NEARLY THERE, BUT NOT QUITE……..AN APPLICATION TO THE ESMÉE FAIRBAIRN FOUNDATION FOR FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE DEFINED IN TERMS OF CONTEXT, ACTIVITY AND GOALS

CONTEXT

The 21st Century Learning Initiative has over twenty five years of experience of working with all kinds of schools, and has extensive knowledge of international research into the nature of human learning. The Initiative is now more convinced than when it started in 1985 that the English education system is, in effect, ‘upside down and inside out’. ‘Upside down’ in terms of the priority it gives to secondary education; ‘inside out’ because it fails to recognise the significance of the home and community in the social and intellectual development of children. By under-investing in the early years, this so damages the chances of many children that they never catch up.

Seeking to argue this in a Proposal to the D.O.E in 1993, the Initiative argued that what the country sought was not “a docile workforce with a range of basic skills but an enterprising, creative workforce of confident, self-starting, collaborative, problem-solving and risk-taking individuals. Such skills and other attributes,” the Proposal argued, “cannot be taught solely in the classroom; nor can they be developed solely by teachers. Schools have to start a dynamic process through which pupils are weaned from their dependence on teachers and institutions and given the confidence to manage their own learning.”

Such thinking nearly 20 years ago antagonised a senior official who, listening to the argument, said “I can’t get my mind around the scale of what you’re talking about; it is totally enormous. Surely you can’t really get the level of consensus within a community to do it this way? And what about all the primary legislation that would be needed?”

At a further meeting in Downing Street three years later the head of the Policy Unit said, “I can’t really fault your argument. But the system you’re arguing for would require very good teachers. We don’t think there will ever be enough really good teachers, and so we’re going for a ‘teacher-proof’ way of running schools; that way we will get uniform standards.”

Fifteen years later the country is paying the price for such a terrible assumption, and this is the ‘context’ within which education still has to operate.

Sensing that the case needed stronger support from the research that was beginning to emerge from the biomedical and cognitive sciences the Director accepted an invitation to Washington to form an international team of scientists and educators to further synthesise such research. In a 1998 Policy Paper they concluded: “Our present community and school structures are finely tuned to outdated assumptions about how humans learn……normal processes of incremental innovation are totally inadequate. New intermediate, community-based units which correspond more closely to human expectation have to be developed.”

Still believing that better informed teachers could, themselves, eventually bring about appropriate pressure on politicians and administrators, the Initiative addressed literally hundreds of conferences of teachers and administrators in the first five years of this century. Initially this unleashed a flood of enthusiasm but by late 2005 this rapidly evaporated as teachers became answerable to an ever-increasing array of legislation. “We know enough already to accept your conclusions, but it is the politicians you have to persuade, for without them we are just stuck.”

The Initiative, accepting as a first rule of politics that politicians are most interested in pursuing those policies that command their constituents’ interest in gaining re-election, decided that it had to find the wherewithal, and the language, to describe all this in a book that would appeal to a wide
range of the population; a best-seller, something like that which Bronowski achieved thirty years ago with his seminal book and TV documentary, *The Ascent of Man*, which so caught the public imagination. For the Initiative to create such a book was not easy and involved two false starts. Eventually it was ready for publication in June 2008 but so chary were possible publishers of the reading public’s interest that it was not until December 2009 that it was actually published (and has subsequently been very well reviewed and a second edition produced).

In an attempt to deepen the political debate about education prior to the General Election, the Initiative produced a Parliamentary Briefing Paper on the *Design Faults at the Heart of English Education*. This rigorously summarised how “contemporary research in the biomedical, social and cognitive sciences into the relationship between innate human nature, and socially constructed nurture, shows how misinformed and inadequate were many of our ancestors’ earlier decisions, especially the decision taken in 1945 to truncate primary education at the age of 11 (not 14) and create the four year secondary school. To fail to understand how such earlier assumptions undermine new policies is bound to perpetuate underperformance.”

Our timing was awful for this Paper reached MPs the week the Parliamentary expenses scandal first broke. Several Members, however, whilst sympathising with the argument, explained that what we sought could never be achieved within a five-year term of office as “it was just too big”, and few politicians would chance their arms on something which could take up to ten years to achieve. An idea too big to handle, yet obviously too important to ignore.

The Initiative’s disappointment at its failure to influence Parliamentarians must have been comparable to that of your Foundation when, two months later, the Cambridge Report on Primary Education was dismissed within a matter of a few hours by Ed Balls as being based on totally out of date statistics and ideas. Three days later Michael Gove, writing in The Times under the ambivalent title of “Another Academic Exercise Divides Opinion” damned the report with faint praise before dismissing two key recommendations that formal classroom studies should not start until the age of 6. Furthermore if Gove were to become Minister there would be no let-up in the heavy regime of testing that puts such a straitjacket on creative work.

**ACTIVITY**

No doubt many of you within the Foundation must be questioning, as does the Initiative, how significant research and carefully considered proposals can more effectively influence public policy. Whilst slowness of knowledge transfer between scientific research and industrial innovation was earlier blamed for the sluggishness of much of England’s economic recovery, the transfer between educational theory and practice has been even slower.

The Initiative has been forced to recognise that however well-structured a proposal, or well written may be a book on education, there is a vast mismatch between those thoughtful readers who follow and accept an argument (but who mainly lack the motivation and stamina to do something with the ideas) and the vast majority of the country who seek only a simple, manageable agenda linked to the powerful leadership of single-minded charismatic advocates who can demonstrate in a spectacular (if restricted) way that they have done something, even if this is not particularly appropriate.

As the Coalition’s preoccupation with establishing large numbers of small Free Schools and further reducing the power of the earlier local education authorities, rather than questioning the very pedagogy that we would argue is at the root of our difficulties, the Initiative was fearful that the reforms it had been arguing for would be lost forever.
Having exhausted most of its funds in pre-election activity the Initiative had to drastically reduce its office and overheads. It then struggled to redefine its role. It stuck with its belief that without a well worked out theory of learning, and deprived of a real understanding of both pedagogy and policy, teachers and administrators end up simply parrotting the latest curriculum directives issued by politicians. That is why the Initiative believes it to be so important to familiarise ever-larger numbers of people about the arguments as set out in ‘Overschooled but Undereducated’.

By the autumn of last year we had turned this into a three-pronged strategy; a general dissemination strategy to the public, an intensive debate amongst significant leaders in society about the relationship of education to social policy, and an intriguing programme for school leavers.

1. The development of a number of animated graphics to illustrate in a simple, interesting and compelling way the main components of this pedagogic revolution that we see as necessary and, by putting them up on YouTube and other social networking sites, take these messages to a mass market (please see www.born-to-learn.org).

2. The second strand goes to the opposite extreme and through the partnership we are making with Tony Little, the Headmaster of Eton, we plan to set-up a series of high-level discussions between some of the most influential people in the land to consider both the future of schools, and in particular the whole relationship of education to the kind of society it will be desirable to create. We are referring to this as the Eton Conversation, and one that could last a couple of years.  

3. While the first two strands may appear highly abstract, our third strand “U-Start” is a very well-grounded gap year introduction for recent school leavers already considering a future career in teaching after university.  

GOALS

1. By motivating both a high level of public understanding through the animations, and the eventual production of a manifesto out of the Eton Conversation, we hope to create amongst the people of England an agenda so broad that politicians would have the confidence to plan beyond the present five-year cycle (as is currently the case with the Defence budget). By building up the U-Start programme we have a potential to focus the excited interest of bright and determined 17 and 18 year olds to do something really significant for themselves, and potentially for the country, by focussing their interest on the whole learning process, before they go to university (see www.born-to-learn.org for details).

2. The Initiative has now to reconfigure its structures and programmes so as to take these ideas further, keep them ever-more tuned to real need, and to do so from an organisational and administrative base infinitely stronger than that which it has at the moment.

OUR NEED

The cost of the third prong to our strategy will be largely met by the contributions of the participants, although bursaries would be extremely helpful. Once the present discussions between the Initiative and Tony Little have advanced a little further we will, together, be seeking for a significant private sponsor for a sum of approximately £1 million to fund a probable two-year programme. The cost of the first video was approximately £12,000 and, as of now, it has been downloaded a remarkable 23,000 times in the seven weeks since it was launched, with more than
5,000 visitors a day to the website that contains so much of the material on which the Initiative’s ideas are dependent. The cartoons for our second video are nearly finished and Damian Lewis and a colleague are shortly to record the voiceover. Whilst the extraordinary speed with which this is circulating amongst social networks does not involve us in a direct cost, indirectly we have to be able to respond to an ever-increasing number of messages that come to us, both raising questions about why we say it in the way that we do and, often quite emotionally, saying why such videos touch a person’s heart. We have developed a sort of “inner-circle” of those people who are asking to be kept directly informed. There are few additional costs in this, other than the considerable time it takes to create the appropriate information. We hope to eventually produce ten more videos, all using the same techniques so as to make ever-more people familiar with the power of these ideas.

When we last approached your Foundation in 2008 we estimated our monthly costs at around £14,000 and were looking for an annual grant of £175,000. As we defined our new strategy so the Trustees calculated that to operate effectively over the next 12 months we would require £120,000 per annum for our operating costs (office costs, salaries, website maintenance, travel, expenses etc); £120,000 for 10 more animated documentaries; an initial £20,000 to prepare the case for the Eton Conversation, which will be subject to a separate approach to sponsors for £1 million, and £20,000 for the start up costs of the U-Start gap year programme, totalling £280,000.

However, because of our changed circumstances we had almost immediately to reduce our operating costs to £7,000 a month by relinquishing our offices in Bath and placing all the Initiative’s extensive resources on a separate floor in the Director’s home. Secretarial help was reduced from 40 hours a week to 12 hours. Having funded the first two videos from our rapidly diminishing reserves, and, in order to make the £20,000 that remains last as long as possible, the Director is willing, as a last resort, to work for nothing. Reserving about £1,500 for the monthly cost of slightly expanded secretarial assistance, and continuing website costs, this would enable us to remain “operational” until December.

However, once the full plans have been made for the Eton Conversation it should be possible, by about Christmas, to have attracted powerful sponsorship, part of which would cover some central office costs. With the very special opportunity extended to the Director to give the keynote speech at this October’s Head Masters’ Conference, the Initiative is anxious to have available on that day both the existing videos and a third, slightly longer video, which we anticipate will cost £25,000.

Obviously we would much welcome an undertaking by the Foundation to help us with a proportion of the costs needed to operate in business-like fashion. The further we get into the organisation of the Eton Conversation, the Head Masters’ Conference and the ever-extended use of the website, the stronger is the case we can make to a range of funders.

**All this depends upon the Initiative being able to operate highly effectively between now and gaining other forms of support.** We estimate that, allowing for the money we still have, we need a further £70,000 between now and Christmas. This would enable us to continue to pay the Director at £3,900 per month, fund the third video at £25,000, marginally increase secretarial and website support, and begin to pay travel and other expenses. Should he work for half payment and only increase secretarial support marginally, this would require us to raise £44,000, and if he were to work for nothing we would still need to raise £25,000.

Once we can reach a relatively stable plateau the Initiative has to find sufficient backing to put the Initiative on to a firm financial base from January 2012, especially being able to appoint a Deputy Director who would be able to consolidate on all these exciting developments, enabling the Director himself to probably retire within three years.