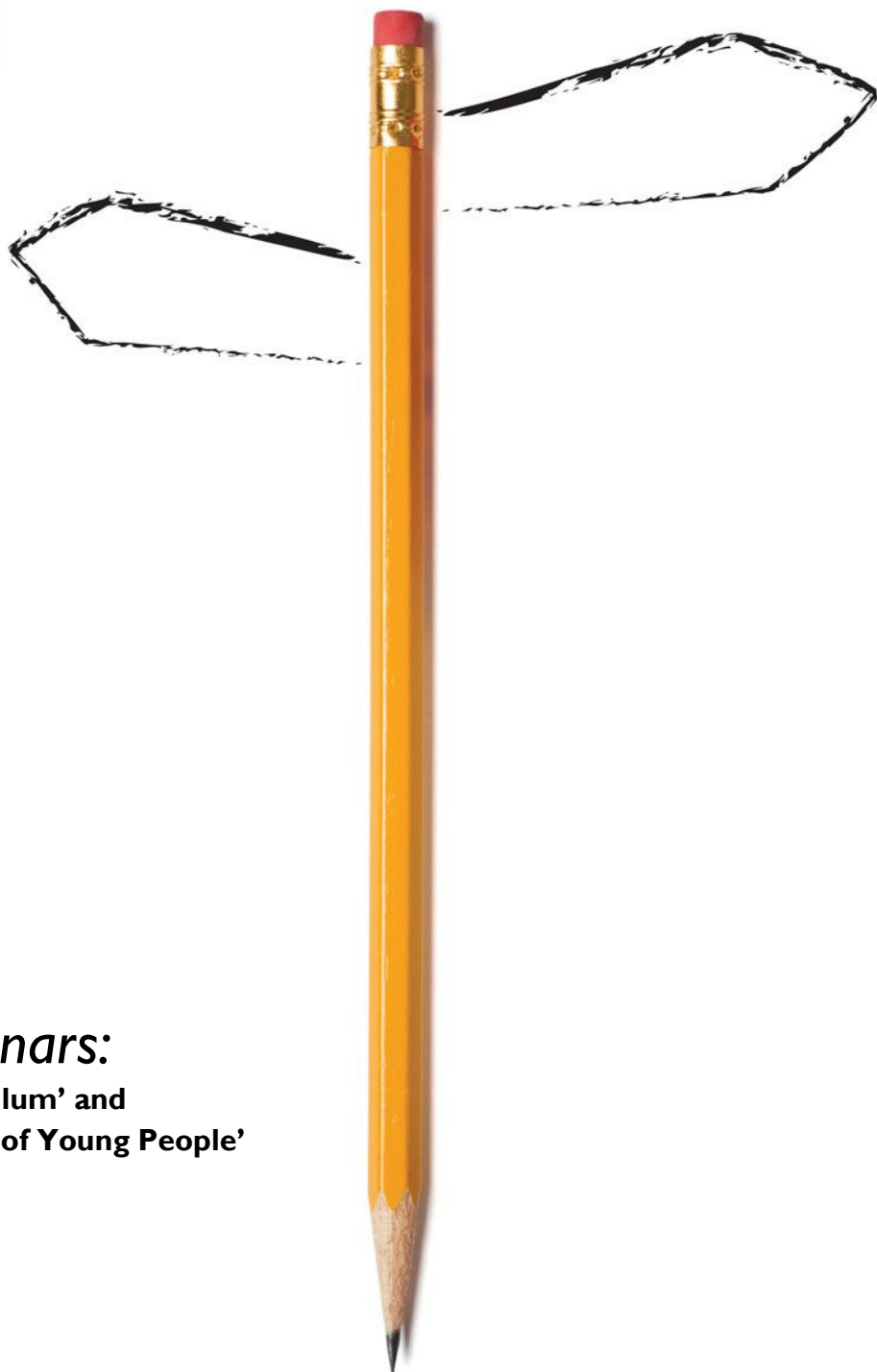


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RSA invitational seminars:
'The Social Brain and the Curriculum' and
'The Curriculum and the Agency of Young People'

An interpretative report by:
Professor Harry Torrance and Professor Maggie MacLure
Education & Social Research Institute
Manchester Metropolitan University

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Summary

Many recent academic and policy publications acknowledge frustration with the rigidity of the existing National Curriculum, and its failure to adequately engage all pupil groups. Key reviews have suggested radical changes to the primary curriculum, and various commentators argue for extension of such radical reflection to the secondary curriculum. The RSA invitational seminars on the future of the National Curriculum sought to contribute to such debates, seeking to incorporate new thinking from other disciplines, including recent research in neuroscience, discourses around democracy and voice, and discussions about the future of the school curriculum. The key questions underpinning the two sessions were: *How could a different, fundamentally social understanding of the brain, change the way we think about the curriculum? And, What does a curriculum that is designed explicitly with young peoples' agency in mind look like?*

The seminars provided a forum for innovative cross-disciplinary debate, and stimulated further questions for curriculum research.

Key issues emerging from the two seminars included:

- The importance of unconscious brain activity: we are not aware of most of the things that we do.
- The brain's sociality: the brain's constant orientation to others and the creation of meaning through brains interacting, rather than through the operation of individual internal cognition;
- The importance of empathy and altruism in decision-making and the impossibility of trying to separate the emotional from the rational;
- The plasticity of brain structure and the importance of practice for structuring the brain through activities, in pursuit of expertise;
- The potential of interactive Web 2.0 technology to radicalise curriculum offers, in terms of access/location (beyond the school) and relationships (potentially collaborative and non-hierarchical);
- The importance of developing qualitative measures of collaborative learning and a wider range of learning outcomes;

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- The need to better facilitate meaningful agency for students, to be developed through a more holistic and integrated vision of the school curriculum;
- The possibility that formal school provision could be radically re-envisioned via development of a much more voluntaristic and open set of relationships between teachers, learners, and the community context in which learning takes place.

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Introduction

The seminars were held in February and March 2010. They addressed separate but linked agendas, with different speakers and (largely) different participants. Participants were drawn from RSA, various university subject departments including education, a wide range of third sector charitable and advocacy groups running projects for schools including, for example, the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), Amnesty International and the National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts (NESTA), and government-supported agencies such as the Innovation Unit, the Academies Trust and Teach First. The underpinning rationale of the seminars was to review recent research in neuroscience, which opens up interesting debates about ‘the social brain’, and link this to discussions about the future of the school curriculum and a more pro-active role for young people in the co-construction of their educational experience. Broad organising questions included: “How could [a] fundamentally social understanding of the brain change the way we think about the curriculum?” (Seminar 1) and "Can insights from other disciplines help us create a broad and balanced curriculum?" (Seminar 2). This report will review each seminar separately, before reflecting on some common themes and issues.

Seminar I: The Social Brain and the Curriculum

A brief introduction and list of speakers can be found at:

<http://www.thersa.org/projects/education/education-seminars-2010/curriculum-and-the-social-brain>

The Social Brain

Recent research in neuroscience was presented which demonstrates that most brain activity occurs without any associated conscious experience. Our brains respond to stimuli, of which, for the most part, we are not aware, and many of our actions are initiated automatically. A simple example is showing pictures to experimental subjects for a fraction of a second: brain imaging registers ‘seeing a picture’ brain activity though the subjects have no recall of seeing a picture. Other experiments demonstrate that, even when consciousness is apparent, brain activity registers before conscious awareness of decisions and subsequent action, and that trying to evaluate too much information can lead to poor decisions; i.e. complex decisions can be made without awareness, or prior to awareness of the decision, and, in some circumstances, we make better decisions when we don’t consciously think about them. The brain is necessarily attuned to and constantly monitoring other people, without our conscious knowledge of this, and most of what we do is completely routinised and taken-for-granted within social contexts. Moreover, other experiments demonstrate that groups make better decisions than those of the best individual decision-makers within the group (because individuals tire, lose interest in the task at hand, etc.). Other experiments demonstrate the role of empathy and altruism in decision-making, with long-term maximisation of benefits to the group outweighing possible short term losses to the individuals concerned. These experiments, taken together with the importance of unconscious brain activity, exemplify the constellation of ideas that constitute current notions of the ‘social brain’.

Other speakers noted that the same form and location of brain activity can be detected when we are thinking about ourselves performing a task or thinking about others performing the same task (the ‘chameleon’ or ‘mirror’ effect); and similarly, when we are shown pictures of expressions, e.g. people in pain, the same area of the brain is active as when we experience pain ourselves (empathy). It was argued that the brain is oriented to ‘pro-sociality’ – to collaboration and co-operation from which the group as a whole benefits.

These ideas fundamentally challenge current prevailing notions of the rational pursuit of self-interest which so dominate econometric models of social and public policy. Emotion and the unconscious, far from being the antithesis of rationality, are integral to it – they are not separable in the way current orthodoxies suppose. It was also noted that the

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brain is highly plastic – we learn throughout our lives and such learning changes the brain's structure - connecting and re-connecting neural networks in different ways, with practice solidifying the habituation of new knowledge and new ways of acting. The role of practice, in both senses of the word, i.e. undertaking practical activities and literally doing the same (new) thing repetitively until it becomes routine and one becomes expert, or at least competent, emerged as a key element of practice-based approaches to learning in the subsequent discussion.

Web 2.0

Additional inputs, more specifically focussed on learning and teaching, reviewed developments in 'Web 2.0' and in the role of questioning and dialogue in learning. 'Web 2.0' is shorthand for interactive, on-line activity. Rather than content being posted, to be read and digested in a 'one-way' communication, users design and post material themselves, and constantly update it, via sites such as YouTube and MySpace. Web 2.0 involves interactive relationships between users on-line, combining knowledge generation and transfer with emotional engagement – the desire to want to get involved, to belong to and contribute to a particular group.

Key features of Web 2.0 comprise:

Collaboration;

User generated content;

Dissolution of expert/ novice binary;

Production of knowledge that is visible, distributed and disputable (not fixed or stable);

Immaterial labour - but not just 'mental labour' in the traditional academic sense – considerable play/fun/humour is also involved, which embodies:

Emotional engagement – the 'reason' for generating and sharing content is located in wanting to belong, to be part of a particular on-line community;

Communication as a value generator.

Web 2.0 is very significant in the business world, involving the development of knowledge management systems/data mining systems and direct access to millions of consumers/producers. Huge profits are being made from harnessing the voluntaristic supply of immaterial labour: MySpace sold for \$580M. Web 2.0 has hardly touched schools and the contrast with formal schooling and teacher-led curricular provision is immediately apparent. Yet simply using the internet more in schools, networking

classrooms and ‘getting into blogging’ may not be attractive – to students or teachers. The very informality of Web 2.0 is what makes it different from, and for many students preferable to, schooling. Furthermore, perhaps there is a place for formality in learning – there is a question as to what extent formal knowledge and rigorous/structured understanding are necessary prerequisites to enable individuals to operate in such an environment. Web 2.0 involves searching, identifying, categorising, validating, synthesising, producing, reproducing and modifying/mediating – all forms of knowledge manipulation activity upon which, it is often argued, the 21st century networked economy will depend. Schools must catch up. But equally, young learners probably need a combination of formal input and self-generated content – the issue is what should the balance be, and who should decide.

Classroom Dialogue

A final input examined the role of classroom questioning in promoting student learning, coupled with structured, teacher-student and student-student, groupwork-based dialogue. It was argued that classroom questioning remains restricted and largely driven by classroom management issues (i.e. control of the class) rather than learning. Nevertheless good quality questioning can be developed in classrooms and research findings indicate that learning requires a mix of instructional monologue, quality dialogue, and group discussion (thinking collaboratively) to explore and rehearse new understandings and solutions to problems. Connections were made between social constructivist theories of learning – the social contexts and interactions which promote and support learning - and new understandings of socially-oriented brain activity opened up by brain imaging.

Discussion

Discussion was wide ranging. The idea of the ‘Social Brain’ found resonance with many participants. The implications of the inputs were largely interpreted in terms of the need to develop more collaborative, group-based and discussion-based interactive curricular provision, coupled with better use of web technologies and out-of-school experiential activities. Many examples of in-school and out of school on-going collaborative projects were noted, designed to engage young people with contemporary issues such as sustainable development and human rights, and promote personal confidence and development through, for example, art, media and music activity. Many comments were along the lines of – ‘we’re doing this already, now we’ve got the scientific evidence to back it up’. A key outcome of small group discussions at the end of the seminar was agreement on the need to better identify, record and evaluate the outcomes of such activities. Qualitative methods of assessment and evaluation are needed to capture, record and report the many and varied learning outcomes of collaborative project work.

However more cautionary observations were also apparent in the discussion:

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What is the role of underpinning knowledge in such collaborative work? What prior knowledge do you need, if any, in order to participate fully?

Do people really collaborate on-line in these ideal-typical ways, or do you have to be into the technology and/or collaboration to begin with? And what about cyber-bullying – do we really want to encourage the development of completely unregulated electronic spaces?

Why is this always done via projects? Teachers can feel very patronised and frustrated by such one-off activity. What is required is for teachers to be empowered to grasp these ideas and change schools from within.

The political climate of public service accountability is completely antithetical to such activities – we operate in an environment dominated by individual certification of students and accountability of schools through test results.

Commentary

Some caution over claims for the ‘social brain’ is probably in order. Much of the experimental evidence derives from fairly simple sorts of decision-making, conducted under laboratory conditions (e.g. selecting one option from two possibilities) and with no information about how the experimenters themselves made judgements about what counts as a ‘good’ or ‘bad’ decision. The evidence is indicative and intriguing, but it does not report naturalistic decision-making in situ. Furthermore, much will depend on the boundaries of what counts as ‘the group’ and the extent to which ‘pro-sociality’ might include non-group members. Clearly, inclusive and exclusive practices can carry negative consequences for those defined and perceived outside the immediate reference group. Violence across tribes and families, cultures, nations, religions, even local street gangs, has a long history. However, such violence may provide further evidence of the embodied role of emotion in decision-making and the impossibility of separating cognition from emotion: violence across groups can rarely be said to be in either group’s interest, yet it continues to occur with depressing regularity.

Many of the immediate practical implications of the input, taken up in the discussion, are not new. Much of the evidence about the low level demands of classroom questioning, and the importance of dialogic teaching, has been available for 30 years. Attempts to change this through project work, collaborative work, and discussion-based work has been a feature of schooling for a similar length of time, right back through the Technical and Vocational Education Initiative (TVEI) of the 1980s to the Humanities Curriculum Project (HCP) of the 1970s. But such curriculum projects rarely penetrate the inexorable organisational imperatives of schooling – the need to house, manage and control large numbers of students in a small physical space. Projects are developed, initially prosper with additional funding and the early energy of enthusiasts, but then wither and die. The

‘social brain’ of schooling has not yet been re-structured by such interventions. Thus key sociological issues remain if the implications of ‘social brain’ arguments are to have an impact on the curriculum – why are schools so hard to change? And why are most attempts at educational change focussed on governance and administration of institutions rather than the curriculum, teaching and learning?

There seem to be two different sets of implications which arise from social brain evidence:

- i) The first is what might be termed a traditional liberal reformist set of implications – more of the same with respect to attempts to develop collaborative project work in schools. In this scenario the ‘headlines’ of social brain evidence will be appropriated to give additional weight to collaborative curriculum projects which have arisen and will continue to arise in the long tradition of ‘progressive’ schooling. It seems clear that much social brain work would indeed support such developments and, properly implemented and evaluated, they are likely to bring significant benefit to individual learners. Whether they change the fundamental parameters of schooling is another matter.
- ii) There is, however, a second, potentially much more radical set of implications, which will take much longer to explore and articulate in terms of practical possibilities. These revolve around the ideas that much brain activity is not conscious, that emotion is central to reasoning, decision-making and action, and that practice is central to learning – to restructuring the plastic brain. These ideas challenge the Cartesian idea of a mind-body dualism and emphasise the embodied nature of knowledge. However, embodied knowledge has always been associated with craft skills and manual labour, and contrasted with higher status academic knowledge and mental labour. The mental-manual divide underpins curricular provision in schools and indeed much of our economic and social system. Can a radical understanding of embodied learning be accommodated in different conceptions of the school curriculum and school organisation? For this to occur, teaching strategies and education policy would need to be much more sensitive to the emotional mediation of learning, and the impact of this on children’s engagement and progress. The ‘rational’, cognitively-based teaching of individual school subjects to individual children is called into question, with the role of motivation and successful practice becoming far more central to learning. The management and disciplining of children’s bodies carries implications for the possibilities of what they come to learn, and the development of vital, less hierarchical relationships between teachers and students would need to be far more central to curriculum planning. The ways in which schools are organised to promote learning and ‘model’ appropriate (collaborative) learning behaviour would need to be much more central to curriculum discussions. By

implication, a much more ‘permeable membrane’ would also need to be developed between school and community, with communities treated as potential sources of social and practical knowledge, rather than as inhibitors of learning (because of negative attitudes to schooling) as is often the case at present. These implications also became apparent during the course of the second seminar, and we will return to them in our final discussion of both seminars.

Seminar 2: The Curriculum and the Agency of Young People

A brief introduction and list of speakers can be found at:

<http://www.thersa.org/projects/education/education-seminars-2010/curriculum-and-agency>

Thinking about Curriculum

The detailed agenda for the session posed a question to the seminar: ‘What would a curriculum designed around young people’s agency look like?’. The Chair introduced the seminar with an observation that the curriculum is often thought of as too narrow and utilitarian: what other skills, attributes and capacities should the curriculum be addressing and developing in young people? This seems to position the issue of agency as belonging to the vocational or pastoral side of the curriculum – i.e. what *else* should the curriculum be addressing, rather than how might the curriculum as a whole be conceptualised differently? This immediately seems to re-inscribe the mind/body binary which the previous seminar suggested could and should be overcome. In the event, most of the seminar presentations and discussion revolved around explicating and evaluating notions of agency and pedagogy, rather than focussing on curriculum: evidence, perhaps, of how difficult it is to think beyond current conceptions of a traditional subject-based academic curriculum and an indication of the level of challenge which ideas about the ‘social brain’ present to thinking about the curriculum.

Definitions of Agency

Definitions of agency were presented and explored. It was argued that agency could be understood as adhering to the individual in terms of rights and responsibilities, or as a more fluid set of socially embedded capacities and capabilities – the capacity to understand challenges and opportunities and act in context. With respect to individual rights and responsibilities, it was argued that this position derives from essentialist identity politics – under-represented and/or excluded groups who insist that their ‘voice’ must be heard, and their group must be ‘empowered’ to act. This version of agency is implicit in arguments for ‘young people’ and school students to have their voice heard in discussions which affect them. However, simply ‘allowing’ children to have their ‘voice’

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heard hardly positions them as having meaningful agency. It also raises questions about what to do when their voice conflicts with that of their elders (and betters?). Discussion revolved around whether or not notions of ‘personalisation’ and consulting pupils about their schooling, as are currently fashionable, are indeed intended to recognise children’s agency, or are more of a pedagogic strategy to ‘teach’ (develop) agency for future use. Such initiatives could of course be addressing both objectives, but personalisation and consultation seem to represent a very limited recognition of a potentially much more radical set of possibilities.

Agency, understood as the capacity to envision and act, presents less specific options and many more challenges for the curriculum. Agency here implies not consultation over a limited set of choices, but developing a general capacity to engage, recognise opportunities, act, and make things happen – i.e. all the understandings and practices that constitute successful negotiation through the experience of schooling and indeed through life in general. Both definitions of agency, but especially the second, beg questions as to whether or not the exercise of agency is always conscious and self aware – the intentional act of the individual human agent. Evidence from Seminar 1 indicates that understanding behaviour as the conscious product of the exercise of cognition is extremely problematic. Our brains are at one and the same time oriented to the social but largely unaware of this. The second interpretation of agency would seem to fit with this conception of human action, involving as it does all the intuitive and intangible ways in which we monitor and manoeuvre within our social environment. However, in so doing, such an interpretation of agency would seem to elide into theories of social and cultural capital, and beg issues of how schools could make ‘the rules of the game’ more explicit – or indeed whether it is even possible to do so.

Subsequent presentations also noted this issue – observing that the idea of agency is very much a product of the Enlightenment modernist ideal of the autonomous, rational subject – with the mind driving efforts to achieve self-determination, both at the level of the individual subject and at the level of the (rational, scientific, planned) society.

Curriculum, Pedagogy and School Organisation

Further inputs argued that curriculum and pedagogy derive from the three main functions of education, i.e:

Qualification – developing and certifying knowledge and skills;

Socialisation – inducting the young into the social order and appropriate ways of behaving; and

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Individuation – developing the idea of becoming an individual human subject – understanding oneself as an individual operating within a social system.

These are not necessarily completely distinct functions but are often treated as such – for example through the development of separate academic and pastoral systems.

Development and exercise of agency was noted as a major intended outcome of the successful integration and operation of all three functions. Much discussion revolved around the extent to which such functions could and should be integrated, and indeed were already integrated in many schools. Some participants argued that ‘good’ schools already model and develop agency through the quality and vitality of school organisation, teacher-student relationships, and consulting students about school management, as well as through the taught curriculum.

Questions arose as to whether or not curriculum content could encompass agency, or whether it was necessarily something that had to be developed through pedagogy and school organisation, i.e. the quality of relationships. As noted above, some participants argued that consulting students about schooling, developing pupils as researchers, and recording a wider range of educational outcomes were already happening in the best schools, and the issue is one of disseminating good practice. Others observed the existence of different more voluntaristic models of engagement. The ‘Countesthorpe experiment’ was mentioned, along with Summerhill, the ‘free school’ started by A.S. Neil in the 1930s, which still runs on the same philosophy today. Summerhill operates as a residential educational community first, and a ‘school’ second, privileging socialisation and individuation before qualification. The key ‘learning environment’ is the school moot – the weekly meeting of students and staff at which all aspects of community life are discussed and agreed. Attendance at lessons is voluntary. Yet in due course many students do decide to attend lessons, and many leave with perfectly reasonable traditional qualifications. Could more schools put the emphasis this way round?

Further inputs noted the interplay and perhaps tension between achieving qualifications and preparing for future social and economic activity. A key element of current government policy seems to conceptualise agency in terms of social mobility, driven by the acquisition of educational qualifications. The implicit bargain offered to young people seems to be – stay focussed, work hard, get your qualifications here and now (in the school system) and you will be set on a successful trajectory for life. Get the qualifications and agency will necessarily be enhanced. This was recognised to be a very narrow and mechanistic view of the relationship between educational experience and subsequent life chances, and much discussion also revolved around the need to prepare

young people to be flexible and resilient in the face of an uncertain future. Links with the second, more open definition of agency as capability, are apparent.

Developing Citizenship

A final input focussed on Citizenship Education (CE) – a relatively new statutory addition (since 2002) to the National Curriculum in England. It was introduced as a practical example of agency at work in the curriculum. A ‘signpost’ towards how things might be. This seems to both overplay the importance of its place in the curriculum and underplay the potential of the debate over agency.

A fairly straightforward review of the aims and claims of CE were presented, along with some examples of classroom activity – e.g. making a film about gang violence in the locality of the school; examining the green credentials claimed by the school; finding out the diverse origins of students in a multi-ethnic classroom, and so forth. These are worthy topics but they have been pursued in personal and social education lessons, general studies lessons, media studies lessons, and sometimes in English, History, Geography and Science lessons, over many years. The aims and methods of CE are not new, and indeed it might be argued that locating approaches to ‘teaching agency’ in one lesson, pursued once a week, would be the least effective way of developing such debate across the curriculum. Discussion revolved around such issues. Questions included whether or not the ‘mood of the meeting’, the orientation of the seminar, was making too many assumption about eliding agency with the development of social skills - what about agency in the academic curriculum, in subject lessons, and across the curriculum?

In this context, some interesting observations were made about the process of schools bidding for Academy status. Academy bids often derive from so-called failing schools and achieving Academy status gives them the opportunity for a fresh start. Many bid documents read very similarly - describing the problems of the previous school and the locality in which it is situated in terms of low achievement, low aspirations, poverty, and so forth, to be addressed by the development of ‘high quality learning’. But learning of what for what? The school curriculum, both before and after Academy status has been achieved, studiously avoids addressing the *substantive content* of the bid document, i.e. the *source* of the neighbourhood’s problems. Young people’s knowledge and experience of such communities is depicted as a *deficit* that needs to be remedied through ‘learning’ – which implicitly deprives them of agency. It was argued that schools should recognise the agency and validity inherent in supposedly ‘low status knowledge’. Furthermore, perhaps the curriculum should examine why neighbourhoods are poor, and what might be done about it, not simply try to equip slightly more students with traditional qualifications that

afford them the opportunity to escape the neighbourhood. Using schools to help transform communities would engage and develop agency in a much more radical form.

Further discussion developed from this contribution around whether or not, and to what extent, teachers themselves feel capable of exercising agency in curriculum planning. Why are radical possibilities so seemingly unthinkable? Why is there such self-censorship around curriculum matters? The mandatory framework of the National Curriculum, National Testing and inspection were noted, with some suggestions that perhaps new forms of private sector provision, deriving from models such as the Academies programme and the policy option of parents starting their own schools, might afford more opportunities for new thinking. The spectre of an innovative private sector, and a narrow, over-managed, declining public sector was raised.

Discussion

Overall, discussion focussed on the idea of agency as capacity and the need to prepare young people to deal with uncertainty. Exercising individual choice – through ‘voice’ - seemed to invoke a much narrower sense of agency – selecting from what is already available, rather than engaging with the environment and thinking about how to change it (and indeed oneself). It was further argued that the issue is not just about developing agency *per se*, but about developing judgement about the exercise of agency – judgement about what to do and how and when to do it. It was broadly agreed that developing agency involves the successful integration of curriculum content, pedagogy and school management. Key elements will involve:

- i) changing curriculum content to orient it more to understanding social and economic issues, as well as teaching individual subjects – e.g. maths could involve analysing the statistics of trade and poverty; geography could involve the politics of child labour and migration;*
- ii) developing pedagogy so that it involves much more in-school and out-of-school collaborative project work – again, possibly, focussing on topics such as those above;*
- iii) developing school management so that student perspectives on organisation and administration are sought and accommodated.*

However, it was also apparent that the discussion could easily slip into assuming that the matter at hand was really to do with developing social skills and understandings. The default position from which the seminar found it hard to escape seemed to be that the mainstream curriculum is given, and so agency will be dealt with through improvements in school administration and what might be termed the pastoral curriculum. Indeed some

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argued that this is already the case and, to reiterate, that the issue was simply one of disseminating good practice.

Commentary

Once again, the implications of the seminar can perhaps be summarised in terms of liberal and radical possibilities. One response to the challenge of developing agency is to say that schools are doing it already – arguments about the need to recognise, value and further develop the agency of young people are already being accommodated through practical developments such as school councils, consulting students about school decision-making, and so forth. And indeed such developments are already drawing criticism from the teacher unions (see: ‘Pupils interviewing teachers for jobs’: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/8599485.stm>).

A second response, again in what one might term the liberal-progressive tradition, is to argue, as described above, for a more integrated curriculum package of changes in subject content, more collaborative group and project work, underpinned by the use of internet technologies such as Web 2.0 explored in Seminar 1, and by the use of more formative approaches to assessment which seek to identify, develop and report a wider range of learning outcomes than just test and examination results.

A third, far more radical set of possibilities would involve a much more voluntaristic notion of both school provision and curriculum content. It was notable that very obvious constraints on young people’s agency such as the mandatory status of compulsory schooling did not feature in the discussion. It was completely taken-for-granted that young people have to be inducted into agency and furthermore that schools are appropriate institutions to do this. Nevertheless, examples of more voluntaristic models such as Summerhill were mentioned, and there was some interest in developing new forms of school provision via the development of Academies and such like, involving new forms of curriculum planning and engagement. Such developments would see teachers and students focus on issues in their locality and build a curriculum around the investigation of community needs and issues. Such localism would also need to be linked to global drivers of local issues in order to avoid the parochialisation of the curriculum. Given the diverse make-up of many communities however, attention to the global is almost inevitable when corresponding with friends and family involves emailing Africa or the Caribbean, or the Indian sub-continent.

Such radical possibilities might also involve treating the community as a much more overt source of expertise, rather than a tangential one, such that a quite different conception of ‘quasi-compulsory schooling’ might emerge. Could schools be conceived

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of as a form of neighbourhood learning centre – part school, part nursery, part library, part health and sports club, with formal lessons provided for all who want to take them, adults and children alike, and with many such lessons provided by members of the community themselves? Such aspirations perhaps shade too far into utopianism, but resonate with many of the more radical implications from Seminar 1, and bear some comparison with the RSA’s current ‘area-based curriculum’ initiative (cf: <http://www.thersa.org/projects/education/future-schools-network> and Facer’s literature review for RSA-ABC: <http://www.thersa.org/projects/education/area-based-curriculum/area-based-curriculum---manchester>). If the idea of the social brain and embodied knowledge is to be taken seriously in curriculum planning, then including the influence of social context in our understanding and pursuit of learning is absolutely vital, as opposed to the present situation where it is treated as at best a distraction, and at worst a barrier to learning.

Emerging Themes and Future Possibilities

Key issues emerging from the two seminars revolve around:

- The importance of unconscious brain activity;
- The brain’s pro-sociality, i.e. the brain’s constant orientation to others and the creation of meaning through brains interacting, rather than through the operation of discontinuous, internal, individual cognition;
- The importance of empathy and altruism in decision-making and the inherent error in trying to separate the emotional from the rational;
- The plasticity of brain structure and the importance of practice for structuring and re-structuring brain activity in pursuit of expertise, including in activities such as collaborative group work, project work and so forth – socially contextualised learning has to be taught and rehearsed to become habitual and effective;
- The importance of Web 2.0 and the opportunities it offers to extend curriculum resources well outside the school and for learners to engage in non-hierarchical, remote collaborative activity;
- The importance of developing qualitative measures of collaborative learning and a wider range of learning outcomes;
- The need to understand agency as the development and exercise of capability-in-action, to be developed through a more holistic conceptualisation and better integration of academic and pastoral provision;
- The possibility that formal school provision could be radically re-envisioned and pursued through the development of a much more voluntaristic and open set of

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relationships between teachers, learners, and the community context in which learning is both generated and utilised.

Many of the implications of the ‘social brain’ could be domesticated and accommodated by current school provision. Some participants argued that several of the proposals for developing more group and project work in schools were already being practised; and indeed we have seen various forms of collaborative group work undertaken in schools over many years. Yet schools, and particularly the core academic curriculum, have not changed fundamentally for a very long time. It is arguable that we are still dealing with a largely 19th century institution. Future seminars should explicitly explore and articulate more fully what we have termed the ‘liberal’ and ‘radical’ implications of discussions to date, identifying different models of curriculum provision, and the conditions under which each might develop in the context of community-based curriculum development projects designed to test out the implications as they emerge.