
Culture, tradition and values in education

Eddie Playfair

Eric Robinson, who died in 2011, was an outstanding and progressive college principal and polytechnic director. He was appointed deputy director of North East London Polytechnic (now the University of East London) in 1970, led Bradford College from 1973 to 1982, and then Preston Poly, later Lancashire Poly, which subsequently went on to become the University of Central Lancashire. Eric worked to create a comprehensive form of higher education; a 'people's university' which could contribute to the education of all and which saw people both as workers and as citizens of a democratic society with a right to share the best of human values and culture.

Eric gave an excellent Caroline Benn memorial lecture in 2009. His critique of economic instrumentalism, the commodification of education and the promotion of institutional choice and diversity was spot on. He eloquently reminded us that markets and privatisation cannot deliver high quality education for all. Five years on, this message is more urgent than ever.

But it was also refreshing to hear him say so much about the role of education in the transmission of culture, the system's loss of respect for certain traditions and its lack of grounding in social and moral values. These are themes which I think are worthy of greater discussion on both left and the right.

The cultural transmission role is often neglected by educational progressives and even seen as rather a suspect area; territory better left to conservatives as the natural traditionalists. But it was Antonio

Gramsci from the left who affirmed the role of school in instituting cultural norms, values and hierarchies. He argued for an egalitarian education system which could give all young people the opportunity to engage critically with the best that was on offer from the cultural traditions available.

We cannot allow the right to be the only champions of a broadly liberal education for all. Rather than giving up on the universal liberal education project because it's 'not relevant' or 'too challenging' for some young people we need to find ways to democratise it and make it accessible without dumbing down. We need to draw on more diverse traditions and offer access to both 'popular' and 'high' culture to all, without elitism, snobbery or exclusivity.

Progressive

Equally, we cannot allow the right to get away with the claim that progressive and secular educators have no moral compass or that cultural diversity or multiculturalism inevitably lead to a weakening of universal values or social solidarity. The real threat to these comes from an excessively narcissistic, individualistic and consumerist culture promoted by commercial interests. One of the key functions of education in a good society should be to put into practice agreed universal values. We should be arguing for schools and colleges to model the good society, to promote solidarity and egalitarian, democratic practices even if the society around

them seems deficient in these. As Eric said at the end of his lecture: 'In evading the cultural, social and moral dimensions of education we are betraying our children and cheapening ourselves'.

Obsessing

Some strands of modern educational thought seem to lack any respect for tradition; jettisoning the values and lessons of the past and obsessing over novelty and superficial change. Ahistorical assumptions such as: 'globalisation is a completely new phenomenon', 'young people are digital natives and learn in a totally different way', 'the skills needed for tomorrow's jobs are radically new' cannot be accepted uncritically and need to be placed in a broad context and challenged. In some cases, they may turn out to be transient or surface rather than fundamental changes. We need to respect our painstakingly learnt traditions of rational thinking and critical evaluation and rely on robust evidence before rejecting 'old' ideas.

New ideas and new ways of working will clearly be needed to address the global challenges we face, and education must prepare people for this. But all new ideas come from somewhere. They arise from people's critical understanding and engagement with the old ideas; after all, they're all we've got! We need to find ways to describe a democratic, egalitarian and critical traditionalism.

Humanistic

In arguing against narrow instrumentalism I think it is wrong to talk of education for *its* own sake. We engage in learning for *our* own sake; there's always a reason for our learning, even if only to satisfy our curiosity or to get pleasure from following an apparently useless line of thought to its conclusion. So I don't think there's anything wrong with a utilitarian view of education as long as our view of usefulness is broad, social and humanistic and not purely narrow, purely economic or individualistic.

In the first half of the 19th century, the Chartists called for 'really useful knowledge' which would help working-class people understand their situation and do something about it. Perhaps we need to describe a 21st century version of 'really useful' knowledge and skills which help people fully realise themselves as individuals, nurturing family and community members, citizens and workers.

Advertisement

Exam reform in the spotlight

At the start of the next school year, new specifications will be unveiled for reformed GCSE and A-level exams. These will bring with them high level risks for the exam system in England, driven by seriously questionable assumptions by Michael Gove and his allies. As the Education Select Committee is to hold an investigation into 15-19 exam reform, it is time to scrutinise the reforms.

The new SOSS pamphlet *Exam Reform: Unresolved Issues* focuses on key issues for immediate consideration. The underlying philosophy needs more debate than it has received, appearing to be driven by an intention to turn the clock back to the 1950s. The immediate need is to decouple exam reform from the timetable currently driving the system towards first teaching in September 2015 of key subjects – Mathematics and English GCSE and the majority of high-entry A-levels. A-level Mathematics and languages are exempt for 2015.

The current priority is to secure rigorous examination of workability. It is remarkable that the proposals are not to be trialled, tested or piloted in any way. Given the problems thrown up by the 2001 A-level and 2012 GCSE reforms, piloting is the minimum required to restore public confidence in exams. The philosophy of returning to end-of-course exams with no resits purely on the basis of memory-test, timed exercises risks producing an alienated generation. The National Union of Students (NUS) is among groups critical of the reforms.

The pamphlet includes contributions from Professor Richard Pring of Oxford University, Dr Sue Pope of Manchester University, who is chair of the general council of the Association of Mathematics Teachers, Professor Margaret Brown of Kings College London, Trevor Fisher and Joe Vinson of NUS.

The pamphlet is available, price for one copy £2.00 (including postage and packing) from VIEWPOINT, PO Box 3599, Stafford ST16 9RD. Extra copies are £1.25 each for 2-5 (inc p&p), 6 and above £1.00 each (inc p&p). Cheques to be made payable to SOSS (Symposium on Sustainable Schools). Please enclose an email address if you wish to be informed of future initiatives.