

# Why are we doing this, Sir? What's the point?

Changing professional identities brings freedom and anxiety for young people

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I used to be a teacher, trying to get young people interested in literature while helping them write fluently, accurately and imaginatively. I often wonder what I would say now to those young people who ask (as they always did), “Why are we doing this, sir? What’s the point?” In the past, I might have fobbed them off with talk of passing exams and getting jobs; I might even have dared to say something about literature being ‘good for you’.

I wouldn’t say those things now.

Years ago, we were defined by our jobs more obviously than now. To some extent, we made sense of the world through our jobs. They represented the sort of people we saw ourselves as being, the things that mattered to us, our values.

Nowadays we’re obliged to shift professional identities in a much more fluid and short-term way because, in so many professions, funding can’t be guaranteed and technology has speeded up the pace of change. In many ways, this means that we’re no longer so trapped. The retirement clock thanking us for all those years of faithful service is unlikely to adorn our mantelpieces. But the price of freedom is that we have to live with much greater uncertainty and with a much less clear sense of our professional identities. “Why are we doing this, sir? What’s the point?” might now translate as “How is any of this going to help us, sir, when the future is so uncertain and when we can’t predict what knowledge and skills we’re going to need?”

Occasionally there are articles in the press, agonizing about the lack of rebellion in today’s youth. But to rebel, you have to have a sense of what you’re rebelling against. The identity of the oppressor has to be clear and you need to have an alternative to the oppressor. In other words, rebellion needs a focus and when things are changing, when our identities are dispersed across social media, it’s hard to find that focus. So, on the whole, young people put up with things. They conform for the time being but, locally, protest in droves that they’re suffering from ‘anxiety’.

I’m not surprised. How to make sense of the adult world without having the identity of a traditional profession? How to develop a sense of personal agency in a world where the rules keep changing? “Most of the ways we describe people, and all of the ways we judge and diagnose people, involve an account of the kind of relationship we have with the rules,” writes Phillips (2005, p146). When the rules are no longer clear, we no longer know who we are or who we’re supposed to be. We jump from one thing to the next, no longer tied down but no longer feeling safe.

“Why are we doing this, sir? What’s the point?”

Nowadays I’d be inclined to tell the truth. “Those are good questions! It’s hard to know the point of anything when everything keeps changing in the world. In some ways that’s exciting but in other ways it’s scary. So we’re doing this because it’s the most useful thing we know to do when there’s so much that we don’t know. And we’re all in it together. We’re all trying to work out the answers to your questions!”