

Lessons in making things shouldn't be axed from schools

BYLINE: James Dyson

SECTION: NEWS; OPINION, COLUMNS; Pg. 18

LENGTH: 399 words

For Britain, being better than our global competitors in the long term demands a generation of problemsolving, academically minded young people who are ready to use their hands and brains. But depending on the forthcoming curriculum review, Britain risks being a less inventive place. To our economic detriment, design and technology is under threat.

D&T is the most popular optional subject. It mustn't be sidelined, but it does need a revamp. It's too broad (learning to cook is important but it won't grow the economy) and it has an image problem (currently viewed as "woodwork", a subject for, dare I say it, the less academically able). If the subject isn't made useful, neither headteachers nor children will opt for it, propelling it into extinction.

It should be called "design, technology and engineering". Modern D&T should sit alongside science and mathematics - merging the practical with the academic; grounding abstract theory. It has the rigour of engineering, so it should attract the brightest minds. Michael Gove, the Education Secretary, sees the English baccalaureate as the new measure of educational success. And already some schools have ditched D&T, discouraging pupils to study anything other than the "golden five" of maths, science, humanities, English and a foreign language. But when will they learn about engineering? We need to develop, rather than quash, the instinct that young people have to rip things apart to discover how they work. Inventors are not mad eccentrics in lab coats; anyone with creativity, application and persistence can invent. We try to encourage this through the James Dyson Foundation by going into schools and exposing young people to how things are made.

Today the 2011 James Dyson Award opens for entries, and inventions from 18 countries are expected. The winners in 2009 were Yusuf Muhammad and Paul Thomas, who invented a fire extinguisher that can be fitted on to a standard kitchen top to detect a fire. Automist is now on the market.

The Budget was one "for making things". An excellent start. But we need the "things for making". Which in turn, requires inventive ideas and inventive people. DT&E's importance must be upheld by everyone involved if we are to rebalance the economy through technology and exports.

Sir James Dyson is the founder of Dyson, the technology company

Design and technology needs a revamp. It's not just 'woodwork'

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Really simmering

Sir, James Dyson's plea not to remove "lessons in making things" from the curriculum is timely and apposite (Thunderer, April 5). But his assertion that learning to cook won't grow the economy misses the point. The UK eating-out market has grown by 55 per cent over the past decade and is one of the key drivers of jobs and economic growth. Licensed hospitality businesses created one in eight of all new jobs last year — jobs in all regions, at all skill levels and for all ages — and grew even when overall employment shrank during the recession.

These jobs are just as valuable as those in other sectors. We need policies which support growth in all areas of the economy, not an Orwellian world where some jobs are more equal than others.

KATE NICHOLLS

Association of Licensed Multiple Retailers, London W5

The Times, 2011