



## **Knowledge vs Skills: Lessons from Lockdown?**

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Things that I have learnt from lockdown:

1. Who society's key workers *really* are (mostly underpaid and overworked public servants);
2. How people react in times of uncertainty (toilet-roll hoarding and manic baking);
3. How much I value my family (but no more zoom quizzes, please!);
4. It's only the fear of visitors that keeps my house relatively clean (I'd strongly suspected this already);
5. How our curriculum is not fit for purpose (hear me out on this one).

We teachers pride ourselves on our ability to reflect. We look at our practices and see how they can be improved. We self-evaluate, peer evaluate and, sometimes, we've even been known to evaluate our evaluations. It makes sense, therefore, that we take the time to evaluate the impact a worldwide pandemic has had on our profession, and, indeed, on the education system as a whole and what we need to do to ensure that we can move forward in the right direction from here.

Let's look at the educational impact of lock-down and the cancelling of exams. If it has taught us anything, it's that the exam board's mission of "developing transferable knowledge, understanding and skills" is a failed one. I know for a fact that I contribute to this failure on a daily basis, but I can't seem to break the cycle. When teaching my exam classes, I am, without a doubt, transferring knowledge (Line. By. Line.) My pupils *know* the characters in *Of Mice and Men* better than they know their own friends. They *know* their 15 poems inside out – context, structure, themes, language etc. They *know* how to get A\*s in their exams, because I have taught them every Assessment Objective and its weighting, even getting them to mark like an examiner. I have taught them to repeat the key terms of the question robotically throughout their response and not to use synonyms to replace that key term, for fear they might not be acknowledged.

Their knowledge is boundless, as is their ability to rote learn, but I have a sneaking suspicion that if I were to produce an unseen poem, or script, or even an unseen extract, that the vast majority would not be able to answer it well. They would not have the *skills* to think independently. Believe me when I say, I try to teach them these skills: I demonstrate how to analyse language, how to look for meaning, how to examine a writer's use of language etc. The reality is, however, that they only want to know about what's going to be in the exam, so

they can answer the question and subsequently forget all knowledge of it the minute they leave the exam hall.

I had my concerns about this pedagogy a few years back when teaching a very high-achieving GCSE English Literature class. While discussing a certain male protagonist, one of my pupils made a highly illuminating and perceptive point. Granted, it was 'outside of the box', but it was discerning and thought-provoking and opened up a fantastic class debate. A class debate, however, that I shut down after five minutes. Why?

Because A: I am squeezing two GCSEs (English Language and English Literature) into the time allocated for one GCSE and B: His view will most likely not be recognised as a valid point. My response to him was "Matthew, that sounds suspiciously like an independent thought; don't write it down – it won't be on the mark scheme." Even though this was said with (some) jest, it didn't sit easy with me.

Many would argue that I should have encouraged him to write it, but in my opinion it was not worth the risk. Anecdotally, most English teachers know of a pupil who thought outside the box and achieved lower marks than expected. Presumably they'd have been better off learning what was in the previous years' marks schemes. A recall of exam papers has several times confirmed that a pupil's insightful analysis of a character had not gained them any marks.

So we have learnt to play it safe. We have, as Mr Spencer says to Holden in *Catcher in the Rye*, learned that "Life is a game that one plays according to the rules."

Unfortunately, it is our attempt to keep grades (and reputations) up that has resulted in our inability to spend valuable time teaching pupils the appropriate skills. We don't teach them how to understand a writer's language and emotions – we teach them how to get an A\* in the exam. Our world is ruled by performativity, not engagement.

What has this got to do with lockdown then? With the ongoing saga around specification changes and the long-awaited decisions from the consultation document, it is impossible not to realise that, had I been teaching subject-based **skills** for the past two years, then the lost teaching time should not really have made much of an impact on pupils' exams. If I hadn't been teaching *specifically to a specification* (the clue is in the name!), *with set poems, books and plays*, but was teaching skills and knowledge in literature, then my pupils should be able to sit any exams at any time. They should be able to apply their skills of analysing poetry to any unseen poem that the exam sets. But they can't. They can't, because they would rather memorise fifteen poems than write an independent, original response to a poem they've never seen. There's no security in it, which is exactly why it's what they should be doing!

Granted, our specification once had an unseen poem question -- worth 10% and given approximately 20/30 minutes in the exam – it was viewed by teachers and pupils alike as an addendum, not as a valuable or worthwhile part of the exam to prioritise. The revised specification now includes unseen prose, but *of course*, it has to be from a 19<sup>th</sup> Century text, because apparently there hasn't been much fiction of value written more recently.

I know that, to many teachers reading this, my arguments do not apply to the subject they teach. I appreciate that there is a place for an element of rote learning and straight transferral

of knowledge that is critical in every subject, quite often, as the first step towards independent thoughts. I get that.

But what if, *what if*, we threw caution to the wind, set knowledge and understanding as the foundations of learning, rather than its pinnacle, and focused on teaching pupils the **skills** to use the knowledge and apply the understanding that the specifications profess to deliver? What if we did that?

Let's not give them a bank of quotes to memorise. Let's encourage thinking about the application of their knowledge to the world around them. Let's not turn their efforts into checklists for Assessment Objectives. What's the worst that could happen? You never know, we might even churn out some independent, forward thinking individuals, individuals who might be able to make '*informed and responsible decisions throughout their lives*'.<sup>1</sup> Imagine that!

\*The author has written under a pseudonym and wishes to remain anonymous.

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<sup>1</sup> This is the stated aim of the statutory curriculum from Foundation stage *up to and including* Key Stage 4, but you knew that already, didn't you?

