Thoughts on the Victorian classroom

By Mark Baker

Education Vision Consultancy

Reflections on the Victorian classroom

The idea that the model of state education has changed little since Victorian times has been around in education technology circles for some years. When I first heard it I found it a provocative and challenging idea - with all the computers, interactive whiteboards, radio stations, video cameras and similar that are found in schools, could this possibly be true?

Ideas that cause us to step back and question things that lie at the heart of our professional values and beliefs are very valuable as they can help to prevent complacency and may lead on towards further creativity and progress. From a personal perspective, I found this particular challenge to be very useful.

When Victorian education was mentioned in Mr Gove's speech at the opening of BETT 2012, I felt it was time for a re-examination. In his speech he also suggested that little had changed between then and now.

"*The fundamental model of school education is still a teacher talking to a group of pupils. It has barely changed over the centuries, even since Plato established the earliest "akademia" in a shady olive grove in ancient Athens.*

A Victorian schoolteacher could enter a 21st century classroom and feel completely at home. Whiteboards may have eliminated chalk dust, chairs may have migrated from rows to groups, but a teacher still stands in front of the class, talking, testing and questioning."

My first response was to consider the parallel with the evolution of the shark or the crocodile. These beasts have evolved little, if at all, over thousands, perhaps millions of years. They are outstanding predators, ideally suited to their habitats and have not needed therefore to evolve any further. If we are still using a model of education that can be traced back at least as far as Plato, that suggests that it has some pretty compelling strengths. Not least of which is the power of the relationship between a teacher and their learners. Even older learners, who are more capable of learning independently, often prefer face-to-face contact with a teacher/lecturer/mentor/trainer when acquiring new skills and knowledge. Although there are some variations, this model is widely used throughout education in state schools, private schools, colleges and universities.

My second response was to consider the change in classroom culture. Having worked on various types of school improvement or school development initiatives I know how difficult it can be to change classroom practice, especially in the short term. However, when you consider the way education has developed over the last 20-30 years, there have been some seismic shifts, in areas like inclusion and SEN, investigative learning and assessment for learning. Perhaps the classroom has changed a great deal more than Mr Gove gives the profession credit for.

It is true that a Victorian teacher would recognise the "single teacher to a class" model and feel very comfortable with that. But I think that any feeling of comfort would end there. The same could be said of other professions. I am sure that a Victorian doctor would recognise a modern operating theatre for what it is and lawyers would understand how a modern court room is laid out as well as the basics of administering justice. However, the education and training needed to work in all these areas, together with the relative complexity of the tools that now have to be applied with skill, mean that these professions have changed hugely.

In moving on from comparisons with Victorian classrooms, we should be mindful that modern technology does offer us opportunities to try both adaptations and radical changes to the tried and tested model of classroom education, that are simply not possible without ICT. I also believe that whilst technology moves on at incredible speed, humans learn how to exploit it at a much slower pace. This suggests that there is a great deal of unrealised potential available to be tapped and might explain why some people (including Steve Jobs and Bill Gates, according to a recent TES article) feel that technology has not delivered the improvements in outcomes that have been hoped for.

Perhaps technology needs to get smarter. Reliability of equipment, the ability of different components to work together seamlessly, together with high quality design leading to much greater ease of use could, taken together, make ICT tools much more attractive to teachers, who spend their working lives under all sorts of short-term pressures. These sorts of qualities can be found in medical equipment, but it comes at a price. Hospitals are "high stakes" environments with equipment budgets to match.

When money is spent on educational technology there is a sharp divide between buying "stuff" and providing training and support. At best the latter gets squeezed, at worst it is left out all together. Sparkling new hardware is tangible, it can be counted and shown to people. It is clear evidence of intent. It can appear in plans where targets can be set, measured with ease and ticked off. Training and support is generally invisible, difficult to evaluate and not always successful.

Surgeons will train extensively before using new equipment, possibly starting with an expensive simulator. Teachers may be expected to teach themselves in their own time or if they are lucky, be sent on a one day training course. So perhaps we need to get much smarter in understanding the different ways that people acquire new skills and embed changes in their practice, so that we can better support staff when attempting to integrate new technologies into schools. Perhaps we could learn from other professions where new technologies are embedded faster, by looking at how they handle training and development.

We might be standing on the threshold of a brave, new world of education, although my instinct tells me that if I were to go into a classroom in fifty years time, I would not feel out of place. Which is not to say that things won't have changed, of course.

Mark Baker

Director, Education Vision Consultancy Ltd