

The revision of National Curriculum design and technology: reviewing the reviews

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It's been my privilege in the past four months to talk with teachers, students, lecturers, industrialists and advisers about the proposals made by the HMI team charged with the task of revising the National Curriculum in design and technology; twenty-five venues up and down the country have been visited. Armed with these experiences it has been fascinating to reflect on the responses given in the last edition of this journal (volume 25, number 2) by two teachers, two advisers and a professor. What follows is a review of the reviews.

Understandably, none of the writers endorsed every part of the proposals but most of them were able to recognise the potential for improvements they made and to demonstrate their understanding by accurately citing chapter and verse from the document. This understanding has been achieved by hard work, often involving long periods of study during the Christmas break. It's a dedication to duty we've come to expect of the professionals who teach the nation's children (the most precious commodity we have in our education system) and I hope we shall never come to take it for granted. All the more impressive when busy teachers rise to the additional burden of writing an article to set the scene for the consultation to follow.

Anyone wishing to respond to the consultative process but unwilling to be constrained by the format of the NCC's official response form, could not have had a better model to follow than the article putting the views of representatives of the National Association of Advisers and Inspectors of D&T. I don't agree with all the points they make but the strategy of listing the aspects of the proposals they do not want to see altered is an excellent one.

It's the teachers' and the advisers' articles that reflected the views I encountered most frequently in question and answers sessions. Sadly, Professor Kimbell's piece is out of touch with the views of the vast majority of teachers. It also contains factual errors, contradictions and misrepresentations uncharacteristic of his writing and fails to do him justice. In the past he has made very considerable contributions to our understanding of the ways in which children develop capability in design and technology, particularly through the work of the team he led when the Assessment of Performance Unit project on D&T was in operation. Such has been his influence in the subject that some busy teachers have accepted

his word without verifying the opinions expressed. At almost every venue it's been necessary to correct the false impressions presented in his DATA journal article. For this reason alone I welcome the opportunity to set the record straight.

Most teachers have analysed the statements of attainment in the current Order to find the eleven strands that are secreted there. They know only too well the linguistic inadequacies of these statements of attainment; the lack of progression, the ambiguity, the multiple command verbs and the consequent difficulties encountered when assessment is attempted. The programmes of study give similar problems, not least because they are vague and fail to give teachers the clear guidance needed to formulate their teaching programmes. And yet Professor Kimbell is of the opinion that

'The original Order inspired the literati of design and technology...'

The use of the word 'literati' in this context is as worrying as it is revealing. The main concern in D&T is to develop practical capability but this word implies an understanding of literature not of technology. Given the difficulties induced by imprecise language in the Order the use of such a word is both sad and ironic for it reveals a lack of understanding of the problems teachers have been wrestling with. However, the final phrase of the piece is even more extraordinary:

'...I predict we shall look back with longing to the open vistas of opportunity offered by the 1989 edition.'

The linguistic inadequacies of the ATs and PoS have created a situation where we don't in fact have a National Curriculum in D&T. The lack of clear definition in the current Order has led to a variety of interpretations, between LEAs and between schools in the same LEA. This appalling weakness would appear to be seen as an advantage. The HMI report on the first year of implementation finds that standards of achievement in KS 3 fell as a result of the use of the Order. Statements such as Professor Kimbell's make parents and politicians distrust the advice of those who call themselves educational experts. No wonder the training of student teachers is being eased away from initial teacher training establishments and relocated in schools.

The contradiction in the piece are equally damaging. One paragraph claims that understanding the needs and values of clients has 'largely' disappeared. The next sentence acknowledges, however, that these aspects are made explicit from level 5 (they are also implicit in a statement at level 4). According to my arithmetic this means that at least six of the ten statements in this strand do explicitly include this aspect of designing. Largely disappeared?

The most confusing part of the article concerns the handling of evaluation in the current Order and in the proposals. In the current order the AT structure is sprinkled with statements about evaluation. It is important that pupils evaluate their work at every state of its development. In this way pupils grow in confidence and competence when they are designing. This is a lesson learnt from the APU project. The revision team were anxious to create a structure where such interactive evaluation would happen. However, they were also conscious of the difficulties created when this end is contrived by adjectival increments in the SoAs. This strategy more than any other has been responsible for the unwieldy and unreliable AT structure in the current Order. The many SoAs dealing with evaluation have proved to be an obstacle and not an aid to good pedagogy. The attempt to achieve progression in them is ineffective and they are an impediment to valid assessment. The underlying philosophy would appear to be one of reminding teachers periodically of the need for evaluation, through the SoAs. It was the view of the revision team that there are some aspects of the subject so fundamental that it is better to find an alternative way to signal to teachers the importance of evaluation.

Those who have really studied the proposals recognise the way this has been achieved and understand the significance of certain key statements. These have been located mainly in the General Requirements pages (p.15 & 16) which precede the SoAs and PoS in the KS documents. It's important to recognise the proposed status of these pages. They should be seen as the equivalent of page 19 in the current Order where the stipulations concerning contexts, materials and outcomes are superimposed on the ATs and PoS. This crucial detail has clearly not been recognised by Professor Kimbell. He claims

'There is no sense of iteration between the organisation and the evaluation of *ideas* in designing'.

The General Requirements of the proposals include these three statements and would *require* evaluation to be at the heart of the work:

'The activities of designing, making, applying knowledge and evaluating should be interwoven so that learning derived from each serves to reinforce learning in the others';

'Pupils should have opportunities to: evaluate their own work at each stage of its development';

'There are two interrelated attainment targets; one for designing and another for making. Work on one attainment target contributes to pupils' development in the other'.

Given the statutory nature of these statements the revisers were clearly of the opinion that the profession is responsible, and responsive, enough to ensure that interactive evaluation is given sufficient emphasis.

Following the consultation period the task of completing this very necessary revision will pass to the National Curriculum Council. They will be working on a document which leaves them scope for improvement and I hope they will be wise enough to give proper consideration to the reactions to the proposals received from the teaching profession. Perhaps their most important priority will be to write clear non-statutory guidance and publish this in September with the final version to explain the intricacies of the revision. Whatever else it does, the revised Order must fulfil at least two conditions. It must be appropriate for pupils who will grow up and, hopefully, prosper in the twenty-first century and it must this time carry the convictions of the teachers who have to implement it. The NCC will have to resist the temptation to change too much in the proposals for, in the words of the economist John Maynard Keynes, 'it's better to be roughly right than precisely wrong'.