

'Philosophy can teach children what Google can't'

by Charlotte Blease

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At the controls of driverless cars, on the end of the telephone when you call your bank or favourite retailer: we all know the robots are coming, and in many cases are already here. Back in 2013, economists at [Oxford University's Martin School](#) estimated that in the next 20 years, more than half of all jobs would be [substituted by intelligent technology](#). Like the prospect of robot-assisted living or hate it, it is foolish to deny that children in school today will enter a vastly different workplace tomorrow – and that's if they're lucky. Far from jobs being brought back from China, futurologists predict that white-collar jobs will be increasingly outsourced to digitisation as well as blue-collar ones.

Philosophy isn't a cure-all for the world's current or future woes. But it can build immunity against careless judgments, and unentitled certitude

How should educationalists prepare young people for civic and professional life in a digital age? Luddite hand-wringing won't do. Redoubling investment in science, technology, engineering and maths ([Stem](#)) subjects won't solve the problem either: hi-tech training has its imaginative limitations.

In the near future school-leavers will need other skills. In a world where technical expertise is increasingly narrow, the skills and confidence to traverse disciplines will be at a premium. We will need people who are prepared to ask, and answer, the questions that aren't Googleable: like what are the ethical ramifications of machine automation? What are the political consequences of mass unemployment? How should we distribute wealth in a digitised society? As a society we need to be more philosophically engaged.

Amid the political uncertainties of 2016, the Irish president [Michael D Higgins](#) provided a beacon of leadership in this area. "The [teaching of philosophy](#)," he said in November, "is one of the most powerful tools we have at our disposal to empower children into acting as free and responsible subjects in an ever more complex, interconnected, and uncertain world." Philosophy in the classroom, he emphasized, offers a "path to a humanistic and vibrant democratic culture".



In 2013, as Ireland struggled with the after-effects of the financial crisis, Higgins launched a nationwide initiative calling for debate about what [Ireland](#) valued as a society. The result is that for the first time philosophy was introduced into Irish schools in September.

A new optional course for 12- to 16-year-olds invites young people to reflect on questions that – until now – have been glaringly absent from school curriculums. In the UK, a network of philosophers and teachers is still lobbying hard for a GCSE equivalent. And Ireland, a

nation that was once deemed “[the most Catholic country](#)”, is already exploring reforms to establish philosophy for children as a subject within primary schools.

This expansion of philosophy in the curriculum is something that Higgins and his wife [Sabina](#), a philosophy graduate, have expressly called for. Higgins’ views are ahead of his time. If educators assume philosophy is pointless, it’s fair to say that most academic philosophers (unlike, say, mathematicians, or linguists) are still territorial, or ignorant, about the viability of their subject beyond the cloisters. If educators need to get wise, philosophers need to get over themselves.

Thinking and the desire to understand don’t come naturally – contrary to what Aristotle believed. Unlike, say, sex and gossip, philosophy is not a universal interest. [Bertrand Russell](#) came closer when he said, “Most people would rather die than think; many do.” While we may all have the capacity for philosophy, it is a capacity that requires training and cultural nudges. If the pursuit of science requires some cognitive scaffolding, as American philosopher [Robert McCauley](#) argues, then the same is true of philosophy.

Philosophy is difficult. It encompasses the double demand of strenuous labour under a stern overseer. It requires us to overcome personal biases and pitfalls in reasoning. This necessitates tolerant dialogue, and imagining divergent views while weighing them up. [Philosophy](#) helps kids – and adults – to articulate questions and explore answers not easily drawn out by introspection or Twitter. At its best, philosophy puts ideas, not egos, front and centre. And it is the very fragility – the unnaturalness – of philosophy that requires it to be embedded, not just in schools, but in public spaces.

Philosophy won’t bring back the jobs. It isn’t a cure-all for the world’s current or future woes. But it can build immunity against careless judgments, and unentitled certitude. Philosophy in our classrooms would better equip us all to perceive and to challenge the conventional wisdoms of our age. Perhaps it is not surprising that the president of Ireland, a country that was once a sub-theocracy, understands this.