



Pause for thought: Big ideas for nursing education

In the first of this new occasional series Gary Rolfe, of Swansea University in the UK reminds us that all too frequently nurse educators and researchers get on with meeting their targets without really being aware of the intellectual antecedents of current policy and practice.

He argues that many great works are neglected and that many of these are mercifully short, certainly short enough to repay a couple of hours' acquaintance with the original. He seeks suggestions from readers of similar works, papers or short books which nurses, and their educators would be the better for having in their armoury. If you have an idea for a short paper of 'editorial' length (about 1500 words) in which you enthuse about, but also critically evaluate the contribution of a particular work or author please communicate with Gary (g.rolfe@swansea.ac.uk) copy to the editorial office (jtyldsley@jtyldsley.karoo.co.uk).

Martin Johnson
Editor

The Two Cultures C.P. Snow (1959)

Fifty years on, it is very difficult to imagine the furore caused by the Rede Lecture of 1959, later published by C.P. Snow as a short 50 page book entitled *The Two Cultures*. Snow, a Cambridge science don who also happened to write novels, pointed out that both in academic life and in wider society, there exist two groups of people, 'two cultures', who have very little idea of even the first principles of each other's body of knowledge and *modus operandi*. On the one hand are the scientists, who rarely read literary works and who typically regard Dickens as a 'difficult', even *avant garde*, author. On the other are what Snow calls the 'literary intellectuals' who do not consider the study of science as an intellectual activity or a cultural endeavour, and who generally have no idea of even the most simple and fundamental intellectual building-blocks of science. Snow suggested that even the leading literary intellectuals of the day 'who, by the standards of the traditional culture, are thought highly educated' would not be able to answer a simple question such as 'What do you mean by mass, or acceleration, which is the scientific equivalent of saying, *Can you read?*' Snow's argument, in a nutshell, is that a fairly good working knowledge of both science and literature is required of *all* academics: the discipline of science provides us with technological advances in order to make the world a better place, and the study of literature stimulates us to think in lateral and non-rational ways and equips us with the necessary sensibility and empathy with our fellow humans (and animals) in order to apply technology in a humanistic and humanitarian fashion. However, our educational system is designed to produce specialists rather than generalists, with some devastating consequences.

Despite a perceived undercurrent of resentment at the disdain which literary intellectuals appear to show scientists, Snow's account

of the ignorance and disinterest displayed by each camp to the other is fairly even-handed. However, the controversial nature of his position only becomes apparent as his lecture progresses and he begins to examine the effects of the schism. Here, the focus is almost entirely on the detrimental effects on the world in general of the widespread lack of understanding of science and its relegation by 'intellectuals' (that is, by the literary elite) as of little interest and relevance to the cultural life of the developed world. Snow's point is that although there are ostensibly *at least* two cultures, the literary is grossly over-valued and to some extent over-invested in, both financially and emotionally. The real controversy begins to surface when he puts forward the argument that it is not only academics and intellectuals in the developed western world who are missing out by this neglect and diminution of science; it is not simply that the beauty of scientific thought and concepts is lost to the vast majority of we 'intellectual luddites'; the emergence of the two cultures is not simply an epistemological issue, nor even an aesthetic one; it is fundamentally a *moral* issue. However much we in the affluent West raise culture and literature above science and technology as academic and intellectual pursuits, Snow insists that 'Industrialisation is the only hope of the poor'.

Snow spends the second half of the book working through the dire consequences for the world of the continued specialisation and elitism of our educational system, and makes an impassioned plea to bring together the 'two cultures' in both our secondary and tertiary education systems. He concludes:

Closing the gap between our cultures is a necessity in the most abstract intellectual sense, as well as in the most practical. When those two senses have grown apart, then no society is going to be able to think with wisdom. For the sake of the intellectual life ... for the sake of the western society living precariously rich among the poor, for the sake of the poor who needn't be poor if there is intelligence in the world, it is obligatory for us and the Americans and the whole West to look at our education with fresh eyes. (p.50)

Looking back over the past fifty years, it is clear that Snow got it partially right, although perhaps in ways that he did not and could not anticipate. He was right about the growing but potentially bridgeable gap between rich and poor being at the heart of the world's problems. As he ominously pointed out, 'the disparity between the rich and the poor has been noticed. It has been noticed, most acutely and not unnaturally, by the poor'. That the gap should be reconfigured in ways that led ultimately to the destruction of the World Trade Center and the subsequent 'war on terror' was probably not at all apparent at the time. What was perhaps also not so apparent in 1959 was the seemingly disastrous impact of industrialisation on the global climate; the black-and-white scenario of 'industrialise or perish' can now be seen in a more realistic light as a multitude of shades of grey.

In retrospect, we can also see some rather more subtle shifts. Many would argue that the 'two cultures' are still with us, but that the goalposts have moved and the teams have realigned. It is no longer physics versus literature; both have declined in influence and importance as academic disciplines in the ensuing fifty years. The 'pure' sciences have become far more applied, and literature has largely been replaced by 'literary studies' and (irony of ironies) 'cultural studies', the title of which is a clear indication that literature and the arts has tightened its grip on our ideas of what counts as culture. However, resistance to the application of science and technology to address the problem of world poverty remains. It is perhaps no coincidence that the real or imagined threat posed by genetically modified crops as a proposed scientific solution to world hunger has been widely summarised in the literary allusion to 'Frankenstein foods', or that the human genome project should be likened by its detractors to Orwell's 'Big Brother'. It appears that the antagonism between science and literature has continued into the twenty-first century.

The two cultures can be detected clearly in the academic discipline of nursing, if not quite so readily in nursing practice. Nurse academics have been known in the past to spend many fruitless hours locked in debate over whether nursing is a science or an art, usually arriving at the somewhat predictable conclusion that it is 'a bit of each' rather than the perhaps more pragmatic realisation that, to all intents and purposes, it doesn't really matter. The 'two nursing cultures' debate has more recently resurfaced in the 'evidence versus experience' argument, and amongst nurse researchers as the 'qualitative versus quantitative' dispute. However, these rather crude manifestations of a schism in nursing belie a more subtle and perhaps more damaging split which affects not only the academic discipline of nursing, but far more importantly, nursing practice. On the one hand, the advocates of a more scientific (or perhaps we should say empirical) approach to nursing practice claim that greater use should be made of the evidence from statistically generalisable research studies, whilst the (for want of a better word) humanist lobby argues that human judgement should prevail over statistics. This debate is sometimes characterised in terms of technical rationality versus human reason, where each

side argues for more of their preferred mode of clinical decision-making.

It is at this point worth repeating Snow's warning cited earlier in this essay: 'Closing the gap between our cultures is a necessity in the most abstract intellectual sense, as well as in the most practical. When those two senses have grown apart, *then no society is going to be able to think with wisdom*'. There are echoes here of T.S. Elliott: 'Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge? Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?' Without wishing to polarise the debate, I would suggest that rationality without reason is nothing more than the blind application of technology, and that reason without rationality is little more than blind intuition. Each is blind in a different way and neither deserves to be called 'nursing'. Information, and even knowledge, is not enough: nurses require *wisdom*, the wise judgement that arises from scientific rationality combined with humanistic reasoning.

If the 'two cultures' debate teaches us anything, it is, as Snow concluded, that a society split down the middle, with a small educated elite at either extreme and a mass of 'ordinary people' in the middle with no serious or significant immersion in either contemporary literature or in contemporary science, is a dangerous prospect. As citizens of the world, we are equipped neither with the empathy provided by reading pioneering and evocative literature to place ourselves in the place of those who are suffering, nor with the cutting-edge scientific understanding required to endorse or reject the proposed solutions to that suffering. Arguably, the same applies whether we are faced with social decisions such as whether to develop pest-resistant GM crops or nursing decisions about whether to employ medical and nursing technology to individual cases.

Snow, C.P. (1959) *The Two Cultures*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

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