

## 9. Wanted! A new vocabulary for learning

The latest edition of the Journal of Curriculum Studies opens with a powerful article by a leading curriculum theorist, Bill Reid, about 'the end of curriculum'. Previously, *In Place of Schools* was the title of a book by John Adcock published in 1994, thus declaring the word 'school' redundant. We need, therefore, a new vocabulary to take us into the next learning system. This is not a matter of mere debate but of necessity. The shape of the next learning system has to be described in new words to convey the new approach, but also in words that make sense to parents.

But first, the old vocabulary has to go. The first casualty has to be 'school'. As a word and concept it has degenerated. It used to mean a voluntary association of learners asking questions and seeking the truth. In earlier times, when scholars (or 'schoolers') like Peter Abelard travelled from town to town, an informal 'school' of enquirers would assemble for a dialogue about his radical ideas. Somehow this idea of a voluntary gathering of learners has become debased. In his classic book, *Life in Classrooms*, Philip Jackson concluded that: "*for all the children some of the time, and for some other children all the time, the classroom resembles a cage from which there is no escape*". We need to remember that when mass compulsory schooling was first adopted in the USA, the children of the pioneer families were escorted to the state establishments by armed soldiers against the will of the families concerned. Currently, in the UK it is hailed as an advance that police cars are used to round up any reluctant learners. The undesirable outcomes are that, somehow, schools have transformed learning from one of the most rewarding of all human activities into a dull, fear-laden, boring, fragmenting, mind-shrinking, soul-shrivelling and often painful experience.

Next, the word 'curriculum' has to go. It has come to mean an imposed course study so dehumanised that all the key decisions about what to learn, when to learn, and how to learn, have been taken before any of the learners have been met and encountered as people. At one point in the National Curriculum deliberations it was suggested that we refer to 'curriculum study units' or CSU's rather than pupils, as a final dehumanisation. Bill Reid, in the Journal of Curriculum Studies, declares that this idea of curriculum, as a nationally institutionalised form of education, is now played out. Even the Prime Minister, Tony Blair, with his somewhat conservative interpretation of 'education, education, education' being synonymous with 'schooling, schooling, schooling', has stated that, "*we will move away from a system that assumes every child of a particular age moves at the same pace in every subject, and develop a system directed to the particular talents and interests of every pupil.*"

Another word that may have to go is 'education'. Quite a few years ago, Bertrand Russell observed that we were faced with the paradoxical fact that education had become one of the chief obstacles to intelligence and to freedom of thought. In common usage, education has ceased to mean 'asking questions all the time, questioning answers all the time, and questioning the questions'. Instead it has become a paper-chase. When you are asked about your education, you are expected to produce a list of set courses completed and certificates obtained, or name the place of conscription that you were required to attend.

Next, officialdom's favourite word may have to go. It is 'standards'. The idea of standards in education is both ambiguous and subjective. For some it means remembering the information designated by adults in power positions as 'essential', even though there is little agreement on what is essential. Training students to be good at the shallow learning of selected mechanical tasks enshrined in institutionally imposed syllabuses, does not produce the more important

deep learning, the kind we already need, and will need more and more in the future. The first objection to shallow learning systems is that they tend to eradicate the potential to develop a deep learning, as the most recent brain activity research shows, on the principle of 'if you do not use it, you lose it'. With the habits of deep learning in your repertoire, you can do shallow learning more or less at will. The reverse, however, does not apply.

Another objection to the current definition of standards, is that most of the required shallow learning is 'junk knowledge'. I defined junk knowledge as 'something you did not need or want to know yesterday, do not need or want to know today, and are unlikely to need or want to know tomorrow.' If you do need or want to know it eventually, possessing the deeper knowledge of such things as questioning, researching, evaluating, self direction and self discipline, will enable you to learn it.

So, parents and children will need to un-learn the old vocabulary and learn a new one. The literature on the next learning system has several suggestions for a word to replace school. Some writers talk of open learning centres, or learning studios, or learning pavilions, or learning networks, or community learning sites, or learning cafes. Another option is to refer to centres for personalised education, or CPE's. Others want to retain the word school in revised formulations such as 'virtual-schools' or 'cyber-schools'. For a time I favoured 'flexi-schooling' but generally, schools proved to be resistant to the idea of becoming flexible.

The main candidate to replace the word curriculum, is the expression 'personal learning plan' or 'personal learning programme'. Personally, I favour retaining the word curriculum as part of the expression, the catalogue curriculum. Such a term implies that learners are able to construct their own pattern of learning from a catalogue of ideas and possibilities, including ready-made courses, individualised courses, and support for groups of learners who want to work democratically and design their own courses.

To replace the word education, many writers now favour referring to 'learning', or 'lifelong learning'. So, the talk is about the next **learning** system rather than the next **education** system. Even the word 'system' is sometimes questioned on the grounds that it implies mechanical imposition. But if we actually, or mentally, prefix the word with flexible - a flexible learning system - it helps people see that what is being proposed is a not a free-for-all or laissez-faire. A system can also be monitored, although the purpose of that monitoring will be to provide high quality advice and information, so that learners can make informed decisions, rather than the motive of the imposition of uniformity and standardisation.

The word and idea of standards chosen and imposed from above, can be replaced by the idea of profiles of personal achievement, which have worked in other European countries, such as Denmark and Sweden, for decades. These can include generalised assessment tests by personal choice.

A recent MORI poll, commissioned by the *Campaign for Learning*, found that 90% of adults were favourably inclined towards further learning for themselves. In the right environment, they were willing to undertake further learning. The bad news is that 75% said they were unhappy and alienated in the school environment, and that, therefore, they preferred to learn at home, in the local library, at their workplace - *anywhere* other than a school-type setting. The old vocabulary and thinking just has to go, and not just in this country. As Edward de Bono says on his web-site:

*"I have not done a full survey or review of education systems around the world so that the views I express are based on personal experience. I would say that all education systems I've had contact with are a disgrace and a disaster." My verdict is the same, though some are more counter-productive than others. They are all deserts and we should not allow ourselves to be confused because we encounter the occasional oasis along the way.*

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