

The role of the State in your classroom

This is a new experience for me. Before taking on the responsibilities as editor-in-chief for this new DATA journal, I have not held any regular editorial post, so the experience is causing me to ask a few questions. And amongst these questions is the teaser: "What is an editorial for?" At one level it might be a discursive summary of the contents of this particular edition of the journal. But that is to take a rather uninteresting view of things, since the discerning reader can derive that information largely from scanning the list of contributions. So what else might it be? On the few occasions when I have the leisure to mull over the newspaper at breakfast, I derive pleasure and some enlightenment from the editorial comment – which is just that. It is comment on a topical matter by those who are reasonably well informed about the events and the issues surrounding it. The editorial is partly a reflection of informed opinion – and partly an attempt to shape and influence public opinion on the matter in question.

It seems to me that this is what the DATA journal editorial should be: comment from the editor on a hot issue of the times. So here goes.

The role of the State in your classroom

In the last few years – as we have struggled with the birth of the National Curriculum – I have been increasingly troubled by the relationship between the role of the State and the role of the individual teacher and school in deciding what should go on in the classroom. The troubling issue can be simply stated. On one hand there are good reasons for having state control over the structure of the curriculum – to do with each pupil's entitlement to a broad and balanced curriculum, regardless of whether they live in Cumbria or Cornwall. On the other hand, the centralising influence of a national curriculum runs the risk of placing a dead weight on innovation – discouraging imaginative teachers and schools from developing their curricula.

Design and technology provides a classic example of this paradox. Had we drawn up a national curriculum 15 or even 10 years ago, design and technology would not have been in it. And arguably then it would have

been very difficult for it to develop in the way that it has. The freedom that formerly existed for schools and LEAs to encourage new and innovative approaches to learning in the workshops was central to the emergence of pockets of excellence in design and technology. These pockets were systematically exploited and developed by HMI and by advisory teams and gradually a national consensus emerged that design and technology is where we should be. Our National Curriculum (essentially defined in 1988) now ensures that this diet of design and technology is part of the national entitlement. We were all gleeful when we pulled off what we saw as this great political achievement, but many of us have become somewhat more reflective of late. What happens when we want to develop it anew – what mechanism exists by which we can keep our discipline relevant to current concerns rather than a reflection of what they were in 1988? The issue is, of course, inseparable from the business of testing and examinations which are there essentially to ensure compliance with the National Curriculum. The essential interrelationship of curriculum and assessment is now illustrated by their common overlord: SCAA.

My concern with these matters has led me recently to engineer an opportunity to see how these issues are played out in a number of other countries, and the two cases of Germany and the USA provide fascinating contrasts to our own position.

Germany is made up of 16 Länder (lands or counties). Within each, the curriculum is derived and sent as a *framework* to schools for implementation. The specificity of this framework is not unlike the level of that in our own national curriculum. However, only at school-leaving points is there any formal state testing, and then only for those in the high stakes business of university or college entrance. More surprisingly, there is almost no external moderation process. Standards within the examination are seen to be the province of the school. Schools are not required to cross-check their marks with other schools, and no visiting examiners will come in to check them. Perhaps not surprisingly, in the weighty area of testing, the results from some Länder may not be accepted by others.

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By contrast, the USA is the land of testing. And everyone wants to get in on the act. The Federal Government sets requirements, the individual States set requirements, the School Districts set requirements and the schools themselves set requirements. And these curriculum requirements are backed up by testing – ad nauseam. And most of it is 'objective' testing; 'multiple-choice' testing. From an early age pupils will be processed through reading and maths tests, and they will continue to take tests right through their school career up to the SATs (Scholastic Aptitude Tests) that are the essential requirement for university or college entrance. Since most of the testing is multiple choice, it is frequently machine scored, and thus 'standards' can be monitored and maintained at the State and even at the national level. State test scores and SAT scores have universal currency.

In the USA, curriculum is unquestionably shaped by the testing. I observed a pupil in downtown Brooklyn struggling with some form of quadratic equation and asked him when he might need to use it. I was hoping he could give me an account of its usefulness in everyday life – but his answer was rather more to the point. "I'll need it in the test". By contrast in Germany, curriculum is not significantly shaped by testing. The activities of individual schools are shaped by the curriculum framework, but then interpreted by the teachers and schools. It is unquestionably a more relaxed system.

So what about the paradox with which I started: the problem of ensuring continuing curriculum development. My reading of the situation is that it is seen as two different things in the two countries in question.

In the USA, curriculum development is seen as dependent upon two related factors. *First* it is concerned with the development of 'standards' – i.e. written statements of achievement at different levels; not unlike our former Statements of Attainment (there are any number of 'standards' projects at work even as I write, developing ever longer lists of competences). And *second*, epitomised by the current priority of the technology teachers, curriculum development in technology is seen as dependent upon having a test for

technology. If they had a test for it, it would be seen as important and they could ensure that everyone did it.

In Germany, curriculum development is not about 'standards', or about testing. It is about teacher development. Since so much is dependent upon the teacher (as interpreter of the curriculum and as holder of the standards) it is essential that the teacher is fully professional. If there is evidence of a teacher failing in either area, it is a case for professional development. The problem of course is finding out about the 'failure', since there is very little in their system to bring it into the open.

So what does all this tell us about our own system? My judgment would be that if we took these two examples as ends of a continuum, we would sit somewhere between them. In the early-mid 1980s we were somewhat closer to the German system, but during the late 1980s and early 1990s we moved dramatically towards a USA model of testing anything that moved – inspired no doubt by all the visits that our political leaders had made to Reagan's America. But most recently we have backed off from the more draconian manifestations of this tendency and back towards a more flexible regime. Nonetheless the two cases I have cited indicate the very different yardsticks that we might use as indicators of where State priorities lie. Is investment going into 'standards' and 'benchmarks' and testing; or is investment going into developing the expertise of our teachers? Neither – by itself – is a complete solution.

PS If you have a view about this new conception of the Editorial – or about the issues I have raised in it – please write and let us know.