

TNP3 CLOSING CONFERENCE IN RENNES, SEPTEMBER 22-23
THE NEED FOR DIALOGUE: A NEVER-ENDING STORY

Brian Fox
(SLIDE 1)

Ladies and gentlemen,
Fellow stakeholders,
Distinguished colleagues,

It gave me particular pleasure to be invited to speak to you here as a representative of the employers. I must however also confess to feeling a tinge of regret since this is the closing conference of the TNP3 project. Not only is the main aim is close to my own heart but, much more importantly, I believe it is of overarching strategic importance.

That is no exaggeration. Let us remember after all that the principal strategy for the European Union up to 2010 is "*to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world capable of sustainable growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion*"

This is far from mere flattery: **(SLIDE 2 "*The fall of Icarus*")**

- The real importance of events is not always readily apparent.
 - The most significant and profound developments do not generally occupy centre-stage.
- (A bit like the EU and 50 years of peace).

Nobody can ignore that Europe will face increasingly fierce competition to retain the place it has occupied hitherto. Acknowledging our unwillingness and inability to compete in terms of low-wages, we must concentrate on our strengths: education, innovation, creativity, skill etc.

We're already moving towards a knowledge-based economy: statistics show that $\frac{1}{3}$ of employees in Europe work in knowledge-intensive sectors and that these sectors create $\frac{1}{2}$ of all new jobs. This is our challenge.

To-day, the need identified by the TNP and the decision to take the initiative to work with all the other stakeholders in order to link up educational programmes with the wider needs of society both current and future could no doubt be described as being blindingly obvious. With hindsight, intelligent ideas very often are. Remember also the famous definition of genius as being 1% inspiration and 99% perspiration. The idea on its own is not enough. Our task is to turn it into reality; again a never - ending story.

As a manager of interpreters and also as the Chairman of the IAMLADP Working Group on training, I know that employers tend to grumble that new graduates skills don't sufficiently match organisational requirements, are not what is needed, that they aren't taught the right things etc.

In fact, employers employ graduates because they find them cost-effective. Otherwise, why recruit them when they cost an average of 50% more than secondary school-trained non-graduates? In reality, the fact is that not only do graduates earn more but they also face a lower risk of unemployment (50% lower) than their secondary schooled competitors. So you are certainly getting quite a lot right.

It is nonetheless true that there is always room for improvement. Over the last 15-20 years, the E.U. and national authorities have encouraged the integration of the concept of employability. For language programmes, - we could probably admit here in the family - declining interest has added to the incentives to adjust our sights.

The concept of constant change is hardly new, 2500 year ago Heraclites famously pronounced "Panta rei!" (everything flows). At a slightly less exalted level, we ourselves started off as tiny babies and have done nothing but change ever since.

In his play "Forty years On", Alan Bennett made the point more elegantly than I:

Franklin: Have you ever thought, Headmaster, that your standards might be a little out of date?

Headmaster: Of course they're out of date. Standards are always out of date. That is what makes them standards!"

Change is also in itself an inevitable result of learning – at least, so it is to be hoped.

Unfortunately, reacting to change is not the same as adapting to change.

"In the 1930s, the USSR was producing fewer films than one Hollywood studio. The Russian director, Boris Shumyatsky, was so alarmed that he planned to create a Hollywood in the Crimea. Stalin had him shot for suggesting there was anything that the USSR might learn from capitalist America." (FT, 9-10/09/2006)

It is perhaps rather clearer to us in these more enlightened times and climes that learning is essential for the effects, insights and results it produces. W. Edward Deming said "*Learning is not compulsory, neither is survival.*" (SLIDE 3)

The TNP has very constructively and very intelligently invited other relevant stakeholders – including the employers – to contribute to how language programmes can better reflect changing needs. Employability is easy to say, more difficult to define and very much more demanding to deliver. Innovation in education takes a great deal of effort, but also time. Trying to see what lies ahead is not always easy. Someone once said "*Never make predictions – especially about the future*".

Even the past isn't as clear as one might think. This year, Chinese students will get a surprise on their return to school. The prescribed history textbooks have been significantly revised. No longer are the dominant themes Mao, dynastic struggle, peasant change, ethnic rivalry and long wars. Instead the new texts emphasise China's role throughout centuries in innovation, technology and trade relationships with the outside world.

The Shanghai scholar who led the revision stressed that the changes did not come from political slogans but reflected a sea change in thinking about what students need to know to be prepared for a new era.

However, prepare we must! One thing we know with certainty is that the pace of change will not slow down. Darwin's theory of evolution is popularly summarised as "the survival of the fittest". In fact, this is semantically misleading. Darwin himself also used a different and more illuminating phrase.

"It is not the strongest of the species that survive, nor the most intelligent, but the one most responsive to change." (SLIDE 4)

As in evolution, change in an educational context will not be an event or even a series of events but a continuing and continuous process. A bit like riding a bicycle really. The bicycle, designated by Scientific American the most efficient machine ever invented. Maintains its equilibrium because of forward movement and imperceptible, continuous correction.

So flexibility is a universally sought attribute and will be the very first of the key deliverables. Learning how to learn will be part of this since education is less and less a one-off episode, and more of a lifelong process.

A second dimension is the so-called soft skills / generic skills / personal attributes: motivation, self-reliance, reliability, timeliness, ability to work in a team, written and oral communication, problem-solving skills.

Thirdly, it often surprises employers and fellow-workers to see how little previous insight students have into the world of work. More cooperation between employers and universities would be highly productive particularly in the form of placements, holiday, work, etc. Wider awareness on the part of students of "culture generale" (current affairs) would not come amiss either

Fourthly, languages are all too often misunderstood. Although the situation can vary widely between countries, the value of languages is largely underestimated. The unequalled transformative effect of language study in obliging students to consider alternative ways of viewing the world, enhancing critical thinking and open-mindedness, is overshadowed by what I term the Tower of Babel syndrome: (SLIDE 5 "*Tower of Babel*")

Languages can all too often be perceived as merely obstacles that get in the way of greater, more important things.

The power of the platitude is such that even normally lucid journalists cannot resist throwing in the Tower of Babel as a metaphor for Europe. In point of fact, a more cliché-free analysis would show Europe as **anti-Babel**.

In conclusion, while it may appear paradoxical to say this at a closing conference, we the various stakeholders all have a lot of work before

us. We may from time to time allow ourselves to utter a weary "plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose", but then I'm sure you will seek reassurance in "The Leopard" by Lampedusa who maintains that "Things must change so they can stay the same".

Finally, allow me to express my appreciation for all the dynamism, dedication and sheer hard work undertaken by the TNP participants and fellow stakeholders, my gratitude for this opportunity and my sincere thanks for your attention.