

Doing It With Passion

Professor Richard Kimbell, Goldsmiths, University of London

In a recent tutorial with a group of students I have been forced to confront an awkward truth. One of the problems of getting on a bit is that one's writing history goes back a long way and occasionally I have realised that my position (on this and that) has changed since the date that I wrote it. That's not so surprising perhaps, since any educated person ought constantly to be holding their opinions as provisional... "I believe this – until I find a good reason to change my view". But what if the original piece of writing was absolutely in one direction and one's current belief is the reverse of that. Surely, adjusting or refining one's views about something is not the same as completely changing it?

This problem has been dawning on me progressively for the last few years – but was brought into sharp focus by a symposium that our final year BAEd students undertake based on the 10,000 word dissertations they are preparing. Essentially we expect them all to do 10 minute presentations of their work, with the whole group acting as a critical audience. And having made their presentation they must defend it against any questions or challenges that arise. We spend a whole day at it (with invited speakers at the beginning and the end of the day) and its seen as an important part of students' emergence as autonomous writers and presenters. Some of the presentations were absolutely brilliant – and one in particular crystallised for me the problem that has been growing in my mind.

Before I launch into what it was all about – let me document the statement that I have been forced to reconsider. I made it in 1996 but it was published in 1997.

"...we should not underestimate the significance of this moment for technology. Never before had it been an entitlement for all children to study technology; now it was. Never before had it been the least bit significant in the primary curriculum; now it was. Never before had the specialist subjects in the secondary school technology domain (craft, design & technology, home economics) been grouped and expected to provide a single coherent technology experience; now they were. But crucially, never before had this compulsory (statutory) experience been described in such incontrovertibly procedural terms: now it was. Technology was defined in law (for the first time ever in the world) as an activity to be pursued and as an entitlement for all pupils. It was a great moment." (Kimbell 1997 p 63)

Whilst this statement about the introduction of the National Curriculum (NC) itself was enthusiastic, I have always been deeply opposed to the assessment regime that the NC introduced. There was never any doubt that it was completely flawed – and fortunately it was pretty much repealed within five years. But – leaving aside the assessment arguments – what about the curriculum statement itself and the way it was defined?

There are parts of this statement that I still hold to. The part about the *procedural* definition of the activity, for example, is something that was very brave at the time. While the rest of the curriculum was defining itself in terms of bodies of knowledge, in technology we chose to do it by describing the *processes* of designing and making. But the bit that I have come increasingly to question is the 'statutory' part. Is it right that the curriculum should be defined centrally – and require all teachers to follow it?

The arguments for and against a statutory curriculum are well rehearsed in the literature. The case for it centres on the 'access' argument. Parents and their children should expect that they have access to a common curriculum experience whether they live in Pontefract, Penrith, or Porthcawl and regardless of gender. But that was not the core reason for my enthusiasm for it in 1996. I was seeing it also as a step forward for a procedural view of learning that celebrated the centrality of designing. I have always believed in the designing experience being at the heart of what we should do. The emergence of designing activities for all – within a statutory NC framework – seemed to me a great step towards spreading this gospel.

However, as I was watching some of the presentations by our BAEd students I was struck not so much by the content of what they were saying as by the manner in which they presented it. One student in particular was so passionate about her idea that you just couldn't help being drawn into what she was saying. It was about knitting... that she had learned initially from her mum and that she had developed into a whole mode of creative expression. Just wonderful – and inspiring. She had undertaken a lot of it in schools in what she had named her extra-curricular 'knitting club' and I asked her (in the question session after her presentation) why she had chosen that route rather than building it into the D&T curriculum. Paraphrasing her answer – the essence of her argument was that she was not in control of the curriculum but she could control her extra-curricular activities. There are of course many reasons why a student

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on a placement in a school might not feel able to take over the curriculum – so I asked her what she would do when she was established as a teacher. Would she be doing her knitting as part of the curriculum? She seemed doubtful that the way she liked to work (and how she liked learners to work) would fit in to the normal D&T approach of design briefs and carousels.

Anyone who saw her presentation – and her enthusiasm, imagination and passion for it all – would have to conclude that if she is NOT doing it, the school and the children would be poorer for it.

Should teachers teach what they want to teach... what they are passionate about? Or should teachers be required to teach a curriculum that has been decided by those in authority? The two might be seen as ends of a continuum and of course there are dangers in both extreme positions. At the extreme laissez-faire position of absolute teacher autonomy (which was the norm when I started teaching in 1970), there can be no assurance about equivalent access to learning opportunities. By contrast, in the extreme position of central control of fine detail of curriculum content, one can carry out audits (inspections) to ensure that this is (at least) 'delivered'. Any 'entitlement' curriculum must necessarily be policed.

The additional set of spectacles that I bring to this dilemma is that of the teacher-educator. What does it mean to develop a great teacher, and how is it different in the contrasting scenarios outlined above. In the first case (the autonomous teacher) – since it involves them having such enormous responsibility, it is absolutely necessary to be very careful in choosing, training and developing them to deal with this responsibility. Only then is it right to let them loose. In the latter case (central control) – the locus of control shifts from enriching their training to policing their classroom so as to ensure that their learners do have access to an appropriate diet. In a nutshell – the former case seems to me to be about *empowerment* while the latter case is about *control*.

I realise that Ofsted, QCDA and others with National Curriculum responsibility will assert that this is just not true and in fact that there is plenty of flexibility built in to the curriculum for teachers to exercise their autonomy. But this is to confuse the law with the police. Yes – the law does allow degrees of freedom, but the law is only perceived through the prism of the police (Ofsted/league tables) and when schools are running scared, they impose on themselves degrees of rigidity that the law itself does not require. So either way (directly or indirectly) the law and its policing has its controlling effect. And a direct

consequence of this is that one of our eminently professional young students (about to become a teacher) **believes** that she is not able to do her passionate thing within the curriculum and must instead squeeze it in somewhere less policed.

The cost of the implementation of a national curriculum should perhaps best be measured not in pounds sterling but in teacher autonomy. And I retain enough of my 1970s instincts to regret this loss.

References:

Kimbell RA, 1997 *Assessing Technology: International trends in curriculum and assessment*. Open University Press: Buckingham.

Postscript From Professor Richard Kimbell: It's time for a party! Wednesday 7 July 2010, Keele University

After too many years banging on about this and that – I shall be retiring from Goldsmiths in the summer. It seems appropriate to have a bit of a party and the Design and Technology Association Annual Conference in July provides a good opportunity. So, on the evening of Wednesday 7 July I will be hosting an evening of drinks and celebration at Keele University and I cordially invite any of my former students and colleagues to join me. There must be a lot of you out there. The drinks reception is free – and if you would like to stay on for the dinner afterwards there is a good rate for that and for overnight accommodation. Please complete the enclosed booking form if you would like to attend, either just for the drinks party or to book additional options too, and return to Laura MacLean by Monday 21st June 2010:

*Laura MacLean
The Design and Technology Association
16 Wellesbourne House
Walton Road
Wellesbourne
Warwickshire
CV35 9JB*

I really look forward to meeting everyone there.

Richard Kimbell

r.kimbell@gold.au.uk