

Reflection: A New Normal?

Richard Green, Consultant and former CEO of the Design and Technology Association (D&TA)

It seems to me that since the election of the British coalition government in 2010, much of our governing politics has been about looking backwards and extolling the virtues of those 'good old wartime days' that never really existed. This turbo-charged patriotism, or more like jingoism, started with the need for a 'Blitz-spirit' to withstand austerity. Then the Brexit leave campaign was framed around a 'Battle for Britain' and our ability to 'stand alone,' and currently COVID-19 will be defeated, we are told, by the application of, 'good, British common sense.' In fact, as someone who has always regarded themselves as patriotic, I find the constant references back to the Second World War by politicians and certain sections of the media, to be very worrying. Victory in Europe was 75 years ago, but should we not be celebrating Peace in Europe for the last 75 years, and looking forward, rather than focussing on Spitfires over the White Cliffs?

English Education policy, in particular, has suffered from this same backward-looking approach. Starting with Secretary of State Michael Gove, and continuing with Schools Minister Nick Gibb, we have seen all secondary schools being told to focus on the traditional subjects of a 1950's grammar school curriculum, which, even then, was only deemed appropriate for a small percentage of the population. Acquisition of knowledge has become central, with application and skills pushed out to, or over, the periphery. We have seen the revision of examinations in order to make them harder, along with the downgrading of coursework, as though these alone will 'drive up standards.' In primary schools the focus on school inspections by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted), the impact of league tables and Standard Assessment Tasks (SATs) has distorted much of the curriculum.

To my mind, what we should be focussing on is a forward-looking patriotism which celebrates and builds on what we are good at now, not 75 years in the past. Collaboration, co-operation, creativity. We have all the benefits of living and working in a diverse, multicultural society. Working in partnership with our neighbours here, in Europe and across the world, brings enormous cultural, educational and economic advantages. And, to cut to the chase, we should be celebrating and building on the fact that we were the first country in the world to make Design and Technology a compulsory subject for all pupils from 5 to 16 when the National Curriculum was introduced in 1989. We were world-leaders then, but over the next 30 years not only have we allowed that lead to disappear, in some schools we have shamefully allowed the subject itself to be removed. We should be making the case for an education system fit for the mid-21st century, not one that seeks to replicate the early to mid-20th century.

Three and a half years into semi-retirement and away from direct involvement in Design and Technology (D&T), have enabled a degree of perspective on the subject that I have been involved with since the age of 11. This perspective has gradually developed over the course of these years, particularly as a result of my involvement in running some of the D&T Association's British Council-funded Continual Professional Development (CPD) teacher courses looking at global education and sustainability. But then over the last few weeks, since the COVID-19 pandemic has affected us, it has become more sharply focused.

At the time of writing COVID-19 has affected over 10 million people across the world and the global death toll is 500,000 and rising. Before the pandemic is over these numbers will increase significantly. However, the World Health Organisation¹ have been predicting for a number of years that between 2030 and 2050, climate change is expected to cause approximately 250,000 additional deaths per year, from malnutrition, malaria, diarrhoea and heat stress. I'm not looking to downplay the devastating effect of COVID-19, but its mortality rate could end up being relatively insignificant compared to potential deaths from some of the other global challenges we face this century. One thing is for certain, if we are to overcome these massive challenges, we need creative solutions and creative designers, engineers, scientists and technologists to work on them.

The sustainability courses I referred to, and the teachers I have met on them, have convinced me of 2 things. Firstly, the continued enthusiasm, skill and commitment of D&T teachers and their ability to truly affect the life chances of young people; and, secondly, the critical importance and relevance of the subject for all pupils who will live and work in a society that is facing global challenges. COVID-19 is undoubtedly a global challenge, and one that is certainly different from the types of challenges we looked at on the courses. What it has done is transform the way the whole of society has had to operate and it is this that has made me reflect on what education, and D&T, might look like as we come out of lockdown with no vaccine available in the short term. What have we learned from the lockdown and what is teaching and learning going to look like in what is now being described as the 'New Normal'?

One of the main features of the lockdown has been a huge increase in online everything - shopping, healthcare, entertainment, communication and, of course, a massive experiment in remote teaching. The success or failure of this online teaching and learning should undoubtedly be the focus of thorough evaluation and research. Anecdotally it would appear that the outcomes have been mixed. Access has been variable and concern has been voiced over the inability of many disadvantaged pupils to benefit from these tools. Pupil engagement has also been mixed, with some pupils coping very successfully whilst others have struggled. With social distancing still being required during the exit from lockdown, class sizes will either need to be capped at around 15 or alternative 'bubble' arrangements implemented to allow a fuller return. The former would require doubling both the teaching workforce and the number of classrooms to allow some form of rota for in-school learning in the short to medium term. Therefore, it is the latter option which is likely to be favoured by the Government in England. It appears that they are already considering a range of measures for the restart which just happen to fit very well with their 1950s ideology: full class teaching; all students facing the front; a focus on a limited range of subjects, particularly maths and English, and with some subjects not being taught at all until summer 2021. However, if, or more likely, when the virus returns, irrespective of the approach adopted, there is every chance of further local or regional lockdowns over the coming year. This would tend to suggest the need for more effective and accessible online systems to support and supplement the potential reduction in face-to-face teaching.

Surprisingly, the Government has not led in these developments. In fact its only involvement was to put limited and belated funding into the establishment of an online 'academy' which was developed by well-intentioned teachers to meet demand in the early weeks of the lockdown. It would be scandalous if the Department for Education compounded their lack of

leadership in this area by pouring further, significant public funding into this DIY-academy without putting a contract out to tender! Yet that is what the Government has signalled it intends to do and, as a consequence, it will very likely tighten its control on curriculum content and pedagogy. This needs to be urgently resisted and reconsidered. What is desperately needed is an approach that draws on the best research in online pedagogy allied to content development from subject experts (a role for subject associations) and produced by professional developers of online systems. The project brief should also include the requirement to develop online CPD modules for teachers. For too long teachers have struggled to be released to attend face-to-face CPD because of both teacher shortages and budget considerations. The need for online systems is only part of the CPD solution, but an important part and one that the Government should be prioritising and funding in order that a national, cost-effective system is available as soon as possible.

A second feature of the lockdown was the rapid abandonment of the 2020 examinations and SATs in favour of teacher assessment. If this could be done so easily with, I suspect, what will turn out to be so little negative impact on results, why can we not use this time to look again at the rationale behind our high-stakes examination system? How useful are the baseline tests in Reception? Should we be testing in Year 6 (11 year olds) when there is a body of opinion which suggests a baseline test in Year 7, when pupils change to secondary school, could be more useful? Do we actually need the examinations taken by 16 year olds in Y11 when all pupils are required to continue education to 18? Would this be the time to look at introducing the wider use of comparative judgements to make teacher assessments more reliable, easier and quicker? These are all opportunities to look ahead, to be proactive, to think and do things differently. But, where there are opportunities there are usually also threats. The early guidance on safe working in schools as the lockdown eases suggests classrooms devoid of resources which could become contaminated; classes of pupils sitting in distanced desks, facing the front and not being able to share materials, tools and equipment. It could easily turn into an even starker version of that 1950s education I referred to earlier.

And what of D&T in the New Normal? We start from a position of relative strength in that most secondary D&T environments were designed for groups of 15-20. But practical work relies on access to shared tools, materials and equipment. If this is going to be feasible Heads of Department should already be compiling their case for longer blocks of time (half days?), which would be educationally beneficial, more productive, as well as safer, with shared resources being cleaned only twice a day rather than after every 45 or 60 minute lesson. Consideration also needs to be given to the division of time between in-school and online learning. What aspects of the subject need face-to-face teaching and what can be successfully taught online? I don't think the answer is perhaps as obvious as it first appears as digital manufacture can be carried out remotely. Could this be the start of a more general move away from many of the traditional hand craft processes?

There are obviously lots of unknowns but as we emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic it is almost certain that the New Normal will be very different from the Old Normal. Already there are calls for wide ranging societal changes. For example, Green New Deal UK² have already started a 'Build Back Better' campaign which, "prioritises people, invests in the NHS and creates a robust, shockproof economy that is capable of tackling the climate crisis." However, opportunities are nearly always counter-balanced by threats, including concerns about the

impact of increased reliance on technology, such as the loss of privacy and, as Naomi Klein³ has written, "... we face real and hard choices between investing in humans and investing in technology. Because the brutal truth is that, as it stands, we are very unlikely to do both."

For education and D&T the biggest caveat has to be that any chance of major change will be significantly greater if Nick Gibb's vice-like grip on the Schools' Minister post is wrested from him - but let's think positively! One of the Government's pandemic mantras has been, "We follow the science," so we can but hope that the New Normal sees the return of education policy that is research-based and evidence-led; a move away from examinations to increased reliance on teacher assessment; a rebalancing of the curriculum with increased priority given to creative and technical subjects; a development of high quality, online learning to support in-school activity; and access for teachers to affordable and accessible online CPD - just to name a few. If only some of these come to fruition then the educational New Normal could be a huge step in a very positive direction.

¹ World Health Organisation; www.who.int/health-topics/climate-change#tab=tab_1

² Green New Deal UK; www.greennewdealuk.org

³ Naomi Klein; The Guardian; 19.5.20; "How big tech plans to profit from the pandemic."