

## Accelerating the arches

Roy Blatchford

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I opened my January 2020 monthly column with these words:

*'A new, predictably unpredictable decade begins. The German poet Goethe wryly observed that everything has been thought of before - the challenge is to think of it again.'*

In common with most futurologists, I was correct and incorrect in equal measure. While 2020 has certainly been unpredictable, a pandemic is not something most of us had thought about before. The 2011 movie 'Contagion' was possibly the closest we had come to viewing a life-changing global plague.

No individual, family, organisation or business has been untouched.

That great symbol of globalisation, the ubiquitous McDonald's - with its 39,000 outlets - saw store sales plunge 40 per cent in April. Yet the burger-chain has responded with characteristic bounce-back, pushing the three Ds of **d**rive-through, **d**igital ordering and **d**elivery. They brand this 'accelerating the arches'.

In education systems across the world, what might 2021 and beyond bring by way of an equivalent? How will education accelerate its own arches? Which embedded practices will be kept, ditched or modified?

Just a glance at the regular classroom or lecture theatre in the 1910s and the 2020s suggests that the forces of conservatism prevail. Invite a group of Edwardian children to sit in the newest academy and, electronic rather than slate tablets aside, they would not feel out of place.

Schools, colleges and universities are essentially buildings, students and their teachers, with a range of support services - that's the canvas, whether in Tasmania, Nigeria or Nepal\*. The global imperative to see children and young people educated and socialised formally in a physical space during their formative years remains unchallenged.

Plus ça change, plus c'est la meme chose. Yes, our education systems will ever embody that maxim. We are social animals first, and all students and teachers want to be physically together again in lessons and seminars, without masks.

And once the vaccine arrives, will all motivation to effect radical change evaporate?

My hunch is that we shall watch four significant shifts unfold across the primary, secondary and tertiary phases - each accelerated by the events of the past year.

## **1. Anywhere learning for students and staff**

This will mean different things to primary children and postgraduate students, but virtual, blended, remote learning models are here to stay: 'bricks and clicks' if you will. And how teachers assess students through portfolios, online and oral tests, collaborative projects and final exams will look different.

Staff too will curate their own professional development, sometimes site-based, often online through global networks.

## **2. What is taught**

The curriculum for 5, 15 and 20 year olds will become more international and inter-disciplinary in content. The subject based curriculum will evolve. Academic excellence will always be treasured; so too will the promotion of well-being, team skills, character, resilience and adaptability. The ethics of sustainability will permeate what children learn from primary to tertiary.

## **3. The habit of collaboration**

Institutions across the public, private and not-for-profit sectors will deepen their habits of collaboration, and benefit from one another's respective skills, talents and mindsets. This will prove a particular accelerator into the future provision of education. The inter-dependence of communities and countries has been *the* defining aspect of 2020.

## **4. Innovation and communication**

In the sphere of innovation, there will be more risk taking, a greater preparedness to fail wisely in order to find new solutions to how children and students can learn most effectively. And enhanced forms of communication, aided by AI, will enable young people of the globe – and their families and teachers - to connect and learn alongside each other.

2020 has marked a year in which not quite everything has been thought of before - at least by most of the world's 7.8 billion people. Darwinian adaptation has been thrust upon us in order to survive and thrive.

What will schools, colleges and universities do differently ahead? I am optimistic that 2021 will provide some compelling answers. We shall not dare waste the lessons of recent times.

*\* Roy Blatchford is education adviser to the charity [Q-Learning Nepal](#) – donations welcome.*

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**Roy Blatchford's recent books are '[The Three Minute Leader](#)' and '[The Forgotten Third](#)', published by John Catt Education.**