

Educating for Utopia: William Morris on Useful Learning versus ‘Useless Toil’

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This article is dedicated to Peter Faulkner in acknowledgement and celebration of his many years in education as both a teacher and a scholar.

William Guest, Morris’s time-travelling narrator in *News from Nowhere* (1890), wakes up in the twenty-second century to a world at once familiar and strange. In order to understand how this world works, he engages in a series of conversations with several friendly, accommodating and patient Nowherians. One of these is about education, but the conversation is doomed from the start in that Dick, Guest’s interlocutor on this occasion, admits: ‘I have never met anybody who could give me a clear explanation of what it means’.¹

Dick’s statement assumes a new and pressing relevance for us during the second decade of the twenty-first century in which debates about the meaning, nature and purpose of education have become increasingly impassioned and partisan. In the UK, these have occurred at every stage of development of the national education system, focusing on such issues as whether schools should be transformed into academies, whether the A-Level 18+ qualification is ‘fit for purpose’, whether there should be distinct academic and vocational routes available, and whether students entering higher education should be asked to pay up to £9,000 a year for tuition fees. The last issue provides a particularly useful focus, in that the debates around the higher education system in the UK have arguably been the most impassioned and partisan of all in the wake of the Browne Report and the Government’s withdrawal of the teaching grant for Arts, Humanities and Social Science subjects. The resulting rise in tuition fees for students entering English universities in 2012 has fostered the idea that a university education is a commodity to be purchased and thus forced the question ‘What is a university education worth?’ It is impossible to answer such a question without reverting to

Dick's problem in *News from Nowhere*; how can we possibly say what a university education is worth if we do not know what it means to receive a university education, and, by extension, what its purpose and its benefits – both individual and social – are?

Such questions do in fact apply equally to primary and secondary education, but have crystallised around current debates regarding higher education because it is here that the price-tag has been more conspicuously attached and the responsibility for paying it shifted more explicitly from the state to the individual. In consequence, a new series of checks and balances has been applied to higher education in order to ensure that prospective university applicants know exactly what they are getting for their money. In their muddled conversation about education, Dick would now have to explain to the bewildered Guest how the Nowherians have rejected not only the standardised education system introduced by the Victorians but also the League Tables, National Student Surveys and KIS data which obsessed university administrators during the twenty-first century.² Proponents of these recent and ongoing changes in higher education claim that they are essential if the system is to be properly funded, quality assured and internationally attractive. They also frequently see education, and higher education in particular, as a means to an economic end – a method of equipping individuals with a range of 'skills' which will enable them to contribute to the financial prosperity of the nation and keep unemployment figures down. Opponents of these changes insist that it is essential to take a stand against this unabashed marketisation of education and the pernicious effects of what Thomas Docherty identifies as a 'managerial jargon of three Es (economy, efficiency, effectiveness)'.³ They also reject the 'employability' agenda which is beginning to infiltrate curriculum content and delivery and that, as Nigel Tubbs argues, 'wilfully ignores how not all graduates (or all graduate jobs) have financial reward as their priority'.⁴

The distance between these two positions in terms of their understanding of education is arguably as considerable as that between Guest and Dick in *News from Nowhere*, and those on opposing sides can appear to be talking as much at cross-purposes as these characters from different centuries. But while Dick, with his Nowherian wisdom, would probably look back with bemused incomprehension at some of the issues being debated during the twenty-first century, Guest would no doubt smile wryly and knowingly were he gifted with a glimpse of these things to come. Guest is, of course, a thinly disguised William Morris, and Morris similarly lived through a period in which education was a fiercely contested subject, not least because it was a period during which the foundations of the education system as we now know it were being laid. This article will thus consider how our own current debates about education revisit many of those that took place during the nineteenth century, and the ways in which the contributions of Mor-

ris in particular to those debates can help us to understand the nature, purpose and value of education in the twenty-first century.

I. THE AGE OF GRADGRIND

Current debates in Britain regarding the value and purpose of a university education may seem exclusively pertinent to a globalised, late-capitalist, twenty-first century society, but they would in fact have been very familiar to the Victorians. Higher education was the subject of continuing debate during the nineteenth century, and the university system similarly underwent a series of expansions and reforms, the two most significant of which are outlined by Stefan Collini in his recent book *What Are Universities For?* The traditional curriculum at Oxford and Cambridge expanded during the nineteenth century to include a range of new subjects, reflecting, Collini argues, ‘a new self-consciousness [...] about educating the governing and administrative classes of the future’ and a growing awareness of these old universities’ ‘place in the national culture’. In addition, a number of new universities were established in large urban areas during the later decades of the century, and these institutions ‘were not afraid to teach practical subjects such as “commerce” alongside the traditional curriculum’.⁵

In the context of what was perceived by some to be an encroaching utilitarianism, it is not surprising to find a series of impassioned statements by prominent nineteenth-century cultural commentators on the inherent personal value of education, and more specifically higher education, the most famous and enduring of which were made by John Henry Newman in *The Idea of a University*, published in 1852. The book was a compilation of his lectures to students at the new Catholic University of Ireland, but its legacy has far outstripped its original purpose. Newman’s ideas and arguments have been repeatedly resurrected in debates about the role and purpose of a university education during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and are still a favourite recourse for those intent on defending the concept of a ‘liberal education’ – although, as Stefan Collini has astutely noted, this demands some highly selective reading and de-contextualising of Newman’s ideas.⁶ For Newman, education is a ‘higher word’ than instruction, for ‘it implies an action upon our mental nature, and the formation of a character; it is something individual and permanent’. For this reason, ‘it is more correct, as well as more usual’, he argues, ‘to speak of a university as a place of education than instruction’.⁷

The aspirational content and eloquent tone of Newman’s various discourses on the nature of a university education were reiterated in various Inaugural Addresses given by notable public figures at British universities during the mid-nineteenth century. In his address to Edinburgh undergraduates in 1866, Tho-

mas Carlyle aligned the university experience with the educational philosophy of Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (1795–96), declaring: 'It gives one an idea that something far better and higher, something as high as ever, and indubitably true too, is still possible for man in this world'.⁸ J. S. Mill, the following year, assured Glasgow undergraduates that the better their education, 'the deeper and more varied interest' they would feel in life, 'which will give it tenfold its value, and a value which will last to the end'.⁹ T. H. Huxley continued the theme with a socially contrasted audience at the South London Working Men's College in 1868, claiming that the liberally educated man was 'no stunted ascetic', but 'full of life and fire'. 'The world is still as fresh as it was at the first day', Huxley encouraged his listeners, 'still as full of untold novelties for those who have the eye to see them'.¹⁰ For Matthew Arnold, such claims validated the demand for vibrant institutions of higher education, establishments whose intellectual health was vital to the overall health of a nation's culture. Writing in the *Pall Mall Gazette* in 1868, Arnold concurred with the view of the German educationalist von Sybel that: 'It is impossible to rate too highly the advantage of our highest places of learning having in their inmost nature the tendency to the complete freeing of the human spirit'.¹¹

Such impassioned pleas for the value of a true liberal education – pleas in defence of the humanities which resonate just as loudly in our ears today – were deemed necessary in an increasingly industrialised and commercialised world. For Newman, a liberal education meant that 'the intellect, instead of being formed or sacrificed to some particular or accidental purpose, some specific trade or profession, or study or science, is disciplined for its own sake, for the perception of its own proper object, and for its own higher culture'. Such an intellect is most certainly useful, Newman emphasises, but not in a 'low, mechanical, mercantile sense'; it is instead useful because it has a role in 'diffusing good' and can thus be regarded as 'a treasure, first to the owner, then through him to the world'.¹² Such utility clearly cannot be calculated, weighed or measured – cannot be statistically represented in a survey or a league table – but, Newman assures his audience, we can be assured that it is there.

Not everyone during the nineteenth century, however, could be the lucky possessor of such a 'treasure'. However inspirational such statements, however eloquent their justification of the value of higher education, it has also to be remembered that they referred to a system which was not only intellectually, but socially elitist: the young men addressed by these speakers were all drawn from the middle and upper classes of Victorian society. And one of the main consequences, and indeed intentions, of such statements was to reclaim the university experience from the narrow, utilitarian agenda which some of these same commentators publically lamented was the dominant ethos in shaping the earlier stages of education in the nineteenth century, particularly for the children of the

lower classes. It was an ethos given its most famous and emphatic expression in the teaching of Dickens's Mr M'Choakumchild, that most unflinchingly utilitarian of teachers, for whom 'the mechanical art and mystery' of a true education system lay in 'educating the reason without stooping to the cultivation of the sentiments and affections'.¹³ Mr M'Choakumchild, a product of the new Victorian teacher training system (equated by Dickens with a factory turning out pianoforte legs), views his pupils as a host of 'little vessels [...] arranged in order, ready to have imperial gallons of facts poured into them until they were full to the brim'; thus safely filled, there will be no space for that dangerous interloper, imagination – a hostile concept in the 'model' school of Gradgrindian philosophy.¹⁴

Dickens presents a grotesque parody of Victorian elementary education in *Hard Times* (1854), but his satirical account of what went on in the classroom was also a reflection of the genuine concerns about curriculum content which were being expressed in education debates around the middle of the nineteenth century, as politicians and educators worked to develop an accessible, effective and efficiently administered education system for the whole nation. Robert Lowe's Revised Code of 1862, with its narrow specification of the elementary curriculum on which pupils were to be tested, and its corresponding 'payment by results', had been, Eric Midwinter suggests, 'a logical development of the Benthamite idea', in which the utility of educational provision was a central consideration, for 'as long as the public acquiesced in child-labour, the three "Rs" were deemed adequate, and few children stayed at school beyond the age of thirteen'.¹⁵ It was this narrow concern with utility which most concerned Matthew Arnold, one of the Revised Code's most outspoken critics, who denounced its inevitable effect of reducing the school to 'a mere machine for teaching, reading, writing, and arithmetic', thereby destroying its true role as 'a living whole with complex functions, religious, moral, and intellectual'.¹⁶ And while the 1870 Education Act increased the range of education provision across England and Wales, its implementation did not necessarily mean an expansion of the curriculum from the dictates of the Revised Code, for it failed to define exactly what should be the constituent elements of a universal elementary education, insisting only that it should be 'sufficient, efficient and suitable'.¹⁷ Such an aim was far removed from the focus on the transformative and the aspirational which dominated Victorian eulogies on the nature and purpose of a university education; state-provided elementary education was clearly intended to be useful in preparing pupils for their working life but not to aspire to a different life altogether.

II. SOCIALISM AND EDUCATION

It is hardly surprising, in view of the utilitarian and socially hierarchical considerations which informed education provision during the nineteenth century that many in the developing British Socialist movement were highly critical of the system. In his 'Chapters on Socialism', published in the *Fortnightly Review* in 1879, J. S. Mill recognised the fundamental importance of education to the Socialist mission, noting that:

All Socialists are strongly impressed with the all-importance of the training given to the young, not only for the reasons that apply universally, but because their demands being much greater than those of any other system upon the intelligence and morality of the individual citizen, they have even more at stake than any other societies on the excellence of their educational arrangements.¹⁸

His comments reflected the work of earlier 'Utopian Socialists' such as Robert Owen and Charles Fourier, who at the beginning of the nineteenth century had recognised education as crucial to determining the eventual success of their experimental social enterprises. 'It is with education that we must begin', asserted Fourier, in setting out the plans for his proposed Phalanx, while Owen warned that 'it is from the errors of education, mis-instructing the young mind relative to the true cause of early prepossessions, that almost all the evils of life proceed'.¹⁹ At New Lanark he accordingly organised the education of the young on the principle he promoted in the first essay of *A New View of Society* (1816), which asserted that 'any general character, from the best to the worst, from the most ignorant to the most enlightened, may be given to the community, even to the world at large, by the application of proper means'.²⁰

Such 'proper means' were not to be found in the standard elementary Board School system according to William Morris, who was one of the most outspoken and persistent Socialist critics of the nineteenth-century education system. In such schools, the dictates of utility continued to triumph into the latter decades of the century, and M'Choakumchild still reigned supreme in the classroom. Only the possession of knowledge useful for their station in life was deemed essential for Board School pupils, and Morris's despair at their limited education was expressed (with a glance at Dickens) in 'Thoughts on Education under Capitalism', in which he lamented: 'I must say in passing that on the few occasions that I have been inside a Board-school, I have been much depressed by the mechanical drill that was too obviously being applied there to all the varying capacities and moods. My heart sank before Mr. M'Choakumchild and his method'.²¹

Morris's Socialist colleague J. L. Mahon wrote in a similarly scathing manner in *Commonweal* of 'the small dose of reading, writing, and figuring which is now crammed into the children at Board Schools', while dismissing the vague aspira-

tions of the Radicals for a more 'advanced' national system which would simply mean 'a superficial smattering of elementary science, and a dabbling in music and literature'.²² By 1894 an article on education in *Justice* implied a slight expansion of elementary subjects taught in Board Schools, including some singing and drawing, although the author, H. W. Hobart, complained of the narrow imperialist slant by which subjects such as history and geography were introduced, with teachers presenting them in 'a garbled way', and concentrating merely on topics and areas where 'British arms have been successful'.²³ It is worth noting here that Hobart's complaint is strikingly similar to those made in recent months about the current Secretary of State for Education's planned changes to the National Curriculum in English schools, in particular the History syllabus. The consultation document issued by the Department of Education in February 2013 states that the teaching of History should, in the first instance, enable pupils to 'know and understand [...] how the British people shaped this nation and how Britain influenced the world'.²⁴ As Daniel Boffey has recently observed, many historians and scholars regard the proposed new syllabus as 'overly Anglocentric, highly prescriptive and quite dull', an assessment corroborated by David Priestland's claim that it stresses 'facts and dates over real understanding', while establishing a 'resolutely insular' and nationalistic focus.²⁵

Socialist commentators were of course astutely aware of the underlying commercial interests which dictated the emphasis on utility in regard to development of a national education system. As James Murphy notes, as early as the 1860s it was becoming clear that:

Britain could not long remain without a truly national system of elementary education. Competition from abroad in commerce and industry was becoming ever more keen, yet there did not exist in England and Wales a basis for producing a generally literate labour force, or a foundation on which to erect a comprehensive system of secondary, technical and commercial education.²⁶

T. H. Huxley gave a stark warning of the consequences of allowing such political and commercial concerns to inform the development of a comprehensive education, lamenting that education was being 'diverted' from its true function 'into a process of manufacturing human tools'.²⁷ His fears were re-iterated nearly twenty years later by Morris in a lecture of 1886 on education reported in *The Architect*. In his lecture, Morris attacked, with added Socialist vigour, the same narrowness of contemporary educational thought and practice which meant 'our present system of education was simply the education of one set of people to become the machines by means of which the other set could carry on their life to the injury of the community in general'. Current commercial and education systems were, Morris argued, inextricably bound up to the detriment of the whole social fabric, for they ensured that the better-off 'were to be educated merely as slaveholders',

while the working classes 'were educated as slaves, and not as men'.²⁸

Notably, the Bryce Report on Secondary Education in 1895 at least partially recognised such concerns regarding the education of working-class children, declaring:

More, much more, than is now done might be done, not merely to fit such boys and girls for the practical work of their respective future careers, but to make them care for knowledge, to give them habits of application and reflection, to implant in them tastes which may give them delights and solaces outside the range of their work-a-day lives.²⁹

Nonetheless, it may be argued that the pleasures of learning are effectively relegated here to a useful and consolatory pastime to occupy the non-working hours of the less affluent and less fortunate members of society in their future lives. Thus in 1901 the Independent Labour Party publication *Platform* could still criticise the blatant self-interest of the 'ideal of education' promoted by the commercial classes, who 'believe in teaching boys and girls to read and write because it makes them better instruments to produce profit for themselves as employers'.³⁰ Notably, this legacy of the Victorians could still be felt during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. In 1995, the then Conservative government created a new Department for Education and Employment, thereby making an explicit policy connection between education and economic productivity. The second change of name under New Labour to the Department for Education and Skills in 2001 took this connection still further, with a policy document from the new Department stating that educated people 'are more productive. This is why they earn more, and are more likely to be employed'.³¹

Morris himself was quick to point to the paradoxical combination of utilitarianism and uselessness inherent in an education system dominated by commercial interests. In 'Thoughts on Education under Capitalism', he asked:

And then supposing the worker to be really educated, to have acquired both the information and the taste for reading which Mr. McChoakumchild's (*sic*) dole will allow to him under the most favourable circumstances, how will this treasure of knowledge and sympathy accord with his daily life? Will it not make his dull task seem duller? Will it not increase the suffering of the workshop or the factory to him? And if so, must he not rather strive to forget than strive to remember? Will not nature force him to that?³²

George Gissing's *The Nether World* (1889) provides a striking affirmation of Morris's claim, in the shape of the character Clara Hewett, whose poverty-restricted circumstances lead her to lament bitterly: 'I wish I could neither read nor write! I wish I had never been told that there is anything better than to work with one's hands and earn daily bread!'³³ Similarly in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*

(1891), Tess, 'with her trained National teachings and Standard knowledge under an infinitely Revised Code', must also suffer the disappointment of ambitions awakened in her by her youthful education. Like Clara, 'she had hoped to be a teacher at the school, but the fates seemed to decide otherwise'.³⁴ Both Clara and Tess bear fictional testimony to the criticism of Morris's Socialist colleague John Bruce Glasier of the essential cruelty of a contemporary education system which meant 'opening up vistas of knowledge and pleasure in the minds of those whom we know are destined to spend their lives slaving in factories and sleeping in cellars'.³⁵ For both, their delight in knowledge is denied all future means of cultivation and expression in the drudgery of their daily existence.

But while much Socialist criticism focused on earlier stages of education, Morris expanded his critique to include the whole education spectrum. For him, the utilitarianism and commercialism which began in the Board Schools reached an inevitable and lamentable nadir in the degradation of the true functions and aspirations of the university. It was a concern he articulated at length in a letter to the editor of the *Daily News* in 1885, protesting:

The present theory of the use to which Oxford should be put appears to be that it should be used as a huge upper public school for fitting lads of the upper and middle class for their laborious future of living on other people's labour. For my part I do not think this a lofty conception of the function of a University; but if it be the only one admissible nowadays, it is at least clear that it does not need the history and art of our forefathers which Oxford still holds to develop it.³⁶

It was 'the history and art of our forefathers' that, for Morris, invigorated the learning environment of Oxford – a vitality he saw being stifled by the commercial opportunism by which the university was now administered. In 'The Aims of Art' (1886), he scorned the manner in which:

the guardians of this beauty and romance so fertile of education, though profess- edly engaged in 'the higher education' (as the futile system of compromises which they follow is nick-named), have ignored it utterly, have made its preservation give way to the pressure of commercial exigencies, and are determined apparently to destroy it altogether. There is another pleasure for the world gone down the wind; here, again, the beauty and romance have been uselessly, causelessly, most foolishly thrown away.³⁷

Morris challenged the very foundations of the higher education system by asserting that what might appear incidental to education – beauty, romance and art – are in fact the most productive stimulus to learning. It was a lesson he had learned early in life at Marlborough, where, he later recounted, 'I was taught – nothing; but learned archaeology and romance on the Wiltshire downs'.³⁸ The archaeology and romance of the Wiltshire Downs occupy the same status as the

history and art of Oxford; for Morris all are appropriate subjects of study, and as such offered a challenge and an alternative to the limitations of the contemporary school and university curriculum.

Indeed Morris's own early educational experiences and his later Socialist activities clearly fostered a belief that neither the nineteenth-century school – Board or Public – nor the nineteenth-century university, were the most effective means of educating the young. Neither was likely to instil a continuing passion for knowledge – a passion which was central to Morris's concept of the eager life and essential if people were to retain an enthusiasm for 'whatever knowledge there is in the world', to resist the limitations of conventional learning, and to avoid being 'beaten down to a dull level of mediocrity'.³⁹ Unsurprisingly, therefore, traditional modes of education are absent from Morris's ideals as articulated in the future society of *News from Nowhere*. When Guest comments that the young people who have spent their summer weeks in the woods 'will be all the fresher for school when the summer gets over and they have to go back again', his host Dick is clearly bewildered:

'School?' he said; 'yes, what do you mean by that word? I don't see how it can have anything to do with children. We talk, indeed, of a school of herring, and a school of painting, and in the former sense we might talk of a school of children – but otherwise,' said he laughing, 'I must own myself beaten.'

A perplexed but shrewd Guest confides to the reader, 'I thought I had best say nothing about the boy-farms which I had been used to call schools, as I saw pretty clearly that they had disappeared'.⁴⁰

III. EDUCATION AS IT MIGHT BE

While *News from Nowhere* provides an intriguing and provocative glimpse of a future alternative to conventional education, it is in his political lectures that Morris outlines most fully his highly personal but nonetheless pragmatic philosophy of education, with a view not only to transforming the present system but also laying the foundations for the nature and purpose of education in a future Communist society. A properly effective education is, Morris argues, a means of cultivating 'an active mind in sympathy with the past, the present, and the future' – a mind filled with 'a longing to know something real of the lives of those who have gone before us'.⁴¹ It is the revelation of 'the stored-up knowledge of the fashion of the universe [...] and of the deeds of men on the earth'.⁴² Thus the key task of education in the society of the future will, Morris declares, be the promotion of 'the pleasures of intellectual development' through which men and women 'follow knowledge and the creation of beauty for their own sakes'. Fur-

thermore, future modes of intellectual development would include and indeed honour the experiences of those aberrant in the Gradgrindian system who are inclined to speculate and contemplate – ‘the man who felt keenest the pleasure of flying on the hill-side under a rushen hut among the sheep on a summer night’, or ‘he who took to heart the piping of the wind and washing of the waves as he sat at the helm of the fishing-boat’.⁴³ Morris thus retrieves the delights of education from the ‘mere word-spinners and hunters of introspection’ whom he criticises in ‘The Society of the Future’ – a criticism he would no doubt find still relevant and applicable to twenty-first century academia – as well as the Gradgrindian utilitarians, and offers a much broader and richer vision of how education might be conceived and delivered in the future.⁴⁴

Indeed, it is the expansiveness and inclusiveness of Morris’s educational vision which distinguishes him as one of the most radical contributors to the educational debates of the nineteenth century. Morris always rejected the traditional – and ongoing – dichotomy of ‘academic’ and ‘practical’ in education, describing in his early lecture ‘The Lesser Arts’ (1877) how he wished to see ‘general cultivation of the powers of the mind’ being developed alongside ‘general cultivation of the powers of the eye and hand’.⁴⁵ Hence while in ‘How We Live and How We Might Live’ he could state that he claimed a ‘liberal education’ for all, his concept of such an education was far broader than that envisaged by Newman. For Morris, to receive a liberal education was to gain access to ‘whatever knowledge there is in the world according to my capacity or bent of mind, historical or scientific; and also to have my share of skill of hand which is about in the world, either in the industrial handicrafts or in the fine arts; picture-painting, sculpture, music, acting or the like’.⁴⁶ In his later lecture ‘The Society of the Future’ he expanded this vision of liberal education even further, stating that ‘all people should learn how to swim, and to ride, and to sail a boat on sea or river’, while learning at least ‘one or two elementary arts of life, as carpentry or smithying’ in addition to learning ‘cooking, baking, sewing, and the like’, the latter being skills which, he argued, ‘can be taught to every sensible person in a few hours’. If everyone was ‘armed with these habits and arts’, he concluded, ‘life would lie before the citizen for him to enjoy’, and it was one of the ongoing follies of the education system, Morris recognized, that it attempted to separate ‘the pleasures of intellectual development’ from the ‘sensuous life’.⁴⁷

While the vision of education developed by Morris thus rejects the utilitarian ethos of the nineteenth-century Board School and university, it is by no means inherently ‘useless’. Indeed one of Morris’s most perceptive and distinctive contributions to debates about education was his ability to envisage a dynamic rather than reductive relationship between education and work. In a post-revolutionary society the ‘useless toil’ which characterises work for many in industrial capitalist societies will, of course, be eradicated, but there will still be work to do which is

not immediately appealing.⁴⁸ With the liberal education he describes, however, Morris claims that men and women will find even ‘their most necessary work grow interesting and beautiful under their hands without their being conscious of it’.⁴⁹ Essential but mundane tasks can thus ‘grow interesting and beautiful’ if undertaken by those who know *how* to find interest and beauty in the details of life, an ability which is predicated on being accustomed from an early age to experience romance and beauty on a regular basis. That, for Morris, is the most desirable outcome of education: to foster an imaginative engagement with the everyday world through cultivating a mind eager for knowledge, used to encountering beautiful things – whether natural or created by men and women – and able to respond to and appreciate those beautiful things. And in our own age of online and distance learning, it is worth remembering that for Morris, the best education is an inherently social rather than solipsistic experience, even allowing for necessary or desirable periods of individual contemplation. Being able ‘to give and take in talk with learned and travelled men, with men of action and imagination’ was, he believed, one of the best ways to learn about the world and find one’s own way of acting and contributing in it; ‘believe me’, enthused Morris in ‘Art and Socialism’, ‘that would beat elementary education’.⁵⁰

IV. EDUCATING FOR REVOLUTION

Morris thus demonstrated how education in a post-revolutionary Communist future could be useful without being utilitarian – useful to the recipient, and to the wider community in a much more tangible and convincing way than the general ‘diffusing [of] good’ envisaged by Newman. But Morris recognised that if such a varied and dynamic system of education would be useful *after* a revolution, it would also be essential before it. In the discourse of political agitation of the late-nineteenth-century Socialist movement, education was identified as playing a fundamental role in preparing and provoking revolution: ‘a true educationist is necessarily a revolutionist’, claimed one contributor to *Commonweal* in 1889.⁵¹ Socialist activists thus took a particular interest in the official structures and systems by which the nation’s young – the potential Socialists of the future – received their instruction. It was an interest given added impetus with the inauguration of new School Boards following the 1870 Education Act. Socialists – May Morris included – contested elections to these boards recognising that this gave them ‘an opportunity to put their democratic policies and principles into practice’.⁵² As Marianne Larsen observes, the development of a universal elementary education system during the nineteenth century ‘was premised on the idea that schooling was to be the cure for the social ills of the time’ by ‘providing children with the foundation they required to become obedient, moral citizens’.⁵³ In engaging

directly with current education policies and institutions, Socialists thus aimed to demonstrate that education was, in contrast, to be ‘the cure for the social ills of the time’ by educating a new generation *not* to become obedient moral citizens, but rather to question the values and challenge the practices of the system under which they lived, and by doing so to transform it.

Morris and his Socialist colleagues also recognised however that such an education must expand beyond the classroom. As Kevin Manton notes, Socialists believed that ‘ignorance was the lifeblood of the conservatism of British workers and, as a corollary of this, that knowledge would lead to radicalism’.⁵⁴ It was this belief which propelled Morris into years of lecturing in meeting halls and on street corners across the country, focused on educating his audiences not ‘to become workmen or the employers of workmen, or the hangers-on of the employers’, as they had been educated at school, but on ‘educating people to a sense of their real capacities as men’.⁵⁵ This meant ‘instilling into the minds of the people a knowledge of the aims of Socialism, and a longing to bring about the complete change which will supplant civilisation by Communism’.⁵⁶ Once people were aware of the aims of Socialism, he felt assured that ‘hope will arise in them, and they will claim changes in society’.⁵⁷ Hence, he argued in his valedictory *Commonweal* article ‘Where Are We Now?’ (1890), it was the primary role of Socialists to ‘make Socialists’, and ‘preaching and teaching’ was the most effective means of doing so and ‘the only rational means of attaining to the New Order of Things’.⁵⁸ Thus education was not only a subject of political debate for Morris, it was the primary method of political activism, designed to stimulate the desire for revolution and to generate the will to bring it about: ‘The one thing to be done is to set people far and wide to think it possible to raise the standard of life’, and the way to do this was by ‘stirring up general discontent’, and then ‘educating that discontent into hope’.⁵⁹

V. EDUCATING FOR UTOPIA

Seeing the stirring up of discontent as the primary aim of education in the twenty-first century would no doubt raise the eyebrows of education ministers, university vice-chancellors and head teachers alike, but for those who work day to day in the classroom, seminar room or lecture theatre, it remains an essential aim and one of the most valuable bequeathed to us by Morris. How else are we to encourage those we teach to challenge received opinion, to rethink what we take for granted, to think differently and, hopefully, to think better? To foster discontent does not mean encouraging students to air their personal grievances through the National Student Survey or on RateMyTeachers.com; it means encouraging them to think critically about the world they have inherited, and imaginatively

about the world they might bequeath. And it means stimulating the will to bring about the necessary changes such a world demands, and developing the skills necessary to implement those changes. Some of these will be learned through the study of STEM subjects – those deemed important enough by government to retain their funding – but they will also be acquired via the study of Arts and Humanities subjects – those now deemed unworthy of state support. Because as one recent commentator has expressed it, to study the art, literature, concepts and ideas which constitute the humanities is to ‘explore what it means to be human’, to ‘help us to make sense of our lives and the world we live in’ and to understand ‘how we have created it and are created by it’.⁶⁰ For that reason, as Collini observes, ‘introducing students to the study of humanities is more akin to inciting them to take part in a discussion than it is to equipping them to process information effectively’.⁶¹ It is through facilitating such discussion that we can best work as teachers and, with Morris, reclaim education as the fundamental means of achieving social and political change; as Ian Angus puts it, we should ‘love the questions’.⁶²

The minds, and the skills, developed by such an educational process will, on a more immediately practical level, be an asset in any number of jobs, and should therefore satisfy those intent on ensuring that students leave school and university ‘employable’ as well as educated. But more important, as Morris perceived, they will help to transform our relationship to our work, whatever that might be – to help us find interest in it and perhaps even beauty. And they will encourage us as a society to think more deeply and critically about what, in Morris’s own words, constitutes useful work as opposed to useless toil and to strive towards eradicating the latter and investing in the former. This is another essential element of Morris’s educational legacy to the twenty-first century – a challenge to envisage a more enriching and constructive relationship between education and work, to see education not simply as a means to a job and a salary but also as a means to find satisfaction and fulfilment in the way we contribute to the world on a daily basis, and to believe that contribution to be a valuable and an important one.

To achieve this goal necessitates overcoming the invidious dichotomy between academic and vocational skills which appears ingrained in our current thinking and practice in education. Why should we choose *either* an academic route *or* a vocational one? Why can’t we choose both? Indeed, why can’t we see them as essential aspects of a truly holistic education? Morris’s envisaging of a world in which people are taught how to be accomplished in carpentry and history, in sewing and science – and how to see all of these as an enrichment of their lives both in a practical and an imaginative sense – might seem a fanciful one in a society which likes to talk about ‘soft’, ‘hard’ and ‘Mickey Mouse’ subjects, but it has much to teach us if we are ever to change the current educational mindset in which those who do not excel academically are made to feel like the failures of the education

system. Morris encourages us to aspire to live in a society in which people are not asked to choose between working with their minds or with their hands, but in which they retain the option and the ability to work with both.

This is the foundation of a truly democratic education system; and to be truly democratic it must be available to all. The issues surrounding the funding of a formal education system – and higher education in particular – are admittedly complex, and in an era of double (triple?) dip recessions, it is perhaps inevitable, if still regrettable, that questions will be raised regarding the cost and the value of post-18 education. In ‘The Lesser Arts’, Morris stated: ‘I do not want art for a few, any more than education for a few, or freedom for a few’.⁶³ The government and citizens of any truly democratic society should feel the same, but no matter how many and what kind of student loans and bursaries are available, increasing student tuition fees and maintenance costs will inevitably price some out of what has essentially become a market-place for higher education. To recognise education as a public as well as a private good, as a social as well as an individual concern, is to recognise that if anything is worthy of state funding it is this. Billions of pounds have recently been spent bailing out banks, and it is not unreasonable to ask whether in a society in which all are educated, as Morris envisaged, to have ‘an active mind in sympathy with the past, the present, and the future’, and, as Collini describes, to ‘extend their understanding of themselves and the world’, there would be people and professions so motivated by profit and greed that they necessitate such bailouts.⁶⁴ Similar questions might be raised in regard to budgets for policing and defence, although there is not space to investigate these here. What is clear is that the short-term policies of governments who always have one eye on the next General Election do not serve the education system well; what is needed is a long-term vision which understands that investing fully and properly in education now will reap social and economic rewards in the future which will more than justify that investment.

VI CONCLUSIONS

As we debate these issues in an era in which the national system of education is once more under intense scrutiny, Morris’s thoughts on education still have much to say to us. He reminds us that education is not a commodity to be purchased any more than it is a utilitarian means to an economic end. He would no doubt have agreed wholeheartedly with Angus’s claim that education should be seen not ‘as something that one has’ but ‘as something that one does and which changes the person that does it’.⁶⁵ And Morris would have emphasised that we do not just ‘do’ education for a specific period of our lives. In ‘Useful Work Versus Useless Toil’, Morris envisages how, in a post-revolutionary society, ‘adults

would also have opportunities of learning in the same schools' as younger people, because true education is about the 'development of individual capacities' at all stages of life.⁶⁶ This is something we struggle to accommodate in contemporary educational thinking; it is notable, for example, that recent changes to the retirement age and to pensions provision have taken account of our increasing life-span while our education system has not. As the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education in the UK (NIACE) has noted, the focus on skills and employability in government education policy since 2003 has left funding for continuing education vulnerable. Central to NIACE's campaign is the need for government to identify learning 'as an element of a broader ageing strategy'.⁶⁷ We live in a society which still tends to regard education as something we should ideally squeeze into our lives before the age of twenty one, after which if we need to update our knowledge and skills for the purposes of our employment we can do so through various arid processes of 'professional development'.

In the midst of current arguments about what we should be teaching, when we should be learning, how much education is worth and who should pay the bill, Morris asks us to remember that education is a vital and ongoing process of personal and social transformation – a utopian practice in itself, and the only way in which utopias can be imagined and achieved.

NOTES

1. May Morris, ed, *The Collected Works of William Morris*, 24 vols, London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1910–15, Vol. XVI, p. 28. (Hereafter *CW*).
2. Key Information Sets (KIS) were introduced to the UK in 2012 in order to provide information about higher education institutions and courses which 'prospective students have identified as useful, such as student satisfaction, graduate outcomes, learning and teaching activities, assessment methods, tuition fees and student finance, accommodation and professional accreditation', <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/whatwedo/lt/publicinfo/kis/> [last accessed 4 December 2012].
3. Thomas Docherty, Opinion Section, *Times Higher Education*, 29 March 2012, p. 33.
4. Nigel Tubbs, 'The Importance of Being Useless', *Times Higher Education*, 11 October 2012, 40–43 (p. 42).
5. Stefan Collini, *What Are Universities For?*, London: Penguin, 2012, p. 28. (Afterwards Collini)
6. Collini, pp. 39–60.
7. John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University*, Discourse 5, in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: The Victorian Age*, Eighth Edition, Vol. E,

- New York: Norton, 2006, p. 1036. (Afterwards Newman)
8. Thomas Carlyle, *Inaugural Address at Edinburgh, 2 April 1866*, Edinburgh: Edmonston & Douglas, 1866, p. 38.
 9. J. S. Mill, *Inaugural Address Delivered to the University of St Andrews, 1 Feb 1867*, London: Longmans, Green, Reader, & Dyer, 1867, p. 99.
 10. T. H. Huxley, 'Professor Huxley's Inaugural Address on Education at the Opening of the South London Working Men's College', *The Quarterly Journal of Education*, Vol. 1, No. 4, February 1868, pp. 145–155 (pp. 149, 148). Afterwards Huxley.
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 12. Newman, p. 1037.
 13. *Hard Times* (1854), London: Penguin, 2003, p. 52.
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 15. Eric Midwinter, *Nineteenth-Century Education*, London: Longman, 1970, p. 38. (Afterwards Midwinter)
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 17. Midwinter, p. 43.
 18. J. S. Mill, 'Chapters on Socialism', *Fortnightly Review*, Vol. 25, Jan-June 1879, p. 521.
 19. Jonathon Beecher, ed, *Charles Fourier: The Visionary and his World*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986, p. 259; Robert Owen, *A New View of Society* (1816), in G.D.H. Cole, ed, *A New View of Society and other Writings*, London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1927, p. 72. (Afterwards Cole).
 20. Cole, p. 14.
 21. 'Thoughts on Education', *Commonweal*, 30 June 1888. As in May Morris, ed, *William Morris: Artist, Writer, Socialist*, 2 vols, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1936, Vol. II, p. 498. (Hereafter AWS)
 22. J.L. Mahon, "'Free" Education', *Commonweal*, Vol. 2, No. 38 (2 October 2), p. 212.
 23. H.W. Hobart, 'Education', *Justice*, Vol. XI, No. 546 (30 June 1894), p. 3.
 24. *The National Curriculum in England, Framework Document for Consultation*, Department for Education, February 2013, p. 165, www.education.gov.uk [last accessed 5 March 2013].
 25. Daniel Boffey, "'Old School and Old Fashioned": Historians turn their fire on Gove', *The Observer*, Saturday 16 February 2013, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2013/feb/16/historians-gove->

- [curriculum?INTCMP=ILCNETTXT3487](#) [last accessed 27 February 2013]; 'Michael Gove's new curriculum: what the experts say', *The Guardian*, 12 February 2013, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2013/feb/12/round-table-draft-national-curriculum> [last accessed 27 February 2013].
26. James Murphy, *The Education Act 1870*, Newton Abbot: David & Charles, 1972, p. 28.
 27. Huxley, p. 146.
 28. 'Mr W. Morris on Education in Art', *The Architect*, 17 September 1886, p. 171. Eugene LeMire lists the title of this lecture as 'Education' and notes that: 'No full text of this lecture remains, but an extensive resume was printed in *The Architect*'. See Eugene D. LeMire, ed, *The Unpublished Lectures of William Morris*, Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1969, p. 307. (Afterwards LeMire)
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 31. 'Education and Skills: The Economic Benefit', Department for Education and Skills, 2003, p. 4, <http://www.education.gov.uk/researchandstatistics/statistics/allstatistics/a00196719/dfes-education-and-skills-the-economic-benefit> [last accessed 3 March 2013].
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 34. Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891), London, Penguin, 1978, pp. 61, 88.
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 37. 'The Aims of Art', *CW*, Vol. XXIII (1888), pp. 85–86.
 38. 'Thoughts on Education under Capitalism' (1888), *AWS*, Vol. II, p. 498.
 39. 'How We Live and How We Might Live' (1885), *CW*, Vol. XXIII, p. 18.
 40. *News from Nowhere*, Chapter V, 'Children on the road', *CW*, Vol. XVI, p. 28.
 41. 'How We Live and How We Might Live' (1884), *CW*, Vol. XXIII, p. 25; 'The Beauty of Life' (1880), *CW*, Vol. XXII, p. 59.
 42. 'Of the Origins of Ornamental Art' (1886), in LeMire, p. 137.
 43. 'The Society of the Future' (1888), *AWS*, Vol. II, p. 467.
 44. *Ibid.*, *AWS*, Vol. II, p. 464.

45. 'The Lesser Arts' (1877), *CW*, Vol. XXII, p. 21.
46. 'How we live and how we might live' (1884), *CW*, Vol. XXIII, p. 18.
47. 'The Society of the Future' (1888), *AWS*, Vol. II, pp. 462, 467.
48. The phrase is taken from the title of Morris's 1884 lecture 'Useful Work Versus Useless Toil'; *CW*, Vol. XXIII, pp. 98–120.
49. 'The Society of the Future' (1888), *AWS*, Vol. II, p. 467.
50. 'Art and Socialism' (1884), *CW*, Vol. XXIII, p. 199.
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53. Marianne A. Larsen, *The Making and Shaping of the Victorian Teacher*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2011, p. 29.
54. Manton, p. 1.
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56. 'Communism' (1893), *CW*, Vol. XXIII, p. 270.
57. 'How We Live and How We Might Live' (1884), *CW*, Vol. XXIII, p. 26.
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65. Angus, p. 88.
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