

The boiling frog

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The apologue which describes a frog being slowly boiled alive may come to be seen as *the* metaphor of this decade in education. Is our system demonstrating an inability or unwillingness to react or be aware of threats that arise gradually, then cause sudden rupture?

Arguably, we are fiddling while the bots are advancing.

Take these recent words from Microsoft AI CEO Mustafa Suleyman: 'I think we're going to have a human level performance on most, if not all professional tasks. So white-collar work, where you're sitting down at a computer, either being a lawyer or an accountant or a project manager or a marketing person - most of those tasks will be fully automated by AI within the next 12 to 18 months.'

So far so good for teachers. But what about how we are preparing our children for a society of radically different employment patterns, perhaps even for a society where a universal wage operates? The global pandemic of 2020 offered a glimpse.

If the Industrial Revolution replaced horse-power with railways, upended rural communities and gave birth to teeming cities, then quite likely the AI Revolution will redefine what we currently mean by 'work' and 'play', by 'amateur' and 'professional', by 'vocational' and 'entrepreneurial', by 'physical' and 'mental'.

Further, the arresting words of Geoffrey Hinton, cognitive psychologist and so-called godfather of AI, run: 'It's quite conceivable that humanity is a passing phase in the evolution of intelligence'.

In an approaching world of superintelligence, how shall we restructure our schools and colleges? Universities may continue as places of research but, for increasingly evident reasons, their days as thriving teaching institutions are surely fading.

The forces of conservatism are strong in relation to schools - and Covid showed the importance of the social dimension of daily schooling. Looking towards the

2030s, let us assume most young people, most of the time, rock up and are taught by teachers, supported by robots in one form or another. We'll also make the collusive assumption that examination boards will be very slow to change their ways - but boiling point will arrive for them sooner than they think.

What then should be on the school timetable? I'd argue the case for the retention of a spiral curriculum in English, mathematics, the sciences, the humanities, from 5 - 16: a compulsory core covering four or five mornings a week. And examined thus: 25% *oral*, 25% portfolio, 25% online test; 25% written test.

The afternoon curriculum would be compulsory in four arenas, variously organised and assessed through electives and workshops, taught by experts in their fields, and readily accessed by every child and young person:

- **sport and physical education**
- **food and nutrition**
- **the arts**
- **philosophy, politics, economics (PPE)**

Underpinning all teaching and learning will be the unequivocal promotion of *oracy* and *critical thinking*, our last hurrahs as humans confronted by machine intelligence.

The 16th century French essayist Montaigne contested that no education could be deemed successful if, as a result of what we learn, 'our souls do not move with a better motion, and if we do not have a healthier judgement'. It is our language, our memory, our souls, our judgement which must manage the superintelligence which beckons.

When railways were introduced, the questions of the time were: What would happen to the human body at speed? Would passengers faint? If cows saw the red-hot funnels, would they abort or bolt?

The problem with the almost tangible future is that the lead-in times are a killer. As with the apocryphal frog, schools risk realising too late that they are cooked, marooned in a different age.

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