

A Rich Curriculum

PUBLISHED ON [June 11, 2018](#)

Debra Kidd

Back in 1991, Martin Haberman, as part of his life long work into how education could tackle disadvantage, wrote "[The Pedagogy of Poverty](#)" in which he explores how the accepted norms and routines of teaching life act to hold down the very children we seek to lift up. In our work, Hywel Roberts and I refer to this idea of a Pedagogy of Poverty widely, but we need to explore how it fits in with current ideas about 'rich' knowledge and core knowledge curriculum models.

All curriculum models have knowledge as a central part of their design. So why do so many advocate for a 'knowledge rich' curriculum? Well, [Tom Sherrington](#) summarises the key ideas of a 'Knowledge Rich' approach here very well and it's difficult to argue against the idea that it is better for children to have explicit and clear recall of curriculum content than a vague recollection of some experiences acquired as a kind of "rubbing off" of content on memory. Let's take his example of teaching the Romans. Tom suggests that it is better for children to have understood and retained the chronology, impact and key vocabulary of the Romans rather than to have a vague recollection of a trip to a museum and I agree. But the trip to the museum will also have had benefits that go way beyond that of remembering stuff about the Romans.

Hywel Roberts tells a story in his wonderful key notes about teaching in a school in Sheffield. The class are looking at town planning and urban developments, so as a way in, he asks them what they might find in a great city – if the city of Sheffield were to be redeveloped, what would they put there? One by one, the children list things the city should have – a Greggs, a BP Garage, a hairdressers called Streakers...they are describing their walk to school. For many of the children, their only experience of the city they live in is the walk to and from school. For those children and others like them, getting on a coach and going to a museum is about far, far more than remembering aspects of the curriculum. It can be literally life changing.

And as I outline [here](#) – we need to seize opportunities to broaden curriculum content out into much more than a series of well remembered facts. That's the bottom line – the lowest common denominator. While I accept that perhaps we haven't even achieved this as well as we might in the past, it is still no more ambitious a goal than getting the kit on a footballer without aspiring to put him on the pitch. When I teach the Romans, I firstly accept one thing:- I'm not going to have the time to teach it all. These historical periods are massive. So

you have to focus in on the key areas and things you want them not just to KNOW, but to UNDERSTAND.

When I teach I want children to connect past, present and future. To link the then time to the now time with a view to impacting on future time. I don't just want children to be able to identify the location of Hadrian's wall on a map, to be able to recount who built it and why and to be able to map out the layout of the barracks. I want them to know that there were black skinned soldiers there who had marched from as far as Syria. If I choose to focus on a soldier there, I choose Syria because the name Syria resonates with children for wholly different reasons. I want children to understand that migration and population movements have always been with us. I want them to grow up to not be Arron Banks – so blinded by his own racism that he won't even accept the evidence from classical scholar Mary Beard that it was even possible that the Roman army contained people with darker skins. I want them to be able to use all the knowledge and vocabulary that Tom describes. But I want more. Much, much more.

What keeps me awake at night when I think about teaching? It's not Ofsted, testing, performance management...Ok – I don't HAVE to worry about those things any more. But even when I did, it wasn't that. I never gave a monkey's who walked into my room to see me teach. I didn't want prior warnings, I didn't want grades. If I had time I might ask for a couple of tips about what they thought I could improve on – who doesn't benefit from a bit of formative feedback? But what kept me awake was not surveillance. It was how to get through to children. It was how to not just engage them in tasks, but to make them care about the content we were covering. It was “how is my teaching going to impact on the future of the world? To make it a more compassionate and responsible place? How am I ensuring that children leave here able to form healthy relationships so that they don't become lonely? How do I teach them to believe that they have the power to change the world, not just to recount what it used to be?”

We are awash with buzz words at all times in teaching. The buzz words of the moment are 'knowledge rich,' 'mastery,' 'explicit teaching,' 'resilience,' and so on. But if we're not careful, they begin to undermine the very thing they aim to achieve. They strengthen the pedagogy of poverty. You cannot argue on the one hand that knowledge has to be painstakingly and explicitly taught and practiced because it can't be left to chance, and on the other to casually suggest that compassion, criticality, creativity and other important human capabilities will just develop by chance on the back of knowledge. For heaven's sake, you only have to look at our 'knowledgeable' government to see that won't happen!

A rich curriculum moves way beyond knowledge. It moves towards the building upon knowledge to ensure that children know what to do with it. That they can't just name emperors and kings, but that they can consider the pitfalls

of power. That they can't just name rivers and mountains, but that they understand how mankind is at the mercy of our natural environment as much as we are able to control aspects of it. They should understand that our capacity to destroy is matched by our capacity to create. They should know the best that has been said and done in a whole range of cultures as well as our own, but more than that – that the best that is to be said and done may well be yet to come. From them.



Year 2. We've been learning about the Great Fire of London. The children know the dates, the places, the statistics – the facts. We've acquired them largely by driving along in a story because we know that, according to Daniel Willingham, 'stories are psychologically privileged' in the human mind. They understand that the fire was bad, but also that it brought about benefits. I want to know just how much they remember and understand. So I test them. I test them not on paper (at least not at first – later they run to the writing because they are desperate to make their case). For now, we stand together in a darkened room. And I have a small candle alight in my hand.

"Let's say..." I start, "Let's say we're back at the beginning. The moment when the fire broke out. Let's say we have the power to blow this small flame out and stop the fire. Shall we?"

Bedlam breaks out. I do the "one at a time – one at a time!" and we listen to each other.

"We must blow it out! We could save at least nine lives – maybe more."

"Hang on. If we blow it out, then the buildings won't get better. There won't be a fire service..."

“It could happen again and be worse if we blow this one out”

“The street won’t get cleaned up and the buildings will still be flammable if we don’t learn from this.”

“But we can’t let people die just so we can make the buildings better!”

“More people might die. It might have stopped the plague from coming back!”

“We don’t know that for sure – but we do know that if we don’t blow this out, people are definitely going to die.”

And so on. I can assess their knowledge and understanding, but more than that is going on here. The children have CONCERN. The facts of the fire matter because they have been placed in a dilemma over which they have some (fictional) control. They are learning more than they would through a simple written test. They are learning that there are no easy answers to difficult problems. As one child sighed “maybe sometimes you have to let a bad thing happen in order for better things to come.”

This to me is knowledge rich. But it’s also humanity rich. Children have mastered content, but the quality of their discussions offer evidence of fluency. They are able to apply knowledge, consider, weigh and adapt. They are learning how to be wise, not just well informed.

So yes, let’s ditch the ‘we’ll learn about the Romans through a dressing up day’. But let’s not ditch the deep questions, the humanity, the links across time, place and context that connect with us all. Let’s have a future rich curriculum for all.