

what education gets from politics

stakeholder voices making sense of conflicting interests

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What education needs from politics is much less control and a whole lot more imagination. I try here to say something useful about how things got this way. My conclusion is that the way things are demands more than an adjustment here, a fix there and a re-launch sometime. I'm arguing for mind-boggling imagination, in support of learning-for-living usefulness, based on root-and-branch innovation.

stakeholder voices

The way things are is not a happy story. It's certainly not hard to find reports that politics is remote from experience. People's life-and-work is changed for the worse by politicians claiming to be acting for the better. The people I'm thinking of are *students*, in the *communities* where they and their families live, with their *helpers* in schools and colleges and in civil society.

All three groups are stakeholders - a term which includes shareholders, but reaches far beyond them. I'll talk a lot about stakeholder voice - how different people, in different groups, differently voice their interests in education. Each speaks with an indispensable authority of the sense they make of their experience. There's more leadership for education than its designated leaders necessarily know about. There are also more conflicts of interest.

For me, the most pressing need has to do with the way in which students now need to navigate a path through accelerating change - a journey too-often signposted for manipulation, deceit and predation. Educators cannot ignore this. But stakeholder responses vary: some see market opportunities, some wonder what markets do for social well-being or personal fulfilment, and some argue for critical thinking to enable students to deal with whatever is thrown at them. I try to show how and why politics shows an active interest in some of this, promises but does not deliver on some, and largely ignores some. Educators are bound to wonder why.

There's plenty here for you to disagree with - and plenty of opportunity for you to say why.

abstractions and metaphors

But there's no quick-and-easy way to talk about education. Attempts at any length resort to abstract nouns. Various stakeholders variously call on such concepts as...

'achievement' - 'creativity' - 'fairness' - 'fulfilment' - 'progress' - 'self' - 'well-being'

They're rarely defined in ways that everyone accepts. Some get regularly redefined. And when any of them are loaded into a conversation about accelerating change, a person can get lost.

It gets worse. As politics turns to education for responses to its own problems, the list lengthens, to include for example...

‘aspiration’ - ‘career’ - ‘choice’ - ‘citizenship’ - ‘employability’ - ‘enterprise’

They’re pretty fuzzy concepts. Some are demonstrably meaningless. But some people’s interests find one or more term compelling - even compulsory.

When definitions don’t help, metaphors sometimes can. They substitute abstract talk with talk of the tangible. Metaphors conjure images which can be visualised as part of a narrative. So it’s possible to talk of education...

as if it recounted ‘a journey’ - or - ‘a race’ or as if featured - ‘a trap’ - or - ‘a key’

Such images matter. And narrative seems to be the species’ default way of making sense of what’s going on. It gives voice to experience...

*what did he say? - why’s that so important to her? -
what can she do about it? - he won’t like that!*

Ministerial pronouncements and stakeholder response can be narrated in such terms. But education can’t rely wholly on such talk - it can deceive. Thinking about education can use narrative, but it needs hard evidence.

imagination and reality

I’ve put in links to imagery that stakeholders might find worth engaging. Here’s the first...

Imagine no possessions
I wonder if you can
No need for greed or hunger
A brotherhood of man
Imagine all the people sharing all the world

John Lennon

John Lennon bequeathed [hope](#), not least to young people. He sees young people as moving on together, as if on a shared journey. He avowedly does not see them as being taken in one-by-one, as in a trap. He wrote this when an economy, culture and technology made such western-hemisphere hopefulness seem possible. Contemporary experience needs a different narrative - not least for students, with their educators, and in their communities.

student voice

So what kind of narrative might resonate with students these days? There’s no hope in a story of entrapment, but it might be worth wondering about the attractions of racing imagery - where people can be winners...

- suppose students mainly value education to help them be winners?
- so that they seek coaching? - to get ahead of the pack? - finding an inside track? - to the finishing line?

- might that mean that giving way to others is believed to be weakness?
- what about if the belief were that losers have only themselves to blame?
- would anybody then expect that excluding others from the game is how the competitive win?

Are students finding such talk any more 'hard to do' than John Lennon found in his imagining? Probably not: such competitiveness is not hard to understand in a stagnant economy, where one person's gain will be another's loss.

There are a lot of issues embedded here. There is evidence that finishing-line learning gets lost when the race is thought to be won. It's learning for a result, not learning for life. But the beliefs, values and expectations associated with such a story can, nonetheless, embed in the culture of a school, a college or a project...

- how far would education be valued for the advantages it gives to 'me', over 'others'?
- are relationships increasingly valued for their 'worth-knowing' networking?
- and about the excluded, who do they believe they can most count on when it matters? - day-on-day? - in a crisis?
- do such outsiders have any value to the advantaged - worth talking to? - caring about? - given as much as a nod?

This may not be what John Lennon calls 'brotherhood'. And there is some evidence of loss of eye-contact in competitive cultures.

Such issues are not intended for research schedules; they are the makings of fuller conversations. For the helpers these are listening conversations - helpers need to know what sense students are making of their experience of education.

So what about John Lennon's talk of 'possessions'? - among which socially-isolating on-line devices may be significant...

- are there possessions that are more valued than, say, on-line devices? - like what?
- do we know what such feelings-for-things are about? - fun? - contacts? - status? - what else?
- suppose it's fun, would that be exciting? - impulsive? - dramatic? - extreme? - dangerous? - what more could it be?
- suppose it's about contacts? - does that mean with people whom 'I like'? - or are 'like me'? - what's most to like? - what people? - found where? - valued why? - something else?
- suppose it's about status, would that have anything to do with expensive stuff? - up-to-date? - looking good? - feeling good? - having followers? - what else?

There's plenty of room for imagination here, but it's not John Lennon's. If educators find any trace of a 'me-now-and-fun' culture, is it showing any traces of what some call 'immature' - and some would call 'infantilised'. There's evidence, and not only among young people. A second bit of imagery: Aldous Huxley attributes such attitudes to most of us, in his ironic [imagining](#) of a *Brave New World*.

There's no limit in such talk to why-is-this-important-to-anybody questioning. Neither is there any limit to what-can-anyone-do-about-it hope.

educator voice

Inserting words like 'empowerment', 'freedom' and 'choice' into a message captures comfortable compliance. Other words, like 'entrap', 'impulse' and 'infantilise' feel more like uncomfortable warnings. But both sets of terms belong to each other, like the conflicted dialogue in a well-told story. Educators do not come empty handed to that conversation. Engaging imagery, tracking sense-making and questioning meaning - that's what educators do. Whatever trap-door may be slammed shut, educators can find a key.

Maybe. But what if education were favourably enough disposed to government to be itself susceptible to capture?

- is it worth asking how favourably disposed to government educators want to be? - need to be? - are?
- what if prevalent social attitudes are more inclined to trust governing voices?
- and suppose governmental and commercial priorities were to become interchangeable with each other?
- would it then be possible that terms like 'markets', 'brands', 'customers', and 'choice' meld education's aims with political and business-world claims? - okay with that?
- if these are trends, then should educators be using on-line sources to track them? - and any place for 'professional' and 'popular' journalism?
- and how much of this do government's 'expert' advisers illuminate? - or do its commercially-based lobbyists?
- should any of this be a concern of educators? - and would that be only if it concerns education and assessment? - or if it affects student's chances in life? - or because it has broader stakeholder significance? - like what?
- but what if such trends are already shaping stakeholders attitudes? - how, then, is any of this making learning-for-living more accessible to some people? - and less to others?

If any part of this line of conversation seeks to maintain independence then it is more than about skills and theory, it's about ethics. It seems to me to be easier to make ethical claims in mission statements, than to demonstrate ethical commitments in a crisis. There is here the makings a conversation for educators, their mentors, trainers, associations and theorists to get into.

Because the situation is critical, an independent education service faces formidable issues...

- suppose educators are asked to treat what students bring out of art, work and creativity as no more than saleable commodities?
- what if history were to become a feel-good account of a great nation's leaders?
- on another tack, would it matter if an uncomprehended 'nudge' supplants any need to understand the whys-and-wherefores for taking action? - or if back-of-the-envelope 'tips' were thought to be enough to guide what people need to do?
- and what if, then, any resulting self-confidence and positive thinking become the prime outcomes of education? - and if not that, something more troublesome? - like asking awkward questions - or dissent?
- would it matter if any me-and-mine individualism tightened its hold on curriculum? - setting aside the sense people make of their experience in their neighbourhoods? - about their inheritance and upbringing? - among their connections? - and their attachments to others?
- would psychology then be strong enough to carry the explanatory freight concerning what people learn? - and what they do with the opportunity to learn? - rather than an understanding social-and-cultural-group influences on their attitudes?
- and would any loss of the sense of living-with-others mean that local and systemic influences on learning are down-played? - allowing the need for socially-located help to be curtailed? - and, despite policy-and-commercial claims to 'openness', not open to scrutiny?

There is evidence that political pronouncements shape prevalent attitudes. But policy promises of 'freedom' might not be freedom as most people think of it. It's freedom for families to manoeuvre into high-rated schools, and for commerce to edge education towards privatisation. It's not freedom for families get their kids into a local school which they have come to think of as theirs. Nor for independently-minded teachers to escape derogatory labelling. It's certainly not a freedom that John Lennon imagined 'would make the world as one'.

A third piece of imagery: are there any traces here of George Orwell's [nightmare](#)? - take control of the language, substitute belief for reality, re-write the past. Evidence of social control includes reports of clever news management neutralising what policy does not want heard, smothering it with press releases which are cut-and-pasted into news items by compliant journalists. The media gain is to capture attention and extend the reach of advertising. Popular demands for satisfaction make for a headline-driven curriculum requiring educators to come up with solutions to situations where they can have no control. And much of each requirement is written by politicians, their advisers and lobbyists. Some of it is lies.

There are different interests at stake here - different students, different educators, in different communities, differently benefit - and are differently harmed. But independent educators make a different use of the headline-driven curriculum: enabling a critical grasp of what the media claim, engaging students in asking on what evidence?, on behalf of whom?, and why? How many politicians have you noticed asking for such disturbance?

community voice

The politics of promise rests on a belief in the possibility of unlimited growth. The evidence is that the economics of such beliefs is unreliable, especially concerning the risks and costs of collateral damage. And that damage ranges from the personal-and-frightening, to the planetary-and-catastrophic. People need a new narrative, making new sense and based on sane assumptions.

Isn't that what education is for? It would be surprising to find that no teacher wanted to help with any part of the processes suggested here. A tough test is the purest of all disciplines - maths (said to be god's language). The most basic grasp of probability undermines the most plausible of bogus promises. That educator needs only to understand that this is not just about acquiring skills for an examination, it's about transferring learning into life.

There's much talk of curriculum reform; a lot of it about the needs of the economy and the usefulness to employers. That story needs retelling...

- suppose we start from an assertion that a pressing need for education is to enable the navigation of a path through change? - how far would the features of that challenge be to deal with overload? - confusion? - deception? - risk? - and what more?
- would that mean enabling people to probe and interrogate every promise, enticement and manoeuvre?
- and how far do they need to be able to do that as individuals? - with friends? - in groups? - on-line?
- do current conditions need an increased ability to scrutinise, probe and interrogate persuaders? - does the phrase 'critical thinking' convey any of this?
- if so, is enough attention given to critical thinking in calls for reform from policy? - commerce? - the media? - religion? - if not, is it up to educators to do more about it? - and students? - and other stakeholders?

Not all educators will say 'yes' to all of this. But this reform doesn't need all educators. The need is for independent educators. Who work with the voice of stakeholders. With their ethics in good order.

The issues raised here are locally experienced, but they are globally generated. The planet is peppered with regimes who find it easier to nudge, entice, cajole and threaten people into compliance than to educate them into autonomy. They breed dependence on dominant and controlling voices. They feed into every conflict, fear and risk that we all face. It justifies violence against outsiders and breeds docility in the group. Educators were never more deeply and urgently implicated. Not least in the UK.

A fourth piece of imagery: John Lennon, Aldous Huxley and George Orwell each rates his mention. But so does Norman [Jewison](#), for his movie *Rollerball* (since disastrously re-made). It tells of a world where global commerce has become the government, shaping what people are to believe, value and expect. The instrument of control is the game - fast, extreme, where winning and losing has life-and-death significance - and, it seems, is impossible to resist. It seems.

why so much detail?

Is there too much to bother about here? Some say so. But the evidence is that the more ideas we take on board the greater our repertoire for action. Complexity is not necessarily the problem, in some form it's necessary to the solution. There is certainly much more going on in teaching-and-learning than is immediately obvious. Anyone who wants not to be bothered by complexity should stay away from curriculum.

The task of reform is, then, demanding. A sane understand must explain uncomfortable causes-and- effects if we are effectively to deal with crises concerning our economy, technology and security. What we do about education is doubly important: for how educators help students now, and for how students go on learning - life-wide and life-long.

The enemy of all this is not 'what-if' thinking. The biggest danger is 'if-only' thinking. I doubt that there has been a reform movement that has not been colonised by such single-minded claims...

if only we could get back to... - if only they had more... - if only somebody would...

It's people zeroing-in on the opportunity to get their idea, or interest, or programme on-board. The argument is, often enough, that...

there's no need to start again, we know what we need to do

But we don't. Education is in unprecedented crisis. The economic, technological and cultural trends move at an accelerating rate, and on a global scale. They are invading students, their helpers and their communities with what are, at times, unmanageable demands. We may not be able start again, but we are able to imagine - and to imagine what it would be like to start from scratch...

knowing what we know about how things are - and if we were building a new education service - what would we build in?

This is not colonising the action with ready-made proposals. But neither is it discarding all the proposals that are within reach. If we can agree about what's going on, in all its complexity, then we can trawl proposals that can be adapted to those needs. And the more we've got to go on, the better.

This innovative strategy does not start with provision but with need. The perspectives which inform the process are not from institutions but from more widely-rooted stakeholders. It is, then, a process of letting go and holding on. It discards what is no longer appropriate, useful or tenable. And it turns to what is. This is what needs mind-boggling imagination, enables learning-for-living usefulness, and calls on root-and-branch innovation.

That's why I've framed the issues outside dominant interests. And it's why you can reframe them. I want you to. There are some issues on which I would be pleased to be proved wrong.

I'll follow this up shortly, with the ideas, argument and evidence that inform what I've set out above. I'm collating it now, and a link will appear here. It will go into detail on both...

what does education get from politics?
and
what does education need from politics?

It will cover...

- what's to be done about competitiveness - commerce - fragmentation - blame - values - infantilism - exclusion - fear-and-hope
- how educators can be ready - getting results - working with stakeholders - re-structuring activity

- what politics can do in localities - seizing opportunities - re-connecting to localities - facing complexities - becoming authentic - being fair - acknowledging failure - re-thinking bases - offering leadership

The [first instalment](#) [BL39] is available now.

Some people have a taste for dystopian narratives, such as *Brave New World*, *1984* and *Rollerball* - and there are plenty more. The best of these bad-news stories are not mere frighteners, to send us behind some sociological sofa. Their imagery takes us to another place, where we can recognise warnings concerning our own society. A well-written dystopia is for grown-ups - however old or young they may be. Grown-ups are people who can figure out how to make good use of bad news.

This is a website about innovation. And this blog claims that UK education is facing as critical a challenge to innovation as it has ever faced. How do we make good use of that bad news? - contribute to the on-line discussion below, or by e-mailing [Bill](#)...

this work is in four parts...

1. **[issues](#)**. [BL38]
2. **[change](#)** [BL39]
3. **[education](#)** [BL40]
4. **[policy](#)** [BL42, BL43]