
Classrooms as Sites of Curriculum Delivery or Meaning-making: whose knowledge counts?

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ABSTRACT Whereas the previous government, regarding education primarily as a means to an end, showed little interest in questions of curriculum content, Gove's counter-revolution involves the enforcement of a deeply authoritarian politics of knowledge. An adequate response to such cultural and curricular conservatism needs to expose the falsity of Gove's claims to rigour, but also to promote an alternative model of curriculum and pedagogy. The salient features of such an alternative are to be found both in the history of progressive education and also in aspects of current practice – aspects that are ignored or marginalised in the dominant discourses of education.

Addressing the Labour Party Conference in 1995, Tony Blair declared: 'Education is the best economic policy there is for a modern country' (Blair, 1995). He went on to announce that the 'knowledge race' had begun: 'The more you learn, the more you earn. It is your way to do well out of life – your route to jobs, to growth, to the combination of technology and know-how that will transform our lives.' The specific claims about Britain's place in the white heat of information technology ring hollow now (his suggestion that metal fatigue on an oil rig in the Gulf of Mexico might be diagnosed from an office in Aberdeen is particularly unfortunate in the aftermath of the Deepwater Horizon disaster). More than this, what is starkly revealed is the woeful absence of a coherent economic policy. If, as Basil Bernstein (1970) observed, education cannot compensate for society, it certainly cannot substitute for an economic policy. The failure to acknowledge this continued to blight policy throughout the years of New Labour, most damagingly in its encouragement to blame the victims: if learning leads so smoothly to earning, then it follows that those who fail to earn are individually responsible for this consequence of a prior failure to learn.

This emphasis on the individual, responsible for their own destiny, is there in Blair's 1995 speech in its insistence on standards rather than structures. It informed later interventions, such as his Fabian society pamphlet (Blair, 2002) and his speech at the opening of the Bexley Business Academy (Blair, 2003). The only values involved are the values of the marketplace: learning is prized because it leads to earning – it is because of its economic value that education becomes a valuable commodity. The effect of the standards agenda is thus to focus attention on the production figures: it is the results of high-stakes testing regimes that tell us that education is working. In this regime, National Curriculum levels and GCSE grades are not to be seen as proxy indicators of learning but as things in and of themselves. And the individual child becomes equally strongly identified with these reified assessments, so that each becomes their level.

In this regime of individualised accountability, there is no space to ask what a GCSE grade or a National Curriculum level might mean. Such meanings are preordained, built into the system. At different stages, a level 4 or a GCSE grade C means that a child is literate or numerate, a failure to attain a level 4 or a grade C signals illiteracy or innumeracy. Education, recast as economic policy, thus tends to lose any intrinsic meaning. What matters is the acquisition of skills that will (it is alleged) be useful later, in the realm of economic activity. In this technical rationalist system, it is not only the learners who are recast as units of production; the teachers, too, become defined by their success in reaching or exceeding the production targets. The good teacher is the effective teacher, and effectiveness is both measurable and regularly measured. Results don't just matter; they confer meaning.

Crash

In the boom years, the claims made for such a system appeared tenable, more or less. There were casualties – schools named and shamed for their failure to meet the production targets, individual teachers who proved resistant to the one true faith of the National Literacy Strategy, learners who couldn't or wouldn't be co-opted, standardised, 'levelled' (and what an interestingly informative verb that is). But the system seemed to be delivering its promises: standards were rising, as was demonstrated by the year-on-year increases in GCSE and A-level passes and so on. And for most young people, at any rate, there seemed to be some truth in the claim that keeping one's head down, getting the grades and moving on to the next stage would lead to something better – to more qualifications, to places in an expanding university sector, and hence, eventually, to better(-paid) jobs. Of course, it was never as simple as this would suggest. Structural exclusions and inequalities didn't vanish; on the contrary, they became more entrenched, more deeply etched into every aspect of both education and wealth throughout the period of New Labour (Hills et al, 2010). But growth, however insubstantial, no matter how insecurely rooted in genuine productivity, how

disconnected from any meaningful economic development, masked these realities.

New Labour's approach to education was both instrumental and broadly inclusive. Though there were significant changes in emphasis in the two versions of the National Curriculum (1999 and 2007) introduced during its years in office, there was little inclination to question the framework that had been inherited from the previous Conservative administration. From Blair, in particular, came the message that what mattered was the use to which knowledge might be put in the world. That, along with New Labour's intensely relaxed attitude to the rich, was what informed the desire to open up schooling to the benign, modernising influence of the private sector, a desire made manifest in the first tranche of city academies, sponsored by captains of industry (Ball, 2007, Beckett, 2007, Yandell, 2009).

Then came the crash. The lack of an economic policy was laid bare, at the same time that the technical-rationalist model of education was exposed as a hollow sham. After 2008, the claim that learning led to earning wouldn't butter any parsnips. And, since 2010, we have been confronted with a very different politics of education, one better suited to an age of austerity (Allen & Ainley, 2013). In place of expansion, we have rationing. That is the effect of the ending of the education maintenance allowance (EMA), the tripling of university fees and the attack on 'grade inflation'. What we have also had since 2010 is a very different politics of knowledge, which, like the rationing of educational opportunities, has been justified on grounds of 'rigour'. For Michael Gove, knowledge matters in and of itself, not merely as a means to an end. What Gove has done, as a direct riposte to New Labour, is to reinsert the claim that knowledge is intrinsically valuable, and that some forms of knowledge – some contents, as it were – are intrinsically more valuable than others. This is an argument both about disciplinary knowledge (which school subjects are valuable and which are not) and about cultural value (which cultural forms, as well as which individual musicians, artists or writers, which artefacts and which texts, are worth attending to). And, generally speaking, for Michael Gove, old is good.

Bad Faith and Knowledge Transfer

To describe this as an argument is, however, somewhat misleading. While Gove has been making his case, loudly and repeatedly, there has been little evidence of sustained contestation of his views. Gove's position is, unsurprisingly, one of extreme conservatism, unashamedly elitist, Eurocentric and backward-looking. Thus, theatre and opera are superior to film, Wagner is better than the Arctic Monkeys, English and maths are rigorous while media studies is not (see e.g. Gove, 2011, 2012). And so on. Knowledge, like culture, is something to be preserved, transmitted from generation to generation, not something to be made. Inextricably connected to this view of knowledge is an equally conservative view of teaching, of pedagogy. If knowledge is to be handed

down, authority lies with the teacher, to the extent that it is the teacher who possesses the knowledge (Gove, 2013). The learner then needs to be respectful of the teacher as the temporary repository of (valorised) knowledge. In this model of curriculum and pedagogy, everyone should know their place – and in this model, pedagogy becomes a very simple matter of knowledge transfer (Yandell, 2013).

Gove's position can only be maintained through a double act of bad faith. His cultural and pedagogic conservatism involves both a desperate nostalgia for a past that never was and a deliberate misrepresentation of the history of progressive education. The myth of the grammar school as an engine of social mobility, providing working-class children with access to both knowledge and the credentials that would enable them to transcend their humble origins, is just that: a myth, albeit an enduringly powerful one. Even in the heyday of grammar schools in the 1950s, most of the children of semi-skilled and unskilled workers who managed to get into them left with fewer than three O-level passes, while only about five per cent of the children of unskilled workers who made it to grammar school emerged with two A levels (Maclure, 1969, p. 237). What had an effect on education and on social structure in the postwar period was the massive expansion of white-collar jobs; it was this economic growth that provided the impetus for the exponential rise in university places during the same period. Given these facts, it is worth considering why the grammar school narrative has retained such extraordinary influence. I would suggest that part of the explanation for this is that it sits within a deeply embedded way of conceptualising the individual as central to learning and development (see Benn, 2011; Yandell, 2012).

Gove's nostalgia is not, though, simply for the grammar school system; it is also for a golden age when knowledge was authoritative, its claims to objective truth unsullied by all that nasty modern relativism. That is why the latest version of the National Curriculum, the one that bears Gove's imprint, echoes Matthew Arnold, Victorian school inspector and poet, in declaring that its aim is to introduce the young to 'the best that has been thought and said' (DfE, 2013, p. 5). There's a vicious circularity about this, isn't there? Who decides on the best? Meanwhile, Gove constructs caricatured versions of progressivism that he can then counterpose to his own valiant defence of rigour (Gove, 2013).

An Alternative Politics of Knowledge

So how should we respond to Gove's version of knowledge? I would like to suggest that there are two distinct aspects to the development of an adequate alternative position. The first (and more straightforward) is to make the case that the curriculum for which Gove is responsible and for which he has been the chief propagandist is woefully inadequate as an outline of learners' entitlement in the twenty-first century. Any curriculum involves processes of selection, of inclusion and exclusion. Gove's curriculum borrows from Hirschian

notions of 'core knowledge' (Hirsch, 1987) but is founded on nothing more substantial than an attempt to recreate a grammar/public school curriculum from his own childhood (Barker, 2013). History is reduced to one damn thing after another – as if engagement in the discipline of historical inquiry involved nothing more complex than a chronological narrative. English becomes reconfigured as canonical literature, learning poems by heart and public speaking; any attempt to engage with the reality of a culturally plural population is marginalised, while there is a steadfast refusal to recognise either the existence of new, web-based literacies or the involvement of young people, through the availability of new media technologies, in ever more sophisticated acts of cultural production. This is, truly, an exclusive curriculum, not only because it is designed to exclude the mass of young people, their lives and experiences, but also because it represents an escape from modernity, an exclusion of contemporary, lived reality.

The second aspect of a response to Gove is to propose an alternative politics of knowledge, and hence an alternative, principled approach to curriculum and pedagogy. This alternative cannot be a retreat into the failed promises of New Labour instrumentalism, the blind alley of schooling for non-existent jobs and the chimera of social mobility. In what follows I want to sketch out some salient features of what such an alternative might look like.

It is worth saying something about where this alternative might be derived from. There is much to be learnt from what might be characterised as the progressive tradition in education – the same tradition that Gove has been so keen to deride. (Indeed, the reason that he has attacked progressivism with such vehemence is that it continues to represent a threat to the authoritarian counter-revolution that he seeks to accomplish.) Thus, for example, Richard Pring has made productive use of Dewey's emphasis on the importance of experience – the practical experience of the learner – in arguing against the current treatment of propositional knowledge (knowing that) as superior to, and entirely separate from, practical knowledge (knowing how). Pring notes that it is often the case that 'practical knowledge is logically and temporarily prior to propositional knowledge' (Pring, 2013, p. 72). This insight has direct consequences for both curriculum and pedagogy. As Pring goes on to suggest, it points to the importance of those subjects or areas of the curriculum that most conspicuously provide opportunities for learning by doing – those areas that have been most marginalised by Gove's curricular interventions (from the EBacc to the latest GCSE proposals). More than this, though, the Deweyan emphasis on experience as central to learning calls into question Gove's – and Hirsch's – facile acceptance of a transmission model of teaching, as if all that were involved in educational processes was the inculcation, through rote learning, of a series of facts.

Likewise, in developing the case for a democratic alternative to current ways of organising schooling, Fielding and Moss (2011) draw on historic examples, from Reggio Emilia to St George-in-the-East School, to show how school students can be – have been – full participants in the construction (and

contestation) of curricula, in discussions with teachers about what was to be learnt and how such learning might best be achieved. What Fielding and Moss present is a direct counter to the accountability regimes under which we all now toil: in place of the false accounting of high-stakes test scores and Ofsted inspections, what they offer is a glimpse of the possibilities of real, direct accountability, in the dialogic relationship of teachers with students and with the communities which the schools serve.

In addition to the history of progressive education, there is another, and possibly even more generative, source of ideas about an alternative to the current dispensation, and it is what is happening now, within mainstream schooling. And, if part of the task that confronts us is to recuperate the history of progressivism, another part is to render visible those practices and aspects of practice which the dominant discourses of education policy have rendered invisible.

Where Work Gets Done

Gove's authoritarian, transmission model of knowledge isn't just a problem because it is exclusive and undemocratic – it's a problem because it's nonsense. This is not how learning happens, this is not how knowledge is acquired. As Vygotsky noted eighty years ago, 'No less than experimental research, pedagogical experience demonstrates that direct instruction in concepts is impossible. It is pedagogically fruitless. The teacher who attempts to use this approach achieves nothing but a mindless learning of words, an empty verbalism' (Vygotsky, 1934/1987, p. 170). If in today's classrooms, under the pressure of high-stakes testing and the internalisation of trivialising regimes of accountability, there is a fair amount of 'empty verbalism', there is also a great deal else happening that is much worthier of attention. Classrooms remain extraordinarily rich sites of cultural production. The work that teachers do is much more complex than the official script of transmission of knowledge might suggest. And the work that pupils do is seldom if ever merely the 'mindless learning of words'. Even in unfavourable circumstances, pupils are engaged together in complex acts of meaning-making.

I want to emphasise that these processes should be seen as work. To conceptualise pupils as meaning-*makers* is to suggest that what is going on in such activity is a form of work. Classrooms are not mere sorting-houses, ensuring the appropriate reproduction of class difference (even if that is one of the functions that schooling fulfils). Nor, despite the instrumentalism of Tony Blair with which I began this article, are they merely places where children and young people are prepared for adult life, fitted up with the right skills to thrive in the new (now rather old and discredited) knowledge economy. No, classrooms are places where work gets done, where transformations happen. What gets transformed is both the learners and knowledge itself. So, in an English classroom, *Romeo and Juliet* becomes a new text with every fresh reading (interpretation) of it, and every class that reads it is transformed in the process.

And every time a history class explores the Industrial Revolution, or the Crimean War, or the Peasants' Revolt, new history is being constructed.

This perspective pays attention to the processes that are evident in classrooms, processes that are both mundane and extraordinary. And, from this perspective, the Hirschian fetish of knowledge as something that exists in hermetically sealed boxes, like Gove's notion of the curriculum as the transmission of the 'best that has been thought and said', is hopelessly inadequate – and downright misleading. As the Bullock Report recognised nearly forty years ago, 'It is a confusion of everyday thought that we tend to regard "knowledge" as something that exists independently of someone who knows. "What is known" must in fact be brought to life afresh within every "knower" by his own efforts' (DES, 1975, p. 50).

But the Bullock Report's emphasis here on the individual learner is also somewhat misleading – or at least only provides part of the picture. These efforts are accomplished in the social, in the interactions among learners and teachers and in their interactions with the cultural resources at their disposal. Classrooms are places that reveal most clearly the bankruptcy of what Ilyenkov (1960/2008, p. 40) has mockingly described as the 'Robinson Crusoe model of epistemology' – the still largely unchallenged theory of knowledge that locates learning simply in the brains of individuals as they interact with their environments. If, on the other hand, learning is accomplished primarily in the social, in the interactions of people as they are located in culture and history, then the notion that one could get an accurate picture of that learning by subjecting individual subjects to traditional end-of-course examinations, however 'rigorous' Gove wants to make them, is itself little short of absurd.

And so, in summary, what I want to offer is an alternative vision of schooling as a site of knowledge construction. This vision isn't a castle in the air but rather is built on the reality of what already happens, day by day, in classrooms, but is neglected, almost invisible, because it does not fit into dominant discourses of accountability and assessment.

- It is a vision that focuses on learning rather than knowledge, because learning encourages us to remain attentive to the process, to the becoming that is the very stuff of classroom experience.
- It is a vision that acknowledges the messiness, the unpredictability and the elusiveness of learning.
- It is a vision that encompasses the irreducibly social nature of learning, its dialogic quality. This dialogue is often uncomfortable. It involves competing interests and understandings, competing voices – the students' and the teachers'.
- It is a vision that recognises the situatedness of all learning, the human agency that is centrally implicated in all knowledge.
- It is a vision that resolutely resists the reductiveness of instrumental versions of schooling. Education is a right, not a privilege – but it is also never merely a means to an end: it is an end in itself, a mark of what it is to be human, and to be valued as a full member of human society.

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