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The Stone Age Didn't End Because They Ran out of Stone: why our children can't wait much longer for a functional school system

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ABSTRACT This article explores the reasons why transformation of the school system is urgently needed. It is suggested that the system will implode as a result of a growing dislocation between what schools need to achieve and the inadequate, if not damaging, practices forcefully promoted by increasing numbers of school leaders and politicians. Alternatively, a culture of schooling in which there is much less directed management of students' learning behaviours and far more challenge, and therefore growth, is advocated. Let us start with the child, not with the school.

> *The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present. The occasion is piled high with difficulty and we must rise with the occasion. As our case is new so we must think anew and act anew. We must disenthrall ourselves, and then we shall save our country.*
> (Abraham Lincoln, Annual Message to Congress, December 1st 1862)

The Tyranny of Common Sense

Ken Robinson used the above quotation from Abraham Lincoln in his 2010 Technology, Entertainment, Design talk (www.ted.com/talks) to illustrate what he called the 'tyranny of common sense' which he feels is inhibiting any transformation of our education system. The talk is witty and eloquent, articulating the imperative to transform the system for the sake of all our

children and society's well-being. Most poignant is his observation that too many people leave school feeling a failure and enter the adult world unfulfilled and unvalued, not having found their 'element': that which makes them feel happy and worthwhile. This is a crisis of the wasting of human resources; schools are failing to identify these resources which often lie deep. This failure is because we have not 'disenthralled' ourselves from old ideas about schools and education; worse still, we continue to embrace them as 'common sense'. This is well illustrated in the latest round of political speeches about why the school system is failing, such as DfE's call for teachers to have 2.2 or better degrees in the subject they teach – a belief that it is common sense that good teachers need to know a lot about their subject rather than understanding how to develop effective learners.

Ken Robinson also argues for a school system based on what he calls an 'agricultural' model and a move away from the 'industrial' model we now have. This model of schooling is posited on the belief that it is possible to put young people in at one end and that by subjecting them to a series of uniform experiences at agreed points, expect them to emerge at the other as competent people ready to embark on the next stage of their lives. This is a belief in defiance of reality: in fact, too many youngsters do not complete the journey and those who do, are not ready for 'the big, wide world', too many emerging convinced that they are inferior in so many ways to other people. If we know that human development and learning is more organic, non-uniform and individual, why doesn't our school system reflect this?

Moreover, the central imperative to transform the school system we have for the sake of our children is pressing, obvious and more widely and vociferously articulated with every day we venture further into the twenty-first century. In addition to the waste of human resources, the present system is not keeping up with the rate of change in the world around us. The function of teachers can no longer be to tell young people about the world because the ground is shifting so quickly beneath our feet that the certainties we are pronouncing may not even outlive our students' educational careers. Better then to balance this entrenched function of presenting young people with a partial and historically fixed knowledge of the world with a new professionalism through which we lead learners to grow increasingly proficient in managing for themselves the challenges of the constant new learning, however it may be manifested in the twenty-first century.

And there are other serious issues with our system of schooling.

The command and control structure of the traditional classroom centred on the teacher is grossly inefficient. It creates a dynamic with the teacher super- (if not hyper-) active in researching, resourcing, planning and organising whilst learners are left passively sidelined. It is as if their teacher has taken them to a gym to teach them about exercise by demonstrating the apparatus herself and shouting out explanations as they sit and watch. And this is day in, day out and goes so far as to encompass their personal behaviours: rather than having their personal disposition for self-management and control challenged and

developed, learners are micro-managed, with most decisions made for them, through controlling edicts enshrined in behaviour policies of increasing detail, to the extent of telling young people what constitutes an attractive hairstyle. Why not simply ask learners to make their own minds up about their behaviour using the questions: 'Is it fair?', 'Is it productive for both myself and others?' and 'Is it feasible?'

Current structures constantly understretch our students and leave them underdeveloped both as learners and moral citizens. They also are moving us to increasingly repressive school regimes: BSF (Building Schools for the Future programme) designs that mirror prison layouts in order to maximise surveillance opportunities; an assumed need for CCTV in toilets; corridor doors that are closed automatically when the bell goes to keep students in classrooms. Can this be healthy?

We have a moral duty to help young people discover who they are by pushing and reinventing themselves, making decisions, testing their hypotheses about their relationship with and identity in the world, making mistakes, reflecting and picking themselves up and trying again. How can anyone really find out who they are if their experience of compulsory schooling denies them the scope to make judgements and act of their own volition? If they don't grow to know themselves under our stewardship, then they will not be as fulfilled or happy in life as they might have been. And that's our fault. And it's wrong.

Furthermore, neither does current educational practice serve the economic well-being of individuals or the institutions employing them. Business does not need employees who, however be-suited, be-tied and archaically hair-styled they might be, are compliant to the point of passivity. They need employees who will question and problem-solve and provoke, in a proactive and confident dialogue with the institution to learn about how processes might be improved. Or they need people who can not only give the right answers, but ask the right questions.

There is also the small matter of global survival. The critical problems facing the world are beyond the scope of the expertise we applied to previous problems. We need genuinely innovative thinking. We need to develop in our young people the capacity to outgrow our current knowledge. Presenting ourselves as the fount of knowledge is as stressful and fallacious for us as a profession as it is debilitating to the thinking of the next generation.

John Abbott makes the point that by pushing our young people through a system designed to control them and prevent them facing risk, challenge and failure, we are doing them irreversible harm:

> Adolescence is a time-limited predisposition. In other words, if the adolescent is prevented (by over-careful parents or too rigid a system of formal schooling or by restrictions imposed by health and safety regulations) from experimenting and working things out for itself, it will lose the motivation to be innovative or take responsibility itself in adult life. (Abbott, 2010, p. 55)

We are also storing up problems for society as a whole. So how are the young people who have been victims of our increasingly repressive school system functioning in society?

Let us take the riots in the UK in the summer of 2011. Images seem to confirm that they provided a stage for an awful lot of young people to prove they did not buy into the same moral code that we would hope they did. Commentators continue to argue about blame; parents either march their children into police stations or cut up their incriminating clothes and lie to protect them; we are expected to be shocked that some of those arrested are university students or from 'good' families. Perhaps we should be asking how 11 years of compulsory schooling managed to produce so many young people, of so many different backgrounds, who made so many bad choices. Of equal concern should be that the politicians' only response is to 'come down hard' on them. Can such a complex problem which has been simmering for so many years have such a simple solution?

Melissa Benn suggests:

> Genuine comprehensive reform is unfinished … The rewards, in terms of better educated citizens of the future and greater common ground between communities and religions and classes, could be enormous. The alternative scenario – of an increasingly fragmented, mistrustful and divided nation, controlled rather than enlightened, dependent on the unstable whim of private or religious enterprise – is too frightening to contemplate. (Benn, 2011, p. 204)

In fact it could be argued that too many schools have lost sight of this function in their panic to secure their own survival as institutions; something that does not require them to take on a social role, simply to achieve good examination results by any means they can. Schools can only help to develop responsible, self-managing individuals if they concentrate on the individual and not on the institution. Schools do not exist as an end in themselves we assume, so what do they exist for?

Now there is the rub.

In fact we need a debate about this before any progress can be made on transforming the school system. It seems to be taken for granted that we all know what society wants from our schools; in fact there is far from universal agreement on this most fundamental of questions. Do we send all our young people to school in order to be inducted into a body of knowledge that our society feels is necessary for them to become members? Or to learn how to be effective (or even compliant) citizens? Or so they can develop good social skills? Do we send them to learn how to think critically so they can help to develop our society and challenge us? Or to be trained in some way to be useful to the general good? Do we send them to gain qualifications that are useful for life or qualifications that open doors but which soon become redundant? The possibilities go on.

Of course, a school could fulfil several, perhaps many, of these functions, but surely not all? Yet it seems that all of this – and more – is being asked of our schools. If we are not clear what we want from schools, how can we expect them to be effective, let alone measure their effectiveness? As it is, the primary function of many schools has become to perpetuate themselves by conforming to Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education) requirements, even if that is at the cost of failing many individual students.

In this debate about the purpose of schooling in England, we need to face an inconvenient truth: too many schools are essentially structured around the survival needs of the institution, not those of the students. We now teach the exam first, the subject second and the student third – and they know it. This highlights what is a stark problem: schools are not concentrating on developing learners because it is not expected of them. They are expected to deliver good examination results – or at least that is the only measure that counts. Rhetoric from politicians, the media, or even the person on the London omnibus may suggest that schools should be turning out 'citizens of the future' who can function in society productively, but the crux of the dilemma is that this does not equate with success in examination league tables and meeting more measurable, but ultimately arbitrary, targets. The real damage is being done by an insistence on conflating these two outcomes and peddling the lie that by achieving the examination results we will have well-functioning citizens.

So, it is clearly time for the profession to evolve its practice then. Quick time.

And it is useful, if we are to move forwards at last, to consider what has stopped us transforming our schools up until now. It is, simply, a lack of trust, in teachers, academics and, most awfully, in young people themselves. We have too limited a view of people, including ourselves, and a kind of paranoia ties us up in cycles of measuring, checking, inspecting and controlling which have severely limited our capacity for innovation and evolution.

We are well-intentioned people: teachers, politicians, all. We want the best for our young people. Yet our mission becomes clouded in a fog of mistrust and diverted by a convoluted, duplicitous, top-heavy and expensive system of 'checking up'.

In the UK even the Government's Ofsted inspectors are not to be trusted; every report is checked, and at times radically amended, a tier up the hierarchy, by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors. We are spending our intellectual energies and precious economic resources on micro-managing compliance rather than improving the system.

John Abbot refers to a quotation from a verbatim report of conclusions made to the Prime Minister's Policy Unit in March 1996:

> Much to my surprise, I cannot really fault your theory. You are probably educationally right; certainly your argument is ethically correct. But the system you're arguing for would require very good teachers. We're not convinced that there ever will be enough good teachers. So, instead, we're going for a teacher-proof system of

> organising schools – that way we can get a uniform standard.
> (Part of a presentation)

Here is no pretence: we do not trust our teachers to do a good job – we cannot even agree what a good job looks like. So we take the attempt to make all education conform to a model agreed by politicians even into our teacher training system. We have a plethora of standards which all trainee teachers must meet in order to qualify; so much time and energy spent collecting 'evidence' for the standards – evidence that can be collected in a file, not necessarily demonstrated, instead of trying to reach a proper understanding of the teacher's role in learning. At a recent training session in Manchester, a hundred or so trainee teachers were asked what would have made their training experience better. There was a general agreement that removing the sterile collection of evidence of 'meeting the standards' would have freed them up to reflect properly on what teaching was really about. Just like passing a financial audit does not have a bearing on whether there has been financial mismanagement, so 'meeting the standards' does not equate with being an effective teacher. What it does do is make politicians feel as though they are monitoring the training. Hence, the DfE has recently published (2011) a revised set of standards for consultation; the Minister has said his intention was to reduce the number; the revised set suggests that simplification was not the motive.

In addition, the most profound and pervasive impact of this deep mistrust of schooling is an addiction to expensive, narrow and unreliable standardised testing. The power of the assessment system to influence what schools do is immense, even to the point of skewing the system away from learning to encouraging schools to concentrate on performance; away from the needs of young learners towards tending to the well-being of the school as an institution.

It may be assumed that if the assessment system is so powerful, then it will at least be reliable. All the evidence suggests that it is not. Our examination boards are businesses competing with each other for the market: schools. They concentrate on making money, not on reliable examination assessment. Year after year, they fail to award grades that are reliable and even to set papers that can be completed. Year after year politicians huff and puff about the shortcomings of the examination system and yet there is no remedy forthcoming. Newspaper reports are only the tip of the iceberg; teachers are the ones on the inside, doing the marking and moderating; almost every one of them can tell a story about inefficiency, poor quality control and lost papers. Of course all this supposes that it is possible to grade accurately; a proposition that, if tested thoroughly, would see the whole unstable edifice we have built our education system upon tumble.

The corrosive influences of teaching to a test, rather than helping young people develop as learners; have been around for a long time. Professor Guy Claxton quotes Joseph Payne railing against the testing introduced as part of the English educational reforms of 1862.

> We need no hesitation in pronouncing it to be mechanical in conception, mechanical in means, mechanical in results … Just in proportion as you substitute mechanical routine, drill and cram, for intelligent and sympathetic development of the child's powers, you shall fail in the very object you are aiming at … The experiment which has now been tried for ten years in England ought henceforth to take a place in the annals of education as an example to deter … [it is] a system which, assumes the name without possessing the spirit of the true education. (Quoted by Claxton, 2008, p. 26)

Furthermore, when so much high-stakes pressure is loaded, for teachers and schools, onto the outcomes of tests, then the logical defence is to direct learners' actions more and more closely in order to reduce the possibility of variation in their test scores. We limit their learning behaviours in the attempt the limit the errors they can make in their GCSE examinations. So we get them the GCSEs to secure a place at college or work, but whether they are equipped to engage successfully with the challenges of their new environment is not our worry. It will be when this outcome doesn't affect our Ofsted report or league-table standing. Thus we work ourselves half to death to harry them to the GCSE results we need them to achieve, through a process which leaves them disengaged, weak and unknowing of themselves. We narrow their development to produce the outcomes we need. Peter Senge stands beside Ken Robinson in defining most clearly for us how the system of schooling which has evolved, echoing the world of twentieth-century mechanised production, has impacted on the learners whose lives we purport to enhance.

> While the assembly-line school system dramatically increased educational output, it also created many of the most intractable problems with which students, teachers and parents struggle to this day. It operationally defined smart kids and dumb kids. ... It established uniformity of the product and process as norms, thereby naively assuming that all children learn in the same way. It made educators into controllers and inspectors thereby transforming the traditional mentor–mentee relationship and establishing teacher-centred rather than learner-centred learning. (Senge, 2007, p. 31)

And there are no real winners within this teacher-centred paradigm: teachers take responsibility for things outside their control, and hence try and increase their grip on the situation by attempting to be ever more controlling, whilst learners are stripped more and more of the basic responsibility for themselves and their learning. Chris Watkins cites Weimar to illustrate this dismal spiral:

> The more structured we make the environment, the more structure the students need. The more we decide for students, the more they expect us to decide. The more motivation we provide, the less they find within themselves. The more responsibility for learning we try

> to assume, the less they accept on their own. The more control we exert, the more restive their response. (Watkins et al, 2007, p. 98)

We have ended up creating a system which serves no one well at all. It is imperative, then, that we evolve to teach differently from how we were taught or even how we were taught to teach. But such development is not as difficult as it might first appear. There is significant knowledge, understanding and practice around us already to help us make the shift.

A useful first step is to consider what learning is and is not.

Exploring What Learning is and is Not ...

Perhaps one of the most problematic obstacles to a discussion of learning is people's tendency to link it with schools. Even when someone is trying to suggest that schools are not good at encouraging learning, there is always the suggestion that they should be. Yet were schools ever designed with learning as their prime objective? History suggests that schools came into being for various reasons and learning was not up there as a prime motive. The 'BBC Radio 4 phenomenon' of expecting schools to put right a host of society's ills is possibly closer to the heart of what schools were set up for. On a weekly basis the media, and always Radio 4 as teachers wake to another day, will report the latest threat: teenage pregnancies, anti-social behaviour, obesity, alcohol and drug consumption, etc. etc. and schools are told they are the place where these issues need to be addressed. The 1870 Education Act was a response to the nation losing its lead in manufacturing industry and a desire by some sections to end child labour. Of course, the Education League and others undoubtedly wanted to do better by the country's youth but there is scant reference to a desire to develop self-dependent, free thinkers who could manage themselves well. In fact there was a real fear in those revolutionary times of allowing the poor to be educated. Yet school structures to this day echo those of the schools from hundreds of years ago. No wonder they struggle with learning: they are not designed for it.

The structures within schools are outdated and obstacles to developing effective learners: classes, year grouping, timetable structures, and staffing structures. Senior managers are without constituency in that they interact with students as learners less than other teachers yet they are held responsible for results and so try to set up systems of monitoring which mirror the politicians' attempts to curtail innovation by teachers and micro-manage their behaviour. This begs questions about why we have teachers at all. Surely, any person who can follow directions can deliver this sort of experience? This is not about promoting learning. This is what happens when the system does not trust the people in it. It is like insisting that doctors structure each consultation, each diagnosis, each operation in accordance with the Government's diktat – not a three-part lesson then, a three-part consultation with your doctor.

We know that young people do not have to be coerced into learning. As toddlers the innate compulsion to learn is as powerful as the drive to feed. Indeed, often more so and this is no temporary state: a striking memory is of three 12-year-olds in school on a cold day politely refusing the invitation from staff to leave their learning (they were putting a car engine together) and come inside for warmth and toast. Real learning is absolutely compelling; listening, copying and completing dislocated, rote, micro-managed activities, isn't. And not only is the pseudo-learning so predominant in schools unengaging, it is ineffectual in producing any lasting gain for either individual or society other than some standardised test scores. Schools have not really left behind that initial drive to deliver content, to tell young people what they should do, how they should behave and what they should know and believe. Teachers are passing on with varying degrees of expertise, content and beliefs that are not owned by the students.

We know that we do not learn only with people of our own age, at the same pace as these people and with the same engagement. When we failed to ride our bike at exactly the same time as the child next door, we were not labelled SEN. As adults we seek out experts to question and listen to and learn from – when we want to know, not when they want to teach us. When we want to refresh our memory about the six wives of Henry VIII, we Google it or even use a book.

As Senge and Robinson suggest, is a group of 25-30 youngsters of the same age gathered in one room listening to one adult for 50-60 minutes the best way to develop the innovative and flexible thinkers we need? Of course this is a generalisation; many teachers work hard to make the content and the process of remembering it as interesting as they can. However, almost all of them work within the constraints of short time slots, children switching from Geography to IT to Maths in minutes as well as juggling the demands of the National Curriculum, league tables, Ofsted, targets, etc. How far away is this from learning? How far away from allowing our children to find and develop their creativity, to think, to define their moral code and learn to collaborate with others? So much time and ingenuity, not to mention money paid to the hints and tips industry, is being spent on trying to make the system more palatable to children. Yet tinkering is pointless: transformation is demanded.

Chris Watkins has for many years used the 'appreciative inquiry' (Watkins, 2007, p. 3) approach with teachers to come to some agreed ideas about promoting effective learning. He identifies an effective learner as someone who:

- is active and strategic
- is skilled in collaboration
- takes responsibility for their learning
- understands her/his learning and plans, monitors and reflects on their learning. (Watkins, 2007, p. 19)

Traditional classrooms and traditional school structures do not make any of this easy. More often than not, they restrict students to being recipients of

information. Unsurprisingly, when some innovation occurs like the Citizenship idea, schools and students struggle to respond. After all, when a young person has been successfully trained to regurgitate only what they need to pass an exam and has received society's message that how they perform in those exams will determine their future success and happiness, they give short shrift to demands that they tackle the big question of what a citizen is – especially when there is no exam grade at the end of it.

The twenty-first century demands that we all can think, be creative, collaborate and be flexible. We have to be learners. We are faced with new learning demands all the time, from using the internet to conduct business and manage information to understanding how the food we purchase can affect our health. Are our schools turning out happy, effective learners who are flourishing and leading the way into the future? The government's own NEET (not in education, employment or training) figures suggest not. Almost a million young people were not buying into the system in the summer of 2011 (DfE, 2011).

As we have seen, Ken Robinson is eloquent in his advocacy of the need to transform the school system, to encourage creativity and to look again at some of the sacred cows of our education system: hierarchy of subjects, the drive to pass on content, a refusal to let young people find their element and so leave school feeling failures and inadequate; can society really afford this collateral damage? Our school system, having failed to address the tension between the fact that it was founded on a presumption of elitism, has moved towards pushing as many youngsters as possible through examinations they don't want in order to appear not to be failing so many but refusing to re-evaluate old hierarchies. Instead they have just devalued the examination system to make it appear more equitable, thereby doing great disservice to so many young people. This is not learning.

Neither can learning be built on the belief that anyone's intelligence is fixed. Carol Dweck's own research (2006) and her analysis of other similar research shows us how damaging fixed mindsets are. Her work confirms Senge's observation that the schools system defines 'smart kids and dumb kids' to both their detriments. This belief that you are given a certain amount of intelligence, and you cannot grow from there, limits people's lives. Schools which insist on labelling learners 'bright' are unwittingly damaging life chances too. All of us can improve through effort and application. Daniel Coyle in his book *Talent Code* (2010) gives us a clear account of how success is linked to hard work; the 'it's funny, the harder I work, the luckier I get' position of Samuel Goldwyn. It is such a powerful message that schools must get over to young people by praising effort and not being 'bright'. Such labels are reinforced through setting, examination tiers and pretending that all people make uniform progress in year groups.

Learning takes place when schools relax and share the responsibility with their students. It is co-constructed and avoids subject boxes. It is not limited by levels or examination tiers; it allows for all learners to achieve beyond accepted boundaries. It does not start from a need to pass a test, exam or assessment but

creates learners who are effective and so can take these in their stride, not seeing them as the be all and end all of school life.

Identifying What Effective Schools Need to Do (and Avoid Doing) if They are to Better Serve the Young People of the Twenty-first Century

'Creativity is National Income'
(Joseph Beuys, The New School for Social Research, York, as quoted in the National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education report May 1999)

Perhaps a first step would be to examine society's attitude to school and schooling. There is a cultural perception that going to school is a necessary evil. This negative attitude is apparent in our culture, from Dickens to *Waterloo Road*. Indeed for many, school was an unpleasant experience, for others a pointless one. It is after all a system which has never resolved the problem of what to do with those young people it has to fail in order to create a group of the successful few. Yet parents continue to be happy to send their children to these places for six or seven hours a day, often only too aware that they may well be miserable and very probably bored for most of this time. This is a fascinating research question. Parents always want their children to be happy; they would do anything for them but they are willing to collude in this, presumably because they think it will do no harm and is vital to 'being successful'. Of course, many young people survive the experience happily but the view of the 'whining schoolboy … creeping like a snail unwillingly to school' pervades our thinking. What a difference it could make if we embraced going to school as a wonderfully positive and liberating experience.

And for teachers too, which is not as fanciful and indulgent a notion as it first appears: it is actually about creating the institutional conditions for both increased efficiency and capacity for improvement in schools. Dr William Edwards Deming, the American statistician who became the principal engineer of perhaps the most successful transformations of the twentieth century: the rise of Japanese industry, including such giants as Toyota, after World War 2, was very aware of the critical importance of what he referred to as 'Joy in Work'. At a seminar in London in July 1988 he talked about 'the aim of management, management's job, is to enable everybody to enjoy his work' (Neave, 1990, p. 35) and repeatedly Deming made it clear that a workplace should be free from fear. One fear pervasive in schools is that of being constantly inspected either by Ofsted or by a management which has learned to emulate Inspector behaviours. This is not a plea for leaving teachers alone as autonomous operators within their classrooms. Far from it. However, there is a world of difference between having a Critical Parent in your classroom and a Critical Friend engaging in a reciprocal discourse about improvement. Indeed, Deming himself was quite clear about this, Number 3 of his famous 14 Points being to

'Cease Dependence on Mass Inspection' (Walton, 1996, p. 34). Deming argued that you can't inspect quality into a product or service. You have to develop systems which will constantly improve what you do. So energy and resources spent developing, for example, the conditions for team-teaching in schools, will improve the quality of provision for the learner far more than the same investment in sustaining a system of regular inspection by line-managers.

Freed from the stultifying effects of being inspected into a set of narrow and defensively safe practices, teachers then have the space to take responsibility for their own development as professionals, to constantly research new and better ways of promoting learning. And Deming's fourth point, 'Institute Training', links directly to this imperative for teachers to be active learners themselves. Deming was clear that best efforts are not good enough. Real quality and constant improvement need training – for everyone. New skills and knowledge are required to keep up and improve; this principle of constant training is also closely linked to Deming's views on 'profound knowledge'. Without theory we have nothing against which to judge what we do. To find and develop our theoretical knowledge of learning and its processes takes regular reading and research, as well as regular discussion and thinking.

If the leadership of our schools is rooted in a philosophy like Deming's of trust, desire for excellence and profound knowledge, our teachers can flourish and help to develop young people into effective learners. In order to do this, teachers must look again at their role, acquire the skills and dispositions of an effective learner themselves and be prepared to fight the 'tyranny of common sense.' So what should learning in a twenty-first-century school look like?

Learning spaces will be multipurpose, with areas for collaboration and conversation, open access to resources including IT and tables for making things and writing: indeed desks can be re-used for this purpose, positioned according to need rather than in rows. However, learning will be taking place all around and outside the school. Students will be making decisions about where they need to be, what resources they need and who they need to speak to. Their learning tasks will have been negotiated with their teachers but they will seek expert inputs from the most appropriate person available. This space will be busy and purposeful with individuals coming and going as they need to. There will be a teacher or teachers, but it may not be easy to spot them at first. Indeed there may well be a number of adults in the room giving seminars, tutorials or offering critique. Each student will have a clear idea of what they have to achieve and they will be working towards a real outcome: a finished product for scrutiny by an expert, an exhibition for a real audience, a piece to be published. These tasks will not be meaningless and sterile, to be lost on pieces of paper in the bottom of bags, unvalued and never looked at again.

Students in this classroom will be used to receiving critique and skilled in using it. They can critique the work of their peers and demand it themselves. They would be irritated by any expectation that they should move off to start another 'subject' after 50 minutes or so; they expect to spend half or full days on their project or enquiry which will allow them to explore ideas and concepts

as thoroughly as they can. What they produce they know has to be excellent; it is not enough to finish, it must be finished to a standard that they feel proud of and ensures that the product will be kept and displayed. Most importantly, these students can discuss their learning development with anyone who cares to listen.

And the teachers? They are practising new skills. No longer the founts of all knowledge, they are able to model the behaviour of the effective learner as well as challenging the students to dig deep and enjoy the experience of tackling difficult, authentic tasks. They are adept at holding conversations about learning at the right time as well as encouraging risk-taking. They are Mentor, Coach, Scrutineer and Provoker, ceaselessly and deftly working to promote self-efficacy, pride in work and intellectual prowess in learners. The teacher has never stopped questioning and reflecting on their role and responsibilities; they are not clones; they have used their reading, reflections and experience to become the teacher they believe they need to be to serve our young people well in the twenty-first century.

Far-fetched? Not really. Think about the best learning you ever participated in either as a student or a professional, perhaps during that day the school timetable was suspended to allow for a special learning event or on that school or college residential you went on. It is there; schools have done it. Let us not ignore the moral imperative to do the right thing by our children.

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High School in Rochdale and the Innovation Unit has recently named it in a list of 10 schools for the twenty first century; it is the only UK school listed.
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