

Chapter 1

Curriculum, Pedagogy and Assessment: Of Rigour and Unfinished Revolutions

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Victorian values: Gove the counter-revolutionary

Writing in the *Guardian* earlier this year, after yet another policy announcement from Michael Gove (this one was about fundamental changes to A-levels), Peter Wilby produced an elegant summary of the Education Secretary's record in office (Wilby 2013). The key to understanding Gove, suggested Wilby, lay in his past – not in some terrible childhood trauma but in his time as a journalist. Thus, whether he was proposing the purchase of a new royal yacht, dispatching copies of the Authorised Version of the Bible into all schools (with a foreword penned in his own fair hand) or insisting on a return to old-fashioned, linear A-levels, what motivated him was a keen sense of news values. In this interpretation, it was futile to look for coherence in policy, since each intervention was designed around the headlines that it would elicit: Gove was a politician on the make, and education merely a stepping-stone on the way to the top job.

Wilby's take on Gove is both psychologically plausible and tactically useful. It provides an explanation for the sheer willfulness of Gove's approach, his remarkable capacity to conjure up policies that are the wrong answers to questions that no-one is asking, his insouciant disregard for facts. Gove emerges as an ambitious, self-

obsessed carpetbagger, here today and gone tomorrow. In direct contrast to his shallow, transient interest in education as soundbite lies the professional commitment of teachers, a commitment that is manifestly neither self-interested nor short-lived. That, of course, is the political value of Wilby's representation of Gove.

And yet it won't quite do, not because it's wrong about Gove's ambition or about the scattershot nature of his policies, but because it gravely understates the ideological seriousness of what is being accomplished by Gove and the Conservative-led government. As Ken Jones (2013) has argued, Gove is a counter-revolutionary, intent on completing the project that Thatcher's government started. One dimension of this project is the privatisation of education, manifested both in 'soft' forms (the creation of quasi-markets in the competition among schools; the further erosion of the role of local authorities; the expansion of the academies programme and the creation of free schools) and in the 'hard' form of handing over schools, chains of schools, the production of curricular materials and other parts of the education service on a for-profit basis to private companies. That Gove is ideologically committed to this is beyond question; his frequent lunches with Rupert Murdoch (Leigh 2012) are not, it's safe to say, evidence that they like the same kind of food but that they have a common interest in education as an immensely profitable commodity. Thus far, at least, Gove has made much more rapid progress with the soft forms; the breadth and depth of popular resistance to the longer-term aim of outright privatisation means that it is not yet realisable. After the next election, though, who knows?

In what follows, however, I want to focus not on Gove the neoliberal so much as on Gove the cultural conservative and on the dimensions of his project that relate to the curriculum, pedagogy

and assessment. My interest in Gove is not some sick fascination with a particularly dangerous (and very plausible) right-wing ideologue; there is an urgent need to make an appraisal of the Conservatives' intervention in these areas and to begin to map out an adequate response.

Michael Gove has a very clear, well worked-out notion of what education is and what it is for. It is a subject to which he returns in speech after speech. Addressing an audience in Cambridge, he announced:

‘It was an automatic assumption of my predecessors in Cabinet office that the education they had enjoyed, the culture they had benefitted from, the literature they had read, the history they had grown up learning, were all worth knowing. They thought that the case was almost so self-evident it scarcely needed to be made. To know who Pericles was, why he was important, why acquaintance with his actions, thoughts and words mattered, didn't need to be explained or justified. It was the mark of an educated person.’
(Gove 2011)

To be educated, then, is to possess knowledge – particular forms of knowledge. Such knowledge is unchanging, and the business of schooling is to ensure that these stable bodies of knowledge are transmitted from one generation to the next. In the same speech, Gove makes clear that there is an established – indeed, unquestionable – hierarchy of cultural value:

‘I am unapologetic in arguing that all children have a right to the best. And there is such a thing as the best. Richard Wagner is an artist of sublime genius and his work is incomparably more rewarding – intellectually, sensually and emotionally – than, say, the Arctic Monkeys.’

He argues for a return to ‘Victorian earnestness’ and, misquoting Matthew Arnold, presents schooling as an encounter with ‘the best that has been thought and written’. This Arnoldian reference reappears in the preamble to the new, Govean, national curriculum (DfE 2013, 5). And, of course, this deeply conservative view of culture and indeed of knowledge itself has direct implications for the curriculum that bears Gove’s imprint. It is designed to fulfil the ‘civilising mission’ of schooling:

‘In an age before structuralism, relativism and post-modernism it seemed a natural and uncomplicated thing, the mark of civilization, to want to spread knowledge, especially the knowledge of great human achievement, to every open mind. But, over time, that natural and uncomplicated belief has been undermined, over-complicated and all too often twisted out of shape.’

This wallowing in nostalgia for the simple values of a bygone age is pretty remarkable in itself. To argue that what was good enough for Gladstone is good enough for the youth of today – that knowledge of Pericles should occupy the same space in the curriculum now as then – fails to take account of the fact that the world has moved on since 1879. Should a modern curriculum limit itself to Newtonian physics, say? Is Darwinian biology possibly a little too contemporary to be contemplated? There are certainly strong correlations between Gove’s version of History – *Our Island Story* – and the history that was deemed suitable for the elementary schools in the 1870s. In English, too, what we are confronted with in the new curriculum proposals is a diet of Shakespeare, Romantic poetry and Victorian novels, while texts in other media have all but disappeared.

The content of this new national curriculum is significantly more reactionary than that of any of the previous four versions. This matters, in and of itself. Within the field of English, say, there should be space for students to explore contemporary culture across different media – to read the *Simpsons* as well as Shakespeare – and to gain experience in producing new texts themselves. Questions of representation – of who and what is included, whose histories and experiences are excluded – remain vital in considering any curriculum, since any curriculum is, inevitably, a selection – and a selection motivated by particular interests.

But it would be a mistake to construe the main thrust of Gove's curricular intervention as being focused on content in and of itself – Florence Nightingale or Mary Seacole, Thomas Hardy or Choman Hardi, Dryden or Daljit Nagra. What is primarily at stake here is a question of authority. That is the force of Gove's nostalgia for Arnoldian values: he wants an education system where the value of particular artefacts, the importance of particular gobbets of knowledge is, literally, beyond question. In Gove's view of culture, value and authority are inextricably connected; thus it is that his curriculum is one of Great Books, Great Deeds, Great Scientists – and perhaps even, in a gracious nod to modernity, Great Coders. And that is why he needs to retreat to the pious certitudes of the nineteenth century – before such views of knowledge were destabilised by Einsteinian relativity, long in advance of the arrival of those pesky postmodernists.

Relativism is a real problem for Gove precisely because it presents a challenge to canonical authority. It means acknowledging different perspectives, different voices, different ways of telling the story of this island (and of other lands). It means different texts and different ways of reading the same texts. And it

means asking hard questions like ‘Whose knowledge is this?’ and even ‘Whose knowledge counts?’

In pursuit of rigour

The word that figures most prominently throughout Gove’s speeches is ‘rigour.’ He tells his audience in Cambridge that ‘mathematics, English, the sciences, foreign languages, history and geography are rigorous intellectual disciplines tested over time’ – not to be confused with soft subjects and ‘soft qualifications’ (Gove 2011). And he tells them that he is going to make GCSEs and A levels more ‘rigorous’, so that they will stand comparison with exams in the ‘most rigorous jurisdictions’. He tells the House of Commons that ‘changes made to GCSEs under the last Government – specifically the introduction of modules and the expansion of coursework in schools – further undermined the credibility of exams – leaving young people without the rigorous education they deserved’ (Gove 2012a). To address this problem, he announces, again, his determination to ‘restore rigour to our examinations’, to ensure ‘more rigorous content’ on vocational courses; in quite a short speech, the word is repeated seven times. To an audience in Brighton last year, he promises a ‘more rigorous foundation stage curriculum with more emphasis on literacy and numeracy’, repeats his pledge to make vocational qualifications ‘rigorous and well-respected’ and announces that ‘we’ve invited top academics and university lecturers to get involved in raising standards and making examinations more rigorous’ (Gove 2012b). In February 2013, talking to the Social Market Foundation, he proclaims that parents, ‘especially poorer parents – want their children to get up and get on. And that means acquiring a proper rounded rigorous education’:

‘Visit the most exclusive pre-prep and prep schools in London – like Wetherby in Notting Hill – where artistic and

creative leaders like Stella McCartney send their children – and you will find children learning to read using traditional phonic methods, times tables and poetry learnt by heart, grammar and spelling rigorously policed, the narrative of British history properly taught. And on that foundation those children then move to schools like Eton and Westminster – where the medieval cloisters connect seamlessly to the corridors of power.’ (Gove 2013)

You get the picture. Rigour matters. And it’s a good thing. A very good thing. But what does it mean?

Its ever-presence might make it tempting to conclude that ‘rigour’ doesn’t mean anything at all, that it is the perfect floating signifier, untethered to any point of reference in the real world. But that would be to underestimate its value to Gove. It’s worth looking at the ideological work that ‘rigour’ does for him. First, it has immense nostalgic power – and Gove is a politician who understands the power of nostalgia. Rigour is strongly associated with tradition, with how things used to be done. Thus, it is a quality that needs to be ‘restored’ to assessment processes, to curricula, to teaching methods: in the past, exams were rigorous and reliable, subjects weren’t ‘soft’ (like media studies) but rigorous (like maths), and teaching used traditional methods, which were, obviously, more rigorous than the progressive ones that have crept in since 1967 (Plowden and all that). And that is the second facet of Govean rigour: it is a stick with which to beat the bugbear of progressivism. There is nothing new about this – it has been open season on progressive practice since Callaghan’s speech at Ruskin in 1976. Gove’s attack on ‘The Progressive Betrayal’ (Gove 2013) aligns him just as much with Blair as it does with Thatcher or Major. Even so, Gove’s attachment to rigour gives him the edge on

the soft anti-progressives who preceded him. Like his insistence that grammar and spelling should be ‘rigorously policed’, it suggests something of the depth of his attachment to authority – the authority of the subject disciplines, the authority of the exam board, the authority of the school as an institution – and (sometimes) the authority of the teacher (but not, as has already become clear, when it comes to matters of assessment).

Rationing education

There is, moreover, a third aspect to Gove’s advocacy of rigour that marks a breach with New Labour and a further intensification of the Thatcherite counter-revolution: rigour is a euphemism for rationing. Gove’s belief in the virtue of rationing isn’t immediately obvious from what he says. It is, on the other hand, an absolutely central feature of his government’s policy, demonstrated in every phase of education from the scrapping of EMA (education maintenance allowance) and the rise in university tuition fees to the closure of Sure Start centres. The effect of all of these measures is to make it harder for working-class children and students to gain access to or to thrive within the arena of formal educational provision: it is to ration education. But that’s not all. Committed to rigorous assessment, Gove wages war on ‘grade inflation’. What this means is placing an arbitrary cap on what students can achieve. It means the return of norm-referencing in place of criterion-referencing. And the effects of this were seen last summer, when tens of thousands of GCSE students ended up with lower grades than they had been predicted because the exam boards, under pressure from Ofqual, raised the crucial C/D threshold. For the students affected, this had material consequences: it meant that many of them could not progress on to the A-level courses that they had chosen.

What happened in the summer of 2012 was a stark case of grade deflation. The grade boundaries were manipulated to satisfy a higher power's arbitrary judgments about how many students should be awarded a particular grade. As Ofqual's own report revealed (Ofqual 2012, 10), it was decided that the proportion of students who were awarded grade C or above should be adjusted downwards because, among other reasons, there were more private school students entered for alternative qualifications (the iGCSE, say), and so they made the assumption that the calibre of the cohort entered for the GCSE would be poorer than in the previous year. And, as the *TES* revealed (28 September 2012), the students who were worst affected by the shift in the grade boundaries were working-class and minority ethnic students.

This wasn't an accident or technical difficulty; it was a moment when the trajectory of government policy in education was starkly revealed. It was the direct consequence of Gove's commitment to rigour, because what rigour means, in the context of high-stakes assessment, is ensuring that there are failures. There is nothing new about the education system functioning as a sorting mechanism, a means whereby structural inequalities in society are reproduced. There is something new, however, in having a government that is so intensely relaxed about this. In education, as in so many other areas of government intervention, austerity provides the cloak for policies that are ideologically motivated: for Gove, rationing is not an unfortunate by-product of rigour but part of its *raison d'être*.

This rationing policy, as Martin Allen suggests in a later chapter, aligns education with pan-European economic reality. At a time of mass youth unemployment, the New Labour pieties of a 'knowledge economy' have a distinctly hollow ring: in the current climate, schooling simply cannot be sold to students on the basis of

a promise that compliance will lead to credentialisation (good grades) and credentialisation will lead to economic advancement (good – graduate? – jobs). So Gove has produced the education policy for austerity Britain. He may talk about the importance of children knowing about place value, but what he really means is the importance of knowing their place. To this end, it makes perfect sense to present the curricular subjects as authoritative, as the repository of stable, established, canonical knowledge and to present teaching as the transmission of this authoritative, authorised knowledge, ‘the best that has been thought and said’.

As Martin Allen also argues, an adequate alternative to the current government’s policies would entail a radically different economic policy. Within the narrower sphere of education, though, there are vitally important arguments to be won. Let’s start with assessment. Gove’s preference is for the terminal examination, with candidates being required to write long essays (Ofqual 2013b). (As I understand it, the quill pen remains optional at this stage!) This, like his version of a Hirschian ‘core knowledge’ curriculum, tests a very specific set of skills and is preparation for almost nothing in the world beyond the exam hall. (For one job, however, it offers the perfect apprenticeship – and that is Gove’s old job as a leader writer for the *Times*. It does, however, seem a little perverse to construct an entire national assessment regime on so narrowly vocational a base.) Modular tests, retakes and coursework have all been anathematised (so has the tiering of exam papers – but that’s a different story; tiers were forced on us in GCSE by the Major government in the early 1990s).

There seem to be three central assumptions underpinning this retreat to the 1950s. First, teachers are not to be trusted. This appears very plainly in Ofqual’s recent pronouncement against the

inclusion of the assessment of speaking and listening in the GCSE English so as ‘to make the qualifications more robust, and more resistant to pressure from school accountability systems’ (Ofqual 2013a, 2). Or, in plain language, teachers might be tempted to give their students a higher mark because they – the teachers – and their schools tend to be judged on the basis of GCSE results. Second, there is the belief that retaking an exam is not quite cricket – sort of cheating, really. Quite why this should be so in relation to A-levels or GCSEs, but not driving tests, isn’t immediately apparent. Underpinning this belief, I suspect, is a particularly nasty sort of innatism – a view of intelligence as fixed, a given, which the examination process simply reveals. This involves a profoundly anti-educational view of the student – a deeply pessimistic rejection of the possibility of improvement, of learning. Third, all Gove’s talk of rigour betrays a staggeringly naive faith in the reliability of any assessment system. It treats some forms of assessment as offering a transparent window on the individual subject. That isn’t, of course, what assessment is or how it works. Assessment is always imprecise, always a social process.

Let’s go back a moment to the controversy about the GCSE English results in 2012. Part of the reason for the widespread anger among teachers was the gap between students’ predicted and actual grades. In most spheres of life, when we talk about predictions, we measure these against actual events. So the weather forecast is a prediction about what the weather will be like, at a particular time and in a particular place. The forecast uses evidence, of various kinds and varying degrees of sophistication. The question of the accuracy of a weather forecast is easily determined: we can test it out by what actually happens. Did it rain today? Likewise predictions about horse-racing are testable against the race itself. If I give you a tip for the 4.30 at Newbury, you are entitled to judge

the usefulness and the accuracy of the tip, and probably of me as a tipster, by what actually happens in the 4.30 at Newbury.

Now, the commonsense approach to predicted GCSE grades would be the same as outlined above. An English teacher predicts a grade C for her student; he gets a grade D; the prediction was wrong, demonstrably, because the prediction did not match what actually happened in the exam. But this is nonsense. A GCSE exam is not like the 4.30 at Newbury. The claims that a GCSE result purports to make about a student are not limited to what happened in an exam hall on a particular afternoon in June; they are claims about what that student knows and can do, in relation to a range of texts and practices that have been gathered together under the heading of 'English'. In fact – in the real world where people talk, read and write a variety of different texts for different audiences and purposes – that GCSE student's English teacher is in the best position to say what that student knows and can do. In this situation, then, the prediction shouldn't really be construed as a prediction at all; it is a statement based on detailed, in-depth professional knowledge, from someone who has been able to build up a picture of that student's learning and development over time. The teacher has a mass of evidence on which to base this professional judgement – evidence much more robust because it is more plentiful and also because it is much more diverse than the evidence that can be provided by a single exam. If this is true for secondary students, it is even more obvious in primary schools, where six-year-olds are now forced to experience the farce that is the phonics test – a test that bears precious little relation to any literacy practice and that provides no useful information on learning.

I am all in favour of robust accountability systems, as Ofqual might put it. But what we need – and need to argue for – are forms of assessment that do justice to the breadth, complexity and sheer messiness of learning, forms of assessment that are not so easily reducible to accountancy, forms of assessment that involve giving an account of learning over time. Teachers are in a position to be able to provide precisely this kind of rich, rigorous accountability. The problem with Gove’s claim to be implementing more rigorous assessment is that it’s simply not true. What he’s doing is imposing cruder, less reliable tests – tests that will, however, be well suited to the task of sorting students and rationing success.

It might seem that arguing for the centrality of teacher assessment is hopelessly Utopian. But in many other countries – including such ‘high-performing jurisdictions’ as Finland – it’s a reality. The outlier, even now, is England. And, with the raising of the education participation age, there is absolutely no good reason for maintaining any form of external, centralised assessment system at 16. Other countries manage fine without one.

Curriculum, pedagogy and the problem of knowledge

In the final part of this chapter, I want to return to the question of the curriculum. Gove’s claims to rigour here should properly be subjected to ridicule. There’s nothing rigorous about a curriculum that resolutely turns its back on the realities – sophisticated, layered, intertextual realities – of twenty-first century digital textual practices and retreats into the imagined safety of a literary canon. There’s nothing rigorous about a curriculum that is constructed of factoids, neatly arranged in lists. There’s nothing rigorous about a curriculum that pretends to an ignorance of theory, of debate, of the contestation of ideas. What is produced is a particularly disreputable instance of the alchemy described by

Thomas Popkewitz:

‘The curriculum of schools performs an alchemy on... disciplinary knowledge. The specific relations from which historians or physicists, for example, produce knowledge undergoes a magical change. Whereas disciplines involve competing sets of ideas about research... school subjects tend to treat knowledge as uncontested and unambiguous content for children to learn or solve problems with.’ (Popkewitz 1998, 27)

This content-driven curriculum is, however, very fashionable. Shaped in the image of Hirsch’s (1996) ‘core knowledge’, it can also draw succour from recent interventions by Frank Furedi (2009) and Michael Young (2008, 2009). Furedi conceptualises education as the ‘intergenerational transmission of knowledge’ (2009, 48). He attacks progressive education from Dewey onwards for its neglect of this duty, teachers for being complicit in the erosion of adult authority and New Labour for policies such as *Every Child Matters*, which he sees as an unwarrantable intrusion of social engineering into the business of schooling. Young, meanwhile, though ready to concede that there might be a place for more progressive, child-centred pedagogy, insists that schools should be responsible for the transmission of ‘powerful knowledge’ – knowledge that is ‘objective in ways that transcend the historical conditions of its production’ (2008, 28). Young’s argument needs to be taken seriously. And yet, for all his attempts to distinguish his position from that of the neocons like Gove, he has a similar attachment to transcendent value: if for Gove it is self-evident that Wagner is ‘greater’ than the Arctic Monkeys, for Young it is equally clear that Jane Austen is worth studying (because her novels are ‘timeless in the moral and relationship issues that they explore’ [2008, 23]), whereas *Holby City* is not.

There are, it seems to me, two fundamental problems with this conception of knowledge, and hence of the school curriculum. The first is, in a sense, a matter of emphasis. If, under the weight of relentless policy intervention, all attention is directed to the content of the curriculum, what becomes marginalised is pedagogy – by which I mean both questions of how children learn and, inextricably connected with this, the social relations of the classroom. One of the great strengths of the progressive tradition in education is that it has attended to – and problematised – these questions. The conservative tradition, on the other hand, has tended to dismiss them, for the reason that they simply don't figure if one retains an unshakeable belief in the authority of knowledge and hence the authority of the teacher who transmits the knowledge. The conservative tradition thus involves a deeply reductive view of the nature of teachers' expertise. Teachers' professional knowledge does not reside simply in content knowledge – knowledge of gerunds or gravity – but in deeply situated knowledge of how children learn – and of particular learners (Heilbronn and Yandell 2010). So, to take one example, teachers – particularly primary teachers – understand the immensely powerful contribution that play can make to learning and development.

The second problem is to do with the conception of knowledge itself, in that it abstracts knowledge from culture and history, as if knowledge were a thing, a commodity to be acquired, rather than a process that involves historical agents – people with particular interests, in particular and always evolving social relations, people making meaning out of the resources that are available to them. This different conception of knowledge may seem far removed from the day-to-day realities of the classroom, but it is crucial to the development of an adequate alternative model of curriculum

and pedagogy. It matters because it constitutes an entirely different orientation towards the learners. Whereas the content-driven curriculum constructs students as deficits (they are the empty vessels to be filled with the powerful knowledge that schooling offers), this dialectical conception of knowledge insists on the agency and the interests of the learners – not just as a starting-point (establishing prior knowledge, say) but as centrally implicated in all educational processes and activities. In this version of schooling, curriculum ceases to be something to be delivered from on high; it becomes a process, enacted (and contested) among a group of interested participants.

This moment presents us with a real opportunity to engage in a serious debate about what education is for. In the period of New Labour, however specious the rhetoric of the knowledge economy and the standards agenda was, it achieved a kind of hegemony. Teachers' sense of professional identity became enmeshed in the dominant accountability measures of high-stakes testing and Ofsted criteria. While each successive cohort attained better grades, while teachers' ever more fine-tuned efforts to meet the targets and maximise potential seemed to bear fruit, there was plausibility to the myth of school improvement. Now, though, as teachers are confronted with rigour and rationing and a headlong retreat to the Victorian era, as it becomes obvious that students' learning and development simply cannot be mapped onto imposed curricula and are not reflected in the academic credentials they are awarded, there might be a space to argue for something different – an approach to teaching and learning that takes seriously the interests of the learners. All of them.

When asked what he thought of European civilisation, Gandhi replied that he thought it would be a very good idea (or so the story

goes). Something of the same might be said of comprehensive education. It won't do to regard it as a failed social democratic experiment, unfit for the rigours of twenty-first-century life. Rather, we should recognise that it is a vital part of our own unfinished revolution, a transformation of education that cannot be accomplished through changes to institutional structures alone, a transformation that requires the fundamental rethinking of the content and pedagogic processes of schooling.

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