

4. Educational Superstitions of our time - Shakespeare, Maths and Handwriting

Professor S. Bengu, The Minister of Education for South Africa, gave a keynote speech at a conference on democratic education last May. In it explained his country's intention to move away from a bureaucrat-driven imposed curriculum towards a **learner-driven** curriculum by 2005.

The enthusiasts for imposing a curriculum on the learners are often horrified at such heresy. *"What if the learners do not choose to learn Shakespeare?"* I always thought that Bertrand Russell gave the cool answer here, when he said: *"Shakespeare did not write with a view to boring school-children; he wrote to with a view to delighting his audiences. If he does not give you delight, you had better ignore him."*

I always found comfort in this view, since I admit that, despite many visits to performances at Stratford-on-Avon, I can take or leave the bard. This does not mean I want to stand in the way of those who want to encounter Shakespeare, and for this reason, I find that the work of John and Leela Hort in making the language of his plays intelligible, is well worth both parents and children investigating. With their love of the bard, Leela and John have spent their time and money producing the Inessential Shakespeare series, 'shortened and simplified versions in modern English', a snip at £2-95 each. Five plays have been translated into modern English so far, and the sixth, Hamlet, is in preparation ready.

The enthusiasts for imposing a curriculum on the learners are also worried by Maths. *"What if the learners do not choose to learn Mathematics?"* Bertrand Russell, who should have a valid opinion since he was one of the world's most renowned mathematicians himself, had this to say on the matter: *"In universities, mathematics is taught mainly to men who are going to teach mathematics to men who are going to teach mathematics to ... Sometimes, it is true, there is an escape from this treadmill. Archimedes used mathematics to kill Romans, Galileo to improve the Grand Duke of Tuscany's artillery, modern physicists (grown more ambitious) to exterminate the human race. It is usually on this account that the study of mathematics is commended to the general public as worthy of State support."*

Maths is useful, however, if you are doing something like designing bridges, but the idea that we must all go through the Maths experience to identify those who are good at it and need it later for specific tasks, is about as sound as saying we must all study dentistry to enable some expert dentists to emerge. When I was learning Maths at school, then teaching it in school myself, and then watching my son learn it, the same heretical thought kept occurring, that surely there are better things we could all be doing than this.

It is a common error to confuse mathematics with arithmetic, and so perhaps it is the latter that should be imposed? Again, Russell is a dissenter: *"Arithmetic ... is overvalued; in British elementary schools and it takes up far more of the time than it should.* He goes on to propose that there are much more useful things to learn. Russell admitted that although he was a leading mathematician and philosopher, he was never much good at arithmetic himself.

It is another common error to think industry has 'needs' that can be 'covered'. A colleague who was a Maths tutor, conducted a survey of the 'needs' of hundreds of firms around Birmingham. When I asked him what he had found, he said, "Total confusion." He could not find any common requirements in mathematics, and the common ground as regards

arithmetic amounted to knowledge and confidence in the four basic rules. This squares with my own experience because when I left school at 16 and went work in a bank, my 'O' level Maths proved to be pretty useless and I had to learn the number games of the bank on the spot.

One home-educating family, where the father was an engineer, asked me at a conference what to do about Maths. I ran through the arguments. They decided it **was** a superstition, and to have the courage to ignore it unless it cropped-up in the course of other investigations. Later they said how pleased they were with this policy and how well it had worked out in practice. But then, with CD-ROM interactive discs now available that will teach you 'O' level Maths in a quarter or less of the time of a taught course, you can take the subject on board whenever you wish.

If I believed in compelling people to learn things, which I no longer do since I advocate the learner-driven/catalogue curriculum approach instead, I could make out a much better case for teaching Logic which is usually missing from the curriculum altogether. But it was Paul Goodman, in a book that shocked people in 1962 entitled *Compulsory Mis-education*, who described mass schooling, including its imposed mathematics, as a mass superstition.

The enthusiasts for imposing a curriculum on the learners are also worried by joined-up handwriting. "*What if the learners do not choose to learn joined-up handwriting?*" I must admit to being much more worried if they do not develop the skills of joined-up thinking that learning logic encourages, but that is another issue. Perhaps more pain is inflicted on children in the joined-up handwriting pursuit than any other. Yet printers print in script because it is clearer. *Natural Parent* would be hard work to read if it were presented in handwriting

Nobody shows much enthusiasm for joined-up figures in sums either, and would see anyone as a bit odd for suggesting it. John Holt in his investigations could find no reasons on offer except a claim that joined-up handwriting was speedier. He showed that this usually was a fallacy by conducting a number of classroom experiments and by experimenting on himself. Usually, script was as quick or often quicker, more legible and looked better. Those who chose to learn Italic script produced very attractive results.

In discussion recently, one handwriting enthusiast told me that the body movements used in the teaching of it were essential for the composed development of children. This was her justification for teaching handwriting. If this is so, why not teach the body movements on their own without the clutter?

The enthusiasts for imposing learning on children in school do not have a good track record. There were earlier superstitions. For a time they tried to make all left-handed children become right-handed, with a heavy punishment regime. Drill was imposed as a subject on all children for many years. Children in Welsh-speaking areas of Wales were punished if they did not speak in English in school. Later compulsory Welsh appeared in English-speaking parts of Wales and I have met adults who resented this being enforced on them as children. And so on.

Part of the task of 'parents as researchers' that I advocated in a previous edition of *Natural Parent*, is to be on the look-out for learning systems based on possible superstitions and get equipped to answer them and deal with them. In later editions I intend to analyse two big superstitions - 'socialisation', and then 'subjects'.

[The Inessential Shakespeare website](#)

The Inessential Shakespeare Series is available from 239 Bramcote Lane, Wollaton, Nottingham NG8 2QL Telephone 0115 928 3001 for a brochure.

A version of this piece was published in Natural Parent in April 1998, as the Roland Meighan column, entitled 'The three myths'.