

Putting designers to work on the 12 Rs

Peter Fox

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Context

This article follows on from my "Twelve Rs". In that I explained what they were (Reading, Riting, Rithmetic, Relationships, Reviewing, Responsibility, Reflecting, Researching, Reporting, Reasoning, Remembering, Resolve) and concluded by pointing out that there was a lot of work to be done to turn these important themes into useful measures supported by appropriate teaching and assessment methods. It is that last part that I shall now discuss.

Taking a quick overview we can see that:

- Different teaching methods will be required
- Age and context variations can make for very different approaches
- These are life-skills not just employment skills
- Assessment is going to be a minefield; a lot will be subjective and based on looking for problem areas. Also some people will be tempted to give 'pass certificates' which are not really valid.

The effort in dealing with all these issues is well worth spending as the benefit for an individual in having a full complement of life skills is enormous and the benefits to society as a whole will overwhelm our ability to measure them. As of today, 2008, these fine concepts are only the first step on a long road to a practical system of basic education and evaluation.

As an overall objective I'd like to see everyone able to exercise the 12Rs

- with competence
- with confidence
- with care.

I'm hoping some readers will be interested enough in the challenge of converting concepts into practicalities to contribute skills, experience, research, conference facilities or money. The next section describes issues that will need lots of discussion, experiment and testing.

A note about myself: I'm a computer boffin, an architect of systems. Whilst I like to think I have a fairly good idea of how to make 12Rs accepted and functional that's only at the higher levels where details of implementation and exploitation are so fuzzy as to be pretty useless. My job is to discover knowledgeable enthusiasts in each field and give them an agenda.

Complicated details

The not complicated at all bits

- *Religion* isn't a basic life skill. There should be no scope whatsoever for hijacking by 'moralists' or other peddlers of ideology.

- *Respect* that is demanded is just fear and awe. True respect, which is earned, belongs as a sub-item of Relationships.
- Eleven of the 12Rs are cerebral skills and do not cover specific practical living skills such as driving, tying shoe laces, repairing a bicycle puncture, navigating to the shops and back, eating well, mowing the lawn or sewing on a button which we find extremely useful for everyday living. The exception is writing.
- The prime time for basic education starts well before elementary school age. Therefore this isn't just something for teachers. Having said that teachers are well placed to notice if somebody is falling short.

Age and maturity

We don't let eight year-olds drive cars. Why is that? Because we can't trust them and their spacial awareness isn't well developed. What then do we let them do and how do we decide in each case? How is an 18 year-old more mature, and suited to higher education, than a 17 year-old? Can you teach an 'old dog' of say 25 'new tricks'?

There are some developmental stages that are better suited for capturing certain skills and if they're missed cause a double lot of bother with catching up or simply leaving a lacuna. I don't know what they are, these opportunities are probably disputed and vary in detail from one area or social class to another. Importantly, spotting falling short for whatever reason is not just a matter for schools. Parents must have a role to play rectifying the situation. For this to happen schools must communicate with, and motivate, parents.

This leads to one important justification for assessment: For the detection of falling short in order that some remedial action may be taken.

Prerequisites and overlap

Some Rs are related to others. For example Reviewing, although not dependent on Reading, Remembering and Writing, can be explored further with those skills and can also be used to exercise those skills. We might ask somebody why they were so rubbish at running the 400m today without using reading or writing, or we might ask they go back over their training diary for the last few days and see if there are any clues in there which uses, and shows the value of, reading and writing.

My guess is that the best teachers will seamlessly integrate the 12Rs with each other and all the other activities they do. Not only that but exploring one R will exercise and reinforce others.

However we also need some stand-alone approaches to focus on single aspects without getting caught up with separate problems, and we need assessment methods that are specific.

There's a lot of teasing required to map the way Rs can enable (or lack of can restrict) each other.

Subject content

It is all very well talking about say 'Researching' in a general way, but we need to identify a lot more clearly exactly what we mean. What competencies and what should somebody be able to do with them and how do we expect them to be applied?

Researching could cover comparing the prices of groceries, using brochures to find a holiday, looking up a medical complaint or treatment. In fact of course it does cover these practical tasks and thousands of others. Our problem is that we have to teach the application of abstract skills using real examples. So we need to identify:

- a good description and details of the abstract skills
- the details of how and why somebody would apply them to a situation
- tutorial examples or how to convert any example into a learning exercise

As part of this we might also

- catalogue common failings
- clarify easy/early bits and more sophisticated and challenging aspects

In the first instance this seems to me like the sort of thing that three or so people with a bottle of wine would be able to tackle.

Accessing learning environments

We never stop learning. In theory the home should be a place for wholesome and uplifting educational opportunities. In theory school should be a thrilling set of challenges. In theory work colleagues and social mates are practically helpful and encouraging.

Umm.

My point is that in any environment we can only offer people opportunities to acquire basic life skills. Our job is to make it easy for them to reach out and take them. Possibly the most important thing is having a name for something *which we all think we know what it means*. "Reading" for example. When we look more closely we see this is a more nebulous concept than we might like, but authors can write books about reading, teachers can plan reading lessons and educational systems can 'measure' it. Also somebody can usually tell if they're not very good at it and, if they were so minded, work at improving it. One of the reasons for "the 12Rs" is to establish an everyday vocabulary for these basic skills: "Dear Mrs. Smith, your Tommy is doing really well at Reading but is too impulsive and needs to work on his Reviewing and Reflection. Otherwise he is Responsible and should really benefit from the school's expedition to Snowdonia at Easter where 'look before you leap' means just that!"

There are situations where people join an organisation or are in the care of an institution and we need to identify which of those people have a full complement of basic skills and which are going to need remedial work. For example it's an often heard complaint that university entrants are seriously lacking in many ways. One of those aspects is basic skills - in which case having a simple set of categories for assessment can help to deal with problems before they nullify the purpose of going to university. The same argument applies to prisons and any work or voluntary environment.

Achievement and under-achievement

I listed Care, Competence and Confidence above and these are difficult to measure directly.

A track record can tell us a lot if it is available. "I work on my dad's greengrocery stall where we work out all the prices and change in our heads" is a good indication that this person has got the three Cs when it comes to arithmetic. Of course this is why employers want to see background information and employment history of candidates so that they can enquire about how they coped or shone.

What can we do when there isn't a track record to investigate? We can give the candidate a task and see what happens. Although we might ideally hope to see the problem attacked with great confidence, accuracy and insight in practice we're looking for mistakes or bewilderment.

Unfortunately doing something well tends not to get noticed whereas making a cock-up or falling far behind gets our attention. It is a fact of life that we'll often need to be on the lookout for signs of failure - the soonest caught the soonest mended. There are plenty of people who suffer seriously as a result of lacking one or more of the Rs. For example they are easily taken advantage of or they cannot 'sort their lives out', not to mention limited employment or social prospects. An Rs assessment might be the first step to dealing with these issues.

Assessment in an academic environment

For the most part 'academic environment' means 'school', but remedial or later-life education *aimed at the 12Rs* should not be forgotten.

Firstly we need to know why we're making assessments and what we will do with the results. I suggest that we need gentle monitoring with occasional stop-and-check in order to:

- spot pupils falling behind
- identify their particular problems
- spot schools that have systematic problems
- with the overall aim of ensuring all pupils have all basic skills.

That's not revolutionary, but how on earth can already over-tested, over-curriculumed, and under-resourced schools hope to even make a start? In the UK we can't do the 3Rs very well so what hope do we have for 12! I don't know the full answer but we must be lean and purposeful.

Secondly we need to use the results or observations expressed in the convenient categorisation and vocabulary of Rs as described above to :

- inform and focus teachers
- focus and motivate pupils
- inform and encourage parents

Thirdly, particularly where we're dealing with remediation, assessment can be used to say "Well done you've reached 'the standard'..."

..."Standard" did I say that! Umm. That's a trap which will catch us out in many ways if

we're not careful. One of the important aspects of the 12Rs that needs clarifying is some sort of 'poor-acceptable-excellent' scale that can be used for all 12Rs and then what our level of expectation is.

Non-academic assessment

Who should I send on a management trainee course and when they get there what 12R checklist will the trainers use and why? What particular emphasis on Responsibility, from the point of view of safety and economical working practices, should the foreman have in his workshop?

These examples illustrate the pervasive nature of the 12Rs. In any situation some will be more important than others. It may be appropriate, for example for people being trained as carers or as team leaders to have specific and formal assessment concerning Responsibility. Team leaders might be informally assessed for their Resilience with many aspects of the course touching on it.

There is a lot of work to be done in this area to discover the 12R needs of trainers and organisations and give them convenient tools for assessment and reporting.

"Stop-go" assessment

There will be situations where there are specific requirements associated with a job, progress or promotion. For convenience it is handy to have a standard like "You must have a score of 7 or more for all of Reading, Writing and Arithmetic". Such tests already exist.

However I suggest that any situation where more than the 3Rs are critical will have developed specific assessment techniques. With any luck these existing methods can be reused as the basis for more general examples and teaching. This has a very important aspect which will make a big difference to the outcome of 12R training: It will be possible to point to real-life situations where a definite level of the 3Cs is required, which should be a good motivator.

Conclusion

Politics and 'the establishment'

To implement the 12Rs will require change which will disturb a lot of comfortable people and frighten others. The details of what we mean by any given R and how we might teach and assess it can be sorted out relatively easily by a few experienced educationalists - but then it gets difficult. Having a complete design laid out for inspection on the drawing board will be the start of persuading people to adopt it and invest the necessary time and money.

Why should they? We might say that if the way we handle relationships can be improved that will save huge costs associated with lonely people and broken marriages. If we can improve as well resilience we might expect less depression. If we improve research, review and reflection we might prevent people spending money they don't have to on 't have on things they don't need. If we can improve resolve then we might

expect the standard of entrepreneurship to increase. If we improve responsibility and relationships we might expect better trained employees staying with one employer for longer. The list of economic benefits goes on and on.

But of course these decisions depend on feel-goodness and fashion more than some vague economics. Whilst it shouldn't be too difficult to enthuse enough educationalists to form a 'reform group' more work needs to be done to persuade the politicians that they can't afford to carry on as they have been doing so far.

Get involved

I've listed lots of things that need doing. Who wants to have a go at some part?