



Nick Oulton

Future perfect?

Nicholas Oulton outlines new approaches to teaching and learning

The world is fast changing and, driven by rapid economic, technical and social changes, prep and senior schools are beginning to examine whether the way pupils are prepared for entrance exams needs to change. As a fresh crop of boys and girls arrive at senior school, we seek ways to help children to settle in and to flourish as adults in a world that is increasingly unpredictable.

'The child is father of the man.' So wrote William Wordsworth nearly 200 years ago in a poem to explain his love of the natural world around him.

My heart leaps up when I behold a rainbow in the sky: so was it when my life began, so is it now I am a man.'

The things that caught Wordsworth's imagination in childhood endured through his adult life and his poetry speaks volumes for how we all develop. Although no educationist, Wordsworth knew that what we learn and how we learn in our youth affects us for life. Many of our interests, our hobbies, our passions and dislikes can be traced back to what and how we learned as children.

Wordsworth's life (1770-1850) spanned a time of enormous change – the mechanisation of agriculture, industrialisation and technological breakthroughs all drove huge social and political upheavals in his day. Now, in the infant years of this millennium, we are seeing another seismic shift of the world's economic and social fault lines, on a similar scale to that of Wordsworth's time.

The rapid technological and scientific developments in medicine, in IT and in environmental understanding are all made possible by the power of mass digital communications. People are not only acquiring knowledge in different ways; the nature of knowledge and information itself is being transformed and many traditional assumptions are being challenged in an increasingly diverse world.

The ways in which people interact with each other across borders and how they share knowledge and express their opinions are changing fast. It is not for nothing that the political upheavals in Egypt this year have been labelled 'the Facebook Revolution'.

The sheer speed of these changes challenges how we teach as well as what we teach. What will the fields of medicine, IT, engineering, financial services, or the arts, look like a decade from now? Many of today's graduate employment options will be radically different and some may no longer exist.

On the other hand, there will be opportunities available to our pupils in careers that have not yet been invented. This is the world today's 12-year-olds are growing up in, and what is needed is a curriculum that prepares them for it, equipping them with the right qualities to carry them through senior school, university and beyond: qualities such as confidence, creativity and communication skills that will be with them through life.

This is the philosophy that underpins the Independent Curriculum (IC), commissioned in 2010 by Galore Park

Publishing and written by a large team of subject specialists under the direction of former deputy head and director of studies, Andrew Hammond. It is guided by a steering group of Heads, deputy heads and directors of studies chaired by John Brett, Headmaster of Old Buckenham Hall, and was successfully piloted by a group of schools last year.

The essence of the IC is twofold. First the belief that pupils do better at school if they are encouraged to discover knowledge for themselves, to scrutinise it, to apply it within creative, problem-solving situations and then debate, discuss and communicate it to others.

And, secondly, in acquiring, applying and communicating knowledge in this way, pupils develop qualities for life that will stand them in good stead long after the precise mark or grade that they obtain in an exam has been forgotten. Employers are looking for confidence, creativity, empathy, discernment, global awareness and resilience, and, more importantly, these qualities provide the key to happiness and wellbeing in adulthood.

When we wrote the IC, the authors had a very clear brief. They had to ensure that the corpus of knowledge that one would expect a pupil to receive from a first class prep school education was delivered with rigour and progression. They were then tasked with ensuring that this 'vertical' column of content was set out against a 'horizontal' set of activities that directed the pupil through the three-fold route of discovering, applying and communicating.

Then the whole scheme was audited against the ten qualities for life that we were seeking to promote: where we felt the activities did not sufficiently point to the development of these, we sent them back to be rewritten.

The resulting curriculum is still rooted in the subject specialism framework of prep schools, with full weight given not just to the core subjects of English, maths and science, or to Latin, French, geography, history and religious studies, but also to art, music, drama, IT and PSHE. In these latter subject areas, not currently examined in entrance exams such as Common Entrance, much creativity is to be found and where pupils are creating, they are truly growing as individuals.

Curriculum development is very much on the agenda of our schools today, and many in the prep school world are seeking to adopt curricular solutions that inspire all good teachers to equip children with the skills and enquiring minds to flourish through the opportunities and challenges that they will face as adults in a fast-evolving century. Of course, they will still need to pass exams, but it is our hope that they will also retain the joys and wonder of childhood into their adult years. 'So be it when I shall grow old or let me die!'

Nick Oulton is a former classics teacher. He set up Galore Park Publishing in 1998 from his garage and it has since grown to become the leading publisher of school textbooks and educational resources for independent schools. For more information about the Independent Curriculum, visit www.i-curriculum.com