On Matriculation Certificate in Further Education:
notes on how to binge and question syllabi topics + an excursus on Systems of Knowledge

Mark Debono

mark.j.debono@um.edu.mt

Abstract: In education, the common practice is for students to demonstrate what they know in examinations. The grading system makes more noticeable this basic fact. This paper, in its first section, considers the two-year course students complete in a sixth form to qualify for a Matriculation Certificate that holds two passes at Advanced level and four at Intermediate level. To this extent it questions whether students qualify for their Matriculation Certificate by digesting a vast amount of information from six subjects at the cost of depriving themselves of other abilities, like the capacity to bring to fruition their relationships with others or the ability to understand matters of public interest. For this purpose, this paper measures and explores whether such condensed coursework dulls creative and inventive skills. The second section of the paper investigates whether Systems of Knowledge offers an alternative path about how students engage with people and the world in a critical, creative, and innovative fashion.

Keywords: matriculation certificate, *bulimia academica*, examination, Systems of Knowledge

Introduction

The introduction of this article aims to make some kind of assessment of five factors that influenced the development of further education in Malta. These factors are: the local context of further education, the future of further education, the learning environment context, the recent MatSec reforms of September 2012 and the stipend system.

To tackle the first factor, which deals with the local context of further education, I am adopting the claims of the April 2009 report of the NCHE titled 'Further and Higher Education Strategy 2020'.[1] Quoting the Education Act,[2] the report delineates further education in Malta as including 'all formal education of persons above the compulsory school age, leading to qualifications classified at NQF[3] levels 1 to 5'.[4] The report provides a clear overview of post-secondary education in Malta. It states that 'general post-secondary education in Malta is provided mainly by two higher secondary schools, the Junior College, two church, and two independent private sixth forms... Post-secondary vocational education in Malta is provided by the Malta College of Arts, Science, and Technology (MCAST)[5] and the

1 'The NCHE was established in 2006 to consult and advise Government through the Minister responsible for Education, to engage in a structured dialogue with all institutions, and inform the public on issues relating to sustainable development of the further and higher education sectors to meet the needs of society,' Introduction, 8: http://www.ncfhe.org.mt/uploads/filebrowser/Further_and_Higher_Education_ Strategy_2020.pdf (accessed July 2014).

2 Laws of Malta, Part VI, Article 63, Education Act, Cap. 327.

3 The Malta Qualifications Framework, launched in June 2007, specifies that the 'concept of learning outcomes is the basis of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) with which all National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs) must be referenced to': http://www.ncfhe.org.mt/content/home-malta-qualifications- framework/5963805/ (accessed July 2014).

4 'Further and Higher Education – Challenges Faced', Chap. 2, 11: http://www.ncfhe. org.mt/uploads/filebrowser/Further_and_Higher_Education_Strategy_2020.pdf (accessed July 2014).

5 'A warm welcome from our 10,000 plus community of learners and educators! Since our establishment in 2001, over 18,200 students have successfully completed full-time courses at MCAST. Many others acquire new skills and qualifications

Institute of Tourism Studies (ITS)[6].[7] The report positions the role of post-secondary education as having a 'critical place in delivering the necessary knowledge skills and competences to young school leavers and adult learners alike. The impressive growth of the vocational sector in the last decade has demonstrated the importance of further education and its significant impact across a broad range of political, economic and social policy agendas. This includes all post-secondary public and private colleges and institutes which provide general and vocational education.'[8] Why NCHE is claiming that sixth forms occupy a 'critical place' in the junction between secondary and higher education? Is NCHE formulating this claim because sixth form education will have an impelled action on the political, economic, and social policies of the country?

One may hint at the answer that sixth forms occupy a 'critical place' because it shapes future citizens of a country. But is it not this future determined by the future we prescribe to further education itself? The second cause which deals with the future of further education takes into account the claim of Gareth Pary that the junction between secondary and tertiary level education, 'is poorly understood even though it is central to government policies on expansion, diversity, and widening participation'.[9] He points that this lack of understanding may lead one

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through our part-time courses every year. With over 170 full-time and 300 part-time courses in 10 different industry sectors, you're sure to find a choice that's made for you. We look forward to welcoming you on campus!' http://www.mcast.edu.mt (accessed July 2014).

6   'The ITS is an institution of higher education aimed at meeting the changing needs of the Travel, Hospitality, and Tourism Industry. ITS was established in 1987 and consolidated by the Education Act No. XIII of 2006 of the Laws of Malta. ITS.' Its main responsibility is to provide the tourism sector with professional personnel who are able to guarantee an excellent standard of products and services within the Hospitality Industry.': http://www.its.edu.mt/abouts-us-its.html (accessed July 2014).

7   'Further and Higher Education-Challenges Faced', Chap. 2, 11.

8   Ibid.

9   'Higher education in further education colleges – A primer', *Perspectives*, Vol. XVI, No. 4 (2012), 118: http://www.tandfonline.com.ejournals.um.edu.mt/doi/pd f/10.1080/13603108.2012.719841; Gareth Pary, Claire Callender, Peter Scott, and Paul Temple, *Understanding Higher Education in Further Education Colleges*

to think of further education institutions as playing a secondary role. Owing to this neglect, further education is enmeshed between two long-term futures:

> One future in which liberalization and spending cuts create a culture of retrenchment and policy incoherence; where market mechanisms create winners and losers without engaging citizens; where further education remains a 'Cinderella' service pushed and pulled by more powerful local players.
>
> Another future that is fundamentally more collaborative, networked, and socially productive; where colleges are incubators of social value and hubs for service integration; where further education serves the needs of learners through being a creative partner in local growth and service reform agendas.[10]

What futures do we want for our local further education? Is the current Matriculation certificate system undervaluing or empowering the key players to 'shape new realities on the ground'?[11] How can we shape these 'new realities' if we neglect today's learning environment?

The third element have to do with today's learning context albeit briefly described here as, 'environments that feature a set of characteristics to enable individuals to learn within and across social spaces'.[12] Today's learning environment happens in an age that shakes the foundations of how we have come to know things. How does a post-modernist perspective, one that 'challenges dominant explanations

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(BIS-Department for Business, Innovation & Skills, Research Paper Number 69, 1–129: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/32425/12-905-understanding-higher-education-in-further-education-colleges.pdf (accessed August 2014).

10 'The Further Education Sector in 2020: a social productivity approach' in *Executive Summary of LSIS (Learning and Skills Improvement Service)*, 6. The report draws on research papers prepared by John Landeryou and Andy Westwood: http://www.rsa2020publicservices.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/LSIS_Executive-Summary_Final_26.05.11.pdf (accessed February 2014).

11 Ibid.

12 Cristina Costa, 'Teaching and Learning in Context … with a little help from the Web' in Frank Coffield with Cristina Costa, Walter Müller, and John Webber, *Beyond Bulemic Learning – Improving teaching in further education* (London, 2014), 117.

and theories, and distrusts ideologies, drawing critical attention to conventional modes of explanation',[13] affect learning environments? In this context, one asks why education, at times, focuses more on the aspect to deliver syllabi on time while at the same time forgetting that today learners operate in a 'digital economy and society'?[14] Are not the 'social and participatory web [which consist] of web and communicating networks, applications, and environments in which individuals act as active participants and contributors of information and knowledge, personal views and opinions'[15] adding up to the process that regurgitates information? The flow of a large volume of information diminishes the ability of teachers to impart knowledge in a way that appears worthy to students. This brings to the point that, 'if a student was to challenge a teacher over a point of knowledge or application of skill, should such a challenge need to be considered as behaviour management issues or as an example of a meaningful, and therefore legitimate, critique of the teacher's role more generally?…If subject knowledge now is no longer the exclusive preserve of the teacher, then what is?'[16]

The fourth circumstance looks at how the recent Matsec certificate developments of September 2012 affect our sixth form learning environments. The first development specifies, that 'candidates from sixth forms and private candidates will be allowed to sit for as many subjects of the Matriculation Certificate (at Intermediate and Advanced Levels) as they wish in the May session and, due to time-table constraints, as many of the following examinations in the September session'.[17] The second development points that 'all candidates will be allowed to obtain the Matriculation Certificate within a period of five years, i.e. when such candidates accumulate sufficient points in six subjects at levels and within the groups specified in the Matriculation

13 L.B. Curzon and Jonathan Tummons, *Teaching in Further Education – An Outline of Principles and Practice*, Seventh Edition (Bloomsbury, 2013), 25.

14 Costa, 118.

15 Ibid. 119.

16 Curzon and Tummons, 26.

17 The new September 2012 Matriculation Certificate developments are published online: http://www.um.edu.mt/matsec (accessed July 2014).

Certificate Examination Regulations (http://www.um.edu.mt/matsec/regulations), they will be awarded the Matriculation Certificate.'[18]

At first glance, these developments seem to help students. But a closer examination reveals that the five year time bracket to attain the Matriculation certificate opens the argument whether sixth form coursework can stay structured on a two-year span. The option for students to go for the exams during their first year of studies produces an impression that the coursework is very easy to handle. At the same time, the five-year bracket allowance to tick off all the subjects generates the idea that the six subject workload is difficult to deal with. Moreover, one can ask questions like, 'Why did Matsec introduce these developments eleven years after the establishment of MCAST and twenty-five years after the foundation of ITS? What type of impact do these new avenues of further education which cater for vocational training have on sixth form education in Malta?

The fifth and last characteristic treats the unique case that in Malta all undergraduate students get paid a stipend.[19] Further and higher education appeared appealing by the stipend system. But such system also discloses the State intervention in funding education.

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This paper limits its research to the Maltese 1994 reform which established the Matriculation Certificate[20] as an entry requirement to

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18 Ibid.

19 R.G. Sultana, 'The University of Malta's Student Stipend System': http://www.um.edu.mt/__data/assets/pdf_file/0012/102252/stipends-UoM.pdf (accessed July 2014).

20 'The Matriculation and Secondary Certificate (MATSEC) Examinations Board was established in 1991 by the Senate and the Council of the University of Malta. The Board was entrusted with the development of an examination system to replace the GCE Ordinary and Advanced level examinations set by the UK examination boards. The new board also took over the function of the Matriculation Board which also used to set examinations at Ordinary and Advanced level in a number of subjects.' http://www.um.edu.mt/matsec (accessed July 2014).

university. First a requisite of two passes at Advanced and three at Intermediate level was established, and then the number of subjects turned six by the inclusion of Systems of Knowledge as an Intermediate subject. Systems of Knowledge was made a compulsory requirement for entry to the university. From 1997, students had to achieve a matriculation certificate to commence their studies at the university, the main aim being, 'to have university students who are competent in a language, a human studies subject, a science subject, and a technology or applied arts subject'.[21] To be manageable, this certificate system groups subjects into four groups and students have to choose at least one subject from each area.[22]

This first observation is that students proceed to sixth form after they have passed their Ordinary levels. The short/long list of results at Ordinary level reveals the effort by students. However, the number of certificates may give rise to false impressions. Students are overwhelmed by the fact that their transition to tertiary education depends on the outcome of the results of the six subjects in the Matriculation Certificate. For most sixth-form students the 'beginning of a life transition is a novel and thus ambiguous situation, as it is not clear yet how one ought to behave'.[23] For students and lecturers alike, the first introductory lectures appear daunting. What better words accompany us at this initial stage than those of Anna Karenina who, upon arrival at the station, 'she stood on the platform, trying to think what she had come for, and what she meant to do. Everything that had seemed to her possible before was now so difficult to consider.'[24]

21 Joseph Giordmaina, 'Systems of Knowledge: A Case Study of Curriculum Innovation in Malta', Innodata Monographs – 3. A new curriculum, 14: http://www.ibe.unesco.org/publications/innodata/inno03.pdf (accessed July 2014).

22 http://www.um.edu.mt/__data/assets/pdf_file/0018/223641/LN316-Matr_Exam-amendment-E.pdf

23 Anat Bardi Valeschka, M. Guerra, G. Sharadeh, D. Ramdeny, 'Openness and ambiguity intolerance: Their differential relations to well-being in the context of an academic life transition', *Personality and Individual Differences*, Vol. 47, Issue 3 (August 2009): http://www.sciencedirect.com.ejournals.um.edu.mt/science/article/pii/S0191886909001123 (accessed March 2014)

24 Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenin*, Part VII, Chapter XXXI. Bibliographic Record.

Noting that this exploratory stage is not coincidental, one may ask whether lecturers should present the enterprise of knowledge in a way that disturbs the previous success of students at Ordinary level. What type of meaning do we get about sixth-form education? To understand better the role of sixth form, one can consider Stefan Collini's argument about universities for whom universities are 'organizations for the maintenance, extension, and transmission of intellectual enquiry; this is necessary a collective enterprise and one which transcends the needs or interests of the present generation, let alone of the individual scholar.'[25] Does not coaching for University transform sixth forms into effective centres of pre-tertiary education and not post-secondary ones? What 'intellectual enquiry' can lecturers/students maintain, extend, and transmit at sixth form? Can 'intellectual enquiry' be recognized as a skill? L.B. Curzon and Jonathan Tummons provide two interpretations about the use of the term 'skill':

> The 'common usage' definition positions 'a skill' as a specific attribute or competence that, once practised and acquired, would allow the student to perform a particular action or procedure as part of a programme of leaning within a specific area (for example, carpentry, jewellery-making, or hairdressing). But the definition of 'skills' that is proposed by notions such as 'employability skill' is more generic, seeing skills as something that can be acquired in a variety of ways and applied to different employment or educational contexts.[26]

In my perspective, academic skills conflate the two usages of the term 'skill'. In the first usage students learn how to become competent in the subject and, in this sense, sixth forms maybe are not failing because most students manage to qualify for the Matriculation certificate. Given these points, it is natural to doubt whether by academic skills at sixth-form level we imply methods of qualification which reduce knowledge to examination

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Translated by Constance Garnett. The Harvard Classics Shelf of Fiction, Vol. XVI (New York, 1917): bartleby.com, 2000: http://www.bartleby.com/317/1/731.html (accessed July 2014).

25 Stefan Collini, *What are Universities For*? (Harmondsworth, 2012), 147.

26 Curzon and Tummons, 308.

purposes only. While competence has to do with skill, intellectual enquiry has to do with questioning. The claims by Frank Coffield[27] about bulemic learning are highly valid for the context of local sixth forms. During the two academic years students binge a lot of information in a relatively short time. Coffield does not use the term 'bulemia' in a light way because, according to him, students 'feel empty and educationally malnourished by resorting to … *bulimia academica* [which implies] repeated bouts of bingeing on information and regurgitating it in exams'.[28] By this process students, 'come to associate learning not with growing self-confidence, a sense of achievement, and a change in identity as component students, but with stress, nausea, and self-disgust. Learning for them is reduced to the skill of passing exams rather than the means of understanding and coming to love the subjects they are studying.'[29]

Apart from the discussion on *bulimia academica*, Coffield offers an insight on *anorexia academica*. He claims that some 'students become anxious about being seen by their classmates to be clever and severly restrict their intake to bite-size chunks of information that makes them easirer to swallow – the educational equivalent of chicken nuggets'.[30] In Coffield's incisive explanation one notices a disturbing result that bingeing produces first/second/third competent students *et cet.*. By bingeing, students process information without further questioning.

And what students are bingeing on if not pedagogical content? Drawing on Schulman,[31] Curzon and Tummons throughout their text *Teaching in Further Education*, distinguish *pedagogical content*

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27 *Beyond Bulemic Learning*, Chap. 1, 'Beyond bulimic learning' by Frank Coffield. In the introduction of this chapter, Frank Coffield is grateful to Amanda Spielman for suggesting this extension to the notion of 'bulimia academica'.(quoting Chap. 1, Note 2, 18). Coffield formulates the concept of 'bulimic learning' from the English exam regime where students 'binge on large amounts of information and then, in government-induced bouts of vomiting, otherwise known as national tests, they spew it out', Chap1, 3.

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid., 4.

31 Lee S. Schulman, 'Those Who Understand: Knowledge Growth in Teaching', 9: http://www.itp.wceruw.org/documents/Shulman_1986.pdf, (accessed September 2014).

knowledge from *curricular knowledge*. According to Schulman, *pedagogical content knowledge* focuses on the particular topics of the subject (what is prescribed in the syllabus), 'the ways of representing and formulating the subject that make it comprehensible to others', while *curricular knowledge* tries, 'to relate the content of a given course or lesson or topics or issues being discussed simultaneously in other classes'.[32] By the bingeing process of six subjects students/lecturers alike fail to keep in sight the curricular connection of their subject with other subjects. The force of questioning can possibly, and to some extent also probably, extend our horizons of meaning beyond the particular topics of our syllabi and in such way allow us to set up connecting points with other subjects.

John D. Caputo's conception of what is at work in the process of questioning merits a closer examination. For him, undecidability is a key element because it keeps, 'questions in question. Questioning is thought's movement, *kinesis*, the work (*ergon*) of thinking which cannot rest … Questioning is a way of staying under way.'[33] What answer can we give to Collini's question about what is 'intellectual enquiry'? Can we say that this 'work of thinking' can be the lynchpin of 'intellectual inquiry'? Are we in this sense as academics workers who carry out our work by thinking? What is our work of thinking? Should we not try to introduce our students to this work of thinking? The term 'work' is being used in a specific sense as an activity which involves a physical/mental effort to get a result. In this sense, questioning comes in as a force that offers a temporary exit from the regurgitated syllabi topics in examinations. According to Ken Robinson, in an educative context questioning becomes a skill, that one exercises to encourage, 'imaginative and critical thinking, the ability to hypothesize, and to question the way things have always been done'.[34] Robinson spells out the four characteristics of the creative processes:

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32 Ibid., 8, 9.

33 John D. Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics*: *Repetition, Deconstruction and the Hermeneutic Project*. (Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1987), 188.

34 National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education, *Creative and Cultural Education*, 'All our futures: Creativity, Culture and Education' No. 93, 59: http://sirkenrobinson.com/pdf/allourfutures.pdf (accessed July 2014).

First, they always involve thinking or behaving *imaginatively*. Second, overall this imaginative activity is *purposeful*: that is, it is directed to achieving an objective. Third, these processes must generate something *original*. Fourth, the outcome must be of *value* in relation to the objective. We therefore define creativity as 'Imaginative activity fashioned so as to produce outcomes that are both original and of value.'[35]

Robinson advocates a democratic definition of creativity, one which views the communication of the creative processes to everyone as 'all people are capable of creative achievement in some area of achievement, provided the conditions are right and they have acquired the relevant knowledge and skills. Moreover, a democratic society should provide opportunities for everyone to succeed according to their own strengths and abilities.'[36] This implies that in some way the learning context must give stimulation where students master a subject in a way that allows them also to probe other questions beyond the syllabus in an imaginative, creative, and pioneering way.

To put it simply, without the Matriculation certificate students cannot make it to university. Is the Matriculation certificate the only means by which students are propelled to university? Are we so impoverished in our educational resources that we can only equate education with the prospects of degrees and careers? The matching of careers with economic needs can further increase the strain on educational resources. Why did we overlook in education the great warning by one of the leading British economists, John Maynard Keynes, who argued that 'the same rule of self-destructive financial calculation governs every walk of life? We destroy the beauty of the countryside because the unappropriated splendours of nature have no economic value. We are capable of shutting off the sun and the stars because they do not pay a dividend'.[37] On the same lines of thinking, is the Matriculation

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35 Ibid., 30.
36 Ibid., 29.
37 John Maynard Keynes, 'National Self-Sufficiency', *The Yale Review*, Vol. XXII, No. 4 (June 1933), 755–69: https://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/interwar/keynes.htm (accessed September 2014).

certificate the only premium students get? Shall we expunge from our syllabi all the material that seem to pay no dividend?

Are we empowering our students to pay attention to the world in a critical approach by simply delivering syllabi content to them? Are we as lecturers being empowered when we tick our syllabi content with 'ready' or 'not ready'? What do we come for in the lecture room? What are we supposed to do in the lecture room? Are we as lecturers treating ourselves as humble servants in the service of education by stuttering the dictates of syllabi? Are we as lecturers supposed to feel happy that we have finished delivering the syllabi on time for the Matriculation certificate? Should not this pettiness of equations between syllabi and exams, exams and careers agitate our thinking in the way we deliver knowledge during our lectures? Should we feature knowledge to students as a commodity in a consumeristic society? This paper has so far argued about how the constant delivery of *pedagogical content knowledge* can only lead to a sterile reproduction of the given sources of information.

In this sense, the lecture room where the learning process takes place becomes a 'critical place' because in it lecturers and students alike can either continue strengthening an educative process which excludes the force of questioning or choose to make practical and effective use of syllabi in a way that allow them to engage in an imaginative, creative, and inventive mediation with the world. To perpetuate lecturing as a dull enterprise is to stage a crisis, which for Hannah Arendt becomes 'a disaster only when we respond to it with preformed judgements, that is with prejudices. Such an attitude not only sharpens the crisis but makes us forfeit the experience of reality the opportunity of reflection it provides.'[38] Arendt criticizes the process of education because education appears always as an 'attempt to produce the new as a *fait accompli*, that is, as though the new already existed'.[39] She stipulates natality as the, 'essence of education … the fact that human beings are

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38 Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future, Eight Exercises in Political Thought*. (New York, 1968), 174–5.

39 Ibid., 176.

born into the world'.[40] Putting it simply, we are born in the world, we grow in it, and we die in it. How can education risk such an enormous failure when in its enterprise it ought to teach one life-long learning skills? Returning to Caputo's argument that questioning is the work of thinking , we might hypothesize that education is an enterprise which generates thinking about the various stages of our life. Education makes us think critically about how we grow in the world, our standards of living, our work conditions, and the forces of life and death that shape our lives.

This is why Arendt herself adopted the figure of Socrates as the one who awakened others to have a deep understanding about the art of living. From the philosopher who was 'wholly of the market-place', [41]Arendt explicates the three metaphors. On the first side, Socrates appears as a gadfly arousing others to 'thinking and examination, an activity without which life, in his view, was not only worth much but was not full alive'. The second side features Socrates like a midwife – 'he knows how to deliver others of their thoughts'. The third side turns Socrates to be like an 'electric ray' – it paralyses where the gadfly rouses.[42] It is the highest state of being active and alive in life.

But what is happening in the lecture room? Are we turning the lecture room into comfortable zones where students do not feel disturbed by the knowledge they are receiving? Or shall we act like Socrates as gadflies awakening ourselves and students alike to the work of thinking? Are we coaching the thinking of our students to the sterile path where they repeat the information in examinations? How can lecturers and students alike communicate their work of thinking as an 'electric ray'? Both the sterile path and the effect of shock seem to produce a paralysis. On one side, the sterile path inhibits further progress; it blinds one to stay captivated in one's opinion. On the other hand, the effect of thinking which dazzles us, according to Arendt, also induces a paralysis. She considers two levels of interpretation for the term 'paralysis': 'it is inherent in the stop and think, the interruption of all activities – and it also may have

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40 Ibid., 175.
41 George Steiner, *No Passion Spent*, *Essays 1978–1996* (London, 1996), 377.
42 Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (London, 1978), 172–3.

a dazing after-effect, when you come out of it feeling unsure of what seemed to you beyound doubt while you were unthinkingly engaged in whatever you were doing'.[43]

The current exam system with its current load of six subjects is rather closing down the educative process. What makes us stop and think? Should students perceive knowledge as a problematic enterprise? If the educative process have channelled students to take knowledge in an unquestionable fashion, is it fair now that we press them to pursue a course of questioning? Was not Socrates a pioneer of change in the work of thinking? And, in being so, Socrates could not shield himself from one of the worst accusations, namely that he corrupted the minds of the young. Why did he not leave the young to do their own business? Why did he want, almost obsessively, to convince others of the worth of the examined life? And what happens after we awaken students to this course of questioning? Cannot the students tell us, like the Magi of T.S. Eliot's poem 'Journey of the Magi', that after being paralysed by the bright light of knowledge and after seeking its path, on their voyage they questioned whether it was safer to stay in their old habitats.

> This: were we led all that way for
> Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly
> We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,
> But had thought they were different; this Birth was
> Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.
> We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
> But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
> With an alien people clutching their gods.
> I should be glad of another death.[44]

According to this view, the lecture room does not remain a comfortable zone, rather it becomes a place of discomfort. For the learning process as a work of thinking turns out to be the vehicle, and

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43 Ibid., 175.
44 http://allpoetry.com/The-Journey-Of-The-Magi#sthash.3Yg236QS.dpuf

the privileged opportunity, where students and lecturers question the forces that shape our daily lives as a community of learners. At least the Maltese educational system in 1987, seven years before the 1994 MatSec reform, provoked an exit point from this industrious repetition of information when it introduced the innovative subject of Systems of Knowledge. In 1994 it was integrated in the MatSec reform as a compulsory subject for entrance to the University of Malta. The question whether Systems of Knowledge turns out to be a subject which presents its material as a work of curricular knowledge and not just pedagogical will be tackled next.

II

The subject Systems of Knowledge was introduced in 1987. As Giordmaina argues that, 'no other curricular innovation in the past two decades has arguably, stirred so much controversy within the Maltese education system as the subject called Systems of Knowledge at the post-secondary level of education (16- to 18-year-olds)'.[45] The subject was politicized and controversy continues to surround the subject to this day. Further on Giordmaina claims that Systems of Knowledge 'was to do away with compartmentalised learning'.[46] Systems of Knowledge aimed from the beginning to infuse a sense of interdisciplinarity between the various subjects and to present such interdisciplinary link within the social, political, and historical forces that shape society. Rather than tracing how the Systems of Knowledge syllabus developed, the following discussion takes its cue from the current syllabus. Quoting deliberately two of the aims from the syllabus to get the argument going that the subject's aim is to, 'develop the candidates' ability to view ideas, and situations from a wider standpoint than that of a single discipline and react to them' and to 'inculcate sensitivity and sensibility towards social, political, and historical realities'.[47]

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45 Giordmaina, 1.
46 Ibid., 7.
47 http://www.um.edu.mt/__data/assets/pdf_file/0015/217302/IM_32.pdf

Currently, the syllabus has four modules which cover the aspects of democracy and citizenship, art, aesthetics and culture, science and technology and sustainable development and environment. The coursework includes a project – where students have to choose to work in one of the areas of responsible citizenship, aesthetics, or environment and then relate their experience to science and technology. Systems of Knowledge can also be expressed in the Maltese language.

Rather than seeing it as a pain in the neck (*kanna*), students should be aware that Systems of Knowledge is the only subject which allows them to explore links beyond the compartmentalized sections of the 'Advanced' and 'Intermediate' syllabi. While the 'Advanced' and 'Intermediate' levels train students to be masters in a specific field, Systems of Knowledge allows students to tackle issues from a wide range of perspectives. In this sense, Systems of Knowledge aims to teach habits of interdisciplinary thinking, of relating to more than one branch of knowledge. Its syllabus is in line with *curricular knowledge* which 'reveal the power that already exists in students and reveal how that power operates'.[48] For the business of Systems of Knowledge is to dislocate what we know, to take students to the experience of wonder, and join what Phaedo said: 'For my part, wondrous were the things I experienced.' But, to experience this wonder, 'we must begin to practise education which informs us not what we must know and how it can be known, but how what we know has always already been learned. Furthermore, education must be understood as the process by which we produce knowledge from the materials which we are given.'[49] Systems of Knowledge constructs its knowledge from the materiality of the world as it explores concrete contexts. In the MatSec exam students are asked to come up with their own interpretation about local or international scenarios. They are also interviewed about their project experience and are expected to produce a personal reflection about such experience.

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48 Alan A. Block, 'Curriculum as Affichiste: Popular Culture and Identity' in *Curriculum*: *Toward New Identities*, Edited by William F. Pinar (New York and London, 1998), 336.

49 Ibid., 336.

The sense of exploration must animate students. As David W. Bollert suggests the Delphic 'know thyself' must be complimented by another corollary 'wonder at thyself'.[50] Systems of Knowledge may deserve a shift to Systems of Wonder – to be stupified, amazed, blinded by the marvel of the heights of thinking by the human person and by what humans can produce. But, to bring about this paradigm shift from 'knowledge' to 'wonder', we need an 'education in imagination, an initiation into the art of this conversation in which we learn to recognize the voices; to acquire the intellectual and moral habits appropriate to this conversation relationship and thus to make our *début dans la vie humaine*.'[51]

It is initiation, it is a celebration of Arendt's natality, that we are born into the world; it is Socratic midwifery; it is a course in 'listening' to the wonders of humans and the world; it is taking care of the conversation that goes on in the lecture room as we exchange ideas with students. But this conversation also arises out of a debt of love, the debt of love becomes the first 'answer' (if we get it correctly) as in Arendt's remark that education is the point at which we decide whether we love the world enough to assume responsibility for and by the same token save it from that ruin which, excepts for renewal, except for the coming of the new and young, would be inevitable. And education, too, is where we decide whether we love our children enough not to expel them from our world and leave them to their own devices, nor to strike from their hands their chance of undertaking something new, something unforseen by us, but to prepare them in advance for the task of renewing a common world'.[52]

The irony is that the Systems of Knowledge experience is reduced to a three-hour exam where students ought to answer four questions in a compartmentalized way. The subject of Systems of Knowledge offers an opportunity to converse with each other about the *same* world

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50 David W. Bollert, 'The Wonder of Humanity in Plato's Dialogues', in *Kritike*, Vol. IV, No. 1 (June 2010), 196: http://www.kritike.org/journal/issue_7/bollert_june2010.pdf (accessed September 2014).

51 Michael Oakeshott, *The Voice of Liberal Education*, Foreword and Introduction by Timothy Fuller, 30. http://www.studyplace.org/w/images/9/9e/Oakeschott-A-Place-of-Learning.pdf (accessed September 2014).

52 Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 196.

we dwell in. And, it is in this world (and no other except this one) that our work of thinking becomes a work of love and justice. It is a task of renewal, of constant exchange of what to replace and repair or leave as it is. Conversation never reduces further education into a 'to-do' list. Conversation always allows us to resist the oppressing and domineering feeling of syllabi by seeking alternative ways which allow us to 'redefine and re-invent the language of identity, the language of theory, and the language of research'.[53] Things always can be otherwise. Our professional public service as educators, according to Paulo Freire, remains a daunting task because it has always come to terms with the concrete challenges of everyday life. It must always rise to provide an 'answer' but this time beyond the pages of examinations for, maybe what keeps us going in this profession, besides hope for renewal, is that our experience as educators comes closer to daring. In the words of the Brazilian pedagogue, Freire, 'we must dare so that we can continue to teach for long time under condtions that know well: low salaries, lack of repect, and the ever present risk of becoming prey to cynicism. We must dare to learn how to dare in order to say no to the bureaucratization of the mind to which we are exposed every day. We must dare so that we can continue to do so even when it is more materially advantageous to stop daring'.[54] What else can we do?

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53 Carmel Borg, Peter Mayo, Ronald Sultana (eds.), *Curriculum Toward New Identities*, 'Revolution and Reality: An Interview with Peter McLaren', 359.

54 Paulo Freire, *Teachers as Cultural Workers, Letter to Those who dare teach.* (Westview, 2005), New Commentary by Perter McLaren, Joe L. Kincheloe, and Shirley Steinbert, Trans. By Donaldo Macedo, Dale Koike, and Alexandra Oliveira, Foreword by Donaldo Macedo and Ana Maria Araújo Freire, 'First Words, A Pedagogical Trap', 6.