

SOME REFLECTIONS OF AN EXAMINER

who does not like the word

One more report to write and that will be the end of my career as an examiner. I have been an external examiner for fifteen universities, the external at possibly more than forty five validations of, mostly, masters programmes, stood in for about a dozen other external examiners when they could not make a meeting and evaluated four faculties.

Earlier I was assistant examiner, chief moderator, chief examiner and chair of examiners for a range of certificated programmes including the Bootle School Leavers Certificate (for fifteen year olds in secondary moderns), the Certificate of Secondary Education (CSE Modes One and Three), Sixteen Plus and the General Certificate for Secondary Education (GCSE Modes One and Three).

Add being Audit Moderator for Key Stage One tests, the writing of syllabuses, papers and mark schemes and assessing the students registered at my university and it looks a lot.

How to make sense of it all depends I think on the prism chosen to look at education. Might it be something we do *to* people or *with* them?

In 1991 John Major made a speech that began the process of turning GCSE from a means of mediating learning into a means of measuring it. Ignoring the research that was taking place on National Curriculum assessment Kenneth Clarke had earlier imposed his own un-researched normative curve and compounded the felony by creating Ofsted as the enforcer of the ministerial will.

Examinations can be part of learning. They can also be restrictive and focussed upon creating a rank order to please politicians. This prism is official. It reminds us that schooling is what we do to horses. The knacker's yard awaits the teachers and the taught that do not make the chosen grade: a grade plucked out of a politician's hat.

For me the word 'assessment' is far better than the word 'examination'. It signifies a process of making sense. Some countries use the word 'evaluation' but to undertake a judgement concerning value you must first make sense of learning. That also means having to consider unexpected evidence for what might be unintended but worthwhile outcomes. Assessment criteria need to be less closed and more open for this to happen. This prism allows us to see and think about far more. And it allows the teacher/examiner to learn from the learner.

My first examination

The Irish Christian Brothers were in breach of the Trade Descriptions Act. In court they could not have provided evidence of their Christianity. Neither could they of their brotherliness. I was probably seven when my mother took it into her head to enter me for the entrance examination to the preparatory school for Saint Mary's College, Crosby. We had neighbours whose children went there. While we boys were ushered off to the examination hall all the mothers went to the chapel to pray; all except my mother who, not being a Catholic, stayed outside to ponder if by doing so she might ruin my chances.

After a while, the mothers clustered round a brother who read out the results for all to hear. He did not mention me. 'But you have not mentioned my Clifford', said my mother. 'He does not appear to have written anything', replied the brother.

I am sure you can imagine the conversation on the bus home afterwards. I had made a show of my mother in front of all the other mothers. She wanted to know what had happened, so I told her.

Remember, I had never encountered an Irish Christian Brother before that examination, held in what to me was a very forbidding building. I was sat at the back. It was where I was told to sit, behind all the other boys. At the front glaring at us was this tall (to me) man all in black. He announced that any boy who copied the work of any other boy would have his paper brought to the front and torn up. AND, he would go to Hell!

As I explained to my mother, I knew that five nines were forty-five but I could see that a boy in front of me had already written that so that meant that I couldn't. To play safe and make sure that I did not accidentally write anything the same as any other boy I wrote nothing. I certainly outsmarted that Irish Christian Brother.

Years later I asked the sociologist Laurie Taylor how he had survived those brothers. He said that he did it by building a counter culture in his head. Others of that generation who went to Saint Mary's included the poet Roger McGough, John Birt, one time Director of the BBC and Tony Blair's 'Blue Skies Thinker' and Tony Booth the actor and father-in-law of Blair. Cherie went to the girls' convent school over the road.

Perhaps I shall write more another time.

Cliff Jones 29th September 2017