

Targets miss the point



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I was listening the other day to a Radio 4 programme about the damaging effects of target-setting in the health service. It strengthened my feeling that many of the same problems are evident in schools. In a hospital, it seems, a target or collection of targets, is set and these become high stakes for the hospital managers.

With the best interests of the hospital in mind, they cannot ignore these targets, so resources – time, people, money and thought – are directed towards meeting them.

Eventually some progress is made, but at a cost in terms of other things that do not feature in the terms of the targets. Hospitals often hit the target but miss the point. It is assumed that the problem must be with the targets and they are modified to try to deal with what is being overlooked. But sooner or later the same thing begins to happen: the new targets are met, appear to be met, or are at least worked towards, but another spinning plate escapes everyone's attention, slips to the floor and smashes.

I can see parallels in this with target-setting in schools, but what concerns me most are targets that teachers construct

for individual lessons, since the short duration of a lesson calls for a small number of simple targets. The problem is not that the targets are insufficiently "smart" (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time-related) or focused. No doubt target-setting can improve the production of widgets in factories, where a sequence of actions needs to be carried out more swiftly, efficiently or economically. But a school is unlike a factory because pupils are inherently complex and variable.

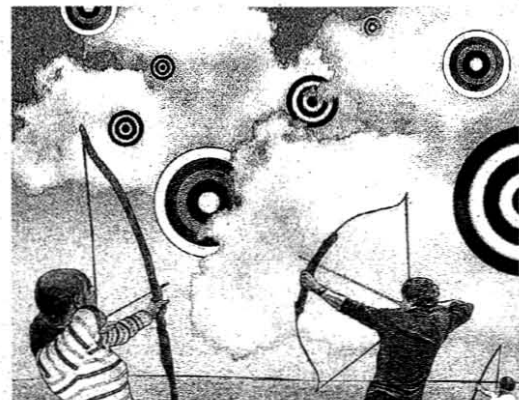
Trying to treat them like raw materials for a production process creates impossible difficulties for teachers.

In schools, one of the chief difficulties is the "m" in smart: only what can be easily and objectively measured has target value, so a premium develops on teaching children to memorise and recall facts, Gradgrind-like.

It is easy to teach bite-size pieces of information and easy to test the parroting back of material. It is also fairly simple to measure the ability to perform a well-rehearsed and tightly defined skill or technique, so that too becomes prime material for a target-led teaching agenda.

But higher-order learning, involving deep progress in understanding and thinking, is too woolly to fit into this way of working. And it will be pushed out of teaching if we are not careful.

Target-setting leads to an inevitable dumbing down of the curriculum towards recall and rehearsal of specific low-level skills and away from investigating and exploring for understanding. Unless we begin to recognise the limitations of target-setting for the world of education, we are going to fail to help children develop the most precious elements of their learning.



It is not always going to be possible to prove that every student has learnt something in every lesson – learning anything substantial is too subtle and complex to be so easily controlled.

Real learning has to be, to a degree, messy and undetermined. There has to be room for flexibility, surprise, responsiveness to learners and sensitivity to the moment. Unless teachers are released from the fear of wasting a bit of time occasionally, many of the opportunities afforded by working with young people will be lost, interest will be stifled and education will not be allowed to flourish.

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