

The 'Why?' questions

Prof Richard Kimbell, Goldsmiths, University of London

I was reading a report from The Royal Society for the Arts concerning climate change. Or rather... it was about *attitudes* to climate change. Polls taken for the RSA and published in the report show that 80% of Britons are worried about climate change but only 14% say they have altered their behaviour accordingly. Rowson (the author) points out that that leaves 66% (two thirds of us) as Climate Ignorers – a condition of polite apathy. (Rowson J. 2013. RSA).

There were two things in particular about the report that made me ponder... and neither of them was really about climate change. First I was forced to recognise that I am in the 2/3 that he has identified. I don't refuse to fly in aircraft, nor do I have an electric car, or restrict myself to bike travel, and whilst I do insulate my house I realise that my motivation is more about saving money on energy than on avoiding climate change. But second – and what really engaged my interest – was a fleeting reference in the report to a Chinese philosopher Wang Yangming, who argued that "to know and not to act, is not to know". This instantly transported me back to the 1960s when I was studying the philosophy of Education – and in particular the Confucian tradition of philosophy.

It's worth pointing out that at that time and in fact up to (about) 1980, philosophy was a compulsory part of the teacher education programme. There was a team of philosophy tutors at Goldsmiths – including Richard Pring – and whilst I cannot claim that I enjoyed philosophy tutorials, I certainly did appreciate the opportunity to engage with issues that go beyond the 'how' and the 'what' that tends to dominate current classroom debate.

What we should teach – and **how** we should teach it are all very well as issues for discussion, but they pale into insignificance beside the **why** questions. Why bother with educating young people? What does it mean to be educated? Why bother with D&T? Why should we spend millions on workshops and specialist teachers? These (and so many more) questions cannot be answered by reference to empirical data – from Ofsted or anyone else. They are questions about meaning and purpose and value. They were at the heart of the philosophy courses that were commonplace in the 1960s and that had pretty much disappeared by the 1980s. They were progressively supplanted by what might be called 'the managerialist tendency'... preoccupied with ensuring that new teachers had good classroom management skills. Sociology and psychology were the disciplines at the leading edge of

these studies – and philosophy was quietly sidelined and then dropped. Whilst no-one could deny the value of classroom management skills, there is a significant part of me that regrets the absence of those challenging and liberating philosophical debates around the 'why' questions.

The Confucian tradition of education originated in the 5thC BC with Confucius' claim that heaven is aligned with moral order but dependent upon human agents to actualise its will. Moreover he argued that moral states are contagious...you 'catch it' from the family and of course from teachers – who have responsibility for diffusing this moral order. Two thousand years later, in the 15th C, Wang Yangming (a neo-Confucian) had been a very able administrator and military official and his contribution to the debate lay in his claim that people are naturally good and that personal morality is the main source of social well-being. Social problems, he argued, lay in the failure to understand one's self and its relationship with the world...and thus fail to live up to what one could be. This led him into the interesting stuff about the relationship between knowledge and action and to the notion quoted by Rowson that 'to know and not to act is not to know'. And this is where the real connection lies to our world of designing.

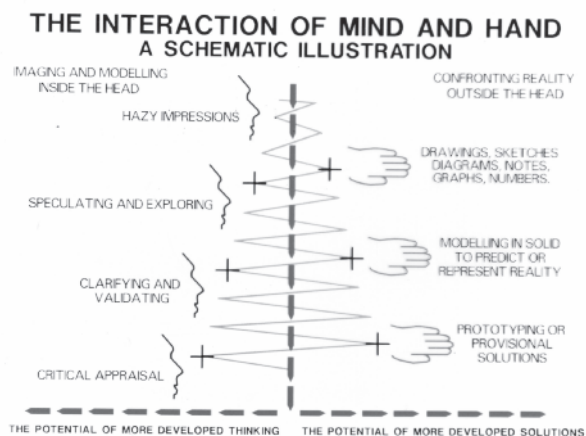


(Wang Yangming 1472-1529)

In 1991 we concluded the Assessment of Performance Unit (APU) design and technology project and published the final report. In it we described a view of designing that stood in sharp contrast to the conventional models of designing that were popular at the time. Instead of describing designing as a linear progression from brief>specification>research>ideas>making>evaluating, we saw it more as an idea journey that iterates between active and reflective modes of operation. We start with an idea (in the head) and immediately externalise it through discussion, sketching or modelling and this allows us to see the idea more clearly and think more deeply about it. We argued that these two sides of performance (active and reflective) were complementary and fed off each other.

The 'Why?' questions

We were fortunate that the APU assessments that we had run in 1988 provided us with an enormous archive of 20,000 pieces of designing by 15 yr old learners, so we had masses of exemplification to illustrate different styles of designing. Amongst the most obvious differences in performance were those that resulted from an imbalance between action and reflection. If learners tried to tackle a design task through dominantly reflective behaviour... thinking about the context of use and the nature of the user and considering how other factors (like safety / saleability / function etc) might bear upon the outcome, then frequently those learners never got round to making any substantive design proposal at all. All the issues they raised clouded their ability to take direct action. At the other extreme some learners were so keen to get into direct action that they just wanted to be provided with materials so they could start making it (when it was far from clear what the 'it' was that they had in mind to make). Such dominantly active behaviour was frequently unreflective and resulted in inappropriate outcomes.



Significantly the best performance was evident when learners balanced reflective and active behaviour. Making proposals, thinking about the consequences for users, modifying the proposal, reflecting on what elements worked well and which didn't, refining and prototyping and reviewing the work through the eyes of others. Such balanced performance was typically stronger than the work from either extreme of imbalance. This all seems a long time ago, and those 15 yr olds are now in their early 40s. But recently, 'iterative design processes' have become all the rage; in the KS1-3 programmes of study, the GCSE consultation, and in the wider literature. (See eg Norman at <http://www.ldpress.co.uk/iterative-model-designing-2/>).

But it was that fleeting reference to Wang Yangming that really sparked my interest, reminding me of my old

philosophy tutorials. So I dug around a bit. Remember that Wang Yangming was writing in the 15th C, and (by way of context) this is when Henry VII was seeing off Richard 111 at the battle of Bosworth... 'a horse, a horse, my kingdom for a horse'. While we were battling it out in our muddy little island, Wang Yangming was following in a 2,000 year tradition of thinking about education. And he produced his treatise about the '*Great Learning*'. At the heart of his educational philosophy was what he described as the unity of knowledge and action. Its necessary to see his use of the word 'knowledge' not as we now do, as an intellectual repository of stuff to be remembered. Rather he saw knowledge more as *knowing*; as the working of the mind.

On the one hand, "there is a type of person in the world who foolishly acts upon impulse without engaging in the slightest thought or reflection. Because they always act blindly and recklessly, it is necessary to talk to them about knowing..."

On the other hand, "[t]here is also a type of person who is vague and irresolute; they engage in speculation while suspended in a vacuum and are unwilling to apply themselves to any concrete actions" These latter people benefit from advice that emphasizes action, without necessarily discussing knowledge.

(Tiwald, Justin and Bryan W. Van Norden [eds.] 2014 p268)

In a nutshell he describes the two extreme states of distorted designing performance that we exemplified in 1991.

All of which encouraged me to speculate a bit more about the cost of losing philosophy from our education courses. Within the philosophy programme we were required to *develop new* courses of study for schools (in my case D&T but in my tutorial group there were also maths, English, geography and PE students) and I had to argue why I would include it in my design and technology curriculum and (if necessary) why other existing elements should be removed. I use the words deliberately... it was *my* curriculum. In a small way, we were required to develop a personal philosophy of learning and to exemplify it through real courses of study for schools.

In the last twenty years we have all witnessed the danger of removing that responsibility from teachers. It is now Mr Gove's curriculum (or perhaps Nicky Morgan's), and our students talk of 'delivering' it, a bit like a postman taking someone else's mail and depositing it here and there.

The 'Why?' questions

Teacher as civil servant; a manager doing someone else's bidding. Which is sadly a long way from teacher as autonomous educator. I can almost hear Wang Yangming turning in his tomb.

References:

Rowson J. (2013) *A new agenda on climate change. Facing up to stealth denial and winding down on fossil fuels*. December 2013. RSA

Tiwald, Justin and Bryan W. Van Norden [eds.] (2014) *Readings in Later Chinese Philosophy: Han to the Twentieth Century*, Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing.