

Curriculum alternatives

Martin Allen investigates *how the relation between vocational and academic courses has developed over time.*

While reformers (including many Tories) continue to emphasise education's potential in challenging inequalities through expanding opportunities for those socially disadvantaged, radical practitioners go further and argue an alternative curriculum is necessary. Here they have been joined by left-wing academics, who, influenced by the writings of Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci and, in this country, by the work of Raymond Williams, have theorised education as a site of ideological or 'hegemonic' struggle, where there is potential to challenge, but also provide alternatives. (Though the extent of education's 'relative autonomy' - the space education allows to challenge, let alone transform, the social and economic inequalities of capitalism - has long been contested.)

Central to this has been debate and discussion about 'powerful knowledge'. In a Marxist analysis, powerful knowledge is equated with the knowledge of the ruling class, appearing as 'fixed' and intrinsically superior, and thus essential in ensuring 'legitimacy'. This is contrasted with 'critical knowledge', or what 19th century radicals termed '*really* useful knowledge' - alternative views of how society works. This represents a different form of powerful knowledge, being potentially empowering. But there is also the 'everyday' knowledge that students draw from the communities in which they live, but which is ignored if not openly despised in many academic institutions, because it's seen as intrinsically inferior. Radical educators have encouraged their students to bring this into the classroom. But they have also continued to be concerned with the processes through which knowledge is transmitted and rather than being handed down by teachers (and 'banked' by students) have emphasised the importance of 'finding out' through interactive activity such as group work, oral discussion, or, more recently, using new technology in a collaborative way.

Yet the alternative approaches to learning that have made some headway should be given some context. The mode 3 CSEs, which grew up from the 1970s and enabled schools to effectively decide their own

curriculum and forms of assessment, were aimed at particular groups of students not considered suitable for academic learning, and whose continued participation in it could be potentially 'disruptive' to other students. The reality was one where, as Paul Willis documented in his historic study (1), many students continued to move into local and traditional employment as soon as possible and without the need for any educational qualifications. These students had already disengaged with school, but were required to remain in full-time education as a result of the raising of the school leaving age (ROSLA), in many cases causing considerable resentment not only amongst students but also from their parents.

Likewise, the new vocational courses that developed in further education colleges and school sixth forms in the 1980s were seen by their creators as a challenge to traditional academic study, incorporating a more learner-centred approach, emphasising learning by 'doing', the recording of 'outcomes' rather than remembering factual knowledge, and building portfolios of evidence as opposed to sitting examinations. But they were aimed at those young people who, because of changes to the economy and the failure of government youth training schemes, had returned to full-time education because of the absence of work. In other words, while the attempts of practitioners to provide a better and more interesting education for their students should be recognised, like the CSEs they were responses to ***potential control problems in educational institutions.***

This is not to say that alternative approaches to learning have completely bypassed mainstream learning. Coursework-based teacher assessment played a key role in the early years of the GCSE, and there were attempts, if short lived, to broaden post-16 education by introducing Key Skills into A-levels, and of course New Labour's *Curriculum 2000* also constituted a major break with convention by introducing a modularisation programme and a new AS qualification. But in recent years there have been fewer opportunities to challenge and innovate,

largely because of the rolling back of many of the progressive gains of comprehensive education and the influence of New Right ideas. Education has also continued to be blamed for economic decline, with Michael Gove's infamous 2010 White Paper specifying that more traditional approaches to teaching and a concentration on 'basic facts' were required, to bring the UK more in line with practices said to exist in the economically successful economies of the Pacific Rim. As a result, the current National Curriculum remains far away from the 'broad and balanced' learning said to exist in previous times. Neither do teacher unions, increasingly overwhelmed with protecting members' immediate interests - like working conditions, security and pay - intervene in curriculum and pedagogy issues like they used to.

Ironically it has been employer organisations, or at least the quangos and think-tanks that service them, that have attempted to put forward a different agenda, and argue that, in response to further changes to work and skill requirements, new types of vocational skills and technical knowledge are required, and that the subject-based, academic National Curriculum is failing. This is a much greater challenge to traditional academic education. Unlike the 1980s, where vocational learning was aimed at preventing youth unemployment, today it is seen as necessary to drive the economy forward (though employers continue to draw many of their top managerial recruits from the arts and humanities courses of elite universities!).

But while the workplace is changing and employers may be right to emphasise the importance of higher level generic or 'soft' skills (educators have continued to promote these) the technical requirements for jobs of the future are not clear. There will certainly be a demand for a knowledge-rich technological/AI-informed elite, but not everybody will need to be a computer programmer. Many will be more likely destined for low paid, low skilled employment in new personal services industries like retail and care. Besides, technological knowledge changes so quickly that it is likely to be out of date by the time a student enters the workplace. On the contrary, more workers will be 'deskilled' as automation expands.

It is also the case that, in the 'credentialised' societies of today, where any real secure employment is dependent on gaining high levels of qualifications - as more and more jobs become 'graduatised', degrees are needed to get them, though generally not to do them! In these circumstances, powerful knowledge takes on a different role, with students seeking particular

qualifications because of their (extrinsic) exchange value in the labour market, rather than any intrinsic educational qualities or their direct relationship with particular occupational skills. This is another reason why right-wingers have attacked alternative pedagogies. Rather than empowering socially deprived students, it's argued they deny access to the knowledge that will help them 'get on'. Again, powerful knowledge is equated with knowledge of the powerful.

Understanding that a collective need to challenge the role played by a particular type of knowledge qualification might contradict the individual need of a student to obtain it, this does not mean that the two are incompatible. Recognising the importance of gaining certain types of qualification doesn't mean that we need to endorse their content like right-wing commentators do. It is also self-evident that these days, as already noted, signing up for traditional academic subjects does not guarantee social mobility ('getting on') as fewer and fewer students, despite their qualifications, cannot get the employment they want, or justify their time spent in education. So, work around promoting an alternative curriculum should not only continue but must be linked to campaigns for changing the relationship between young people and labour market entry.

At post-16 level, until now, many curriculum reformers continue to campaign for vocational and academic learning linked through an overarching or 'baccalaureate' qualification which gives equal status to different types of knowledge. Indeed, business groups and educationalists have been in unanimity over this. But while this is and should be an undisputed objective, it leaves the content of the curriculum unchanged. We should call for the reform of the 'academic' curriculum, making it less specialist, and giving practitioners more of an input into syllabus content and assessment. But, in the context of the opening line of this article, our doubts about the new employers' agenda mean we need to ask serious questions about vocational education, moving beyond a 'skills for work' focus and developing a new *critical vocationalism* as part of a 'good general education for everybody'.

1. Paul Willis (1977) *Learning to Labour. How working class kids get working class jobs.*

