

# Careers Education in Schools and Colleges: forever clinging to the edge of the timetable?

## Bill Law

**Bill argues that we should put a hold on our habitual defence of careers education. He wants to take another look, but from a point of view outside of careers education and guidance. Looking outside, at what is happening in our communities, suggests useful ways of understanding how young men and women make up their minds about what they will do in their lives.**

It also suggests useful ideas about what we can best do to help them.

The issues for careers education raised here concern:

- changes we now face;
- emerging cultures;
- working with cultural realities;
- the help that is now needed;
- the implications for curriculum.

These concerns lead to new proposals to the QCA for how careers education should now be organised. The proposals are headed 'LiRRiC – life role relevance in curriculum'. They carry a hope that we need not forever cling to the edge of the timetable.

An article in an earlier edition of the *Journal* (Law, 2005a) argues that the cultural impact of globalisation and its technologies is at least as important to careers work as their economic impact. The government white paper *Youth Matters* makes cultural change a starting point:

**"The internet, mobile phones, digital TV and games consoles have transformed the way young people use their leisure time. Texting and chat rooms are for many an essential means of communication. The web is today's newspaper, gossip column and encyclopaedia all rolled into one" (para 44).**

There's nothing surprising about talking of the future in terms of new information technologies. But *Youth Matters* inverts habitual thinking: its story does not start with how the technologies can serve careers work, it speaks of how they are already changing the lives of young men and women. The impact is cultural – changing the way people learn, and how they influence each other. And we are barely beyond the beginning of that trend.



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We should not underestimate it. If people are changing the ways they learn, then we must think again about how we help.

## Changes we now face

The general shape and structure of the trend is not in dispute:

- There is a massive expansion in how people find out what they need to know – including information and impressions of working life.
- That access itself develops self-propelled ways in which people make up their own minds about what they will do.
- And the resulting networks are colonised by groups seeking to influence what people do – urging a multiplying range of social, ethnic and commercial allegiances.

And so <google>, <wikipedia> and <myspace> are not just tools; iPod, camera-phone and game-box are not just toys; *East Enders*, *Big Brother* and gossip are not just pastimes. They frame beliefs, values and expectations, and that is a culture – carrying messages about 'who we are', and 'who can be allowed to have a say in our lives'.

There is little dispute about the facts; but different commentators point to different features. Some complain about what the trends mean for what young people do and don't do – about work, on politics and in social-and-leisure life. But philosopher Stephen Law (2006) points to what the trends are doing to young people: he characterises the situation as a 'war for children's minds'. It runs psychologically deeper than we have yet fully appreciated. Neuroscientist Susan Greenfield looks inwards – towards the impact on thinking of...

**"...sounds and sights of a fast-paced, fast-moving, multimedia presentation displacing any time for reflection."**

Policy commentator David Goodhart (2006) looks outwards – pointing to how a multiplicity of influences moves people away from a shared citizenship towards detached individualism, in limited group alliances.

**"A sense of national purpose has been replaced by the idea of individual self-actualisation – or by a narrower group identity" (pp.32-33).**

Careers education and guidance has been quick to respond to the economic impact of globalisation. But we are here looking at a second-wave cultural impact. Cultural beliefs, values and expectations influence what people do. We have been ready to adjust to changing economy; I find it hard to see how we can reasonably ignore cultural change.

## **Cultures of flexibility, tentativeness, and distrust**

We need better to understand the interweaving elements here. There is no single and uniform transformation. There is variety and variability – working out differently in different neighbourhoods and with different groups. All are relevant to careers education.

Global trends need new technologies. And there is increased informal use of the net (Vernon, 2005). But these trends are not wholly technology driven: the experience of friendship is changing (Pahl, 2000); the significance of gossip grows (Dunbar, 2004); and the demand for respect is increasingly insistent (Sennett, 2003).

Social observer Nick Barham (2004) reports the interaction with technology. He speaks of flexibility and tentativeness in how young people use texting and blogging to assemble accounts of what is going on:

**"Kids have several virtual personalities... passports to different behaviours. The fluidity is expressed by two favourite phrases:.. "like" and "sort of". They acknowledge the impossibility of knowing anything completely, or of getting any closer than an approximation. Everything is metaphor. Nothing is real" (pp.206 & 288-9).**

Literary academic Terry Eagleton locates all of this in an historical perspective. His account of the changing ways in which people think and talk, leads (rather grumpily) to a contrast between traditional and emerging cultures. He sees flexibility and tentativeness as...

**"...centre-less, hedonistic, self-inventing, ceaselessly adaptive – which fares splendidly in the disco and supermarket, though not quite so well in the school, courtroom or chapel" (p.190).**

Sociologist Frank Furedi adds a further theme – a pervasive scepticism. People want knowledge on their own terms.

**"Today the very possibility of knowing has been called into question by people who claim that the world has become too complex to understand... The sense of powerlessness with which change is perceived has weakened people's belief in the possibility of knowing what lies ahead" (pp.54-59).**

Sociologist Anthony Giddens (1994) links all of this to contemporary anxiety. He interprets what is happening as the development of self-propelled strategy for dealing with risk – a rejection of dependence in favour of...

**"..an inner confidence which comes from self respect... in a constant flow of experience" (p.192).**

Maybe. But there are deeper historical roots. The eighteenth-century enlightenment was a rejection of arbitrary authority – in its day of crown and mitre. Theologian Jonathan Sacks (1997) regrets its undermining of tradition. Stephen Law (2006) asserts its valuing of independent thought.

There is, of course, change associated with globalisation. It actually reaches us in three waves: economic, cultural and environmental. All have, and will, change the way people think about work. The full extent of its flows and vortices deserve a deeper research effort than it has yet attracted from our field.

Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman rates his reputation for being able to characterise the impact. He uses the term 'liquid modernity' (2000): a shift of focus from production to consumption (p.151); a drive for instant gratification (pp.155ff); and a loss of confidence in traditional authority (pp.165ff) – all stemming from a sense of the precariousness of experience (pp.160ff).

Advertising copy writers (who are also smart people) may have located and plumbed these dynamics better than some academics. Advertising is a cultural document (and useful to alert careers educators). It would expose a fatal flaw if commerce were shown better to understand our students than we do.

Philosopher Onora O'Neill points to what she takes to be the central issue. Her Reith Lecture (2002) speaks of a 'crisis of trust'...

**“New information technologies are ideal for spreading reliable information, but they dislocate our ordinary ways of judging one another's claims and deciding where to place our trust.”**

Economist, cultural commentator, political economist, literary theorist, philosopher, sociologist, theologian and advertising executive agree: there has been an erosion of deference. It is a trend with some momentum and is probably irreversible. We now live in a world where élites are subject to sceptical scrutiny – whether politicians, traders, journos, medics or boffins. Their pronouncements invite suspicion.

Are teachers on that list? Actually young people may never have thought of school-learning as likely to be useful in their lives. But – with other sources to draw on, other people to heed, and other ways of acting on what they say – claims to exclusive authority will not go down at all well.

### **Working with the cultural realities**

What to do? Onora O'Neill urges tighter standards for professional information providers – she is thinking of politicians and journalists. She looks outward for a strengthening of professional behaviour; but Susan Greenfield looks inward. She points to the need for people to have time and space to...

**“...pose appropriate and meaningful questions.”**

Careers work is involved in that outward-inward issue. The outward strategy broadly corresponds with what is urged for careers work: tighter standards, for example to ensure impartiality. The inward strategy is the enlightenment strategy; it supports people in their struggle to sort things out for themselves.

The two do not exclude each other. Stephen Law is clear about this: enlightenment values do not pull back from the expert communication of facts – nor even the opinionated communication of beliefs, values and expectations. But they insist on people being free to subject all to independent scrutiny.

If we mean to go any distance down the questioning path, we need an understanding of how people learn to question. In the recent past we have drawn ideas from sources pointing to the importance of 'emotional intelligence', 'instrumental enrichment', 'learning circles', 'multiple intelligence' and 'neuro-linguistic programming'. But we need to go on looking; for these are psychologically-based responses to culturally-located events.

David Goodhart's reference to group identity is significant. Economist Amartya Sen (2006) develops the point, seeing people cajoled into group membership – some framed on a world-wide basis. Young men and women derive much of their identity from such allegiances. But, he argues, people may be drawn in on terms which actually harm

their interests. And people do not always initiate membership, sometimes they are claimed by the group.

Philosopher Michael Kenny (2004) agrees that we are dealing with group phenomena. And he characterises them as an extension of the enlightenment trend. That trend, he argues, has long-since moved on from doubts about crown and sceptre, to a questioning of the white, male, middle-class hegemony. And now? He traces a multiplicity of alternative allegiances...

**“...a new kind of politics founded on social identity... in a host of movements, groups and cultural communities... whose influence, appeal and impact appear to be growing.” (p.1).**

Identity politics speaks of allegiance to one's own – once defined by gender, race and social class. Michael Kenny argues that such allegiances are becoming more varied and more specific. He has a point: people explicitly identify themselves in terms of shopping and other preferences, sporting and other commitments, ethnic and other kinships, religious and other values. In critical moments the group manifests 'who I am', and that self speaks and acts for the group.

In careers work, it is Paul Willis (1977) who has blazed the first trail towards an understanding of such allegiances. He makes authentic contact with a group of psychologically different lads bound together by shared cultural identity. It is spoken of as over-against other groups. The 'lads' see themselves as not like the 'ear'oles' – so called for their teacher-compliant behaviour. This was in the 1970s: there really is nothing new about the erosion of deference at school.

The language has changed: 'chavs' and 'boffs' have supplanted 'lads' and 'ear'oles'. And we have the group terms – 'gang', 'posse' and – especially – 'crew'. These days crews display the icons, logos and mantras that express allegiance. But, like the 'lads', they tell stories that celebrate the beliefs, values and expectations of the group – and the protection that the group affords. Then and now, membership is prized.

Easy talk of 'peer-group pressure' does less than justice to the depth and dynamics of all of this. We have not done enough recent work on understanding it. Memoirist Bernard Hare (2006) offers more than few leads by the telling the story of the Leeds-based 'shed crew' – pretty-well wholly in cultural terms.

Amartya Sen and Paul Willis agree: cultures can entrap people in behaviour which is contrary to their own interests. That inhabitation forms habits-of-mind. Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1973) compresses the two ideas into a single term – 'habitus' (pp.97-98). He points to how culturally acquired habits-of-mind are negations of autonomy.

## What sort of help?

Careers education is in no position to enable people to deal with these socio-emotive pressures. The *Real Game* serves as a test for what currently happens. It has a reputation for being among the best of the off-the-shelf packages – a litmus for issues raised here. Recent work uses an input-process-outcome model for scrutinising such schemes-of-work (for example, Law, 2005b). Suggestions for improvement in The *Real Game* activities coming out of this work are:

- (1) expand the base for learning;
- (2) enable learning-to-learn;
- (3) organise for transfer-of-learning.

All three findings raise demanding issues. We need a wider-ranging and more systematic account of learning than we have so far gleaned from psychology. Stuart Maclure's and Peter Davies's (1991) survey of ideas about how learning is linked to social action is useful. As is Sara Meadows' (1993) survey of the evidence on how children think as individuals and in a social context. Knud Illeris's more-recent (2002) collation of what is known about the tensions between cognitive, emotional and social influences is particularly useful.

### 1. Expand the experience-base

The social-and-cultural arena is where people learn from experience – the 'university of life'. *Youth Matters: Next Steps* (DfES, 2006) urges the educational value of such direct-and personal experience:

**“something to do, somewhere to go, someone to talk to” (strapline).**

This is informal learning, valuing one's own and other people's stories. A careers-work finding consistent with this hypothesis comes from researcher Sara Bosley (2004). She observes that learners place special trust in people they can actually meet. There are two aspects: they value 'insider knowledge' based on that person's direct involvement in work; and they value talk in terms which 'resonate' with their own experience of life.

Her work re-examines and updates community-interaction theory (Law, 1981) which points to the importance of social attachments as influences on career development. Researchers Phil Hodgkinson and his colleagues (1996) have significantly expanded that thinking by drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus'. It opens the door to an understanding of how individual attachment can develop into group allegiance.

The experience of attachment and allegiance can only be conveyed through narrative. Contemporary sociologist Charles Tilly (2006) uses real-life reports of critical incidents to locate a range of ways of talking about why things happen. He contrasts 'stories' and 'codes'. Codes are specialised formulas for setting out how things go

together; he says 'X-to-Y matching' is an example. By contrast, stories are popular but looser accounts of experienced causes and their effects.

This two-fold analysis is reflected in careers-education method. Codes appear in the information-based matching analyses incorporated into our worksheets, data bases, tick-lists and psychometrics – versions of which appear in *The Real Game*. But narrated experience can do other useful things: identify points-of-view, locate events in a social context, explain change-of-mind, and suggest how one thing leads to another.

In learning theory, Sara Meadows' survey points precisely to that distinction between coded analysis and narrated experience. She surveys what is known of semantic and episodic memory (1993, pp.278-282). Semantic learning defines, analyses and lists what is known; it is how experts help us to know about things. Episodic learning is biographical: it is developed over time from direct-and-personal encounters with what is going on.

Ideas about attachment, habitus and episodic learning have been built into the coverage-processes-influences (CPI) analysis of careers work (Career-learning Network, CLN, 2005). It characterises these narrated experience bases for learning as 'inner life and other people'.

But because cultural membership – and the stories it exchanges – is as likely to entrap as to liberate, we need to say more. CPI suggests strategies for expanding and multiplying the experience base for career-learning – in pursuit of 'new places to go, helpful people to meet, useful things to do'. It counterpoises cultures of origin with alternatives. It interferes with habits-of-mind and makes change-of-mind a possibility.

The culture of origin need not, then, be the culture of destination. But only a more ambitious curriculum, even than *The Real Game*, can sustain a programme for what needs to be done.

### 2. Enable learning-to-learn

There is no argument here that narrated experience trumps coded expertise. As Charles Tilly insists, these are not superior and inferior ways of knowing, they are just different. Each offers its own perspectives on what a person might do. And there is a lot to know. Learning for work-life action in the contemporary world is as demanding as learning for anything.

This is where Susan Greenfield's plea for 'appropriate and meaningful questioning' comes in. Questioning is a learning process: it is about how people learn rather than what people learn – process rather than coverage. The greater the complexity, and the greater the rate of change, then the stronger the case becomes for careers work to help young men and women to learn how to question – or, more broadly, to learn-to-learn.

Rate-of-change is the usual argument for learning-to-learn: whatever people learn today will soon be out-dated; they therefore need to know how to go on learning. But that is only part of the argument: learning-to-learn means knowing when you are under social and emotional pressure. It also means knowing how to deal with it. These are critical abilities for young people dealing with technologically-enhanced cultural pressures.

Learning-to-learn points careers education in the direction of helping students to learn how to find things out, how to know whether you can believe them, how to check that out, and whether you need to know more. In psychology it is set out as critical thinking; in philosophy as the epistemology of why we should believe anything; in sociology as understanding 'habitus'. And where other people have an interest in what people do there will be such pressures.

Sarah Meadows calls the learning response 'metacognition' – cognising cognisance. She summarises evidence to show that it is a combination of abilities – to plan, seek, check, monitor and adapt (1993, pp.78-81). One implication is to engage learners in a range of different views. The disagreements help students to identify the different things that are going on in different processes. It is called the need for a 'theory of mind' – an understanding not only how I come to know, but how *other people* do it differently.

CPI assembles this thinking into a progressive sequence, inviting students to wonder when people have enough to go on, how they sort it into useful order, what is important to them, how it helps to explain how things got this way, and what anybody can do about it.

It applies the inward strategy advocated by Susan Greenfield. It develops the critical thinking advocated by Stephen Law. And, while gathering new information is always useful in any here-and-now situation, learning-to-learn is an acquisition with lifelong usefulness.

### 3. Organise for transfer-of-learning

Transfer-of-learning is an absolute requirement of careers work: it means that what is learned in one setting will be used in another. If what students learn in careers education does not make a difference to what they do in their lives, then it is not working.

Transfer is an outcome, but more than a learning outcome – it is a living outcome. Learning outcomes are set down in terms that are observable in the classroom. But doing well in a classroom is not an indicator of transfer. Its indicators will not come from conventional classroom assessment.

The requirements are demanding. In their survey, Stuart Maclure and Peter Davies draw attention to how learning for action in life requires high levels of abstraction, based

on an understanding of underlying principles (1991, p.xxviii). People can then apply those principles in a variety of situations. In her survey, Sara Meadows points to how transfer-of-learning requires that learning is encoded, so that learners can see links between what is being learned and where it is to be used. Such markers must be made in some depth and detail (1997, pp.81-87).

CPI takes on board both indicators of transferability. On the need for deeper understanding: its account of process describes a stage-by-stage learning progression – from initially sensing the situation to arriving at an explanatory understanding of it. This is a requirement if the students are to be able to anticipate the consequences of their own action in life.

On the necessity of encoding: CPI urges the use of 'life-role markers'. Every decision, transition and moving-on is negotiated in role – whether in domestic, neighbourhood, work or citizen roles. The situation is always of being: (1) in that position; (2) with those people; and (3) taking on that task. Conventional careers education emphasised the importance of skills for tasks; but there is more to learning-for-life than that. We need deeper and more detailed ways of indicating how learning can be transferred.

In CPI putting a marker on a life role therefore comes from a discussion around (1) 'this is where you will be', (2) 'this is who you will be with', and (3) 'this is what you will be taking on'. It is a useful a start-up activity. But, in order to get both specificity and range of transfer, CPI describes a follow-through along the lines (1) 'where else can you use this learning?...?', (2) 'with whom?...?', (3) 'doing what?...?'

The base-line requirement for transfer is that the classroom reminds students of their lives so that their lives remind them of the classroom. There is no slick formula here. It needs talking through – processing.

### The implications

So, does our future belong to information technology? In the input-process-outcome analysis technology is not a method (a process) it is a resource (an input). And it is only one possible resource. We should resist the random effects of 'digital distraction'.

There are two ways to be practical about resources. One is to make the process fit the input. The more professional way is to find the input that best serve the outcomes. And, in that respect, expanded community-contacts and useful time slots – for processing – are at least as significant as new technologies. No doubt, existing and upgraded technologies will figure somewhere as resources. But probably not in the way that we have been using them in the past. We have barely begun to recognise the opportunities that emerging technologies can bring to enabling the questioning of narratives. And that is where this argument leads.

It says we must first adapt the technologies to the needs, not the process to the technologies. Stuart Maclure and Peter Davies are acutely aware of how radical are these implications (1991, pp.201-223). They move us way beyond tick-box and click-mouse routes to ready-made outcomes.

Some of the most demanding resource implications concern useful time:

- enough time – this level of complexity needs time to process learning;
- long-block time – and units of time to allow enquiring, questioning, narration, trial, testing and adaptation;
- at the right time – with good timing, so that students grasp the learning as-and-when the need for it comes into view.

It needs room for manoeuvre – so that that learning can be organised as a series of episodes, or as a continuous process, or interleaved with experience-based work. To do it means abandoning careers education as a marginal add-on to mainstream curriculum.

Education-academic John Gray (2005) comments on marginal tendencies:

**“Many schools have fairly primitive ways of accommodating innovations – they simply bolt them on to existing efforts and then find themselves overloaded. Ways of funding and supporting initiatives which encourage more coherence and develop a greater and enduring capacity for change might increase the likelihood of reforms taking root” (p.89).**

They might!

## The LiRRiC proposals

The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority is currently undertaking root-and-branch thinking for 11-19 curriculum. Part of that ‘blue-sky’ thinking is LiRRiC – a proposal for ‘life role relevance in curriculum’ (Law, 2006). The LiRRiC strategy finds the resources to meet the needs.

But the analysis of learning needs set out here is wide ranging. It accepts no clearly-bounded body of knowledge; it imports from a range of disciplines. This article has drawn on economics, psychology, sociology, political economy, theology, philosophy and cultural theory. This process of wide-ranging acquisition has maintained careers work in a decades-long series of adaptations. The more we have taken on board the more we have been able to work out new and useful things to do. Indeed, we have long-since passed the point where the term ‘careers education and guidance’ any longer fits: much of what we do is neither ‘careers education’ nor ‘guidance’.

It is not that complexity is invariably a good thing; but evolutionary progress is always towards complexity. And an assumption of LiRRiC is that we will not enable autonomy except by facing up to the complexity and liquidity of contemporary realities (see Law, 2005; following Dennett, 2003).

Accordingly, a LiRRiC programme would draw on academic knowledge as well as careers-work applications, calling in community-based experience as well as professionally-based expertise, and working with an ‘other-than-careers’ as well as a ‘careers’ focus.

The result is a wider, life-work-balanced and integrated whole-curriculum timetabling strategy. It would take careers work off the edge of timetable. More than that, it locates it where it can inform on-going whole-curriculum reform.

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## Links

An account of the LiRRiC proposals:  
[www.hihohiho.com/magazine/features/caflirric.html](http://www.hihohiho.com/magazine/features/caflirric.html)

This article is abstracted from *The Copenhagen Strategy – Thinking Outside the Box*:  
[www.hihohiho.com/underpinning/cafculture.pdf](http://www.hihohiho.com/underpinning/cafculture.pdf) (from August 2006)

Information about *The Real Game* can be found on their website: <http://www.realgame.co.uk/>

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