

BATTLING FOR THE SOUL OF EDUCATION: MOVING BEYOND SCHOOL REFORM TO EDUCATIONAL TRANSFORMATION

by John Abbott

John Abbott is seeking a revolution in education that will put learning back into the hands of the learner. He writes of the learner needing to be free-ranging and weaned from instruction. He is the director of a new wave of thinkers who are members of The 21st Century Learning Initiative, which places emphasis on the skills of critical thinking, problem solving, innovation, independence, collaboration, teamwork, leadership, multi-cultural understanding, communication, IT skills, and career and learning independence. This movement gives insight into Montessori adolescent education as it also is clearly reacting to the content-based learning that Montessori does not view as its focus or priority.

How humans learn – and consequently how children should be brought up – has concerned the elders of society for millennia. It is referred to as the nature/nurture issue: how much of what we are is a result of what we have been born with, and to what extent is this (or can this be) enhanced by how we are brought up?

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That there is no easy answer to this question concerned the Ancient Greeks¹ as much as it did our Victorian ancestors, and is as lively an issue today for the proponents of 'outcome-based education' as it is for those who argue

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for teaching children how to think for themselves. With the virtual disappearance of learning through apprenticeship in the late 19th century, concerns about how children learn have shifted away from the home and the community to focus, almost exclusively, on the role of the school.

Questions about school reform are being asked with increasing frequency in many countries, especially those seeking to adapt to rapidly changing social, economic and political turmoil. A range of indicators suggest, however, that after a couple of decades of intensive effort and vast expenditure of funds the results of several English-speaking countries remain problematic.²

Given what we now know from research into human learning, it would seem that what we need is not further school reform, but a radical transformation of the education system based on the complementary roles of home, community and school. To guide future policy we must recognise that the present structure of British, essentially English, education (a structure that has significantly shaped education in many English-speaking countries) is a result

¹Plato asked Socrates 2,500 years ago: "Can you tell me", the greatest Greek philosopher asked his colleague, "are our behaviours taught, or are they acquired by practice? Or are they neither to be practised nor learnt, but are they something that comes to men by nature or some other way?"

²Late October 2013, as this article was being written, a flurry of media interest was generated by the OECD's *Survey of Adult Skills* which highlighted (shockingly) that in my country – England – those aged over 55 had better numeracy and literacy levels than those aged 16-24. Knives were out; heads had to roll (if they were still alive). In England, the effect was traumatic. England came 22nd for literacy and 21st for numeracy. My countrymen were undoubtedly the 'dunce' in the OECD corner with only the United States (the home of much of this policy muddle), Spain and Italy beneath us. Truth is we English have been in that corner not simply for decades, but as the work I have been producing over the last 25 years has shown, for generations. Having worked and studied around the world throughout that task, I feel like an intellectual refugee from my own country.

of numerous decisions taken in times past by policymakers as they reacted to social and economic environments very different to those of today.

Most of the schools that today's children attend were designed when prevailing cultures assumed that children were born to be taught rather than to learn. So, what kind of education is now required to prepare the younger generation for the kind of adult life which our society values, and wishes to perpetuate?

WHAT KIND OF EDUCATION FOR WHAT KIND OF WORLD?

Lecturing widely around Britain, North America and Australia in the mid-1990s, I proposed a graphic metaphor: *Do we want our children to grow up as battery hens or free-range chickens?*

To ask whether an education system is like a battery hen farm or a free-range farmyard raises significant questions. To an accountant the exact measurement of inputs given to battery hens can give the farmer a more apparent real return on his investment than the less precise practice of leaving hens to wander around the farmyard. But what if the farmer got the shape of the wire cages wrong and the hens had to be released? They would, through lack of exercise,



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Hershey Montessori School, Huntsburg, Ohio

hardly stand on their own feet, or flap their wings. Lacking the natural adaptability of a free-range cockerel who can always escape up to the nearest beam or branch, the over-bred battery hen becomes a perfect morsel for a predatory fox to gobble up. Whether a farmer decides to invest in a battery hen farm, or a free-range farmyard, is ultimately a question of the kind of chicken (meat and eggs) he wants to produce, and the market he is seeking to satisfy.

The same is true of education. To develop a system that reduces the individual's adaptability so as to enhance a set of special skills – a battery hen-type schooling – requires a dangerous certainty about the future. If there is any doubt about the kind of world our children will inherit, then a free-range approach that encourages adaptability and creativity is not only desirable but essential.

Everything I have learnt over the past 20 years about the multiple forms of innate human predispositions to do things in certain preferred ways, has always to be subsumed to what I once heard an eminent neurobiologist say, “in terms of our everyday decisions what matters most are the value systems of the society in which we live”. In other words, although it seems that in the long term we have strong internal mechanisms to balance our competitive instincts with collaboration and our material ambitions with our need for human affection, in the short term if everything around us urges us to be ultra-acquisitive then the most aggressively competitive person will win through. But that is only in the short term. As the systematic study of the evolution of human behaviour shows us, a surfeit of acquisition inevitably wrecks a society.

PILGRIM OR CUSTOMER?

Another way of challenging ourselves to think about what we are doing, is to ask whether we see children as pilgrims or customers. ‘Customer’ surely defines a specifically materialistic concept of life. John Bunyan’s Pilgrim³ is an allegory of a man making his troubled way through life with a heavy load upon his back, beset on all sides by temptations and threats to his world view. An idealist who could see beyond him the House Beautiful, yet could still flounder in the Slough of Despond when the going got tough. Pilgrim, moved by

³Bunyan, J. (1678) *The Pilgrim’s Progress*.

the story of the Good Samaritan, knew that, however rough the going was for him, there were always others who were worse off. A man who grew stronger with every obstacle that he learned to overcome. Pilgrim or customer? Creators of their own material and eternal destiny, or consumers of a range of goods and services as defined by someone else? Thinkers able to take responsibility for their own actions, and willing to accept responsibility for working for the common good, or someone who, in their frustration that nothing so far pulled off the shelves of a supermarket quite suits their tastes, searches for yet another perfect brand? That one has to raise such a question has to be a sign of the moral confusion of our times.

These issues are increasingly being taken up by a frustrated public. Is it just possible that the contrast between the excessive bonuses to the few and the ever more stringent restrictions on others might provide just the stimulus to arrive at a moment when a bigger conversation becomes essential?

ILL FARES THE LAND

As he was dying from motor-neurone disease, Tony Judt captured this dilemma in *Ill Fares the Land*, when he quoted Adam Smith from more than 250 years before: “No society can surely be flourishing and happy, of which the far greater part of the members are poor and miserable”.

Something is profoundly wrong with the way we live today. For 30 years we made a virtue out of the pursuit of material self-interest: indeed, this very pursuit now constitutes whatever remains of our sense of collective purpose. We know what things cost, but have no idea what they are worth. We no longer ask of a judicial ruling or a legislative act: Is it good? Is it fair? Will it bring about a better society or a better world?

The materialistic and selfish quality of contemporary life is not inherent in the human condition. Much of what appears ‘natural’ today dates from the 1980s: the obsession with wealth creation, the cult of privatisation and the private sector, the growing disparities of rich and poor. And above all, the rhetoric which accompanies these: uncritical

admiration for unfettered markets, disdain for the public sector, the delusion of endless growth.

We cannot go on living like this.⁴ And yet we seem unable to conceive of alternatives....If young people today are at a loss, it is not for want of targets. Any conversation with students or schoolchildren will produce a startling checklist of anxieties.....but accompanying these fears is a general sentiment of frustration: 'we' know something is wrongbut what can we believe in? What should we do?⁵

"Do You Teachers Realise How Boring You Are?"

Such frustration is forever boiling over, as it did at a large meeting of teachers in Toronto in 2004. Two 15 year-olds turned on the teachers and said, "Do you teachers realise how boring you are?" Stunned by such a direct criticism, the teachers listened intently as one of the girls went on, "You treat education like a TV dinner. You tell us to go to the freezer, pull out a box, read the instructions carefully, take off the wrapping, puncture the cellophane, then set the microwave for the right time. If we've followed the instructions carefully, we'll get full marks. But that's so boring. What would be more interesting, would be to make up our own recipe, mixing different ingredients we had chosen. Then if it didn't work, we would change the recipe slightly, and keep trying until we had got a recipe that tasted really good. That kind of learning would be fun and make us think. At the moment we are being taught to fit into, rather than shape, our world". Such 'TV-dinner teaching' produces battery hens, an undernourished landscape, and the perpetuation of the system Judt described.

Ask Yourself This...

Read today's papers carefully, listen to the radio, watch television or scour the internet and ask yourself, which way do you see politicians trying to lead us? Towards battery-hen schooling or a free-range education? Which way do you think we should go? And is there a compromise: Can we bring children up to experience both tightly-prescribed schooling, and the open world of exploration and

⁴"Ill fares the land, to hastening ills a prey, where wealth accumulates, and men decay", Oliver Goldsmith, *The Deserted Village*, 1770.

⁵Judt, T. (2010) *Ill Fares the Land*, pp 1-3.

discovery? If so, what are the difficulties? That there are no easy answers to this is all the more reason to ask these questions.

The Crisis Threatening Civilised Life

The spectacular rise in standards of living in recent years especially within the English-speaking nations, has created an extraordinary paradox: The busier and wealthier we have become the less time we seem to have for each other.

This has created a crisis in how we educate our young people. It is a crisis of many parts that threatens the very basis of civilised life – and it deserves your attention. We undoubtedly live in extraordinary times, rich in opportunity yet

A whole new way of doing things has to be found. It is not just the political realm, or the economic, or even the scientific or the spiritual realms, but it is all of these elements of human experience that have to be considered. And considered in their entirety, not separately.

loaded with uncertainty. While it is predicted that a healthy child born today in the UK has a 25% chance of living to the age of one hundred, only a decade ago the then President of the Royal Society gave humankind only a 50-50 chance of surviving that same hundred years. Why? Because, he argued, our technological knowledge is outpacing both our wisdom and our ability to make balanced judgements: a most dangerous mismatch.⁶

The more confused adults feel about the big issues of life, the less willing they are to give their adolescent children the space to work things out for themselves. Uncertain adults breed uninvolved, inexperienced adolescents: *A society that has to rediscover reasons for its faith in the future is a mean place in which to bring up our children.*

Such uncertainty stems from the competing Customer and Pilgrim narratives and their critical differences: The first argues for the rights of the individual, the latter for interdependence and community.

⁶Rees, Martin, *Our Final Century: A Scientist's Warning: How Terror, Error and Environmental Disaster Threaten Humankind's Future in this Century—On Earth and Beyond* (Heinemann, 2003).

Beyond this even, the struggle is being fought over the remains of much older narratives, well-known in their different guises to our ancestors. These older narratives had been about moderating and civilising the competing drivers of human behaviour that would otherwise bring chaos to individuals and societies, by establishing a sense of the common good.

In today's "let's have it all now" society we have forgotten the social significance of those spiritual traditions (referred by many as ethical and philosophic) which in the past sought to "bind"⁷ the individual and community together for mutual benefit and create a sense of meaning. With the weakening of commonly agreed codes of behaviour and morality, governments have seen it necessary, even desirable, to describe in ever finer detail what individuals must, and must not, do. What has life become if we are so reduced to doing only what we are told to do, that we no longer have it within us to rise to the challenge of being personally responsible?

CONSTRUCTING AN ALTERNATIVE VISION

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Instigating a Collective Change of Heart

Some self-selected groups of dedicated individuals have to have the foresight, energy and imagination to transcend the comfortable rules and procedures of self-defining disciplines and embark on a synthesis of facts and theories that, however inconvenient this might be, seeks to appreciate the entire situation. Like an Impressionist painting composed of thousands upon thousands of apparently disconnected dots, we only understand the brilliance of the artist when our focus shifts from seeing the separate dots to suddenly appreciating the picture as a whole.

⁷The word 'religion' is derived from the Latin word 'religio', which means 'to bind together'.



Montessori High School at University Circle, Cleveland, OH, courtesy of Hugh Kdayssi

Even when we have the whole picture nothing can be achieved without a fundamental change of heart on the part of the people themselves. To activate a population involves constructing a persuasive, alternative vision which is so compelling that the contemporary narrative is shown up for what it is – something shallow, utilitarian and demeaning to the grandeur of the human intellect.⁸

A campaign to reverse an overschooled but undereducated society cannot be masterminded by any single, brilliant strategist. It requires distributed leadership, and for that to be effective everyone needs to be really knowledgeable about why they are involved and the rightness and urgency of the cause.⁹

Our post-modern societies have done their best to convince us that there is no such thing as a shared moral code. But without such commonly held beliefs simplistic, politically-correct statements that reflect only the lowest common denominator, squeeze the life out of education by dulling the vigour of pupil and teacher alike.

⁸See 'The Brilliance of Their Minds', proposed TV script available on www.born-to-learn.org (See Appendix F).

⁹Under the banner of Responsible Subversives, the Initiative seeks to build an ever more influential network of people able to draw all these ideas together. See www.responsiblesubversives.org.

A Complete and Generous Education

For young people to utilise their innate predispositions to the full, they need both a formal, rigorous curriculum and a whole experience of life that will later sustain and make them strong enough to deal with all the vagaries of life. John Milton, a man of towering intellect and much practical common sense, reflecting his contemporary Jan Amos Comenius' *The Great Didactic*,¹⁰ spoke in the midst of all the turmoil of the English Civil War in 1644 from a time before reductionism sought to undermine the glory and complexity of what being human could mean. He gave a definition of education nearly four centuries ago that I would argue we need to rediscover:

I call therefore a complete and generous education that which fits a man to perform justly, skilfully and magnanimously, all the offices both public and private, of peace and war.

Ponder those words: – an education that was *complete and generous* (no half measures here), that *fits* (like a tailor making a bespoke suit), so as to *perform* (not just talk) *justly* (so requiring a fine appreciation of ethics) *skilfully* (Milton's definition of skill included the practical as well as the theoretical) and *magnanimously* (with a big heart and empathy with others), *not only in his private affairs but publicly*, when things were going well as well as badly. The rounded person, the adaptable, free-range person, not the efficient and single-purpose battery hen. People who can think for themselves, however complex the situation. To establish such a national vision of education for our own times, in terms comparable to Milton, has to be the starting point for a strategy in any nation in the world that would reverse

¹⁰John Amos Comenius, in the book *The Great Didactic* of 1638, wrote: "Following in the footsteps of nature we find that the process of education will be easy

1. If it begins early, before the mind is corrupted,
2. If the mind be duly prepared to receive it,
3. If it proceed from the general to the particular,
4. And from what is easy to what is more difficult,
5. If the pupil is not overburdened by too many subjects,
6. And if progress be slow in every case,
7. If the intellect be forced to nothing to which its natural bent does not incline it, in accordance with its age and with the right method,
8. If everything be taught through the medium of the senses,
9. And if the use of everything taught be continually kept in view.
10. If everything be taught according to one and the same method.

These, I say, are the principles to be adopted if education is to be easy and pleasant."

our increasingly overschooled but undereducated societies, and recognise that real education has to start far away from the gates of the school. It is surely self-evident that the better educated people are, the less they need to be told what to do. Unfortunately, the reverse is equally true, for the less educated people are, the more government feels it necessary to issue larger rule-books. As regulation is extended quickly it becomes self-perpetuating, for the more people accept being told what to do, the less they think for themselves. This is the tragic point that many English-speaking countries now seem to have reached: *We are in danger of becoming so over-taught that we will lose the art of thinking for ourselves.* A national vision of education should involve the exploitation of recent findings from neurobiology, cognitive science, systems thinking and what it tells us about cognitive apprenticeship,¹¹ and how this is in effect hard-wired into our brains.

Cognitive apprenticeship suggests that learning involves the progressive deepening of earlier understandings, and the joining together of what had earlier been separate, disconnected ideas. It is through experience mixed with reflection that humans weave their own experiences and knowledge of the world into unique patterns. The role of the teacher has to change from 'sage on the stage' to 'guide on the side'.

Cognitive Apprenticeship – A Model for Our Times

Within a cognitive apprenticeship both the task, and the process of achieving it, are made highly visible from the beginning. The student understands where they are going and why. Learners have access to expertise in action. They watch each other, get to understand the incremental stages and establish benchmarks against which to measure their progress. These are the processes that are at the heart of apprenticeship and have evolved over thousands of generations as parents sought the most effective way of helping their children to understand the world. The definition of success over countless ages in the past was when the novice learner/apprentice could demonstrate that they were as good as their master, and maybe even better.

¹¹See Abbott, J. (2004) 'Lieutenant Peter Puget, the grain of the brain and modern society's failure to understand adolescents', available at www.21learn.org.

Cognitive apprenticeship gives us a whole new way of looking at the evolved grain of the brain, and calls for a pedagogy that progressively weans the growing child away from its dependence on instruction. Such pedagogy has to honour the ages-old principle of subsidiarity, whereby it is wrong for a superior to hold to itself the right of making a decision which an inferior is already qualified to do for itself. Just as parents have to let go of their children as they grow older, so subsidiarity necessitates a relationship of trust, not control. If we equip ourselves to be able to do something but then are constantly over-ruled, we fast lose our motivation as control slips away from us (which is exactly what happens to teachers subjected to too much micro-management). It is not an easy principle to put into effect, as the contemporary struggle within the European Union between Brussels and individual member states testifies.

England (as with other comparable nations) needs an education system that will reverse the priority first gained by Dr Arnold for secondary education in the mid-nineteenth century and further extended throughout the last century (for a very brief history of British schooling, see Appendix A and Appendix B [of *Battling for the Soul of Education*] if you wish to dive deep). *It is imperative to see the primary school as the stage when the essential foundations for lifelong learning are built, and funded accordingly.* Once that essential design fault has been recognized then the senior years of education would involve teachers and schools sharing with the greater community the responsibility for providing adolescents with a range of in-school as well as community-based learning opportunities.

The Opportunities and Limitations of Technology

There is another design fault. Schools with their separate classrooms, each arranged for specialist teachers to deliver their own self-contained subjects are very much a product of paper and ink technology. Clearly, the world has moved on, and while there is much commentary on the technology now available to pupils, there is a disturbing lack of discussion over how technology can be used to support the way pupils naturally learn.

A good classroom needs extended periods of quiet in which children enjoy burrowing away at a topic – and a good teacher needs

the space to respond to the particular interests of the class. Besides supporting a child's natural mode of learning, this space allows for the 'rigour' that Tony Little mentions in his Commendation on page 41 [in *Battling for the Soul of Education*], and which is so valued by the Finns. Simply put, 'rigour' is about driving yourself to really understand what something is all about. This requires that teachers have the wisdom and the opportunity to escape from a lesson plan and provide alternative ways to get children to use time.

When the use of technology becomes over-dominated by the end result, you lose, in the name of 'efficiency', the slippage time vital for deep learning. Technology badly used can push children so fast there is no space for the spontaneous to happen. But just as a teacher who holds too slavishly to their lesson plans misses a precious opportunity, so too do those children who follow the pre-designed paths the technology sets out.

With this in mind, government needs education professionals to advise on the opportunities – and limitations – that technology offers. It is my experience that too often this is something those professionals fail to provide as they seek to juggle political expectations.

