
Ofsted: little boxes made of ticky-tacky

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ABSTRACT This article looks at serious issues that confront Ofsted and the ethics at its heart. What effect does the spectre of Ofsted have on life in schools? Is it possible that Ofsted infiltrates to such an extent that the day-to-day life of a school could be geared towards, and focused uniquely on, 'what Ofsted wants'? In this article the author argues that this Ofsted 'culture' is leading to increasing pressure for schools to conform. Teachers are expected to stick to a prescribed pattern: there is a 'correct' way of doing things. It is desirable for everyone be similar to everyone else. It is suggested that Ofsted is changing – but will it be too little, too late?

There is a song that my dad used to sing to me, the lyrics of which went something like this:

Little boxes on the hillside, little boxes made of ticky-tacky. Little boxes on the hillside and they all look just the same ...

I enjoyed this song as a child, but in more recent years, I have found myself humming it to myself quite often in a symbolic, secretive way.

Those lyrics have resonance that I could never have imagined or understood as a child; much like another of my favourite childhood songs, Joni Mitchell's 'Big Yellow Taxi', the playful, colour-referenced lyrics obscured the grey clouds of true meaning.

'Little boxes', I now know, is a reference to cheaply built, post-war United States housing stock. Comprised mostly of plywood and plasterboard, they may have been cheaply built, but they looked just fine. Their lack of material substance was well-concealed, a bit like a repertory theatre play set. They sold the dream but kept their lack of substance hidden behind colourful, seductive exteriors.

But what, may you ask, has this got to do with education? In recent years the parallels, particularly in reference to the 'boxes' and 'all being the same' themes, seemed uncannily applicable to what has been happening in the world of education, and certainly here in England.

Over the years something unfortunate has been happening in schools. An insidious, creeping trend like a blanket of fog slowly creeping ashore from the ocean. A trend so sinisterly innocuous that we teachers allowed it become absorbed and accepted almost without question. In fact, some actually even view it as a positive thing: conformity. Or perhaps orthodoxy, pernicious as it is. George Orwell noted in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*: 'Orthodoxy means not thinking – not needing to think. Orthodoxy is unconsciousness.' This is the antithesis of good teaching practice. No class, no collection of students is the same, so how can a uniform pedagogic strategy fit satisfactorily into every teacher's daily delivery?

Unfortunately, in the case of teachers, we really must conform. No one wants, or expects us to be, much different from the teacher next door, or even the teacher in the next county. A box-ticking accountability structure has grown up around this goal which is now so huge and unwieldy that it must surely topple at some point? I have several theories as to *why* this has happened, but there is no hyperbole at all in categorically stating that it *has* happened.

This tendency to insist on conformity manifests itself in many areas, but their shape is always square: and I think Ofsted is to blame.

On my own blog [1] some months ago I wrote about a favourite and much-loved and admired teacher from my first year at secondary school. Mr Graham was an excellent teacher, a gifted teacher. He had the invisible ability to instil self-belief in his pupils, while at the same time fostering a love of learning. His lessons were a higgledy-piggledy hotch-potch of questions, discussion, writing and teacher talk – apparently sticking to no pre-planned ideas or scheme. But we all did well in those classes. Mr Graham was the very antithesis of a box-ticking culture. You couldn't have put him in a box if you'd tried; and he was much respected, as much because of his idiosyncrasies as in spite of them. In today's culture, I surmised, he wouldn't have ticked many boxes either. He'd have almost certainly been branded as 'requiring improvement' or 'inadequate' simply because of this modern preference for style over substance.

In order to check that we are all conforming to our modern ideal, or meeting a 'set' standard, teachers are usually subject to their school's own regular internal scrutiny, in addition to the spectre of actual Ofsted inspections. This monitoring of teachers comes in a variety of unwelcome forms. The list often includes such things as 'book scrutinies', which ensure that your marking is conforming to everyone else's, and 'environment scrutinies', which are similar, but this time purport to ensure that displays conform. Then there are 'learning walks', which are usually something like mini-observations with a whole variety of boxes to be ticked.

I return to Orwell: 'For, after all, how do we know that two and two make four? Or that the force of gravity works? Or that the past is unchangeable? If both the past and the external world exist only in the mind, and if the mind itself is controllable – what then?' How, indeed, do we know that Ofsted works? How do we know that present teaching methods improve

on past ones? How do we know that the demands on teachers and the oppressive observations imposed and impressed upon us by Ofsted are right? No. I thought not.

Lesson observations are the big bad boss of all scrutinies, and are now a major source of stress, dread and discomfort for many teachers. A typical lesson observation will take the form of one member of the senior leadership team, or sometimes two, sitting in a class with a criteria checklist. Teachers are then graded on a 1 ('outstanding') to 4 ('inadequate') scale based on how many boxes they tick successfully. Unfortunately, at least in my personal experience, the requirements of this checklist are so bewildering as to render it almost impossible to fulfil all of the requirements.

What all of these 'scrutinies' have in common is tick-lists. The more boxes you tick, the more successful you are perceived as being. So, for example, if every teacher has their interactive whiteboard switched on, if they have the pupils working in groups, if there isn't too much teacher talk, and if the lessons follow a set '3-part' format of starter, development and plenary session, then this is all to the good. This all comes under the umbrella of 'School Quality Control' – very little screams conformity more than the factory-production-line term 'quality control'.

In fact – and I must stress that this also applies to my very recent experience – the more 'entertaining' a lesson is, the more favourably it is viewed. I often refer to these lessons as 'bells and whistles lessons'. A straight teacher-led grammar lesson would never cut it. I'd hardly be able to tick a single box that way. Instead, I, and many teachers, feel a bizarre obligation to put on some kind of a show when being observed. This could include the following: card sorts, interactive work, group work, use of new technologies, a variety of tasks and limited use of 'teacher talk' or 'teacher-led' activities.

All this despite much recent evidence strongly disputing whether pupils actually learn better this way. Professor Robert Coe, Director of Durham University's Centre for Evaluation and Monitoring, has somewhat led the way in all this. His research highlights some very interesting findings around the validity (or otherwise) of lesson observations. The following passage is from a BBC news report (13 September 2013): Professor Coe suggested that ratings given to lessons by observers could be 'influenced by spurious confounds'. These included the charisma and confidence of the teacher, the subject matter being taught, students' behaviour in the classroom'. Professor Coe noted the following:

If you sit in a classroom, everyone thinks they can judge how good the lesson is – but can you really? Quite a lot of research says that you can't.

He went as far as to say that schools inspectors are basing their verdicts on evaluation methods which may be completely unreliable.

Meanwhile, in the very teeth of all this, many teachers have been trying their very best to continue as normal. Many knowing that their techniques were different to the practitioner next door, yet both equally worthy. Only when being watched did the panic of conformity and the need for sameness and orthodoxy occur. 'What questions will you ask?' and, 'how will you prove learning is happening?' Such questions are passed on through classrooms like dominoes or Chinese whispers, 'I hear they particularly like to see this...' 'Psst! Don't forget to establish that they know nothing to begin with... it's easy to show progress then!

Whether it is all true or not, or whether some of what Ofsted is said to be looking for is nothing more than Chinese whispers and rumour, no matter. The fact remains that the blame for much of this is to be laid squarely at its feet. Reading historic (and even some more recent!) reports of Ofsted inspections, it is clear that Ofsted did have a preference for certain styles of teaching and lesson structures. Inevitably, it was these methods that teachers were then encouraged to adopt. An Ofsted orthodoxy has prevailed. This may well have suited some teachers, but many more – myself included – found it nigh-on impossible to completely alter a trusted and successful way of doing things. Because a teacher may choose not to deliver their lesson in a particular style, or weren't prepared to adopt a certain lesson structure, they could be marked down, or deemed to be 'inadequate'. Thus the careers of many highly skilled teachers were put in very real jeopardy.

Then, in summer 2012, something astonishing happened. It looked like things had finally begun to change when Sir Michael Wilshaw, Chief Inspector of Schools, said:

Ofsted should be wary of trying to prescribe a particular style of teaching, whether it be a three-part lesson, an insistence that there should be a balance between teacher-led activities and independent learning, or that the lesson should start with aims and objectives with a plenary at the end. (Sir Michael Wilshaw, Chief Inspector of Schools, speech to RSA, summer 2012)[2]

All of this was reinforced more recently by Michael Cladingbowl, National Director, Schools, who cited the following anecdote, obviously in the hope of further stressing and emphasising Ofsted's new position on the matter:

I was speaking to a colleague today, one of Her Majesty's Inspectors. He reminded me it is all about outcomes and that it does work both ways. In a classroom he was in recently, a teacher produced, literally, an all-singing, all-dancing lesson. There was music, comedy, costumes, games, 'thinking hats', and all with clear objectives on the whiteboard. He recorded a teaching quality grade of inadequate. Not because of the 'performance' on the day but because students' graffiti-strewn books hadn't been marked for six months and work was shoddy or incomplete. In contrast, he graded teaching as outstanding in a classroom where students sat reading in silence

because of the exceptional quality of students' work and the teacher's marking in exercise books. He told both teachers what his conclusions were. (Michael Cladingbowl, National Director, Schools, 'Why Do Ofsted Inspectors Observe Individual Lessons and How Do They Evaluate Teaching in Schools?')[3]

With all the latest guidelines and statements, it looks like Ofsted is now back-peddling furiously. But it could be too little, too late. For many, the damage is now done.

Personally, I'm standing on a precipice watching myself falling. There is literally nothing I can do. I argue, send emails, meet with the bosses and wave the new guidelines about. Still the old ways prevail. For a minnow like me to suggest to my school's senior leadership team that they should now disregard all they've been told before is a bit like trying to instruct a devout religious convert to completely abandon their faith.

In order to be able to judge all schools in the country equally, Ofsted needed to encourage systems of conformity. This is the point at which conformity became the desirable entity. The holy grail. Any vast organisation needs this. After all, it would be very confusing if every branch of McDonald's adopted its own menu, layout, uniform and logo. But is this really how teachers and schools want to be judged? Surely the results will out, ultimately? It is how well the pupils succeed that matters. Currently we seem to have embraced a system, albeit unwittingly, which makes our inspectors' lives simpler. This formulaic practice, I'm utterly convinced, exists only for that purpose. It's like we've been sleepwalking, unquestioningly, into membership of a religious cult, or something akin.

The reality of life is, I think, that no one really wants to be put in a box. We encourage behavioural conformity in pupils, but make provision for their academic differences and value their idiosyncrasies in personality. For way too long now, teachers and schools have been pushed into a particular mould. The wind of change is in the air now, I think. It seems that Ofsted is beginning to realise that its bluff has been called. Much like a spouse breaking free of a controlling relationship, no amount of 'I didn't mean to make you feel that way' and 'I'll change, give me another chance' will really alter the way that teachers feel now.

Notes

- [1] See <http://cazzypotsblog.wordpress.com/>
- [2] <http://www.thersa.org/fellowship/journal/archive/summer-2012/features/the-good-teacher>
- [3] <http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/filedownloading/?file=documents/inspection-forms-and-guides/w/Why%20do%20Ofsted%20inspectors%20observe%20individual%20>

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lessons%20and%20how%20do%20they%20evaluate%20teaching%20in%20schools.doc&refer=0

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