

A School for Thought

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I've been lucky enough to persuade my school's senior management to let me set up something called, portentously enough, School for Thought, to be the 'Thinking Core' of our school's curriculum, taught to all students from years seven to eleven. Its aim is simple: to get our students to do *more* and *better* thinking.

My conviction that there is a 'thought deficit' is the product of two decades' teaching in English and Scottish secondary schools during which I have been stalked by a disquieting sense that what I was teaching- and what my students were gaining from the rest of their time in school- fell short of what might wholeheartedly be described as an education. When I say this I am not offering up a *mea culpa* – rather I am criticising the wider education system of which I, and the various schools in which I have taught, have been a part.

It is, I hope, uncontroversial to say that education should help students to think better. Various clichés about the aims of education capture



this; it's about learning to think for yourself or to think critically and so on.

This seems right, but obviously leaves a great deal of detail to be filled in.

And here is where my experience of what goes on in schools – that is to say the institutional values, structures, physical environment, curriculum and pedagogy through which we educate our students – clashes with the clichés. It's not that we don't make strenuous and effective efforts to improve our student's thinking- we do. It's just that the dominant conception of thinking with which we operate is severely restricted and constricting- squeezing out other modes of thought that ought to be given more air.

This favoured faculty of the mind is recall. Its effects are visible everywhere and its status taken as a given. The business of teaching and learning is understood to be the transfer of information from one location (mind of the teacher, textbook, video, website etc.) to another – the mind of the student. The student's own task is then to reproduce this with minimal loss of fidelity on an exam paper. The more perfect

the recall, the higher the mark. The curriculum is thinned down to the sparse bullet-points of the exam specification: [knowledge of sufficient power](#), it is hoped ([perhaps erroneously](#)) to merit its selection. Pedagogy becomes a matter of instructing teachers in the best techniques known to cognitive psychology, as many an inset day attests. We pass them on to our students so that they can pull off the remarkable feat of learning the specified content from ten or eleven separate subjects.

This can and does lead to some extraordinary acts of memorisation. Schools, teachers and students are getting better at this; and it is this that is celebrated as 'progress' and 'improvement' whenever grades go up nationally or a given education authority/school district is seen to be performing well. Heroes of the examination season make it into local news bulletins and every school website trumpets their achievements.

I think we are getting better as a profession at preparing students for recall-rich examinations. 'Memory champions' can and do learn telephone directories, orders of packs of cards and so on, displaying their mastery of the techniques that form the basis of teacher training

programmes throughout the world (interleaving, spaced practice, elaboration and so on). We know how to make the transfer efficient, to reduce [cognitive load](#) and to [make it stick](#).

What we ought to question is the value of this exercise in information-retrieval. Whether we should view the minds of our students as well-formed and educated because they can recall knowledge as if it were no more than a bank of Wikipedia stubs. And whilst it is clearly a good thing if we can readily remember lots of facts about our common world – the more the merrier – I don't think it merits the costs incurred through making our children's education into nothing more than a gigantic and [joyless](#) end-of-school quiz, however inherently ['thrilling'](#) the selected content for the particular round of the quiz/exam is believed to be.

My interest is in exploring the faculties of the mind that don't hog the limelight in our schools: what other kinds of thinking should we nurture and how can schools create the right conditions for their growth? How can we move from the mental monoculture of 'schools for recall' to ecosystems which sustain a richer and more varied life of the mind?

The logo for pesgb, consisting of the lowercase letters 'pesgb' in a white, sans-serif font, centered within a solid teal square.

These are the hard questions that I and my department have been lucky enough to encounter and be charged with exploring, resolving even, in our classrooms and beyond – to embark on the, perhaps Quixotic, quest, to clip the wings of ‘recall’ so that other kinds of thinking can take flight in our ‘School for Thought.’ Further dispatches to follow as we try to give some reality to our counter-cultural dream over the next few weeks, months and years.

*After eighteen years of wandering through the full range of English and Scottish secondary schools, **Paul Moore-Bridger** has ended up in Birmingham where he is Head of Religion and Philosophy at King Edward's School, Edgbaston. He is still wondering.

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