

DISCUSSION PIECE

Revisiting Postman and Weingartner's 'New Education' – is Teaching Citizenship a Subversive Activity?

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ABSTRACT This article revisits many of the characteristics of the 'New Education' as identified and discussed by Postman and Weingartner (1976), and considers them as central in the development of citizenship as a National Curriculum subject in England. The content of the original is briefly reframed to address this suggested centrality within a specific and specified meaning of 'subversive'. In being influenced by a number of contemporaneous contributions to the sociology of education such as those of Bernstein (1973), Illich (1973), Goodman (1975), Bowles and Gintis (1976), and Willis (1977), reference is made to the significance to current educational developments of what was described some thirty years ago as the New Education. The paper concludes that, if citizenship education in English schools is not being subversive, it is not achieving its objectives.

citizenship (education) . . . hammers one more nail into the concept of the teacher as an authority in a particular subject whose job it is to teach it.

Chris Woodhead, former Chief Inspector of Schools for England [1]

*Load up on guns and bring your friends, it's fun to lose and to pretend
She's over bored and self-assured: oh no, I know a dirty word.
With the lights out it's less dangerous. Here we are now, entertain us.*

Nirvana 'Smells Like Teen Spirit' [2]

Introduction

This article considers both the impact of Citizenship Education in the National Curriculum of England and the principles underlying the development of citizenship as a subject in England. It is not the product of structured and systematic long-term research, but based on data already in the public domain and upon experiences and observations gained by the author in training specialist teachers of citizenship. The title is both statement of intent and homage to Postman and Weingartner (1976) in order to demonstrate the importance of the stance – emphasising a need for belief,

commitment and passion in education – taken by them and many of their contemporary sociologists.

Even though Postman and Weingartner (1976) were writing at a different time and in a different place, and about the whole field of education rather than about one specific aspect of it, their work is relevant because so little of substance appears to have changed. While schools in twenty first century England are not the same as the schools of 1960s USA, and many changes to structure, content and delivery have taken place in both countries, it is the belief and experience of the author that, in England at least, pupils are still largely expected to be passive recipients of learning about their place in society – that Bowles and Gintis' (1976) Correspondence Theory remains an appropriate and accurate analysis of the application of education in this context.

Postman and Weingartner (1976) offer a quotation to the effect that learning causes nothing but trouble, juxtaposed with lyrics implying that schooling is designed to produce unquestioning loyalty and cannon fodder. The quotation and lyrics with which this article opens are intended to indicate that policy shapers still fear that education might lead to questioning, while the reality is that many young people have moved beyond questioning to rejection. American schools now see young people 'load up on guns' (the day before a version of this article was presented as a conference paper, a school student in the USA shot and killed nine people) and there are increasing media reports of classroom violence in English schools; young people are becoming 'over bored' and metaphorically 'lost overboard'; teachers and other adults might not always welcome the self-assurance of modern youth; fascination with guns, with libido, and with entertainment indicate not innocence and passivity but awareness, reaction and rejection. It is more helpful to examine why so many young people appear to have rejected the current state of affairs than it is to say that they should not have done so, and it is more sensible to develop strategies to encourage their involvement and contribution than to demand their acquiescence. Pandora's Box is open, there is no point trying to force the lid shut.

Evidence that there might be an intended subversive edge to the Citizenship Education National Curriculum can be found in the Final Report of the Advisory Group on Citizenship, now commonly referred to as "The Crick Report" after the chair of that group, Professor Sir Bernard Crick. The advisory group was established by the then Secretary of State for Education David Blunkett immediately after the Labour Party election victory of 1997, with terms of reference requiring advice 'on effective education for citizenship in schools' (Crick, 1998:4) and expecting 'a broad framework for what good citizenship in schools might look like, and how it can be successfully delivered . . . [including] the involvement of pupils in the development of school rules and policies' (Crick, 1998:4). In the introduction to their report, the Advisory Group stated that its aim was 'no less than a change in the political culture of this country both nationally and locally: for people to think of themselves as active citizens, willing, able and equipped to have an influence in the public life and with the critical capacities to weigh evidence before speaking and acting;' (Crick, 1998:7). There might be a rationale for concern that enabling people to perceive themselves as active members of their society, able to exert influence and to develop critical awareness could be viewed as a change in political culture in a modern democracy. There can be little doubt that expectations of increasing pupils' influence over their schools and encouraging them to question from their own experiences and perspectives was a radical departure from the National Curriculum

of the previous ten years. These priorities would indeed lead to the concerns raised by Woodhead at the beginning of this article.

'Subversive', as used here and by Postman and Weingartner (1976), does not mean to overthrow or undermine social values and institutions, but to face and attempt to resolve problems pervading society, to undermine the attitudes which result in suffering and the processes which result in feelings of hopelessness and social alienation. Postman and Weingartner (1976:12,13) pondered whether anything could be done to save a society characterised by:

mental illness . . . crime . . . [adolescent] suicide . . . the most common form of infant mortality in the United States is parental beating. . . misinformation [which] takes many forms, such as lies, clichés, rumour, and implicates almost everybody, including the President of the United States . . . [And] the air pollution problem, the water pollution problem, the garbage disposal problem, the radio-activity problem, the megalopolis problem, the supersonic-jet-noise problem, the traffic problem, the who-am-I problem and the what does it all mean problem.

The list could be extended to include religious fundamentalism, religious intolerance, and the decline of faith and values; impending environmental disaster, growing consumer debt, and internet pornography; problems of falling standards and of unrealistic expectations; political apathy, political intolerance, political inertia, political disempowerment, and politicians who neither deserve nor earn respect. Lists such as these, vividly described by Arthur (2003:3) as "litany of alarm", lie at the heart of citizenship education – but only if they inform strategies for action rather than become reasons to be disenchanting. If the current political establishment does not seek to address and resolve these problems but, through deliberate endeavour or casual oversight, allows them to continue and to multiply, then – according to Postman and Weingartner's *New Education* – that establishment must be scrutinised.

The teaching of citizenship education, at its best, equips young people with the tools, knowledge, skills and information through which such scrutiny can be conducted. The purpose and practice of citizenship education is not to produce mindless electoral fodder but to question a society which accommodates or even expects and accepts problems such as those listed. With such a questioning approach, young people are enabled to subvert values and structures shown to be bankrupt, while retaining those demonstrably effective and appropriate to their lives. It is from this position that it is argued that teaching citizenship is both a subversive and empowering activity.

Postman and Weingartner (1976) revisited

While theories of democracy tell us that everyone is equal in law, in access to power and in social engagement, we know this is not true. Weber explained the need for clear rules and structures to prevent bureaucrats from assuming the authority of their office and manipulating decision making to their own ends; Michels' (1949) 'Iron Law of Oligarchy' demonstrates the inevitability of people becoming more answerable to their hierarchical superiors than to the system they both serve. Such ideas are not simply sociological products; television programmes such as *Yes, Prime Minister* and *West Wing*; the populist and popular journalism, film-making

and books of Michael Moore; news coverage and popular street mythology; all reinforce the perception that the same could be said for capitalist democracy as was often said about state communism – that it is fine in theory but unworkable in practice – although capitalism is more colourful, generally more comfortable, and offers more television channels.

Political leaders retain their power irrespective of incoherent speech, internecine rivalry, mud-slinging, corruption, double-dealing, deception and dishonesty. People are told ‘there is no alternative’ when clearly there are alternatives, that weapons exist when there is no apparent evidence of their existence, that politicians have our interests at heart when they seem consistently to demonstrate the opposite. It may be that the perceptions of alternatives, of lack of clarity and of inconsistency are not true but, as Thomas (1923) demonstrated, if people believe something to be real, it is real in its social consequences; if people believe they are being fed crap, they may well bite the hand that tries to feed it to them.

Postman and Weingartner (1976:16) argued for “a new education that would set out to cultivate . . . experts in crap detecting”. The teaching of Citizenship in particular is concerned with the cultivation of skills of communication and informed participation, the development of both knowledge and understanding of structures and relationships in society, and how such skills and knowledge can be deployed. In order for young people to understand ‘what can be’ and possibly ‘what should be’, they need to look at and understand ‘what is’. Many bring a perception of how life and society operate, rejecting politics in its ‘party, economic strategy, acceptance and admiration of one’s betters’ sense while developing interests and opinions on a range of issues. Such young people comfortably fit Postman and Weingarten’s criteria for crap detectors.

Citizenship Education should be about being critical, learning that learning can be fun, that there are as many right answers as there are people searching for them. It is therefore the antithesis of what Postman and Weingartner (1976:32) disparage as ‘The Vaccination Theory of Education’ – the perception that the professional knows what is best, and that substance and dosage are both outside of the recipients’ control.

Several schools are meeting the requirements of the Citizenship National Curriculum to the letter rather than the spirit, with some failing to go even that far (Leighton, 2004a, 2004b; Bell, 2005b). The current shortage of specialist-trained teachers makes a strategy of subject avoidance or token provision inevitable in the short term, but is it a short-term strategy? By summer 2006 there will be approximately 800 specialist citizenship trained teachers qualified through the Post Graduate Certificate in Education route, enough for only 15% of schools to have one such teacher each. There should therefore be competition between schools to ensure they can recruit a specialist; as some schools have already recruited two and a few have three, such competition should be intense. Yet Bell (2005b) expresses both surprise and concern at the paucity of advertisements for specialist trained teachers in the educational press and the limited number of training places for teachers of citizenship in England. He poses the question “if these specialists have so much to offer to this emerging and exciting subject, why are there not more advertisements from schools wishing to recruit them?” and recounts much of the good practice seen by his inspectors, but does not offer an answer to his question. One possible answer could be that the very nature of the subject and the measures it uses for effectiveness contribute to many schools’ reluctance to recruit, particularly the expectation placed on, and supported by, the Advisory Group – that the involvement of pupils in the development of school rules and policies should be encouraged. Yet, as Goodman

(1975:15) wrote, “it is impossible to become engaged or usefully to identify when one cannot initiate or have a say in deciding”. Perhaps that ‘yet’ should be ‘because’.

The approach that it doesn’t matter who teaches Citizenship denigrates both the subject and the staff involved, and limits the opportunities for school students to understand and to make progress. It reflects the politicians’ lip-service to public accountability and is equally unsuccessful. It is tantamount to saying ‘it doesn’t matter, you don’t matter’, accepting the moderate and the mundane rather than seeking to excel – ‘it is okay to be medium’ seems to be the message. To say anything else while failing to implement legal and educational obligations is bound to be uncovered by the crap detectors, and that failure is symptomatic of the social reality citizenship seeks to subvert.

As Postman and Weingartner (1976) assert, much of pupils’ involvement in the processes of education has been based on guesswork – guess how apparently disparate strands are interconnected, guess what answer the teacher wants, guess what is RIGHT and TRUE – but with the valued questions, values behind the questions, and arbitration on validity of guesses, being in the sole remit of teachers.

Questioning a dependence on guesswork has been rejected as ‘trendy’, progressive or hammering one more nail into the coffin of teacher as unquestionable authority as “most educators . . . are largely interested to know whether it will accomplish the goals that older learning media have tried to achieve” (Postman & Weingartner 1976:37). Despite legislated and social changes, those goals are still largely led by outcomes perceived to be measurable. In the past this may have been evidence of accomplishment in ‘the three Rs’ or the proportion of pupils getting particular grades; grades still haunt many schools, along with Standard Attainment Test scores at the end of each key stage and league table positions. Their point was that new methods of learning and development are necessary for new skills and a change in the nature of society, and that new goals and ways of perceiving goals and their achievement need to be identified. It is through questioning not acceptance, working things out instead of learning by rote, cooperating rather than competing, that new attitudes will be forged and the needs of a more rewarding society will be met. It has been seen as perfectly acceptable for those with authority to throw questions at children but not for those children to ask questions of the authority figures. Should anyone really be surprised that consistent exposure to questioning has developed a desire to question?

Dedication to ‘older learning media’, Kuhn’s perception of dominant but unshifting paradigms, might here reflect a fear of inquiry or a fear of uncovering inadequacy amongst decision makers and commentators, a preference for their own feelings of security and superiority rather than looking to develop and enhance the prospects of future generations. Bowles and Gintis’ (1976) Correspondence Theory leads us to conclude that such decision makers and commentators are determined that young people are not encouraged to have questioning, enquiring and critical approaches but, instead, should be acquiescent and accommodating.

However, citizenship is about being questioning. It is about being informed enough to know which questions to ask and of whom they should be asked, and alert to the consequences as well as the content of any answers. Asking directed and informed questions has been derided by Woodhead as a “utilitarian skill”; he places an emphasis on knowledge which assumes either that teachers can give pupils all the answers or that teachers and the National Curriculum for England must have absolute control over what constitutes appropriate knowledge. He also seems to forget that young people are asking questions and probably always have done.

In England, Citizenship is about involvement – one of the three National Curriculum strands requires that students are enabled to develop skills of active involvement and participation. Where the teacher is considered “an authority in a particular subject whose job it is to teach it” [1], the words resonate with the description CW Mills (1980) offered of professionals as people of narrow interests and narrower specialisms. There is nothing new in the idea of involving pupils in the curriculum nor in developing independent learning skills, but there is some opposition to this approach.

When Crick (1998), Arthur and Wright (2001), Brett (2004) and others have contended that Citizenship is ‘more than just a subject’, they have argued that the development of social responsibility and moral character require schools and teachers to develop new methods, new content, new activities, and new approaches to learning. Citizenship education must be relevant to the lives of pupils and to the lives of those around them if it is to have any long-lasting effect. It is not a subject to be taught by avowed experts to a receptive and passive audience but one which requires pupils to question themselves and those around them, to learn as much about their own potential as about their rights and responsibilities, to understand and to participate and to contribute. Where the subject, its content and its presentation are not seen as relevant, the subject simply does not work.

From observation of the teaching of citizenship, and in discussion with practicing teachers of Citizenship – both subject trained and non-specialists – it is clear that non-specialists regularly adopt and adapt ideas from student teacher specialists in order to make their own delivery of citizenship more relevant to their pupils. These trainees and teachers have indicated some commitment to citizenship and to ensuring its relevance to pupils as well as adhering to the National Curriculum. However, other research (Leighton, 2004a, 2004c) indicates that not all teachers of citizenship see the subject requirements and their professional obligations in the same light. That school management teams consulted with staff in only 29% of the schools where the subject has been introduced (Cleaver et al, 2003) does not bode well for any inquiry into the extent and outcomes of pupil consultation. When established teachers expect specialist trainees to work with non-specialist materials or wholly in conventional ways, lessons are rarely as successful, nor placements as successful, as when there is collaboration and innovation. Nonetheless such expectations are commonplace. It is also becoming clear that some schools welcome and develop a critical and questioning approach, welcoming pupil contributions and striving to make sure that citizenship is not only taught in innovative ways but that its content remains relevant.

One concern of the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted, 2003, 2005; Bell, 2005a, 2005b) - the inspectorate for education in England, directly accountable to Parliament – is the way in which citizenship is delivered, often cross-curricular provision with only a cursory relationship with National Curriculum requirements. Structures of delivery have been addressed elsewhere (Leighton, 2002, 2004b), but a common approach is to see the subject combined with Personal Social and Health Education (PSHE), or with Careers education, perhaps once a fortnight. It therefore becomes a subject perceived as of little academic value and little valued by the school, taught largely by non-specialists, an irrelevance and often a distraction from the ‘proper’ business of schooling. At least one school has changed from ‘Citizenship’ to ‘Life Skills’ as the pupils changed the final letter to a ‘t’, others offer PACE (Personal and Citizenship Education) or some other locally created but not necessarily even locally understood name. Bell (2005b) expresses particular

concern over the misunderstandings which lead to and develop from such misplaced provision.

When this is done, it reflects an attitude in keeping with Woodhead's belief that citizenship education is both "absurdly grandiose and dangerously diminishing". The Crick Report (1998) and the National Curriculum (DfES 1999) both allow for schools to tailor the subject to meet and address local circumstances. For many schools this has been used as a loophole to avoid a considered approach to delivery, replacing it with an arbitrary combination of curriculum aspects which move away from traditional approaches to education. In such cases, schools are continuing along the path against which Illich (1973a) argued, that they are organised to meet the priorities and needs of teachers rather than those of pupils.

Many schools advocate school councils, community action projects, general studies and general lectures on aspects of current affairs. They provide careers guidance and information regarding substance abuse and legal responsibilities. These activities are controlled by teachers who either set their own restrictions or follow guidelines laid down by school managers or school governors. It is exceptional for a school to devolve any budget to a school council, although a few do; it is rare for schools to have pupil representation on governing bodies, although there is legislated provision for such representation. It is almost unheard of, in the state sector, for pupils to have any formal say in the structure of their day, their lessons, or their curriculum. What is worth knowing, therefore, in preparation for adulthood and participation in the rights and responsibilities which constitute being a citizen, is almost always dictated according to Bowles and Gintis' (1976) 'Jug and mug' principle – that those in authority know best. This hidden curricular message, self-evidently not a universal truth to anyone sharing the concerns identified thus far, produces a wide-spread attitude of opposition to citizenship education because of the inherent hypocrisy of an approach which says 'we will tell you what is important to you, how to form opinions and what opinions to form'.

Underpinning values of citizenship education include that it enables the development of skills of enquiry, the ability to form and articulate personal opinions, to understand the views of others, and to prepare young people to play an active and effective part in shaping the type of society in which they wish to live. Foisting a passive acceptance of the status quo is an improbable route to achieving these objectives. A more appropriate approach would be to enable young people to understand society and how to read society. In the words of Postman and Weingartner (1976:85) "in order to survive in a world of rapid change there is nothing more worth knowing . . . than the continual process of how to make viable meanings".

Whose meanings are considered 'viable' or worthwhile? Postman and Weingartner (1976) propose eight different teacher 'types', each of which we might recognise from our experiences as teacher trainer, as teacher, as teacher trainee and/or as a pupil. For many pupils, part of the reality of the process of schooling is to identify which 'type' best describes a particular teacher then to work out and apply whichever strategies will bring most success in appearing to meet that teacher's criteria; 'successful' pupils being those who can most effectively judge and meet the expectations of a teacher type. Those who are equally successful at judging but either do not have the strategies of apparent or real compliance, or prefer not to employ them, are unlikely to be successful. Those not equipped or unwilling to make effective judgements might find that they hit upon a coping strategy which sees them through the system, or they fail to do so and therefore struggle through the system. If this is what is happening in citizenship lessons, then those lessons become

simply another part of the process of negotiating survival rather than part of skills and knowledge development.

If this is the case, pupils have learned to make viable meanings and act according to them – a valuable citizenship skill, if unconsciously promoted by teachers and certainly not one which features in the National Curriculum statutory guidelines. A systematic and coherent approach to developing similar skill and discernment, but without creating a long-lasting antipathy to education and to authority, might be a more effective strategy in the long run.

Postman and Weingartner (1976:131-3) identify a newspaper article in which high school dropouts addressing a conference of teachers decried the way in which teachers refused to listen to or take account of the attitudes and experiences of the young, and to which teachers' responses mixed 'that doesn't happen' with 'too much paperwork' and "It's not my job to love my pupils – it's my job to teach them." The big question had become "Where do we get the new teachers necessary to translate the new education into action?"

The big question now is 'Where do we get enough established teachers to translate the new education into action?' Leighton (2004a) discusses some of the issues around redirecting established teachers towards citizenship education; one of the greatest barriers for established teachers is that they have often adopted a 'professional perspective' rather than a subversive one. In order for teachers to begin to function as subversives, Postman and Weingartner (1976) suggest sixteen principles of practice, some of which remain highly relevant to the present discussion as I attempt to demonstrate below:

1. A 5 year moratorium on the use of textbooks – the rapidly changing nature of citizenship 'knowledge' and the wealth of resources being produced means that, although there are many books available, these are often used sparingly to aid learning, rather than as a substitute for learning.

2. Teachers teaching outside their own specialisms – with most citizenship teachers trained in other subjects and specialist trainees being graduates in other disciplines, all teachers of citizenship teach outside their specialisms.

3. Teachers who claim to 'know' their subject well should have to write a book on it –the introduction of citizenship education has seen a plethora of books produced, not always by teachers who could justify a claim to know the subject well. This has made the observation of principle 1 above all the easier to achieve.

4. Prohibit teachers from asking questions they already know the answers to – if only.

5. Requirement of evidence that a teacher has had a loving relationship with at least one other human being – the word 'other' being crucial here.

6. All graffiti from school toilets be reproduced on large paper and hung in school halls – whereas the tendency is to use anti-graffiti paint. School desks remain a valuable source of information on student angst, and the growth in popularity of websites of pupils' views of schools is also instructive.

7. Citizenship pupils are expected to consider issues from a range of viewpoints other than their own, to have and respond to opportunities to communicate their own ideas, to recognise and celebrate diversity. This explicitly includes ethnic, local, regional national and international diversity; it also includes the expectation that 'diversity' is a theme, not a topic. Whatever topic or issue is being considered in class or in other environments, pupils should be enabled to understand that there is a range of perspectives, each based on particular experiences and values which may not be their own and, crucially for those who are or who feel marginalized (Labov,

1969; Torrey, 1970), which may indeed be their own but shared with others not in the immediate vicinity.

Bernstein asked how we could “talk about offering compensatory education to children who . . . have as yet not been offered an adequate education environment” (1973:215); a pertinent question today considering that independent schools remain, as do over 150 state-provided grammar school and a number of faith schools, when citizenship requires emphasis on integration, equality and mutual understanding. When David Bell, the Chief Inspector of Schools, said that “This growth in faith schools needs to be carefully but sensitively monitored by government to ensure that pupils at all schools, receive an understanding of not only their own faith but of other faiths and the wider tenets of British society” (Bell 2005a), he was widely criticised for an attack on Islam not evident in the text of his speech. While Bernstein was writing largely about the physical environment of school, about which no specific subject can do a great deal, the ethical and moral environment can and should be fundamentally influenced by citizenship education.

Another concern which Bernstein raised was that “we offer a large number of children . . . unstable teaching staff and . . . expect a small group of dedicated teachers to cope.” (1973:215). This can apply to the provision of citizenship teaching in ways illustrated in earlier sections of this paper. There are a few dedicated citizenship teachers working to deliver a subject whose provision has been materially inadequate over many years. Opposition to provision on any level in some schools led Bell (2005a) to say that “citizenship is the worst taught subject at Key Stages 3 and 4” (p1). Where it is taught well there tends to be a clear ethos throughout the school and explicit support from the school management team, but for those schools where this is not the case – the majority, according to Ofsted inspections – children are being deprived of their entitlement and, by default, so is the drive to moderate and integrate society.

Day (2004) writes of passion for one’s subject, for teaching, and for the future of young people as essential emotional characteristics for teachers. It may be that there are people who have drifted into teaching or while teaching who never had or no longer have such passions. People get jaded. Their attitudes, interests, talents, preferences, passions can change. If a person is no longer committed to upholding the law, one might expect them to cease to be a police officer. If a person no longer cares about the health of others, one might expect them to cease being a doctor. If a person is no longer committed to the principles of learning and personal development, goes this argument, one expects them to recognise their new or previously submerged commitments, and give up teaching. If a person no longer cares, or never did care, about Citizenship Education, it would follow that they should not be involved in it. Previous research discussed elsewhere (Leighton 2004c) suggests that there are at least six identifiable positions regarding teachers’ views on teaching citizenship: commitment; conversion; co-existence; colonisation; compliance; conflict. It was found that those teachers who fit the first two categories felt best equipped to deliver an active and critical Citizenship Education curriculum, and could demonstrate their effectiveness, but that many teachers were to be found in the other categories. Such teachers were not engaged with their subject, and neither, in the main, were their pupils.

Finally

What Postman and Weingartner (1976:204) wrote about ‘the new education’ over thirty years ago can be applied to citizenship education today. “It consists of

having students use the concepts most appropriate to the world in which we all must live. All of these concepts constitute the dynamics of the question-questioning, meaning-making process that can be called 'learning how to learn'. . . The purpose is to help all students develop built-in, shockproof crap detectors as basic equipment in their survival kits”.

It was with considerable prescience that Goodman observed, in 1964, that “the future . . . will certainly be more leisurely. If that leisure is not to be completely inane and piggishly affluent, there must be a community and civic culture” (1975:44). In this, he is clearly advocating some form of critical awareness and the development of commonly held and demonstrated values. It is in relation to that position that Goodman asks whether “since schooling undertakes to be compulsory, must it not continually review its claim to be useful?” (1975:19). If the approach to compulsory citizenship education in English schools is not subversive, if it does not both encourage and equip young people to ask questions and then to take action, if it isn't being useful and enabling young people to feel of use and value, it isn't working.

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NOTES

- [1] <http://www.danceage.com/media/338-Nirvana-Nirvana.php>
[2] <http://theinternetforum.co.uk/school/woodhead3.html>

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