

John Guy - Welcome to the Dinner Discussion



John Guy: Evolution is not gradual

Introducing the third in a series of dinner discussions with employers held over the past few years, the Principal outlined the College's aim further to improve the curriculum for all students by engaging critically on the subject of employability skills. He sought to create an evolutionary environment which predisposed the College to make occasional successful leaps, building good ideas into College practice. Contrary to popular belief, genetic evolution was not gradual; it depended upon mutations (leaps) which survived and prospered within a changing gene pool. If the gene pool was not ready, the mutation would not survive. The dinner discussion was a way of improving the College's gene pool of ideas - and this evening's important area was that of employability skills.

Sir Alan Jones "Change the future in one generation"



Sir Alan Jones: Diploma Champion

Sir Alan described the critical involvement of employers in the development of the new Diplomas, noting that there were many similarities between what the new Diploma promises and what Farnborough Sixth Form College already offered, particularly with regard to personal learning and thinking skills. However, this was not the case everywhere, and we needed to invest in our human

capital to improve business performance. He noted that:

- in the future, China and India would outstrip the UK;
- the Global Competitiveness Report put the UK low in the top 10;
- we were below the OECD average for the number of 15-19 year olds in education;
- the Leitch Review indicated that 1 in 6 school leavers couldn't read, write or add up, 5 million adults did not have functional literacy and there were 17 million adults who had difficulty with numbers.

Diplomas would bring together parents, employers and students and provide the basis for UK plc's competitiveness. Employers already played a significant part in education and training - out of £100 billion spent annually on education and training in this country, £30 billion came from business - but employers needed a clear understanding of the Diploma and needed to be involved with schools and colleges offering, for example, work place visits, work experience and involvement in course delivery.



Melanie Hunt, Director of Learning and Skills, Ofsted

Paul Sloane: Do employers encourage or impede innovation?



Paul Sloane: Destination Innovation

In order to meet the challenges outlined by Sir Alan, Paul described the urgent need for an innovation economy if we were to compete with rising nations like China and India. Were employers rejecting people for the wrong reasons? Challenging the audience, he asked if a young Richard Branson would be rejected by their company if he applied for a job?

Recruiting to conformity was not a formula for innovation. We should recruit some rebels - some 'troublesome talent' - to challenge the orthodoxy in our organisations. We should also be allowing employees to fail occasionally - innovation involved failure and managing risk. We needed to equip young people not only with knowledge but also with creativity and lateral thinking skills - in this way we would inspire rather than impede employee innovation.

Vince Scannella - So how do you teach PLTS?



Vince Scannella reappears!

As the College's Director of Teaching for Learning, Vince suggested that teaching A levels was easy - but what did it mean to teach Personal Learning and Thinking Skills (PLTS)? Students came to us with all sorts of 'self-talk' which was a barrier to their learning. They (and we as employers and teachers) were running various programs in

our heads which held us back from achieving our potential. Using shock tactics, Vince demonstrated the impact of self-doubt, noting that these ideas were often passed on from the family and then students got free updates from school! All of us would like to be our 'Ideal Self', and there were practical ways of achieving this through techniques such as Visualisation and Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP). The College had been practising these approaches with some students with great success - but these skills were not easy to develop and still less easy to teach. He lamented the lack of advice on how PLTS would be delivered in the Diploma programme noting, however, that there were reams of details on how these skills should be recorded!



Student Katy Sellars confirmed the significance of NLP to her learning.



Martin Doel, new Chief Executive of AoC



So do employers have the skills?

The skills of the audience were found wanting when put to the test! The Principal introduced some communication and numeracy tests which were displayed for immediate interactive responses by the employers and guests using an electronic voting system. Barely half of the audience was able to identify the correct use of the word principal as an adjective, many preferring 'The principle policy of the Corporation' to the correct version: 'The principal policy of the Corporation'. In another example, fewer than half were able to identify the correct approximation to the sum 19720 / 493 as 40, preferring the incorrect option 400.

However, nearly all identified the correct use of the apostrophe in National Singles' Day; Alan Sugar's Apprentices had struggled with this the night before!



The audience is tested for communication and numeracy!

Brian McBride "There's a lot of smart people in Slough"



Brian McBride: Amazon boss

Starting the post-prandial discussion, the Chief Officer of Amazon.co.uk confirmed that the 3 Rs were still important to employers, but they were also looking for interpersonal, team building, self-awareness and self-management skills. Degrees were important, but more for the evidence they provided of an individual's ability to stick at something than for the content of the degree. The onus was on individuals to develop themselves in the workplace. The Sector Skills Councils provided an excellent bridge between employment and education and he urged employers to become involved.

Points raised in discussion

In a wide-ranging discussion, employers, students and teachers wrestled with issues raised by the presentations.

- How will Diplomas deal effectively with literacy and numeracy problems?
- Can Diplomas support the kind of innovation shown in Vince's work in the College?
- A nurturing atmosphere is essential in education and the workplace.
- There is a lack of attention to detail/accuracy amongst many young people.
- How can Ofsted make judgements about the kind of learning environment that promotes personal learning and thinking skills?
- How will continuity in terms of learning environment be maintained between colleges and employers?
- Is there too much focus on what employers want? Are the students not the primary customers, managing their own careers?
- How committed is business to the education sector? Beware! Any staff released by businesses and industrialists are those that they can spare.



Rex Knight, Deputy Vice Chancellor, Oxford Brookes University.



Alan Montgomery injects a note of caution



Student Mike Eager challenges opinion

- Is industry necessarily best placed to know what skills will be needed in the future?
- It is not an either-or discussion! It must be about education and business working together.
- It is often difficult for graduates with very good degrees to even get an interview at some organisations.
- Is information about Diplomas reaching employers?

Not a single employer represented in the room was preparing to develop work experience places for Diploma students. If all the College's students undertook 10 days of work experience during their 2 year programme, 15,000 days a year would be needed, equivalent to about 80 employee-years every year.



Spencer Gallagher - Founder of Bluhalo



College Governor Mike Philippson



Chief Superintendent Mark Chatterton



Dr Christine Marshall



The debate continues over supper