

Something Happened

Something Happened is Joseph Heller's second novel published in 1974, thirteen years after *Catch 22*. Its main character and narrator is Bob Slocum, a businessman who engages in a stream of consciousness about his job, his family, his childhood, his sexual escapades, and his own psyche.

While there is an ongoing plot about Slocum preparing for a promotion at work, most of the book focuses on detailing various events from his life, ranging from early childhood to his predictions for the future, often in non-chronological order and with little if anything to connect one anecdote to the next. Near the end of the book, Slocum starts worrying about the state of his own sanity as he finds himself hallucinating or remembering events incorrectly, suggesting that some or all of the novel might be the product of his imagination, making him an unreliable narrator

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David Lambert

Something Happened!

Preface

This talk is an act of sharing a story that has come into sharper focus in recent years - at least for the narrator. Just as Bob Slocum in Joseph Heller's novel is forced to reflect on events from his life when preparing for a promotion at work, as well as all kinds of memories (including false ones), I have, in the twilight of a 45-year career in geography education, at least the opportunity to think and reflect.

I don't mean this to be self-indulgent. There will be no creation of some kind of lost golden age. No sense of remembrance of *temps perdu*. The talk will be forward-facing.

But we will start with what the late Geoff Whitty (in 1974) called "naïve possibilitarianism" of which there was much on the 1970s, and perhaps even more today. The following is from Geoff Whitty's IOE blog post, written at the time of the publication of Michael Young's Festschrift¹ (posted 28.11.2017, entitled "Questioning the Curriculum")

"What especially grabbed my attention at that time [1971] was the idea that the school curriculum was a social construction and that it didn't need to consist of subjects based on academic disciplines. This interpretation of Michael Young's work led some of his disciples in the so-called new sociology of education (though not I think Michael himself, even then) to go further and argue that the traditional curriculum was little more than a middle-class confidence trick that could be swept away and replaced by a curriculum based on working class culture.

¹ Guile, D., Lambert, D. and Reiss, M. (eds) (2018) Sociology, Curriculum Studies and Professional Knowledge: new perspectives on the work of Michael Young. Abingdon: Routledge.

... However, just as there was a danger in the early 1970s of Michael's work being confused with what I then called naïve possibilitarianism, his recent work has sometimes been seen by others as a justification for the naïve cultural restorationism of Michael Gove."

I have spent much of my professional life at the UCL Institute of Education, the intellectual home of both Whitty and Young. I had very little to do with Michael in the first twenty years – though I knew him, and I was aware of *Knowledge and Control* from my PGCE studies. I think my assumption was that we shared little: after all, as a geography teacher and enthusiast, I was part of the despised 'middle-class confidence trick'. But something happened to change this.

We will finish with EPoCH². This proposal is based on the desire to respond to (a) the naïve rediscovery and embrace of curriculum studies (alluded to by Geoff Whitty) by many in the vanguard of the 'knowledge turn' in schools (including Ofsted) and (b) to the complacency in education concerning the existential challenges of the human epoch (the Anthropocene).

Act one: Teaching as a subversive activity

I began teaching in 1974.

My training consisted of Philosophy (including lectures from Hirst) which I enjoyed; Sociology which I didn't understand; Psychological theory which I thought was irrelevant. And 'method' sessions led by a bloke called Rex, which were transformative. Loads on teaching and quite a bit on curriculum – drawing from Graves' *rational curriculum planning* and reference to the emergent curriculum projects: Avery Hill (GYSL); Bristol (14-16); the US HSGP; and MACOS, which introduced me to Jerome Bruner; (16-19 had not happened yet).

This was a period of immense teacher freedom. There was a space for teachers to exercise autonomy and agency. I was driven by the immensity of this responsibility: to teach what I wanted, inspired by Bruner's inspiring claim that *anything can be taught in an intellectually robust manner to anyone* - and the notion of education as liberation, summed up in Postman and Weingartner's 1969 book as *crap detection*.

Mistakes were made. I recall teaching the ice blitz theory to sixth formers (– though in my defence, not as a 'fact' but as a means for them to understand feedback loops in systems). I co-wrote a sixth form series (*Space and Society* for Longman). But I will admit that for many years, geography was just my chosen, very agreeable 'vehicle' for teaching. Although it wasn't written yet, I embodied the sentiment behind Frances Slater's *Learning Through Geography*. And Michael Naish, coining the phrase 'geography as a medium of education'.

² "Engagement with Knowledge Power in Schools and the Development of Educational Capabilities for the Human Epoch" [EPoCH] **EU/H2020/ Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions/ITN: European Training Network**

The world was changing. The so-called Great Debate in the mid-1970s began the process of the state taking a direct interest in the curriculum; and education becoming a key plank of economic policy. 'Grammar schools for all' (Harold Wilson's characterisation of comprehensive schools) was clearly not going to work: the curriculum was failing many.

Knowledge and Control seemed correct: alternative curriculum solutions were urgently sought. In geography, GYSL offered at least part of the answer.

Act two: Thinking through geography

I began at the IOE in 1986.

GCSE began – grade related criteria came in, with a focus on skills and what students 'can do'. Differentiation was a new watch word. Schemes of work to show rational sequencing of objectives and progression became *de rigueur*. Teaching became a lot more 'technical'. But the drip-fed derision of teacher education also began at about this time – university tutors needed to demonstrate 'recent and relevant experience' in schools and HMI inspections began. It was as if technical proficiency out-trumped vision, ambition and indeed, scholarship.

ERA arrived in 1988, and the national curriculum followed (as did my KS3 text book *Jigsaw Pieces* with CUP and a teachers' manual on *Geography Assessment*, also with CUP).

At the same time, I had to get a PhD, described by the Director as my 'equity card'. I should call this *pride and prejudice* (!). It was finally achieved in 1995. And it was overtaken by the rising pace of reform – of the national curriculum; examinations; league tables; teacher education. This was turbo-charged by the election of New Labour in 1997 who through their 'national strategies' vowed to give the teaching profession a new language (of pedagogy) in an unrelenting environment of high stakes accountability and managerialism.

I co-wrote a book on *Understanding Assessment* with Routledge and co-edited a book on *Citizenship in Secondary Geography* also with Routledge. It was as if instrumental outcomes dominated everything - and indeed, the IOE nailed its colours firmly to the mast of so-called 'School Improvement' during this period.

Learning to Teach Geography was co-written with David Balderstone at the end of the century and the first edition was a weighty tome, I think reflecting the way teaching had become highly technical: there was a lot to get in adequately to cover the 'learnification' of geography education. Learnification and the erosion of teaching was epitomised in my view by David Leat's *Thinking Through Geography* in 1998, which had virtually no geography left in it.

Act three: A Different View

I began at the GA in 2002.

Thus, began an immensely satisfying time for me both personally and professionally. I was motivated at least in some measure by the prospect, through the GA, to say something - *do something* - about the loss of geography in schools, and the erosion of an educational ideal.

The position of both (geography and education) had become precarious at the beginning of the 21st century. There was precious little incentive for teachers to think hard about the curriculum – or even *whether* geography was taught at all. Successive OFSTED reports routinely described and lamented this, but the message was somewhat mixed. Data management and manipulation became key to success. Rumours were flying that when Ofsted called they expected to see observable progress being made by all children within each lesson they observed: ludicrous of course, and denied by Ofsted, but part of a culture of fear that suited many a ‘senior leader’.

The policy environment was perplexing: the Department for Education was re-badged the Department for Children, Schools and Families. The National Curriculum, reformed in 2007 became a complex ‘big picture’ of processes, dimensions and cross-cutting themes – subjects being just the statutory ‘stuff’

At the GA we did what we could through several major projects, most notably the Action Plan for Geography (2006-11) with our partners the RGS. The GA, I think significantly, published its *Manifesto* in 2009, a bold statement of intent for the educational purpose and potential of teaching geography in this day and age. Without realising it at the time, this became a call for Future 3 thinking – rejecting knowledge-blind Future 2, but also the inadequacies of the delivery model embedded in Future 1.

Act Four: Bringing knowledge back in

I returned to the IoE in 2007 (on a job share basis)

I delivered my inaugural professorial lecture (*Lost in the Post*) in 2009. I made some speeches about this and the *Manifesto* – to the SSAT and PTI conferences for headteachers, both in 2010. At the latter, I **happened** to share the platform with Michael Young who was speaking about this 2008 book, *Bringing Knowledge Back In*.

It was then that I privately began to wonder whether my inaugural lecture had been premature. I realised that there was a theoretical background – and indeed a whole narrative from outside the inner world of geography education – which was necessary to engage with and explore. Even though I had dallied with the capabilities idea, what *this* needed in order to give it full force was a more robust interrogation of knowledge.

I acknowledge the part my co-worker John Morgan (between 2007-12) played in this³. Our joint mission was to find ways to open up the world of geography education, which we tried to do in 2005 (*Teaching School Subjects*) and 2010 (*Teaching Geography 11-18: a conceptual approach*). His published accounts of school geography in social, economic and cultural contexts are important and brilliantly illuminating.

The ill-defined and controversial idea of powerful knowledge seemed to hold enormous potential for taking the 'knowledge turn' to places far beyond "the naïve cultural restorationism of Michael Gove" (and Nick Gibb). Whether this is possible remains to be seen and will depend on the efforts of others.

However, I maintain that although key initiatives and developments like GYSL or even the GA's Manifesto had characteristics of Future 3 they lacked a theoretical framework with which to demonstrate the epistemological 'distance' between their intentions and those of other, ill-conceived knowledge-rich curricula (some of which advocate scripted lessons for goodness sakes) - let alone those subject-lite, competence-led curricula.)

³ I also acknowledge the influence along the way of many other treasured colleagues within and beyond the GTE network.

Engagement with Knowledge Power in Schools and the Development of Educational Capabilities for the Human Epoch [“EPoCH”]

The EPoCH initiative is needed first to respond to the contemporary ‘abandonment of curriculum development by curriculum scholars’ noted by Rata and many others resulting from what she calls the ‘post-1990s learning discourse’ and ‘the outcomes-based approach of twenty-first-century instrumentalised education’⁴. Secondly, EPoCH is committed to both critique and design school curricula appropriate to the acute global, existential challenges of now and the immediate future, in what we call the **human epoch**.

Enhancing the **quality of education** in secondary schools is a constant, on-going issue across Europe and beyond. Thus, in recognising the urgent need to open a global discussion about education the OECD launched the “Future of Education and Skills Project 2030”⁵. But there appears to be little focus on the curriculum and the quality of what gets taught. Thus, the implementation of principles underlying ‘learning for the 21st century’, has raised deep **concerns** amongst some scholars and policy makers, resulting in disputes about curriculum design and enactment and the rise of the “learnification” of education⁶. In this analysis, the now ubiquitous idea of “learning to learn” has supplanted the crucial question of what learning is for. This repositions the teacher from an acting professional to an instrumental ‘factor’ in educational production. Furthermore, the assumed “genericism” of competence oriented future curriculums obscures the crucial role of knowledge and content in schooling.⁷

EPoCH tackles these concerns under the cohesive and coherent architecture of what we call ‘**Future 3’ thinking**¹, part of a fruitful heuristic introduced by Young and Muller for envisioning future curriculum scenarios - including curriculum design, implementation and evaluation.⁸ In a Future 1 scenario (F1), best characterised as the “traditional” school model, a given and inert selection of knowledge-as-fact is “delivered”, but this under-socialised view of knowledge risks becoming rigid and unresponsive. It is widely agreed that F1 scenarios are unsuitable for contemporary high-quality education. Future 2 scenarios (F2) have emerged as a “progressive” reaction to F1. Here curriculum is typically generic and considers curriculum content to be arbitrary and flexible: *in extremis*, knowledge is constructed on site by the learner. This *over-socialised* model risks becoming “knowledge blind”, ignoring the domain-specific character of learning. F2 thinking is widespread and for some this represents a crisis in the curriculum⁹. Responding to this crisis - without recourse to the ‘safety’ of F1 – calls for Future 3 alternative scenarios: the visioning of progressive and knowledge rich school curriculum for all.

Future 3 (F3) thinking builds on Michael Youngs notion of **Powerful Knowledge** (PK) as a curriculum principle¹⁰. Drawing on a social realist perspective, PK is understood not as given and static. But nor is it arbitrary and fluid. A curriculum based on PK places stress on how knowledge is produced and changing within specialist communities with shared rules and norms, and how such specialist

⁴ Rata, E. (2019) Knowledge-rich teaching: a model of curriculum design coherence, *British Educational Research Journal*, 45, 4, 681-697.

⁵ <https://www.oecd.org/education/2030-project/about/>

⁶ Biesta, G. (2015) What is education for? On good education, teacher judgement and educational professionalism, *European Journal of Education*, 50, 1, 75-87. Also: Biesta, G. (2017) *The Rediscovery of Teaching*. Abingdon: Routledge.

⁷ Young M. (2008), *Bringing Knowledge Back in: From Social Constructivism to Social Realism in the Sociology of Education*. Abingdon: Routledge. Also: Young, M. & Muller, J. (2013) On the Powers of Powerful Knowledge, *Review of Education* 1, 3, 229-250.

⁸ Young, M. & Muller, J. (2010). Three Educational Scenarios for the Future: Lessons from the Sociology of Knowledge. *European Journal of Education*, 45(1), 11-27.

⁹ Young, M. (2013). Overcoming the Crisis in Curriculum Theory: A Knowledge-based Approach. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 45(2), 101-118.

¹⁰ Young, M. and Lambert, D. (with Roberts, C. and Roberts, M.) (2014) *Knowledge and the Future School: curriculum and social justice*. London: Bloomsbury.

knowledge could be a resource for giving all children epistemic access to deep and critical disciplined thought. The ideal of a F3 curriculum is the central hypothesis and starting point for the EPoCH. The research programme seeks to determine the extent to which the school curriculum can truthfully teach young people about the sociality of specialised knowledge: that our knowledge of the world is real and material but is nevertheless emergent as it is systematically revisable. This ambitious F3 formulation of the school curriculum is required to enable an adequate educational response to the challenges of the human epoch.

While mostly associated with the global challenge of human induced climate change we take ‘the human epoch’ (the Anthropocene) to be an inclusive metaphor that embraces a host of wider contemporary challenges. For example, Friedman’s ‘perfect storm’ caused by society’s inability to adapt to the pace and scale of change implied by the nexus of globalisation, climate change, and technological innovation¹¹. He concludes that politics, economics, ethics (and we argue, the school curriculum) all need to be re-imagined. Other aspects of the human epoch include concerns about information society in the digital age, fast capitalism and the rise of ‘impulse society’¹² - or even current anxieties over post-truth and the side-lining of experts in public discourse.

The themes alluded to here are in line with themes possibly included in the German educationist Klafki’s notion of “epoch typical key-problems”¹³. In this context, an appropriate education must be concerned less with the achievement of discrete competences or ‘learning outcomes’, and more with enhancing young people’s agency. This is ambitious and expresses what lies at the heart of F3 thinking as it stresses the intellectual **capabilities** required to make judgements, discern truth and be comfortable with the dynamic nature of knowledge and meaning making. A high-quality education therefore depends upon certain qualities being present in curriculum design and enactment. It acknowledges the need for curriculum coherence and thinking about knowledge progression as forms of “**epistemic ascent**”¹⁴. It requires young people to be deeply engaged with knowledge: cognitively, creatively *and* (after the geographer, Alan Wilson¹⁵) making imaginative connections across the borderlands between specialist domains. All this depends on the renewal of distributed **curriculum leadership** as a key component of enhanced teacher professionalism, suggesting that a way forward is to enable collaborative work within teacher learning communities.

The EPoCH programme adapts and takes up the challenges offered by the GeoCapabilities project¹⁶ which boldly claims that the absence of high-quality specialist geography teaching in schools may result in a particular form of capability deprivation: an *educational* deficit resulting in a significant loss of intellectual potential in young people. It explores **inter-disciplinarity** in school and the research will be relevant for other school subject specialists and those interested in integrated curriculum models.

EPoCH’s overriding **Research Question** is: “*How can Future 3 curricula be envisioned, developed and enacted in practice?*” EPoCH is therefore organized around reimagining school teaching in a F3 curriculum scenario (initially with a focus on history and geography). This implies a multi-level perspective where different parts of the educational system will be of interest, from policy level to the classroom.

¹¹ Friedman, T. L. (2016). *Thank You for Being Late: An Optimists Guide to Thriving in the Age of Acceleration*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux

¹² Roberts, P. (2014) *The Impulse Society: America in the age of instant gratification*. New York: Bloomsbury.

¹³ See Meyer, M.A. and Meyer, H. (2007) *Wolfgang Klafki: Eine Didaktik für das 21. Jahrhundert?* Weinheim: Beltz. Also: Willbergh, I. (2016) ‘Bringing teaching back in: The Norwegian NOU ‘The school of the future’ in light of the Allgemeine Didaktik theory of Wolfgang Klafki’. *Nordic Journal of Pedagogy and Critique*, 2, 111–24.

¹⁴ Winch, C. (2013) Curriculum Design and Epistemic Ascent, *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 47, 1, 128-146

¹⁵ Wilson, A. (2010) *Knowledge Power: interdisciplinary education for a complex world*. Abingdon: Routledge

¹⁶ <http://www.geocapabilities.org/>
