

Rote learning not the right answer

During his recent visit to Australia, US commentator Thomas Friedman had an unwelcome message for cultural conservatives like John Howard and Kevin Rudd: don't confuse rote learning with education. Following the federal budget, both sides of politics are committed to giving a long-overdue boost to education. Unfortunately, they seem to have reached a bipartisan consensus that stale and mouldy is the way to go when it comes to stimulating young minds and helping build a vibrant future.

An acclaimed author best known for celebrating capitalism, Friedman wants education to foster imaginative thinking, not the ability to recite a dreary list of facts. He sees an education system that encourages creativity and innovation as the key to combining a strong response to global warming with continued prosperity.

In an address to the annual Sydney Institute dinner, Friedman said: "The single most important thing you can learn in school is how to learn." What you learn doesn't matter all that much, he says, as "you never know where the inspiration is going to come from". Friedman cites the example of Apple founder Steve Jobs, who says a course he took in calligraphy played an important part in the design of the Macintosh computer.

Friedman told an appreciative audience, many of whom normally applaud calls for "back to basics" education, that "imagination matters most of all. The country that's going to win is the country that empowers more of its people to imagine and act on [their] imagination".

It's not known if Friedman, who met the Prime Minister and the Opposition Leader, managed to stress the importance of fostering imagination and curiosity in schools. If so, it's not a message that's getting through as both



Lists of facts are not the way to stimulate young minds, but this is the slant in the major parties' education policies. Photo Bloomberg

Howard and Rudd vie with each other over who's keener on a return to an old-style curriculum in which every student is supposed to reel off an endless succession of historical dates, name almost every mountain and river around the globe and beat their South Korean counterparts in a tedious trigonometry test.

Great importance is attached to the traditional study of an inflexible "canon" of great English literature. Too bad if an enthusiastic young student would prefer to discuss an exciting new Indian novelist or Chinese filmmaker, rather than a twee early 19th century English poet.

History provides an irresistible battleground where politicians have their pet list of facts without which no student should be allowed to leave school. Education Minister Julie Bishop wants every student to know why Captain Cook sailed down the east coast of Australia.

For Bishop, the correct answer every child must give is, "He was on a scientific expedition", even though it can be argued that a "correct" answer would include his role in claiming possession of the east coast for the English Crown.

Bishop's predecessor, Brendan Nelson, wanted all children in Muslim schools to learn about the

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role of Simpson and his donkey in Australia's contribution to the 1915 invasion of Turkey. It quickly transpired Nelson was unaware that Simpson was the assumed name of an illegal immigrant who refused to fight and that the donkey was Turkish – and probably came from a good Muslim family.

In his passion for higher standards, Nelson came perilously close to suggesting the impossible – that every student can be lifted above the bottom quartile in tests.

The push for a return to a curriculum that stifles curiosity comes as some prominent Singaporeans, whose schools hammer a dull conformity into their hard-working students, ask why they haven't produced a single Nobel Prize winner when other countries of similar size have several. One plausible answer is that this failure stems from the rigidity of the school system and a lack of encouragement for fundamental research at the university level. Respected Singaporean medical specialist and educator Kenneth Lyen recently wrote: "We need to cultivate a mind with an almost obsessional degree of curiosity, a willingness to challenge authority, to think independently, to take risks".

It's easy to see a reluctance to challenge authority as a legacy of Lee Kuan Yew's authoritarian form of government. But Australian universities are hardly in a position to boast about their intellectual freedom as academic publishers and senior staff become increasingly timorous. Although Bishop is more circumspect, Nelson once phoned the vice-chancellor at Macquarie University to pursue a claim from an individual student that a particular course was biased.

The main problem, however, is not so much that the federal government imposes an overt form of censorship. It stems from the demands for universities to fit an administrative straightjacket designed in Canberra. The latest edict requires all universities to manufacture vast quantities of data to test whether they meet a new Research Quality Framework (RQF) before they can be deemed eligible for about \$500 million in funding.

The Howard government has allocated \$85 million to start putting the RQF in place. But \$45 million goes to the Education Department, \$24 million to data capture and \$16 million to the universities to prepare for the RQF. A deputy vice-chancellor at the University of NSW, Les Field, recently warned staff that the research groups pulled together for this purpose will have "little real meaning or identity outside the RQF [and] will not necessarily represent coherent or collaborator research teams".

Field said no other country tried to assess one of the key measures – the "impact" of research in terms of its "social, cultural, economic and environmental importance" – there are no well-defined metrics and little confidence that it can be assessed reliably.

Not an extra cent of funding for this project will be exercised will give Bishop claims a red tape at unive.