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Using Google in exams will wipe pupils' memories

Tom Payne

Mark Dawe, an executive at the OCR exam board, has been thinking out loud about having students use Google in GCSE exams. The plan, he says, is to assess the way people access information and then draw on it. This is surprising in itself. Parents are already wearily familiar with homework briefs that say: "Go and research one of these things. Turn your findings into an exciting poster."

The result is that children these days are geniuses at googling things. The only thing that's stopping children from getting A*s in googling is their inability to spell whatever it is they want to research. Luckily Google will rapidly suggest many variants on that, too.

Once you've found the information, the one difficulty is to work out if the website is reliable. And how are you going to do that? Well, you could see how often the information on it has been cut and pasted from other

websites. Or you could do something even more radical: learn something for yourself in the first place.

The proposal goes to the heart of a debate that divides teachers sharply. Should we be imparting information to children, or preparing them for the real world by giving them valuable skills? On the face of it, this seems obvious. "Surely when they learn in the classroom, everyone uses Google if there is a question," muses Mr Dawe, as if preaching to the choir. "It is more about understanding what results you're seeing rather than keeping all of that knowledge in your

head because that's not how the modern world works."

But it's not at all obvious. Our reluctance to remember anything at all is threatening our memories in the long term — and in the short term you need information on the tip of your tongue to make rapid sense of it. Even the use of Google in an exam will test working memory. The knowledge has to be in your head for at least as long as it takes to process and manipulate it; and how are children going to do that if they need to remember ever less?

As for the modern world, do people sit in courtrooms, or in front of parliamentary committees, and say: "Hang on, let me google that"? Googling in exams is already happening in Denmark, but I'll believe it reflects the modern world when I see the prime minister in *Borgen* take a laptop into PMQs. Until then, forget about it.

Tom Payne (@tomwesleypayne) teaches at Sherborne School and is the author of *The Ancient Art of Growing Old*

Do people sit in a court saying 'Hang on, let me google that'?

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