished without a struggle. For the sons and daughters of many working-class parents, school was regarded as a diversion from the main aim of making the transition from child to adult, a process that involved leaving school, taking up paid work, learning to stand on one’s own feet, and ‘settling down’ to family life in a capitalist culture. This transition from school to work was gendered and classed, but, for many, it was rooted in a sense of the locality and the community.

On top of this was the rapid transition to a consumer society where new ways of relating to each other through work, leisure and identities were being worked through. This was a society where new ‘formations of pleasure’ were in the making. One of the most important aspects of this was the rise of the

affluent teenager, and the widespread concern in the media about a widening 'generation gap'. These changes came to impact on the nature of life in schools, and led to intense debates about how schools should respond. For example, in 1960 the National Union of Teachers held a conference entitled 'Popular Culture and Personal Responsibility' which led to the publication of an edited Penguin Special, *Discrimination and Popular Culture* (Thompson, 1961). The book contained chapters on a wide range of aspects of popular culture, and the message of the book was that education should provide training in 'taste' or discrimination. A rather different perspective was provided in Stuart Hall & Paddy Whannel's *The Popular Arts*, written in 1964 at the height of the 'Beatlemania' phenomenon. It was written in response to the authors' experiences as school teachers in Brixton, which they describe as a sobering experience – 'a time in which he [the teacher] is made acutely aware of the conflict between the norms and expectations of formal education and the complexities of the real world which children and young people inhabit'. Hall & Whannel were clear about the historical significance of these shifts in popular culture:

Within one lifetime we have seen the invention of two powerful means of communication, cinema and television. Television now reaches virtually every member of the community. Most important from the teachers' point of view is that much of what these media have to offer is specifically designed for the young audience.

Hall & Whannel make an argument for extending the powers of discrimination as an entitlement across the curriculum, and in the process reducing the boundaries between the formal curriculum and the informal cultures of young people. This is a theme that has continued to animate debates about the nature of the curriculum that is on offer to students in schools, and arguments and debates about the relation of the formal curriculum and the informal cultures of children and young people were a constant theme in the Enquiring Minds project. Any attempt to develop a curriculum space which allows students to have control over what and how to study raises questions of what counts as valid knowledge. At times teachers felt the need to intervene to police and shape students' choices, and at other times teachers made genuine attempts to engage with the knowledge and perspectives students brought to the classroom. In the process, questions of the relations between power, class and knowledge were posed.

### **School Knowledge and Social Class**

An important aspect of any attempt to redefine the relationship between the official knowledge of the curriculum and the informal cultures of young people is the question of 'power'. As the arguments about popular culture developed in the 1960s and early 1970s, many teachers and educators became sensitised to the ways in which the school curriculum could serve to reproduce the

ideologies and worldviews of powerful social groups. By the early 1970s the post-war educational settlement described in the previous section had started to break down, and within the field of cultural studies and the sociology of education questions of the class-based experience of schooling were re-examined. In academic terms this was reflected in the development of the so-called 'new sociology of education', so called because it rejected the 'old' sociology which was concerned with questions of the home cultures of schooling and the outputs of educational processes, and instead sought to focus on the processes that operated in classrooms (Young, 1971; Whitty & Young, 1977; Whitty, 1985). Influenced by the work of Berger & Luckmann's (1964) *The Social Construction of Reality*, the 'new' sociologists argued that school knowledge was produced in the structures and routine interactions of teachers and pupils in schools. In many ways, this was an optimistic message, because if school knowledge was a social construction, it was possible to remake it in ways that were more socially equitable. The knowledge taught and learned in schools as facts was in reality the knowledge of the ruling and middle classes.

Workers in cultural studies focused on the ways in which youth cultures were a response to the processes of social change. Importantly, these were initially linked to debates about schooling. For instance, Graham Murdock (1975) argued against the tendency to see the rise of youth culture as an essentially classless development. This myth of classlessness was based on the idea that there is an unprecedented gap between the social experience of those who grew up before or during the Second World War and those growing up in the post-war period, and following from this that generational membership has displaced social class as the key determinant of social consciousness; and that this generational consciousness is sustained and expressed through the mass entertainment, especially pop music. Against this, Murdock insisted that young people's cultural choices were closely related to distinctive class positions. He argued that 'English secondary schools are in large part reproductions in miniature of the social and ideological universe of the professional and managerial middle class, and ...the underlying assumptions are those which underpin the middle-class career-individual achievement, rational calculation, forward planning and deferment of immediate gratification in favour of long-term gains'. The response of many working-class pupils to the class-based nature of schooling is the construction of a distinctive identity. This is recognisable in the famous study by Paul Willis (1977), *Learning to Labour: how working-class kids get working class jobs*, and Paul Corrigan's (1979) *Schooling the Smash Street Kids*. This had implications for the types of knowledge that formed the basis of the school curriculum. Thus, in his essay 'The Politics of Culture' in Douglas Holly's *Education or Domination?* Murdock argued that:

The basic content of what is taught in schools is laid down by the curriculum. Traditionally the curriculum has been underpinned by a hierarchical classification of culture. Consequently, only certain sorts of knowledge and experience have been defined as suitable subjects for thinking and talking about in school, while others have been

classified as unsuitable and have been excluded from consideration ... Traditionally, therefore, the curriculum has enshrined the assumptions and forms of the dominant culture as the yardsticks against which other, contending, cultures have been measured and found wanting.

One of the challenges that is faced by radical curriculum projects such as Enquiring Minds is the nature of the knowledge that is constructed in school classrooms. To study popular music, rather than classical forms, or to choose to examine comic books rather than the canon of great works, or family histories over formal history is not simply a matter of choice, but ignores the ways in which knowledge is valued and takes the form of cultural capital.

### **The Turn to Cultural Populism**

A third strand that influenced the conceptualisation and operation of Enquiring Minds came from the 'economistic' discourse that has come to dominate debates about the purposes of schooling. The conditions that had created the space for educational progressivism and more radical accounts of the relationship between schooling and culture changed dramatically in the 1970s and early 1980s. Andrew Gamble (1981) charts a tale of Britain in decline as a consequence of lack of international competitiveness, innovation and investment in industry, and the response of governments through cuts in public expenditure in the early 1970s. The 'Great Debate' inaugurated by Prime Minister James Callaghan's Ruskin College Speech in October 1976 served to shift the terms of education policy towards the needs of industry and the disciplining of the workforce. It led to the return of the 'two great principles' of Victorian schooling: standards of excellence and fitness for work. Whilst, for many teachers this revealed the lie behind the claim that education was somehow above politics, it revealed tensions within the ruling elite about the purposes of education, and these were played out in the 1980s. It represented a closer articulation between the requirements of the economy and structures of schooling.

Thus, the early 1980s were characterised by high levels of youth unemployment which at times boiled over into unrest in parts of Britain's large cities. In this context there were moves to develop schemes to equip young people with the skills and attitudes required for the world of work. The establishment of the Manpower Services Commission (in 1973) represented a significant shift, since it challenged the power of the Department of Education and Science. It introduced to schools the Technical and Vocational Educational Initiative (TVEI) which looked to develop new vocationally oriented courses and more flexible or 'progressive' teaching approaches, in which technology played a major role. Indeed, as the extent and depth of Britain's industrial restructuring became apparent, technology came to play an important role in the re-imagining of the revived economy. In this context schools and teachers were urged to introduce and develop the use of computer technology (Goodson &

Mangan, 1995). However, this was not simply a technical matter, but entailed a major shift in the education system to reflect the new regime of accumulation based on neo- or post-Fordism (Robins & Webster, 1989). Technology and the so-called 'new vocationalism' was an important part of this. For instance, Tom Stonier's (1983) *The Wealth of Information* was an early example of the argument that Britain was in the process of moving to an information society that would have profound implications for work, leisure and schooling, and was followed by a collection of essays for the Royal Society of Arts (RSA) edited by the industrialist Tyrell Burgess, *Education for Capability* (1986), which, in its argument that the traditional curriculum subjects are no longer suited to the preparation for life in a post-industrial economy, can be seen as a precursor to the later Opening Minds project. These arguments were part of a wider discourse concerned to develop an 'enterprise culture' and overcome the British 'disease' associated, it was alleged, with an anti-business culture (Weiner, 1981).

Whilst these early debates focused on how technology could help to reform schools so as to meet national economic needs, there later developed important arguments about how technology had the potential to liberate the learner and allow for the development of creativity and expression (for an early example informed by a libertarian perspective see Schostack, 1988). These concerns with creativity should be seen in the light of the rise of cultural populism within the field of cultural studies (McGuigan, 1992). As the 1980s and 1990s wore on, it became increasingly common to argue that consumers, film-goers, video-game players and so on were not passive dupes who were somehow 'tricked' into consuming goods through 'false consciousness'. Instead, audiences were actively involved in the construction of meanings (Fiske, 1989; Willis, 1990; Sefton-Green, 1998; Richards, 1998).

The decline of the Left in general with its focus on questions of political economy and production was reflected in the changes in the nature of cultural studies and media education, which came to influence curriculum discussions. In Britain media education emerged out of the struggles over the politics of culture during the 1970s and 1980s. It was concerned with the representation of distinctive groups based on gender, class and race, and sought to understand how media representations were linked to the political economy of communication. The goal was to identify the ideology of the texts and teach students skills of critical reading or discrimination. However, over time there has been a shift in the practice of media education in schools away from a defensive position to what David Buckingham (2003) calls a 'new paradigm'. In the new paradigm media education is both a critical and a creative enterprise:

It provides young people with the critical resources they need to interpret, to understand and (if necessary) to challenge the media that permeate their lives; and yet it also offers them the ability to produce their own media, to become active participants in media culture rather than mere consumers.



Whilst Buckingham here is careful to distinguish between a wider concept of media education and a narrower focus on media literacy, there is a strong set of arguments that stress the importance of media literacy in which students are actively involved in the construction of meaning, and this focus on participatory cultures and the possibilities for 'ordinary' people to make meaning has been latched upon by those who seek to argue for the 'end of schooling'. Examples include Charles Leadbeater in his books *Living on Thin Air* (2000) and *We-Think* (2008), Tom Bentley's (1998) *Learning beyond the Classroom*, and those who argue that the 'new economy' requires new forms of learning, such as Diana Coyle (2001). These books are routinely cited by those arguing the need for a transformation in the nature of learning and schooling.

### Summary

Drawing together these themes, I would suggest that projects such as Enquiring Minds may be seen as radical in the way that they attempt to overcome the tendency of modern schools to 'fragment, compartmentalise and reduce what is complex, interdependent and transdisciplinary' (Fielding & Moss, 2011, p. 26). However, whilst there is an understandable concern to identify the factors which 'enable' or 'inhibit' change (see Thomson [2007] for a comprehensive review), such projects invariably occupy and must engage with long-standing and enduring 'cultures of schooling'. In the case of Enquiring Minds, the project was shaped by, encountered and attempted to engage with arguments about the relations between informal and formal cultures of learning, the relationship between power, knowledge and curriculum, and the role of technology, participation and the changing economy. The complexity of these debates, and the variety of actors involved in such projects, means that the meanings of the development are contested and rarely finalised. Thus, in Enquiring Minds there were strong currents of digital participation and the sense that traditional forms of learning and schooling are challenged by technological innovation. In turn, these discourses of 'empowerment' were closely linked to the idea of a global knowledge economy which required new forms of learning, less concerned with acquiring curriculum content and more concerned with 'learning how to learn'. At the same time, we as researchers sought to complicate these discourses by drawing on ideas about power and curricula and class-based notions of resistance to school. Enquiring Minds, with its focus on children's cultures and emerging forms of digital participation, risked at times a utopian view of digital participation whilst at others it was justified (to teachers and students) in terms of developing 'life skills' valuable for the new economy, and yet others, in finding ways for teachers to engage 'alienated' learners with issues and topics that were of personal interest and meaning.

*Radical, in What Ways?*

Finally, I think it is important to ask in what sense these types of projects can be called 'radical'. As the project went on, we as researchers became increasingly aware of how a project which looked to start with the questions, interests and concerns of young people in schools was more and more appropriated as evidence for what education might look like in the new knowledge economy. It became clear that Enquiring Minds was one instance of a wider educational project to re-imagine progressive educational futures in a global economy. This is neatly encapsulated in the RSA's Education Charter:

The world is changing rapidly. The globalised economy creates opportunity, challenge and unpredictability ... Young people bring with them the expectation not just to sit and listen, but to participate, to interact, and to shape.

The establishment of a new Liberal Democrat-Conservative coalition government in May 2010 means that the future of these 'radical' curriculum initiatives is uncertain. There are presently moves to stress 'the importance of teaching' (the title of the White Paper published in November 2010) and restore the 'traditional' subjects.

In this context, one way to understand projects such as Enquiring Minds is that they represent the radicalism of the 'revolutionary' wing of the capitalist class (seeking alliances with other progressive forces), which is increasingly impatient with the 'staid' and 'traditional' forms of schooling offered by national state education systems. To develop this point it is worth returning to a 1974 essay by Douglas Holly called 'The Invisibility of the Ruling Class'. Holly starts by pointing out that most educational debate in Britain is framed by concerns about the relationship between the 'working classes' and 'middle classes'. However, this tends to obscure the existence of a 'ruling class' who set the parameters for education and schooling. Though head teachers and school leaders may have space to develop their own visions of what schools are like, they do so within limits set by capitalism – schools are places to produce the future labour force and reproduce the social system. However, Holly argues, the ruling class is itself divided between those who have an interest in stabilising and reproducing the existing social order, and those who, in order to seek out new markets for products, seek to 'speed up' the process of accumulation, to 'revolutionise' aspects of the system. Following this analysis it can be argued that projects such as Enquiring Minds – sponsored, we should remember, by Microsoft – represent the desire of certain sections of Capital to transform and 'radicalise' education. Before we rush to simply dismiss Holly's argument as a relic of a bygone era of class conflict and as guilty of deterministic thinking about the correspondence between schooling and capitalism, I would argue that, at the very least, it gives pause for thought to consider the powerful forces that seek to promote 'radical educational change'.

What should be clear is that neither 'traditional' subjects, imbued with conservative ideas about economic and social relations, nor 'innovative' curriculum projects that stress the acquisition by students of the 'soft skills' or 'competences' required for life in a global capitalist economy, are substitutes for radical or what Michael Young calls 'powerful knowledge' which helps students to understand the forces that create and shape the social and natural world. For that, more critical versions of school knowledge are required.

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