

Final reading of the triple echo?

IT'S THE examination season again. I find myself pondering the meaning of words with every script I have to read. It heightens one's sensitivity to the nuances of language to read innumerable answers to the same questions in the hope of distinguishing the excellent, the good, the mediocre and the bad. At the end of a long batch of scripts how one longs – or at least this one longs – for the student either who has had a temporary aberration and cannot complete an answer or who has had what might be considered divine inspiration and provides the perfect answer.

Unfortunately it is rarely the case that such students present themselves. It is always so much more finely balanced and agonising to make the ultimate judgement, in the certain knowledge that one will be affecting some student's future life course. This is even more difficult in the case of external examining where one is truly the final arbiter.

But each year I find myself in praise of the British system of examining, with its in-built system of checks and balances through the system of two internal examiners and the added reassurance of the external examiners. Nevertheless when the piles of scripts from other institutions land on my desk, I must confess that I find it hard not to stifle a groan or two and wonder if I can put off the moment of marking for something – whatever it is – more pressing. I also wonder how other



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external examiners seem to remember, in minute detail, the oddities and howlers of some students' examination papers. And of course, there are occasions when I – and I suspect some other equally lesser mortals – go on auto-pilot and think that I have read the scripts, simply because the words have passed before the eyes and I have turned the pages over. Then I wish for an alternative system of examining, whereby everything is in beautiful and brilliant typescript, rather than in incomprehensible handwriting.

On the other hand, I know that I learn something every year from the scripts and course work essays I have to read. And it is from this that the real pleasure for me as an academic and

teacher derives. There are always some of the most pleasant and sweet surprises in those apparently interminable scripts. This year I found a lovely footnote in a piece of coursework I had to evaluate as an external examiner. It made my day; the elegance of the prose helped to vitiate an intellectual numbness. One student wrote: "Throughout this essay I shall use women's forenames in addition to the customary academic use of their surnames, in order to draw attention to and to protest against the appropriation and subsequent naming of women as possessions by men in our patriarchal society."

I am also now wondering how much more of this relatively "expensive" and careful system of marking and examining we can afford and sustain in these days of almost exponentially increasing student numbers. We are already in the process of streamlining and developing our teaching and consequent assessment methods, while trying hard to hang on to our traditional systems of quality control. But if students increase exponentially, so too will their work and pieces of assessment. Will we be able still to check all of this work through such rigorous systems of three markers for every piece of work?

And at the same time of expansion of student numbers towards a mass system, rather than an élite system, of higher education we are witnessing a variety of changes of language which also seem to signal other shifts in

meanings, even the meaning of education itself.

The way in which the name of the central government department responsible for education has changed quietly and overnight is a case in point, perhaps even the case in point. Had it changed a month or two earlier, I am sure there would have been many an examination question on the various education courses asking for an explanation of the difference between the Department of Education (and Science) and the Department for Education.

Presumably, the Department of Education and Science was meant to signal that it was a government department made up of people, especially educationists, such as the HMI, who were concerned to provide an educational system for the country as a whole. Similarly, the departments of Employment and Environment were created to provide systems either of employment or of meeting environmental needs.

The Department for Education, on the other hand, signals that the Government is indeed in favour of education, just in the same way as it may be in favour of employment or the (healthy) environment. It is also like being in favour of the family (or apple pie). But it does not necessarily imply that the Government has any necessary responsibility to provide that education, either through its own offices or those of local government. Indeed, taken together

with the creation of the new department to administer the citizen's charter, it may imply that responsibilities to provide education no longer lie with central government but rather that the government's responsibilities are merely to regulate standards and particularly only minimum standards of provision.

And another examination question that will surely appear in future courses will be about the implications of the changes of the names of the majority of higher education institutions to university. What are the nuances of meaning attached to these shifts? Do they indeed signal a shift towards a mass system of higher education or is it more to do with a new system of packaging? Given the amount of both squabbling in some cities about the names for the "new" or "metropolitan" or "statutory" universities as opposed to those bastions of tradition, it seems that the name change does have some dramatic meaning. But for some it may be a change towards a rather bizarre historical tradition, such as in Leicester.

Luckily for us in South Bank Polytechnic there was no discussion let alone acrimonious debate. However, our name has never quite signalled what was perhaps hoped for in some association with the intellectual "left bank" in Paris. Rather most Americans with whom I have discussed it think that we are funded by some large private financial institution. So much for the subtleties of meaning! And perhaps would that we now were!