

A few months ago I received my copy of the Robinson Report 'All our Futures – Creativity, Culture and Education', sponsored jointly by the Departments of Education and Employment and Culture, Media and Sport (Blunkett and Smith). Having scanned through it – and having been largely impressed by its sound common sense – I think I can be forgiven for the fact that it has since sat unopened on my bookshelves. For the fact is that the report has been received with a deafening silence from all quarters that matter to schools. However, over the Christmas period, my interest has been revived by another report in the same vein, from the DEMOS think-tank, and entitled 'The Creative Age; knowledge and skills for the new economy'.

At one level, we might take all this interest in creativity as a clear sign that the government is really interested in the subject and determined to press forward with important initiatives that will support the creative development of our youngsters. After all, Blair himself is on record as being (apparently) very enthusiastic about creative Britain. "Our aim must be to create a nation where the creative talents of all the people are used to build a true enterprise economy for the 21st century..." (NACCCE 1999 p. 6)

Like motherhood and apple pie, creativity is obviously 'a good thing' – and we all welcome it, and embrace it, and celebrate it. Don't we? Do we?

The sad truth is that we don't, for education and creativity make very uncomfortable bedfellows. As I shall attempt to illustrate below, the currently prevailing atmosphere in schools is utterly antipathetic to the development of creativity. Here, more than in any other area of education policy, the rhetoric and the reality are worlds apart.

### Training creative designers

Higher education design courses in Britain have a well deserved reputation around the world. We produce some of the best – most creative – designers, and we produce lots of them. I have referred in previous editorials to the astonishing figure of 62,000 design students currently studying in the UK, and most of the courses on which they study will espouse the development of students' creativity.

But we do so knowing the difficulties that are raised by such a claim, for we know that creativity is – by definition – unpredictable and even anarchic. In a recent research exercise that we have conducted for the Design Council, we

interviewed students and tutors on design courses, and we were specifically interested in this question of fostering creativity, and how it required students to *take risks*. The obvious tension is whether they go with a risky exciting idea (and invite failure) or whether they play safe and guarantee an outcome?

"... we do encourage students to take risks and sometimes what we try to do is reward failure when people have taken risks." (tutor interview)

"You've got to have an awful lot of failure ... because if you don't fail you will never transcend ... students must handle failure and then if the end result doesn't work it isn't necessarily a failure because the process might have been wonderful ... the outcome at the end of the day isn't the be all and end all ... if you are going to reward risk then you've got to reward failure as well and that's hard." (tutor interview)

This apparently contradictory idea – that you need to reward failure – forces the issue of assessment into the centre of any debate about creativity. And from our study it seemed that the biggest determinant of whether the students did (or did not) embrace the risky and the creative, was the attitude of their tutors. In their attitudes to failure in particular, these tutors determined how far students were prepared to chance their arms.

This evidence is entirely consistent with all the established evidence about fostering creativity. None of us will take risks with a highly creative idea if we think that any possible failure is likely to be criticised, damned and rubbished by those who hold power over us. All the evidence shows that we need to be confident that we are in a secure and supportive environment before we take risks. Words like trust and faith feature strongly in descriptions of creative learning environments and of the working relationships between creative teachers and their students.

"we create bonds of trust and shared understandings that make it possible to redefine failure as a positive and beneficial experience" (Seltzer, K. and Bentley, T. 1999 p 73)

### The constricting climate in schools

So what of the situation in schools? No teacher needs to be told about what counts in school. Everyone knows that the bottom line is about Ofsted inspections, examination pass rates,

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**References**

National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education (NACCCE) (1999) *All Our Futures: Creativity, Culture and Education*, DfEE

Seltzer, K. and Bentley, T. (1999) *The Creative Age. Knowledge and Skills for the New Economy* DEMOS

literacy and numeracy targets and the whole grotesque panoply of league tables and monitoring and accountability initiatives that have flooded out of the DfEE and its multiple offshoots over the last 10 years.

Naming and shaming is the order of the day. To hell with trust, faith and supportive risk-taking environments. I am not noted for excessive use of rose-tinted spectacles, but I am quite sure that in my career lifetime there has never been a more constricting reactionary atmosphere in schools than there is now.

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In case readers would like a piece of hard evidence of this phenomenon, I refer them to the Teacher Training Agency (TTA) ‘standards’ that define acceptable levels of professional performance for teachers. If we refer to the standard for Qualified Teacher Status (which all of us in teacher education know by heart), we read something like 65 standards statements covering everything from knowledge and understanding of one’s subject to planning and class management. And in these 65 statements, I invite the reader to guess how many of them refer to the need for teachers to be creative and imaginative. Or how many of them are used to insist that the development of children’s creativity is a priority for teachers. None. Not one. The whole set of standards is utterly devoid of any mention of creativity.

As Robinson somewhat diffidently points out:

“It is important to eliminate the factors which inhibit the creative activity of teachers ... There are now in education unusually high levels of prescription in relation to content and teaching methods.” (NACCCE 1999 p96)

You can say that again. Standards specification and accountability-mania dominates all debate about what should be going on in schools.

**‘Joined-up’ government?**

I am drawn to the inevitable conclusion that there is lots of political puff about creativity in schools – but that is all it is. For all the serious messages to schools are diametrically opposed to creating the supportive culture of freedom and risk-taking that alone will foster creativity.

It is therefore not in the least surprising that Robinson’s readable and well informed report has disappeared into a DfEE black hole. To respond to it properly, ministers would need to draw back from the inspection and accountability culture of naming, shaming and blaming. They would need to reassert the personal autonomy of teachers and the importance of allowing space for these teachers to experiment with new curricula and new methods. Somehow I don’t think this is likely.

But, interestingly, if such a burst of classroom freedom were to be announced, it would go a long way to solving a different problem for Blunkett – the desperate shortage of graduates wishing to train for teaching; particularly in design and technology. Preliminary data from a research exercise in the DfEE suggests that the biggest turn-offs for design and engineering graduates is that they perceive teaching as insufficiently creative and overburdened with paperwork.

Blunkett therefore has the rare opportunity of a triple-whammy. He can implement the recommendations of the Robinson report, he can be seen to be acting in support of his leader’s desire for a creative Britain, and he can help solve the teacher shortage.