

OxCHEPS, New College, University of Oxford

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A PRIMER FOR EXPLORING THE CONCEPT OF ‘THE OXFORD TUTORIAL’ IN TEACHING WITHIN SCHOOLS AS WELL AS IN UNIVERSITIES

- 1. This is a Primer that may assist in considering the concept of ‘The Oxford Tutorial’ (TOT) as a pedagogical tool that engenders critical-thinking as part of a liberal education: essentially by giving generous scope for the student to engage fully in the academic discourse relating to his/her degree subject/discipline through the academic’s steady prompting using the Socratic method of questioning. It is suggested that TOT may be of interest not only for use within other universities than Oxford as part of the ‘teaching and learning’ package for undergraduates – and not just in the Humanities but in any and every discipline/subject. And perhaps it is worth exploring also as part of the teaching of school students.**
- 2. In simple terms TOT is very ‘small-group teaching’ – traditionally delivered within the Colleges at Oxford as a one professor (‘don’, ‘tutor’): two undergraduates (‘tutees’) in an hour-long session (‘tutorial’) once or twice a week for the 24 teaching weeks in each of the three or four year degree course. The Colleges of the University of Cambridge also use their charitable endowments to subsidise this labour-intensive teaching methodology, calling it ‘The Cambridge Supervision’. For more, see: Palfreyman, ‘The Oxford Tutorial’ (OxCHEPS, 2008) available as a free download at the OxCHEPS website: (go to oxcheps.new.ox.ac.uk); and as a hard-back book from Blackwell’s for £10.99. There is a 2010 Chinese translation available from Peking University Press.**
- 3. As modern mass HE systems struggle with properly resourcing undergraduate teaching and, where tuition fees are levied, dealing with the increased expectations of the student-consumer in relation to value-for-money, there is need for a**

radical review of the teaching and learning ‘offer’ and this sometimes involves asking whether some version of TOT can be fitted within the economics of undergraduate education. The concept of ‘flipped learning’, for example, is in vogue to refer to small-group teaching where the student gets greater opportunity to engage in discussion about the subject than in traditional large lectures and what have over recent decades become over-large unwieldy seminars. See Chapter 7 (‘Futures for the university and college’) of Palfreyman & Temple, ‘Universities and Colleges: A Very Short Introduction’ (Oxford University Press, 2017).

- 4. Similarly, in schools there can be concerns that teaching relies too much on rigid rote-learning that inhibits students developing their critical-thinking skills and independence of mind as preparation for an ever-changing work environment that they will be navigating for five or even six decades ahead.**
- 5. This Primer proceeds by way of setting out some material that prompts questions about the balance between rote-learning and the wider idea/ideal of what education should/could be. The extracts are spread over several centuries, showing that the issue is not new - and probably will never be definitively resolved!**
- 6. But it must be stressed that TOT concept of a liberal education is applicable to the way any and every subject is taught – it is not a version of laying on courses as ‘Physics for Poets’ or ‘The Great Books of Literature for Engineers’ as an attempt via ‘general education’ to straddle the Humanities-Sciences divide (even gulf). See how its use is described in Palfreyman (2008, as above) by a variety of Oxford dons in doing their tutor job in a range of academic disciplines – Law, Modern Languages, Biology, History, Engineering, English, Politics, Philosophy, Economics.**
- 7. As noted in Chapter 1 of Palfreyman (2008) philosophers of education use various terms to describe the idea and ideal of a liberal education – for example: Allan Bloom, ‘the adventure of a liberal education’; Michael Oakeshott, ‘liberal learning’**

and far more than ‘mere instruction’; Cardinal Newman, ‘a real cultivation of mind’ as ‘not Learning or Acquirement, but rather is Thought or Reason exercised upon Knowledge’; A.N. Whitehead, ‘imaginative consideration of learning’ and ‘the imaginative acquisition of knowledge’; Alan Ryan, ‘the provision of a general intellectual training... an education in intellectual freedom’; Paul Axelrod, ‘designed to cultivate intellectual creativity, autonomy, and resilience’; Abraham Flexner, concerned ‘with liberation, organisation, and direction of power and intelligence’; Jorge Dominguez, ‘a liberal education is what remains after you have forgotten the facts that were learned while becoming educated’; Francis Oakley, aiming for ‘some richness of understanding’; Ron Barnett, ‘the emancipatory concept of higher education’ through cognitive self-empowerment’ of the student so that he/she enters ‘a common discourse over ends, values and achievements’.

8. Now for four longer gobbets: from 1575, 1673, 1742, and 1854...

9. In relation to each the Reader should ask whether his/her experience of education (at primary level, at secondary level, and if appropriate at university/college) has been rote-learning instruction or a liberal education, or a well balanced mix of both - and indeed, whether there can be the higher level of liberal education without some element of the rote-learning of core shared factual information on which academic discourse can later be built?

WILLIAM BALDWIN & THOMAS PALFREYMAN, 1575 (‘A Treatise of Morral Philosophie’, chapter entitled ‘Of Learning and Knowledge, two Mental Vertues’): They cite, inter alia, Socrates as seeing himself as ‘a midwife’ when teaching, as bringing out or bringing forth wisdom through education as a process of drawing out rather than of filling up the mind (as mere instruction). They also quote Seneca: ‘Searche for the cause of everything’ and ‘An opinion wythoute learnynge cannot be good’. Finally, Plato: ‘As a captaine is

a director of an whole boate, so reason joyned with knowledge, is the guide to life’.

So, is ‘knowledge’ achieved as a rote-learning slog while ‘reason’ comes from a liberal education? – but a careful balance of both is needed?

OBADIAH WALKER, 1673 (‘Of Education’): good judgement arises from a sound education so that the educated person is enabled ‘thereby to discern and chuse true from false, good from bad and good from lesser’, and ‘to discourse pertinently and rationally’ in a way that ‘brings a question to the point, and discovers the very centre and knot of the difficulty... warms and activates the spirit in the search of truth, excites notions’. Thus sound learning is not about ‘memory’ but about the ability ‘to digest what is read, and to be able to know where a difficulty lies, and how to solve it... [to] discourse, doubt, argue upon and against’.

So, is a liberal education an inoculation against falling for ‘fake news’ as the curse of C21 social media and politics?

GEORGE TURNBULL, 1742 (‘Observations upon Liberal Education’): He argued for a reform of schools, for changes in teaching style and for a much broader curriculum, for a liberal education that ensures youth are duly ‘warned and armed against the vices and snares with which they will find the world to abound as soon as they enter it’. Turnbull praises ‘the Socratic method of teaching’ whereby the young are encouraged ‘in finding out truths for themselves’, where the teachers ‘take frequent opportunities of instructing their pupils by conversation... by leading them to ask questions... by acting the midwife to their thoughts’ – and these ‘teachers of youth must not trust entirely to their grave and formal lectures’. The pupils ‘ought to be inured to speak out what they have learned, not by rote... but easily and in their own words, from their judgements and not from their memories’ – he means ‘judgements’ and ‘inventions’ as what we would label critical-thinking, and ‘memories’ as rote-learning. This liberal education produces ‘the habit of comparing and

computing... patience of thinking... virtue of strength of mind...'. It leaves the educated 'able to resist all the most inviting specious promises and solicitations of objects til their pretensions have been thoroughly tried and canvassed'.

So, are Turnbull and the other authors quoted above all saying much the same thing? – and all would abhor the next version of what education should be about, as the very opposite of what they hope for from the process of liberal education?

CHARLES DICKENS, 1854 ('Hard Times', where Mr Gradgrind of Coketown – a fictional place representing the grim industrial cities of England's North at the height of the Industrial Revolution – runs a school for the children working in the mills and factories, a school for which he has a clear educational philosophy as expounded in Chapter 1 (entitled 'The One Thing Needful') where he initiates his new schoolmaster...): 'Now, what I want is, Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else... In this life, we want nothing but Facts, sir; nothing but Facts!' This scene is in 'a plain, bare, monotonous vault of a school-room', with the speaker's voice 'inflexible, dry, and dictatorial' and the speaker possessing an 'obstinate carriage, square coat, square legs, square shoulders'. The sea of watching pupils are 'the inclined plain of little vessels then and there arranged in order, ready to have imperial gallons of facts poured into them until they were full to the brim.'

So, your experience of schooling? – did it feel like you were one of Mr Gradgrind's 'little vessels' being filled 'to the brim' with 'gallons of facts'? Or was it a more mind-broadening experience along liberal education lines as set out by our other three authors? If relevant, was/is university/college different, better?

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