

2012/61

16 Nov 2012

Pocket Watch – ‘In praise of tests’

Introduction

The title perhaps says it all. In a major [speech](#) this week, Michael Gove set out in his own imitable way a powerful argument about the importance of exams, using eight propositions to demonstrate that they matter. The speech was important for two reasons. First because, it was further evidence of the way in which he is carrying his reforms forward, using a public platform to speak to a wider audience and generate momentum for reform, "*an old fashioned strategy for a sound bite age*" as Fraser Nelson conceded in an article in the Daily Telegraph on the Gove approach but clearly an effective one. For those looking for a master class in the genre by the way, Michael Gove's [speech](#) last November on the importance of learning stands out. Second because the whole question about the nature and purpose of assessment and exams is a huge one for education at present with many feeling that the clock is being turned back to an age of traditional knowledge-based testing that could marginalise some students and fail to recognise the skills and actual application of knowledge that a modern society requires

The argument

The argument is that regular and demanding testing takes away the joy of learning, reduces teaching and learning to a mechanistic measurement process and fails to allow for other achievements that can inspire a student. Critics point to the testing of grammar, spelling and punctuation in forthcoming Key Stage 2 tests, the introduction of linear arrangements for exams at Key Stage 4 and the forthcoming changes at A level as evidence of a trend towards an over reliance on traditional testing. Michael Gove understood but put forward eight arguments to justify why exams are important and capable of serving a wider, social, function

Why exams are important.

1. They are tools of social mobility ensuring 'society is ordered on the basis of fairness' not wealth, class or prejudice. In perhaps the most prominent part of his speech, he argued that external assessment, because it is blind to class or background, offers a more fair and equal way of recognising talent and thereby of opening up opportunity in society
2. They provide essential challenge, "*humans are hard-wired to seek out challenges,*" which helps provide motivation and stimulation for students
3. They bring satisfaction and contentment; a job well done, a challenge overcome, all essential to future success (though this rather depends on individual achievement)
4. By providing stretch and challenge, they can help identify where more help or support is needed; "*exams pitched at a level which all can pass are worse than no exams at all*"
5. They ensure that a solid base of learning is complete before progressing on to further learning. '*Assessment must not be seen as an end in itself, it must prepare the way for future learning*'
6. They help facilitate 'proper' learning and support great teaching. Because tests require students to demonstrate what they've learnt, tests can, apparently, "*drive creativity*"
7. They signal that a person is ready to take on greater challenge and responsibility; completing an apprenticeship is a signal that a student is ready to apply skills learnt
8. And finally, "*schools that take exams seriously take students seriously*"



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