FORUM
Volume 59, Number 1, 2017
www.wwwords.co.uk/FORUM
http://dx.doi.org/10.15730/forum.2017.59.1.103

An Article; a Speech; an Address: three texts

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This Special Issue, 'For Michael Armstrong', closes with Michael's own words from across more than three decades of his long involvement with the journal. A collection of all Michael's articles for *FORUM* is to be published.

More Time for Teacher Training

from FORUM*, volume 5, number 3 (1963), pp. 87-88*

At the outset of his career in the classroom, Michael Armstrong contributed to a FORUM *debate about initial teacher education.*

There is a familiar conflict, in the training of teachers, between understanding and experience. No one can teach effectively without some understanding of what he is trying to do; but no one can understand what teaching is without some experience of it. At the post-graduate department of education where I was trained, many students felt that what they needed was primarily to gain experience, chiefly through teaching practice. But for myself, teaching practice was the least satisfying part of the course. Throughout it I was oppressed by my lack of understanding. I had seen very little teaching before I began to teach. One morning a week during the first term we watched teachers in a secondary modern school and for a week and a half at the start of the second term I observed the classes that I was to take over for the rest of the term. After that I taught on my own, watching other teachers' lessons only occasionally and unsystematically.

Association with the Schools

The help, advice and criticism of the teachers at the school and of my tutor at the department were valuable, but they were not, in themselves, enough. I

needed to know more about how an experienced and successful teacher set about his job. I would have liked to have spent half a term, preferably a whole term, in a school where the methods propounded and discussed in the department were practised, where I could have watched one or two good teachers closely and frequently and begun my own teaching as their assistant. At present it is almost impossible, both during and after training, to acquire any systematic insight into the work of the good teacher. Even when a teacher writes about his own work one is usually acutely conscious of what is left unsaid. If my own experience is at all representative then it is clear that departments of education should be in a much closer association with individual schools, schools which should be staffed and equipped to specialise in the training of teachers.

Theory and Practice

But if the departments should incorporate schools, the schools should be far more attentive to the departments. It is still a commonplace in a staff room to hear education departments scoffed at for their 'theorising', their irrelevance to teaching experience, as if experience were sufficient in itself. Yet unless it is rooted in the study of education, experience is fruitless. Every teacher needs to have some understanding of the nature of children, of the society which forms their environment, of the aims and purposes of education, and no amount of experience can guarantee such understanding. The study of education is a necessary and necessarily large part of a teacher's training. It is, however, so broad and ramifying a study that it cannot be adequately fitted into a one-year course. A choice has to be made of what to sacrifice, the detailed insights or the overall picture. At my own department it was the overall picture which suffered and I am certain that the choice was the right one. We were given a few general lectures on the psychological and sociological background, on the history and philosophy of education, but the most interesting and important work was done in seminars devoted to specific issues, such as delinquency, the philosophy of 'progressive education', psychometrics. It was in these small groups that I found my ideas about education changing and reforming, and the knowledge and understanding I derived from them have coloured all my subsequent thinking. Moreover, the lack of any examination gave me the opportunity to read and to write in considerable detail about those aspects of education which most interested or disturbed me. Much of my study was 'theoretical', but, so far from being irrelevant, it has provided me with the only sure criteria I know for evaluating my own work as a teacher and analysing my own mistakes. Nevertheless, I regret that when I left the department I still knew so little, for it has been difficult since to find enough time for further study. Much of the knowledge of psychology and sociology I need, for instance, I am still struggling to acquire. The choice between the detailed insights and the overall picture ought not to be necessary.

More Time Needed

Thus my predominant impression of my own year's training is that it was too short. More time is needed to observe other teachers and to become accustomed to the experience of teaching; more time is needed to think about education. Perhaps the first two years of teaching should be incorporated into a teacher's training, during which years he would divide his time between teaching, observation and study, retaining his connection with a department of education. Or perhaps he should have a year out of school for further training after teaching for two or three years. To both solutions there are objections and it may be that they would only further discourage graduates from entering the profession. But without more time a graduate's training is bound to be relatively superficial; valuable certainly, but valuable enough to make him wish for more.

Popular Education and the National Curriculum

from FORUM*, volume 30, number 3 (1988), pp. 74-76*

Michael delivered a speech at the FORUM *conference UNITE FOR EDUCATION on Saturday 19 March 1988*

Twelve years ago it seemed just possible that popular education in this country might be on the threshold of a major intellectual achievement. The steady, if uneven, growth of comprehensive schools, and the gradual abolition of streaming, first within the junior school and then in at least the earlier years of the comprehensive school, had at last served to focus attention on the central challenge to any genuinely popular education: how, within an admittedly unequal society, to reconstruct the relationship between organised knowledge and naive experience in such a way as to make the various worlds of the mind – those arts and sciences which are expressive of our culture – accessible to all, irrespective of wealth, of class, of ability (that most artificial and arbitrary of concepts). We had begun, that is, to address the fundamental problem of curriculum, which is not so much the question of what subject matter to teach as of how subject matter can be revived and reconstituted and extended so as to make it more diversely appealing to those who learn. Already it seemed legitimate to celebrate the achievement, however incomplete, of our most adventurous primary schools as the beginning of 'a major reorganisation of subject matter into a common and coherent framework' – to cite an essay written in *FORUM* in 1973. We were beginning at that time to discover how secondary education might extend and refine this emerging tradition. But it was not to be. The years between have been years of declining aspiration as government after government has quailed at the financial and social, but above all at the intellectual consequences of carrying through the comprehensive reform. Characteristically it was a Labour government, in 1976, which first gave

official encouragement to reaction, and this at the very moment of intellectual advance. It is, after all, no accident of propaganda that the consultation document on the national curriculum cites Jim Callaghan's Ruskin speech on its second page. For the Education Bill is not so much a radical departure as the codifying of what is already, in many parts of the country, an increasingly common and increasingly narrow practice. And yet, precisely because it CODIFIES a profoundly restrictive and negative practice, the Education Bill threatens the future of popular education to a degree unparalleled in the history of the journal which has called this conference.

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The national curriculum which this Government now seeks to impose on maintained schools depends upon three great fallacies. The first of these is the fallacy of the SUBJECT. There is nothing wrong in thinking of the curriculum, AMONG OTHER WAYS, in terms of subjects – 'a particular department of art or science in which one is instructed or examined' (*Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*). Indeed, by the time they enter school at the age of five many children already show an incipient interest in most of the subjects which appear on the Government's foundation list, as well as in other subjects which the Government has chosen to neglect. Of course the Government's list, as it stands, is more or less arbitrary – but then what isn't in this Bill – and wholly unargued. Why, for example, should science be closer to the heart of the primary school curriculum than art – except on the most crassly utilitarian grounds? Why should the moral sciences – ethics, civics, philosophy – be less fundamental than the physical sciences – unless it be that the latter might appear to be less politically sensitive? Why should history and geography be preferred to Social Studies – other than for reasons of political prejudice? Or art and music to drama and dance? Why is there no mention of craft – or is it simply subsumed under technology? The Government may like to argue that there cannot be time for everything and that choices had to be made, but it refrains from defending the particular choices which it HAS made. But in any case the entire argument about which subjects to make compulsory and which to leave optional misrepresents the way in which individual subjects permeate a curriculum and subserve it. For to describe a curriculum in terms of subjects only makes sense when set alongside alternative and complementary descriptions. Perhaps the most significant alternative, though not the only one, concerns the material and cultural resources that compose a classroom environment and provide the wherewithal of children's studies. It is characteristic of the best classrooms, and not only in the primary schools, that they present children with a multitude of focuses which invite, promote and sustain inquiry in a way that overwhelms subject boundaries. It is not just that there are certain specific THEMES, as the Government calls them, which cut across traditional subjects and offer as it were an alternative body of knowledge. (Health Education and Information Technology are predictably the

Government's anodyne instances.) It is certainly not a matter of finding room for the ubiquitous primary school 'topic'. It is rather that most of the really fruitful classroom inquiries, whether on the part of an individual child, a small group of children, or an entire class, have a way of moving in and out of subjects, conflating traditions, confusing boundaries, eliminating distinctions and creating new ones. So a study of the life of a frog becomes an exercise in philosophical speculation, scientific observation, literary fantasy and artistic method. So designing a set of earrings turns into an investigation of the psychology of faces. So an examination of mathematical powers embraces the geography of the universe and the mythical origins of the game of chess. In learning, from nursery to university, the significant insights tend to come to those, teachers and pupils alike, who refuse to be bounded by subjects, who are prepared to move freely between traditions and beyond traditions – from science to philosophy to art to some new field of inquiry – without embarrassment. Every significant curriculum rewrites to some degree the history of knowledge. To understand this is to recognise that neither a list of subjects nor a description of resources is enough to define a curriculum. Each point of view requires the other in order to complete itself.

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The second great fallacy that bedevils the National Curriculum is the fallacy of the TEST. 'At the heart of the assessment process', announces the Government in the characteristically sloppy prose of its consultation document, 'there will be nationally prescribed tests done by all children to supplement the individual teacher's assessments.' It is the most dispiriting sentence in the whole dismal document. For tests, whether of the kind which Mrs Thatcher prefers or of the kind which Professor Black prefers, measure no more than the SHADOW of achievement. Their role is peripheral to assessment. They help us, sometimes, to diagnose particular weaknesses, to locate gaps in knowledge, to detect unevenness in development, or to estimate proficiency at accomplishing a limited number of set tasks. But when the shadow is mistaken for the substance – when nationally prescribed tests are placed at the CENTRE of a school's assessment of its pupils and become the chief criterion of comparison between children, teachers and schools – then children's individual accomplishments will at best be caricatured and at worst be altogether denied. To describe children's achievements adequately we require a critical account of their most significant pursuits: of their stories, their paintings, their scientific investigations, their inventions, their mathematical speculations, their historical researches, and especially of the work on which they have lavished the greatest care and enthusiasm. To offer such an account requires close observation, careful reflection, considerable knowledge of the children whose achievement is in question, and a strong personal commitment to intellectual inquiry. Above all it requires an openness of mind in the face of the extraordinary richness and diversity of children's most deeply considered thought and action. The urge to

grade, to mark, to label, to say as the Government wants us to say that '10% got Grade One, 20% Grade Two, 30% Grade Three', is fatal to a critical account of achievement. The first and chief requirement is to DESCRIBE an intellectual performance, not to JUDGE it: that is to say, to examine the purposes or intentions inherent in a child's characteristic pursuits, their development over time, the recurrence of particular themes and motifs with their variations, the relationship of a child's thought to the medium of its expression, the interplay of content and form, the handling of particular opportunities and constraints. The more our attention is focused on such issues as these the less compelling is the urge to grade. In the end individual achievement is incommensurable. The act of measurement is inevitably an act of reduction and rejection – an act which deprives many children of the value of their own accomplishments, confining acceptable knowledge to the interests and purposes of the privileged and the selected.

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And this brings me to the third and greatest fallacy of the National Curriculum, the fallacy of DELIVERY. Just as the metaphor of the market dominates and distorts the Government's understanding of society as a whole, so the metaphor of delivery dominates and distorts its understanding of education. Indeed the two metaphors are essentially the same. Throughout the consultation document, throughout the Bill itself, knowledge is portrayed as a commodity, delivered by teachers, grocery boys, as it were, of the curriculum, to children. The metaphor of delivery diminishes the status both of teachers and of children at the same time as it lends a spurious authority to the concept of knowledge. For to treat knowledge as a commodity is to place it out of reach of the process of critical inquiry in which it has both its origin and its significance. It is to suppose that knowledge is altogether independent of the circumstances of human experience and the social order: independent of social conditions, of relationships of power, of the interest and purposes of those by whom or to whom it is to be delivered. It places knowledge above reproach. It makes it mysterious and impenetrable, something to be taken on trust at the valuation of those who are placed in authority. Such a conception is of course only too convenient to those who exercise power in our society, inasmuch as it allows them to control access to knowledge and so to preserve it from the radical scrutiny which might threaten their own authority. It is not in the least surprising in this regard to find the Government re-emphasizing the values of obedience, of uniform, of punishment even, while deploring or forbidding the study of peace, or of politics, or of race, gender and sexuality. Whatever slender plausibility this naive understanding of knowledge may possess depends on the twin assumptions that neither teachers nor children are capable of, or to be trusted with, a critical engagement in subject matter. As far as teachers are concerned it is all too clear, despite the glib asides, that they are to be allocated no significant role in determining, revising or challenging the knowledge which they are required to teach. The academic

freedom which the Government may yet be forced to concede to the universities is in no measure to be permitted the schools. But still more total is the Government's rejection of the critical enterprise of children. Their motivation is never mentioned in the consultation document. Their interests count for almost nothing, either in the specification of subjects, the determination of attainment targets and programmes of study, or the choice of methods of assessment. They are the more or less passive recipients of whatever the Government happens to decide that teachers should place before them. Yet critical enterprise is inseparable from learning. The exercise of judgement is embedded in children's earliest experience of art or science, of literature or mathematics. It is, for children no less than for adults, a condition of performance. Indeed the course of intellectual growth can best be described as the natural history of every child's practice of the arts and sciences, from the earliest scribbles to the most advanced speculations. The central responsibility – and the unfulfilled but attainable goal – of popular education is to provoke and sustain the critical enterprise of every child in every school. The present Government has chosen to ignore, to evade, and in the last resort to deny this responsibility. I find it hard to imagine that the children of this country have ever been more grossly betrayed.

Recognising Imagination: agenda for a new generation

from FORUM*, volume 36, number 1 (1994), p. 6*

In November 1993 the British Film Institute, in association with the Times Educational Supplement*, organised a two-day Commission of Inquiry into English, held at the National Film Theatre, under the chairpersonship of Mary Warnock. Michael Armstrong was one of the four witnesses called to address the fourth session of the Commission which was devoted to the theme Future Visions: English 1998-2011. This is the text of his five-minute address.*

The greatest need in education at the present time is to rediscover the imagination. If there is one thing which I would hope for children born today, it is that they might be taught in schools which recognise in the power of children's imagination the chief condition of learning and the crucial test of a curriculum. From infancy onwards, children struggle to make sense of the world through a creative engagement with the various forms of expression which define our culture. Their earliest stories, poems and plays are evidence of that struggle and its outcome: the beginning of a critical practice that underlies and controls the entire history of learning. The business of education, as I understand it, is to excite, sustain and interpret that practice, week in week out,

throughout a school life. Here is Holly, at the age of six years, pondering in narrative form what it means to destroy a habitat:

> Once upon a time there was a hedgehog
> He had a friend called Mr Caterpillar
> They went to Mr Hedgehog's house in the hedge
> The farmer chopped up the hedge
> At the bottom there was a pile of leaves
> They fell down, they sat on the leaves.
> In the morning they were dead

Elementary syntax and a simple vocabulary do not constrain this young storyteller. They have become an opportunity, the appropriate means by which to express her unsparing vision. So it is with every young writer. Teaching means recognising the creative achievement and seeking to advance it. I want to draw attention to three consequences of looking at education in this way, each of which has been neglected by the National Curriculum. The first is this. The development of technique, in matters of punctuation or grammar, argument or style, is dependent upon each child's developing imagination. The basic skills – a misleading term – are neither the prerequisite of a critical practice nor its complement. They are embedded in practice and advance by way of practice. Punctuation for example. Long before they master the standard forms children become adept at their own punctuating devices: radiating lines around a word requiring special emphasis; huge letters denoting a shout; a single large stop, or the words 'the end', to signify closure. A more conventional fluency comes only as children see that their practice requires it if their intention is to be understood. The second consequence is larger. Any curriculum is necessarily provisional. The shape of learning is determined by the interplay of authorised knowledge and naive inquiry within the classroom. To prescribe what books are to be read, which writers are reputable, what language is correct, what forms are appropriate for which purposes, is to ignore the innovative aspect of education. Education is a process which redefines culture in the act of handing it on. We look at the way young children begin and end their stories, how large a space they leave for interpretation, how readily they incorporate visual elements into their writing, and our own sense of narrative possibility is changed. No subject matter is quite the same after teaching it. A good curriculum undermines itself. The third consequence concerns assessment. The critical evaluation of children's learning depends upon documenting and interpreting their intellectual enterprise, as displayed in their stories, poems, plays, mime, dance, conversation, argument, speculation. It is a matter of tracing the progress of their thought from year to year; identifying the themes, motifs and concerns that govern their practice; observing how they incorporate new material and fresh experience into their composition; examining the ways in which they exploit a developing technique. Its appropriate form is the edited archive: a body of work selected, arranged and annotated by teachers, in collaboration with their students, as representative of present accomplishment

and indicative of future learning. The archive is the antithesis of the test. It emphasises uniqueness and individuality. It resists standardisation. In the archive learning is made manifest as nowhere else. When I imagine a classroom at the turn of the century, I see it as a cooperative of writers and readers, dramatists and film makers, exploring the imagination in as many forms as come to hand; anxious to share their work with each other and with their parents, teachers and local communities; guided and directed by teachers but ready to challenge their preconceptions. A classroom in which the acquisition of knowledge is always in part a reconstruction of knowledge. In its present condition, and under its present leadership, our own society may not be capable of realising this vision. But I propose to go on working as if it were.