

The re-emergence of the O-Level and Grammar School Tendencies

Professional positivity loses out to old educational prejudices

Has positivity become passivity?

1975 and two books caught the mood of professional self-confidenceⁱ that had been growing since the Newsom Report of 1963. Lawrence Stenhouse's *An Introduction to Curriculum Research and Development* encouraged schoolteachers to see themselves as researchers with HMI in support. Try to imagine such a thing in England today.

Denis Lawton's *Class, Culture and the Curriculum* proposed a form of National Curriculum based upon prior collective professional discussion of social values. Lawton was a member of the Politics Association, set up in 1971 for teachers of politics. Emerging from that Association was the 1978 Report on Political Literacyⁱⁱ.

The theme was *participation in learning, assessment and in government and politics.*

The General Certificate of Education (GCE) O-Level had encouraged the skill of recall but the Certificate of Secondary Education (CSE), targeted at young people in secondary moderns who decided to stay till sixteen, offered sustained research in the form of coursework and a variety of different styles of questions, testing critical reflection, interpretation, evaluation *and* recall. CSE provided essential groundwork for the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE).

Its philosophy meant all would have the *opportunity to demonstrate what they know, understand and can do*: differentiation by outcome, not by task. Mark schemes were not simply lists of right answers but descriptions of the kind of responses expected. They also considered what the candidates had written that might be unexpected and yet valid.

As a Chief Examiner for Government and Politics I was asked to work with the A-Level Politics Chief Examiner in order to produce a specimen GCSE exam paper and mark scheme that could be used for training purposes. I showed him a CSE paper I had written. He read it, paused and said,

You ask the same questions as me. The difference is that you make your questions clear to the candidates and I hide the meaning of mine.

The theme was *accessibility and, for people working in my field, roughly the social sciences, that also meant discussion of public values.*

The O-Level and Grammar School Tendencies strike back

A personal story that I hope makes relevant points about making and executing policy.

John Major's speech in 1991ⁱⁱⁱ began to transform GCSE from a part of learning into a means of measurement. As a Chief Examiner, with many others I was summoned to a residential meeting in a hotel in Newcastle in order to work out how to write tiered papers, as we were now required to do. Three-dimensional chess was now the name of the game.

Major also did not like coursework. For some people unless assessment is a test carried out in silence young people will cheat or middle class parents will do the work for them. There is a difference between research and plagiarism and as a teacher not only is it important to impart the skills and values of research but if you are, and you should be, close enough to your students to recognise when a passage is written and punctuated in an unexpectedly different style then you have opportunity to enable further learning.

The theme was *discrimination* and the assessment crime of simply aiming to achieve a rank order returned with official blessing.

The summons meant driving from coast to coast over the snow bound Pennines. Before I left the house in my red (with white roof) Mini Cooper to pretend to be a rally driver the post arrived, including the Dearing Report of 1994 on the National Curriculum, with some reference to Key Stage 4. I threw it on the back seat.

Eventually I took a wrong turn where the sign saying *Road Closed* had fallen down and was driving over melting ice and snow on a single lane road with a steep hill on one side and, on the other, no wall; the valley bottom about 1,200 ft. below. Eventually it was too narrow on the outside to get past a snow drift so, the valley floor looking unwelcome, I tried to batter my way through. I got stuck. No-one around. There were some telephone wires leading somewhere so I followed them to, after a few soaking miles, the house of a shepherd. He was fast asleep in front of the telly. I managed to rouse him and explain my predicament. He got out his 4x4 with knobbly tyres and, back at my car, we dug it out. I gave him all the money I had, ten quid, and set off again, stopping at a friend's house where my trousers were put in a tumble dryer.

First to arrive at the hotel, I leafed through Dearing and read that in about nine months the government's agent, the Schools Examinations and Assessment Council (SEAC) was intending to produce new criteria for GCSE. What, I said to myself, a wasted journey. When the exam board person arrived I showed the report and suggested she call SEAC to ask why we had to make all these changes now when the rules were going to change later in the year.

'You must', they told her, 'do as you are required!' So we did. The policy had to get through!

An amusing, frustrating, ironic, irritating comment on all this urge to implement policy no matter how illogical or at what cost is that History GCSE failed to meet the deadline to make the required short notice changes. Being a curriculum big noise it was allowed to get away with it and for years avoided the damage inflicted by Major's speech.

Raised from the dead: education free examinations

With GCSE, Keith Joseph had, before Major's intervention, provided us with a system of assessment that was fair, fulfilling and could be educationally interesting to all taking part. Michael Gove and Nicky Morgan resurrected simple-minded ideas of assessment being about acquiring 'facts', reintroducing one-dimensional examinations that reduce accessibility.

They also decided their policies must get through regardless of parents, teachers, children, young people, society or the capacity of exam boards to respond to sudden change. Michael Gove's eagerness to break the legislative speed limit meant that he made use of terrorist enabling law to fast track his deformation of the school and assessment systems. He used the word 'reform' but it meant 'deform'. He was also deforming democracy by working like this.

On the 18th September 2012, in a letter to the Guardian, the late Kathleen Tattersall, first head of Ofqual and possibly the most experienced head of an examinations board in the country, referred to the new proposals as 'an examination that will define failure.'

Now yet more education is being extracted from public examinations and the pace of change exceeds the capacity of exam boards to keep up while unfairly disrupting the learning of young people as they prepare for exams.

It saddens me that because of, I assume, pressure to achieve results by means of sit-up-and-beg examinations teachers apparently welcome the demise of coursework^{iv}. It took time away from examination preparation. This is government induced *trahison des clerc*. Sudden death end of course tests should never supplant coursework. Educators might ask what the first seven letters of 'professional' spell out. In what do professionals believe, education or pleasing Ofsted?

The theme is *devastation* for young people and for education as a system devoted to fairness and fulfilment.

Drawing upon my Pennine experience, the professional options today are:

drive on the edge and risk being cast into the abyss; stay stuck in the snowdrift and wait for retirement; or dissipate your energies trying to make workable the unworkable.

Cliff Jones February 2016

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This is a link to an essay on what I take to be the changing phases of educational policy making since 1945. The professionally self confident phase now looks to have been relatively short, although people like me went on feeling like that for a long time after we were justified in doing so.

<http://www.criticalprofessionallearning.co.uk/assets/WebFor%20DH%20Lawrence.pdf>

ii

This link does little more than establish the existence of the political literacy report. I served on the working party and felt that we finally were getting rid of courses and public examinations on Civics, Citizenship and British Constitution (no one in Britain is a citizen: we are all subjects) and taking more seriously the part that education could play in encouraging a society in which participation was important.

The year of publication was 1978. In 1979 came a government with a different philosophy and the political education movement lost ground.

https://books.google.co.uk/books/about/Political_education_and_political_litera.html?id=NeolAAAAMAAJ&hl=en

iii

Here is the link to John Major's speech that began the process of transforming the purpose of GCSE from being educative into a means of measurement. Like James Callaghan before him Major is clearly against what was, by the time of his speech, negatively labelled by members of the 'O-Level and Grammar School Tendencies', as 'progressive education'.

<http://www.johnmajor.co.uk/page867.html>

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This is a link to a report that is not up to the minute but provides a detailed account of responses to recent proposals.

http://www.schoolzone.co.uk/schools/NCres/GCSE/Curriculum_reform_report_Secondary.pdf