

McGregor, Richard ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6685-2589> (2011) "Is this a dagger I see before me?": the power of agency in the discussion and delivery of subject knowledge. In: TEAN Subject Knowledge Seminar, 14 January 2011, University of Cumbria, Lancaster, UK. (Unpublished)

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“Is this a dagger I see before me?”: the power of agency in the discussion and delivery of subject knowledge

I have a problem. Every time I hear the phrase ‘the changing nature of subject knowledge’ or similar, I cringe. It’s simply not true. $2 + 2$ will always equal 4 (on this planet at least), and 1066 will always be 1066. You can deny that 1066 actually took place at all of course and say that England was always ruled by the Normans and that the Saxons simply made an unsuccessful uprising that was subsequently used as propaganda by the Norman ruling class. Such a view (which by the way I’ve never heard expressed) would be termed revisionist history, and should tell us more about ourselves and our current attitudes than about what in fact took place. It is more pernicious and sinister of course when, for political or propaganda reasons, someone, or a group, deny that the Holocaust happened – or that it’s Jewish propaganda exercise aimed at blackmailing the world. Or a more recent example that I have encountered is the claim that while 9/11 did happen it was an insider plot by the CIA so as to turn the world against Islam

Such revisionism pits interpretation against facts and big reputations can be made on the basis of revisionist thinking. Generally however, we can assert that facts in relation to subject knowledge are *de facto* facts and will not change. What IS at stake is how we contextualise subject knowledge. I’d be so much happier if the phrase ‘the changing nature of subject knowledge’ were replaced with the ‘recontextualising of subject knowledge’.

However before we can begin to understand why there needs to be a distinction we have to consider what it is that actually creates our views of the value and place of subject knowledge. In the modernist, as distinct from postmodernist, world there was an answer to everything, religion and science had the answers. In the postmodern world there are no overriding answers, no metanarratives that encompass all things. Barthes declared that the ‘author is dead’ and since then postmodernism has declared ‘the death of Man’ / ‘the death of humanity’. To put it simply, in postmodernism everyone’s opinion is right.

However, even if that is the case, there is no escaping from the truth that the positions humans adopt, the things they say, think even, are shaped by a myriad of different influences. And that is where agency comes in. So that we can have a shared understanding of what I mean by agency and in what sense the rest of this short paper depends on that understanding, I’ll spend a few moments explaining what I mean, in the present context, by the word agency.

As a living human being I possess agency – self-agency. The things I do, the things I say, what I write, how I teach, all these convey my influence, my opinions, my moral stance and so on – and the effect of these can be long lasting on the individuals with whom I have interacted. And I have self-agency because I can choose to do or say as I wish (ok within certain limitations which I’ll come to in a moment). However as an individual I have experienced the agency of other humans and these have shaped MY thinking. It depends on the discipline as to

how these human agents are defined – human agent, self-agent, and primary agent seem to all be aspects of the same phenomenon.

There is however agency that operates upon me which appears to have some kind of collective sense. At the risk of over simplification sociologists might term these Corporate Agents, but in philosophical debate these might be called non-human agents. So for example agency operates on me to regulate my behaviour in public: convention, good manners, good taste act as non-human agents on my behaviour out of doors – though of course indoors I can abandon all to 'be myself'. But what about Fate as agency. The ancient Greeks would have understood that concept: as Aristotle said 'no one deliberates about things which cannot be otherwise'.

And so, if I am a teacher, what agency is operating on me influencing what I think, what I say, what I believe is important, what I choose to include, what I choose to leave out. No doubt some will argue 'well of course you as the teacher have total self control, self agency, in relation to what you teach'. Not true. The exam board, the headteacher, my head of subject, OFSTED, the current political agenda, what's currently fashionable, to name just a few, all exercise human or non human agency on what I teach. And for that reason questions that as a teacher I SHOULD ask of my pupils may not be asked.

Let me take an example.

Many primary school children are encouraged to make a study of their locality. What was it like 100 years ago, 200 years ago. This may or may not be tied into some form of family history. As a result of this study children learn some important lessons about how and why societies have changed over time. But, I wonder, how often is it extended to ask the citizenship related questions round 'what is your locality like now' 'what is YOUR place in that locality', 'how do YOU fit into it', 'why do people in your locality behave in a certain way that might not be socially acceptable'. And then there are wider questions that stem from this – maybe these are more relevant to older pupils but they are still very apposite: how do you view your locality in relation to the rest of the region, or in relation to England as a whole, or Britain as a whole, or the world.

Each pupil is part of an historical continuum in a locality so how does that pupil view their place in it, what is their embeddedness in their locality look like, how is it manifested, how do they respect their embeddedness in their locality, how do they celebrate it? Asking questions like this sooner or later gets us to the point of realizing that there is non-human agency at work within the idea of an island nation mentality, which promotes a notion of isolationism from, for example, the rest of Europe, and leads to generally held views (by which I mean the general population's view and not economists or other 'experts') that Britain should not be in the European Union and we should adopt the Euro over our collective dead bodies.

I saw such attitudes among teenagers in Luton when I taught there. They had no respect for their community because they saw it as having nothing to offer, 'nothing happens here' and 'I'm getting out of here as soon as I can down the thirty miles to London where it's all at'. Consequently they were loathe to give time to their community. Luton tried to emulate Glasgow's success with the "Glasgow's

miles better” campaign, in order to up the image of the town. The campaign lasted no more than 2 months before it was abandoned. Lorraine Chase’s “Luton Airport” didn’t help.

agency is at work in all aspects of the decision-making processes related to subject knowledge, and, while some facets of agency may be benign, even beneficial, other facets are detrimental and potentially damaging to the development of subject teaching.

Thus, for example, it is not what OFSTED ‘say’ that is necessarily the issue. agency is at work in what that body **tacitly** encourages and what it **tacitly** discourages: if few OFSTED reports contain the word ‘fun’, it can therefore be inferred or intuited that it does not consider ‘fun’ to be a significant element in children’s education. If it’s not OFSTED then it might be what the teacher thinks the faceless Exam Board wants or will reward as appropriate work for the level. To take an example from my own subject - the Waltz. It is not stated anywhere that I know of but there is a view held by some music teachers that in order to get a good mark in composition at GCSE students should write a waltz. Therefore they teach a formulaic approach to writing a waltz, all the pupils do it like that and presumably the formula works because the pupils achieve generally satisfactory marks. But composition was never meant to be like that and no-one that I have ever encountered has advised this route. We must therefore be dealing with some kind of agency which persuades teachers to adopt this approach.

agency operates within a wide range of political, social, personal, academic and environmental contexts in which teachers have to situate themselves when responding to government, school, parent and societal expectations. Thus when the Labour Government were perceived to have no particular view on the importance of the Arts in schools this acted as agency to confirm in the minds of parents that working in the Arts was not a ‘proper job’.

agency also operates within the psyche of the individual teacher. If something is perceived to be the case it can become the case. Why is it, for example, that so many schools’ history courses (not to mention exam board syllabi) focus on World War II? World War II has become the ‘best’ war to study in the school context. What aspect of agency is at work here that prevents us from suggesting that, if only from a moral and ethical perspective, either the Falklands War or the Iraq war would actually be better conflicts to study – if we must study war in the first place?

The fact is that agency is a multi-layered, pernicious and often hidden influence that works often on the subconscious level to reinforce conformity and compliance in relation to subject knowledge. I would argue that we need to focus more on changing contexts for and in the delivery of subject knowledge rather than trying to ‘change’ the nature of ‘subject knowledge’ itself?

In the light of the current Government’s thinking I believe we will probably see MORE evidence of agency than less. What after all is Big Society if not agency given a tag by which to identify it. Big Society **demands** that WE take more

responsibility for looking after the poorest in our society, Big Society **demands** that WE take collective responsibility for dealing with antisocial behaviour etc, Big Society **demands** that WE accept our responsibility for the decisions that are made. Move agency away from the Government and into a collective subconscious...

Well then you might ask. Sure I recognize that agency operates within the system but I'm bound into the system, what can I do other than accept it? If we think like that we are well on the way to giving up our individuality and becoming part of the collective: I tried hard to avoid reference to 1984 but well, maybe Orwell had a point!

Until we come to recognise fully the power of agency working within the education system and within current subject discourses we will never actually create a curriculum which effectively develops pupils' thinking responses rather than simply their compliant responses.

So what can be done? Well first of all the reflective teacher needs to have a real awareness of how and where agency operates within the education system and what the manifestations of it are both in the responses of others with and under whom we operate, but perhaps as importantly where its influence finds expression in what we as individuals do, how we convey ideas, what we have been almost conditioned to accept as the 'necessary content' of syllabi and so on. So recognition first.

Next, we need to know how to, but also that we actually do have permission to, question those aspects of agency which seem to determine what it is we teach and sometimes indeed the way we actually teach it. What we are touching on here is in part how we question the examination boards view of subject content. And immediately we are up against some faceless agency which says that examinations are getting easier. Who is it that says this? And what exactly is easier? Are we not testing the same subject content as we always have...

Let me return to my own subject for a moment. A couple of years ago a colleague in school contacted me because she really wasn't sure that the composition which her pupil had done would actually get a good mark in the examination. It was, if you like, too 'different' – that's not to say it was 'original' as such but it didn't follow the models, one of which I referred to earlier. Her worry was that it would be dismissed by the examiners as unmusical and possibly computer assisted. I gave quite a bit of advice but the main message I gave was that the pupil should clearly indicate intention – what was there was there by deliberate choice and not by accident: in short that the work be defended musically.

It is only if we as teachers start to ask questions about the appropriateness of the 'perceived criteria' which underlie the assumptions of what the curriculum for a particular subject should include, and then subsequently what examination boards decide is testable (and what is not), that we will begin to claim back the notion of independence in relation to subject teaching.

It's not just that pupils should learn the lessons of history, it should be that they are able to question why history happened in that way, and engage with the recent past to be able to reflect on moral and ethical issues in relation to present and future political and social agendas.

By tacitly promoting conformity rather than innovation, not questioning agency working through government, examination boards, 'parent power' (heaven help us), and so on we will continue to perpetuate the systems that now exist, and largely in the forms in which they now exist.

Let me close with a very recent example of how I think agency works in the political context of education. The day before the White Paper on Teacher Training was produced OFSTED reported that the best ITT training was to be found in successful HEI/School partnerships. Surely the government had advance knowledge of this finding, and yet the White Paper insists on increasing the number of teachers being trained on the job, despite evidence that this is less effective. I ask myself then what agency is working upon governmental thinking to drive ministers down this line. We know it is not research which asserts that it is a better method. [You might well ask how it is that, for example, a single individual department can give a trainee experience of a broad range of methodological approaches]. Could it be that a certain agency known as 'Financial Imperatives' might be driving this change.

Education comes from the Latin 'to lead out' but it does seem that the way we often respond to the various agencies both human and non-human that exert influence on us as teachers is to adopt processes to induce, adduce, and deduce rather than educe, [which the Oxford Dictionary defines as 'bring out or develop (something latent. or potential)'], and instead of promoting originality and reform we can end up promoting, encouraging or acquiescing to conformity, similarity and conventionality.