

Reading 14

Dead certainties: a post-modern world

Andy Hargreaves

Notes

In this edited extract, Andy Hargreaves explains how the momentous changes in the world in the last few decades have also changed the way we think. The author talks about a 'modern' world and a 'post-modern' world. What does he mean by these terms?

In everyday language, 'modern' usually means 'up to date' and 'different from the past', but it can also refer to a particular historical period. What historians have called the 'modern' period began in Europe with the major break from the thinking of the past that took place during the Renaissance and Reformation. However, it developed great momentum during the eighteenth century, in the period called the Enlightenment.

The idea grew that many human beliefs and practices of the past had been irrational – they were not based on **reason**. The use of human reason could be seen in its highest form in the application of scientific method. Scientific method provided a valuable tool that promised to produce reliable understanding. On the basis of that understanding, it was believed, the behaviour of things could be predicted, and this ability enabled human beings to control their environment in new ways.

A belief in human **progress** through the use of **reason** (rational progress) became more and more firmly established in Western society – not only in the field of science, but also in government, the law, manufacturing, the economy, and so on. It was felt that up until that time, human affairs had been conducted on the non-rational basis of things like religious belief, or the privilege that came with being born into the aristocracy. If, on the other hand, human affairs were based on the use of **reason**, it was widely expected that humanity would progress to the point where ignorance would be banished, certainty would prevail, and the human race would rid

itself of disease and social ills.

This belief in rationality, and enthusiasm for science and progress, were the basis for 'grand' theories and developments as different as capitalism, Marxism, and scientific method.

However, in recent years, the widespread belief in scientific progress and reason has been eroded. Hargreaves explains why certainties that have served us for a long time have begun to dissolve. This erosion, he says, has had the effect of undermining people's faith in the certainty of knowledge as something that is fixed and reliable. Hargreaves goes on to examine some of the effects of this lack of certainty on **education** – the field in which teachers as knowledge-workers conduct their practice. Hargreaves writes about his experiences in Britain and Canada. To what extent do his arguments hold for South Africa?

Reading

post-modern: describes a society – our contemporary society – that distrusts science and reason, the processes that the modern world used to better understand reality

globalization: the process by which the world becomes a 'village', in which television images, computer information, or money transactions flow across borders instantly

grand theories: theories that attempt, ambitiously, to explain how *all* people function (for instance, psychoanalysis) or *all* societies function (for instance, Marxism)

proliferation: a rapid growth or increase in numbers

credibility: the quality of being accepted and trusted

The collapse of certainty

In the post-modern world, confidence in all-encompassing belief systems is in decline.

Increasing awareness of the possibilities of environmental catastrophe on a global scale has seriously undermined our faith in technology as a way of reliably predicting and controlling our world in the rational pursuit of progress. Similarly, the globalization of economic life, along with the spread of information through satellite television and other means, has threatened beliefs in the 'scientifically predicted' inevitability of socialist transformation; a change symbolized by the destruction of the Berlin Wall. Such grand theories are in disrepute.

The knowledge explosion, meanwhile, has led to a proliferation of expertise; much of it contradictory, all of it changing. This has begun to reduce people's dependence on particular kinds of expert knowledge, but it has also created a collapse of certainty in established beliefs. Sunshine is good for you, then it is not. Alcohol is assumed to be detrimental to one's health until it is announced that modest consumption of red wine actually reduces cholesterol levels. Science no longer seems able to show us how to live, at least with any certainty or stability. In post-modern societies, doubt is widespread, tradition is in retreat, and moral and scientific certainty have lost their credibility.

There are a number of other reasons for this shift from ***cultures of certainty*** to ***cultures of uncertainty***.

- Information and sources of understanding are spreading out on an increasingly global scale. The Internet, television, and satellites are but

three technologies that bring us into instant contact with almost anywhere in the world.

- Communication and technology are ‘compressing’ space and time, leading to an increasing pace of change in the world we seek to know and in our ways of knowing it. This, in turn, threatens the stability and endurance of our knowledge bases, making them fragile and provisional.
- More multicultural migration and international travel are bringing different belief systems into greater contact with one another.
- An ever-tightening and interactive relationship between social research and development, where the social world changes even as we study it, not least as a result of the very inquiries we make of it.

provisional: temporary, possibly to be changed later

singular: here, refers to ideologies like communism, or capitalism, both of which have a *single* explanation for how all societies and people operate

The post-modern world’s effects on education

The collapse of singular political ideologies, the diminishing credibility of traditional knowledge bases, and the declining certainty attached to scientific expertise have far-reaching consequences for the changing world of education, and the place of teachers’ work within it.

Fact-based curricula become obsolete

First, and most obviously, as scientific knowledge becomes more and more provisional, the validity of a curriculum based on given knowledge and indisputable fact becomes less and less credible. Processes of inquiry, analysis, information gathering, and learning how to learn in an engaged and critical way become more important as goals and methods for teachers and schools in the post-modern world.

The purposes of education are questioned

Second, the decline of the Judaeo-Christian tradition as the prime purpose underpinning schooling and teaching in a context of greater religious, cultural, and ethnic diversity and contact raises penetrating questions about the moral purposes of education. One of the greatest educational crises of the post-modern age is the collapse of the kind of school that is tied to its community and has a clear sense of the social and moral values it should instil.

For a while, this crisis of educational purpose was met with a characteristically *modernistic* response, which placed scientific and educational faith in technological efficiency and effectiveness. Around the world, educational researchers and those who funded them invested heavily in the development of *quantitative* research technologies to discover the

modernistic: the belief that we can solve *all* problems through *thinking* and rigorous research

quantitative: research that measures scientifically

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scientific certainties of school effectiveness.

In many school systems, these attributes of effectiveness – such as high teacher expectations for achievement, a strong focus on instruction, a safe, orderly, and supportive school climate, and strong leadership by the principal or head teacher – were zealously applied to the practical world of education as policy goals, or as criteria for monitoring progress and performances. This modernistic faith in the triumph of science and its capacity to determine what makes a school effective has also started to dissolve, however. The limitations of 'effective schools' research and practice are becoming increasingly obvious, even to their most enthusiastic supporters.

Most of these limitations have been well summarized by Reynolds and Parker, and include the following:

- Checklists of characteristics do not give a clear, *holistic* sense of what makes an effective school and how one establishes it.
- While we know what effective schools look like, we do not know how to create them. Indeed, attempts to make schools effective, using the effective schools research as a basis for these efforts, have often led to teacher resistance to what they perceive as overload and unwanted, imposed change.
- There is mounting evidence that effective schools do not necessarily remain stable over time. Even if we knew how to create effective schools, therefore, we still would not know how to sustain them.
- 'Effective' schools embrace rather narrow and conventional definitions of what constitutes effectiveness. Most studies have highlighted academic results and particularly basic skills. Schools that are effective in these conventional and restricted terms might not be at all effective in terms of the demands of the post-modern, post-industrial world. We do not know, for instance, what effective schools that create success in problem-solving, creativity, risk, flexibility, or learning how to learn would look like.
- Our notions of effectiveness are often contextually and culturally specific, limiting what we might imagine schools to be by the settings in which we study and administer them. Thus, strong, heroic, and individual leadership is closely correlated with successful outcomes in American and British schools, but not in Dutch ones, where the cultural expectations of leadership are rather different.

holistic: a focus on how all the parts of a system relate to each other, rather than looking at parts in isolation

“Where teaching methods are involved, the pathways of educational reform are strewn with the discarded certainties of the past.”

Thus the faith in the scientifically-known principles of *school effectiveness* has begun to be replaced by commitments to more ongoing, *provisional*, and *contextually sensitive* processes of *school improvement*.

The decline of traditional moral and religious certainties, coupled with the collapse of technical and scientific certainties, has been responsible within many schools for widespread quests for mission statements, visions, and a sense of 'wholeness' in the form of whole-school curriculum development and whole-school change. Faith in the *product* of

effectiveness has been transferred to trust in the *process* of *improvement*.

Scientific certainty, the certainty grounded in proven principles of *generalized* applicability, is being replaced by *situated certainty* – the certainty that teachers and others can collectively glean from their *shared practical knowledge of their immediate context* and the problems it presents. This *school-based* search for mission statements, visions, and ongoing improvement gives much-needed weight to the validity of *practitioner knowledge* and to the needs and demands of each particular context within which these practitioners work. Yet it also leaves important social, moral, and political concerns about the shaping of future generations to a process determined primarily in individual schools.

The crisis of educational and social *purpose* in the post-modern age is, in this sense, a crisis that still awaits resolution. Nor can that crisis be properly resolved by *nostalgic* returns to the mythical certainties of a (badly remembered) past in which ‘real’ (i.e. traditional) school subjects, traditional standards, and basic skills were supposedly triumphant. Not only is the solidity of that past historically doubtful, but its appropriateness to the complex, diverse, and fast-moving settings of the present is even more questionable.

generalized: in this case, the ability to generalize one research study to all people

nostalgic: feeling a sentimental longing for a period in the past

No single teaching approach holds all the answers

The third set of implications that cultures of uncertainty raise for teachers and schools concerns teaching strategies. Where teaching methods are involved, the pathways of educational reform are strewn with the discarded ‘certainties’ of the past. Reading schemes, language laboratories, programmed learning, direct instruction, even open classrooms – reforms such as these would be appropriate exhibits for any museum of educational innovation. Today’s solutions often become tomorrow’s problems. Future exhibits in our museums of innovation might include the communicative approach in language teaching, or co-operative learning. *Singular models* of expertise that rest on supposedly certain research bases are built on sand [...]

Reliance on the imposition of singular models of teaching expertise can create inflexibility among teachers and make it hard for them to exercise proper judgements in their classrooms. It can lead to teacher resistance because it may seem to imply rejection of the worth and value of the rest of a teacher’s repertoire, and of the life and the person that has been invested in building it up. It can also lead to an overly narrow focus on particular techniques, which can restrict teachers from establishing and drawing upon a wider repertoire of teaching strategies that they can apply flexibly as the context requires. Multiple and flexible conceptions of teaching excellence, however, are grounded in and arise from collective wisdom in the community of teachers (including

singular models: models that attempt to explain something in one way only, like Marxism, or psychoanalysis

repertoire: here, refers to all the skills that a teacher has and can use

research). They also acknowledge the *provisional* and *context-dependent* character of the knowledge base of teaching. They respect and leave space for teachers' discretionary judgements in their own classrooms. And by encouraging the possession and application of *broad* teaching *repertoires*, they permit teachers to gradually and selectively adapt and integrate new approaches without this necessarily implying wholesale rejection of the old.

Some of the emergent approaches to school-based staff development that offer menus of choice and discretion for teachers instead of standardized imposition, within a context of commitment to continuous learning and improvement, show signs of acknowledging the value of situated certainty over scientific certainty in teacher developments.

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