

Systems of Knowledge: A Pedagogy of the Privileged or of the Oppressed?

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Abstract: Fuelled by the hegemonic neoliberal agenda, education policy in Malta is progressively becoming subservient to the needs of capital, leading to the further commodification of learning in an increasingly credential society. At the same time, the conventional pedagogical discourse of education policy is that learning should serve as an inclusive liberating force for creativity, innovation, critical thinking and problem solving. This dichotomy between theory and praxis in education policy is particularly evident in the pedagogy of Systems of Knowledge, as its revolutionary potential as a progressive force for social change is appropriated by the commodification of learning, accreditation and market forces.

The superficial and inapt application of critical praxis in terms of both pedagogical content and processes, infer the subordination of progressive and liberal ideals to neoliberal policies, demeaning Systems of Knowledge into another commodified tool of the privileged over an emancipatory vehicle for liberation and social justice. In this context, the paper questions; is Systems of Knowledge truly a pedagogy of the oppressed or another oppressive apparatus for the privileged?

Keywords: Systems of Knowledge, pedagogy, commodification, social justice, critical praxis

Pedagogy of the Privileged or of the Oppressed?

Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity or it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world.

(Freire, 1970, p.34)

Banking education vs Problem-posing education. Conservative vs Progressive. Right-wing vs Left-wing. Formal vs informal. Exam-oriented vs life-long learning. On which side lies Systems of Knowledge (SOK)? Is it an educational tool for the practice of domination, or a tool for the practice of freedom?

In its written overt aims and objectives, SOK is definitely a tool for the practice of freedom as it ambitiously aims to equip learners with “a body of knowledge;...an awareness and application of values;...insight into different systems of knowledge;...ability to view ideas, and situations from an interdisciplinary perspective...and react to them; develop...skills necessary to transform acquired knowledge into practice; acquire critical and creative thinking and communication skills; [and] inculcate sensitivity and sensibility towards diverse social and political contexts” (MATSEC, 2024, p.2).

Yet, how much are these objectives effectively being reached? Does SOK really empower learners to “participate in developing the pedagogy of their liberation” (Freire, 1970 p.48), or is there a gap between discourse and praxis; in theory acting as a tool for the practice of freedom, in reality, sustaining practices of domination? Guided by the following questions, the article aims to contribute to the existing theoretical and empirical work on SOK by examining its pedagogical potential for critical praxis.

Following a brief overview of SOK’s scope, origins and development, the subsequent sections will elucidate its radical pedagogical potential based on its interdisciplinarity, incitement of critical thinking and advancement of ethical praxis. Examined within the context of the commodification of learning within an increasingly credential society, the paper examines the lost potential of SOK as a force of liberation and proposes remedial action in the area through the reappropriation of its radical potential.

SOK: Its origins and development

As early as 1972, UNESCO decreed that education should promote world peace, international understanding and unity and instil values which promote such objectives. These principles, which have been reiterated through various legal instruments and frameworks for action saw the introduction of values and citizenship education in national education policies and curricula. Taking different forms in different countries, in Malta values and citizenship education also materialised through SOK.

SOK was introduced in 1989 in “an attempt to broaden the sixth-form curriculum” through a “cultural course” to “break down departmental separatism” in education (Heywood and Serracino Inglott, 1987, p.182). Forming an integral part of the entry requirements to the University of Malta,

it was originally devised to impart greater “depth and breadth” to Advanced-level subjects by helping learners to contextualise their knowledge within broader socio-political and cultural contexts and become “more adaptable, flexible and broadly educated” (Heywood and Serracino Inglott, 1987, p.182). It was also designed to “integrate thinking and doing”, “recreate the wholeness of the person” and “militate[s] against an unreflective and mechanistic approach to life” (Heywood and Serracino Inglott, 1987, p.182). SOK was also designed with the intent of bridging the divide between arts and sciences and facilitating “the transferability of intellectual skills” including analytical and argumentative skills (Heywood and Serracino Inglott, 1987, p.182). Indeed, it ambitiously endeavoured to teach young people “how to think, how to look for truth and information, how to seek who is right” (Giordmaina, 1999 citing Il-Mument, 18 October 1987, p. 24).

On the basis of these noble objectives, the SOK curriculum was designed to address a wide cross-section of knowledge, skills and values. Initially, the syllabus addressed six diverse topics, including ‘Man and Symbols’, ‘Man and Environment’, ‘Man and History’, ‘Scientific Methods’ and ‘History of Science’, ‘Sea Texts’, and ‘Artistic Aims and Achievement’. Despite recurrent revisions to the syllabus throughout the years, SOK has largely remained faithful to the main themes of politics, science, art, and the environment.

Introduced in the aftermath of the tense political climate of Malta in the 1980s, SOK was from the outset politically charged, with the party in government, then the Nationalist party, arguing in favour of its introduction, whilst the Labour Party in opposition retaliating against it. Indeed, the subject was introduced amid significant contention between these two parties, where apart from being criticised by the Labour Party as indirectly imposing a numerus clausus for entry to tertiary education, concern was raised about its potential “to promote the political ideology of the party in power” (Giordmaina, 1999, p.4). This led to the issue being placed high on the media agenda, with “questions...asked in Parliament, [and] student protests...held” (Giordmaina, 1999, p.3).

Indeed, “no other curricular innovation...has, arguably, stirred such controversy” within the local educational context (Giordmaina, 1999, p.3). Yet, despite that more than thirty-five years have passed since its introduction, the subject remains to the present day mired in controversy. Resistance towards the subject remains widespread. Most students declare to ‘hate it’, seeing it as an additional imposed burden - a mandatory adjunct and “inconvenience” rather than as “complementary” (Gatt, 2018, p.293) to their opted A level and Intermediate subjects, thus contributing to added work to their already hefty curriculum.

SOK: A revolutionary pedagogy?

Since its inception, SOK has been subject to various content, pedagogical and assessment reforms. These transformations reflect wider trends in education as well as innovative endeavours to enhance the subject's unity and coherence (Gravina, 2003). Yet, despite these various revamps, the subject's core objectives have essentially remained the same. Equally extant remain the challenges for the successful accomplishment of its pedagogical potential which, apart from its innovative curriculum content, results from its interdisciplinarity, promotion of critical thinking, inculcation of values, and applied knowledge and skills through the amalgamation of theory and practice.

Knowledge content

The curriculum content of SOK covers a wide range of topics across four different modules dealing with 'Democratic Values and Responsible and Active Citizenship', 'Culture, Art and Aesthetic Values', 'The Environment and Sustainable Development' and 'Scientific Values and Technology'. Whilst this breadth of content offers incentives for student engagement due to its wide spectrum of areas of interest, this presents challenges of memorising knowledge content (Gravina, 2003, p.31). This may result in a superficial examination of the topics apart from leaving little leeway for undertaking arduous initiatives (Gravina, 2003). This is exacerbated by the fact that unlike other Intermediate-level subjects, in most post-secondary institutions, SOK is allocated only two formal lessons per week (instead of three) in addition to tutorials which are generally assigned to the project component.

The breadth of the subject not only hinders an indepth examination of the issues concerned but also the possibility of adopting a more engaging pedagogy that encourages debate and discussion and enables more active participation and engagement. Indeed, these tangible limitations perpetrate the top-down 'banking concept of education', whereby information and knowledge is deposited (Freire, 1970) onto learners, primarily within the parameters of the syllabus.

Since SOK forms an integral aspect of the entry requirements for tertiary education at the University of Malta, it is often conceived as 'another' subject to be studied first and foremost 'for the exam', which factor hinders motivation to go beyond the expected syllabus and learning for its own sake. This undermines a core objective of SOK: to empower students to engage actively in socio-political life and to become central protagonists in their own learning journey.

Interdisciplinarity

SOK is distinguished by a broad spectrum of knowledge and concepts drawn from multiple fields of study. Whilst a chronological and historical analysis underlines these areas, SOK goes beyond the acquisition of historical, artistic, scientific or environmental literacy since its underlying scope is the inculcation of interdisciplinary knowledge (Gravina, 2003). Indeed, a main objective when first introduced was that of doing away “with years of compartmentalized learning” which shapes the local education system (Giordmagnia, 1999, p.7). This interdisciplinarity makes SOK ‘broader’ than other disciplines since it bridges the historical divide between the sciences and the arts (Gravina, 2003).

Interdisciplinarity purports to present comprehensive and integrated understandings of complex problems and situations through looking at issues from a multidimensional perspective. A key objective is that of “answering a question, solving a problem, or addressing a topic that is too broad or complex to be dealt with adequately by a single discipline” (Klein and Newell, 1997, p.3). While complexity “has traditionally been studied through an analysis of its parts” (Kapila and Moher, 1995, p.1), interdisciplinarity aims to integrate rather than amalgamate diverse strands of knowledge. Interdisciplinarity draws on ‘pre-established discipline’s (Misiewicz, 2016) by “comparing, contrasting, connecting, adding to and changing disciplinary concepts, theories and methodologies” (Institute for Interdisciplinary Studies, 2024, para.1) with the aim of generating new insights and mitigating against fragmentation of knowledge.

Integrative learning goes beyond the acquisition of content material but extends to overarching baseline skills such as communication, teamwork, critical thinking, ethics and applied knowledge. SOK seeks the integration of knowledge, skills, and values on both the theoretical and practical level and emphasises purposeful learning and individual and social responsibility.

Emerging as part of a wider liberal approach to education, interdisciplinarity offers various benefits to learners but also to educators and the wider educational community by encouraging collaboration and the sharing of expertise, whilst widening opportunities for personal and professional growth (Institute for Interdisciplinary studies, 2024). Interdisciplinarity develops critical thinking, creativity, communication, and problem-solving, helping learners to overcome biased perspectives and develop tolerance towards divergent ideas. Despite its substantiated benefits of transcending the restrictiveness of individual disciplines, particularly in the context where “crossing boundaries is a defining characteristic of our age” (Klein, 1996, p.1), the interdisciplinary approach in SOK remains characterised by various outstanding challenges. The establishment of a unifying framework based on the integration of different disciplines presents a cardinal problem (Gravina,

2003) and it remains debatable as to what levels of integration this interaction should take.

As currently taught, SOK may be considered more multi-disciplinary than interdisciplinary, since “the relationship between the disciplines is merely one of proximity” rather than integration (Moran, 2010, p.14). Thus, despite bringing insights from different disciplines, it does not fully integrate this information, and knowledge remains fragmented. This siloism is also embedded in the structure of the exam as students are expected to answer four different questions from each module rather than integrating knowledge from the different modules to particular issues.

Unlike most other academic subjects, there is no specific pedagogical course qualifying educators in SOK. The academic background of educators traverses across disciplines from the arts, humanities, natural sciences, law and medicine, and pedagogy. While in some post-secondary institutions educators teach across the whole curriculum, in other settings modules are taught according to the educators’ area of specialisation. While both methods have their respective advantages and disadvantages, they also pose challenges for interdisciplinarity, particularly in maintaining continuity and establishing meaningful connections across the various modules and the issues they explore.

Critical thinking

A main goal of education is that of promoting “the critical thinking capability of students and thus, to create good citizens for a just society” (Uddin, 2019, p.109). This underlines various Marxist and liberal educationalists’ pursuit to transform education from transference of knowledge to its creation, through learner-centered activities such as dialogue and problem-posing.

Arising from the Hellenistic period and emphasised through the Enlightenment to the Frankfurt School, critical thinking is interwoven within the Western tradition of education. The pioneers of the critical pedagogy movement, amongst others saw education as a way of emancipating the oppressed and transforming society. Criticality entails “epistemic adequacy” to contest flawed argumentation, unfounded generalisations and lack of evidence-based claims. Thus, critical thinking as “the art of explicating, analyzing, and assessing” the consumption of information (Paul, 1990, p.66) is essential for addressing “irrational, illogical, and unexamined living” (Burbules & Berk, 1999, p.46).

Critical reflection considers one’s views as open to challenge and whilst not necessarily leading to relativism, or equal validity of arguments, refutes “universality or finality” of ideas (Burbules and Berk, 1999, p.61). From this

perspective, criticality cannot be exercised solely on an individual level, as it results from dialogue and other forms of interaction (Burbules, 1993).

SOK aims to foster this criticality by engaging learners in questioning, examining, and exchanging ideas and values, thus becoming “more skeptical toward commonly accepted truisms” (Burbules and Berk, 1999, p.45). Its multi-perspective approach promotes increased acceptance of conflicting and ambiguous scenarios and advances reflexivity and positioning. Yet, given that “standards of critical thinking...are culturally biased in favour of a particular masculine and/or Western mode of thinking”, other ‘ways of knowing’ are devalued (Burbules and Berk, 1999, p.49). To be true to its pursuance of criticality, SOK needs to challenge dominant world views, including its restrictive Eurocentric vision by valuing that the history of the world extends beyond the European narrative (Gravina, 2003). Eurocentrism creates an ‘us and them’ mindset, emphasising exclusion and prejudice which easily gives rise to racism and xenophobia (Gravina, 2003).

The dialogical method, promoted as an educational tool since the times of Ancient Greece, not only facilitates interaction and exchange of ideas, but “is also capable of generating critical thinking” (Freire, 1970, p. 92). Based on a two-way communication where educators and learners adopt an active role as equal partners, dialogue offers a “technique to break the silent nature of the students and the monologue of the teacher” (Uddin, 2019, p.113). Dialogue is intrinsically linked to problem-solving as it proffers different perspectives and inculcates reflection on one’s positionality, encouraging learners “to see the world not as a static reality but as a reality in process” (Uddin, 2019, p.83). Indeed, Freire (1970) considered problem-posing education as a mechanism for transformation, as it also assists learners towards ‘learning to learn’.

‘Learning to learn’ entails the inculcation of skills which enable learners to differentiate between information, and discern factual knowledge from subjective opinion (Gravina, 2003). Such ‘learning to learn’ tools (Gravina, 2003, p.27) which “unfortunately... tend to succumb to the dominance of content knowledge” (Gatt, 2018, p.296) are pivotal for critical thinking. But, “what is the moral, ethical and political dimension of learning to think critically?” (Cowden and Singh, 2015, p.1). Acquiring factual knowledge alone is not sufficient to shift attitudes; rather, such change is more likely to occur through learning that engages empathy.

Values and Ethics

As principles and standards of behaviour, values offer guidance as to what is relevant and important to our lives, encouraging reflection on our “attitudes, choices, decisions, judgments, relationships, dreams and vision” (Lakshmi and Paul, 2018, p.29). Values materialise “through the priorities we choose,

and...act on" (Hall, 1994, p.39). Values education aims at enhancing engaging reflection of the relevance of and impact of certain values over others with the aim of promoting ethical living both within and outside the classroom and school environment (Lakshmi and Paul, 2018). Indeed, criticality entails contestation of not only "demonstrably false beliefs, but also those that are misleading, partisan, or implicated in the preservation of an unjust status quo" (Burbules and Berk, 1999, p.51). By questioning inequalities of power and how these are perpetrated and legitimatised by social structures and myths of meritocracy, critical pedagogy aims at promoting progressive social change.

Critical pedagogy does not take place in a vacuum. It offers a right way of thinking by acting as a form of problem-posing and putting knowledge to the wellbeing of society (Freire, 1970; Dewey, 1916). By empowering people to become "more critical in thought and action", critical pedagogy aims at transforming "inequitable, undemocratic, or oppressive institutions and social relations" (Burbules and Berk, 1999, p.46-47) in the pursuit of social justice. The critical learner is thus one who "is empowered to seek justice, to seek emancipation" (Burbules and Berk, 1999, p. 50). Despite this clear stance towards social justice, critical pedagogy is not "monolithic or homogeneous" (Burbules and Berk, 1999, p.48). Conversely, it helps us to overcome 'egocentric' and 'sociocentric' beliefs (Paul, 1990, p.7) by nurturing dialogue and assessment of truth claims from multiple perspectives. Critical pedagogy thus fosters a "humanizing effect" (Burbules and Berk, 1999, p.46).

But, as argued by Gravina (2003, p.23-25), is the aim of SOK to teach values or to "teach about valuing?" As it stands, SOK is focused entirely on the essence of values despite this not being "the best approach to learn values" (Gravina, 2003, p.23-25) since it offers little opportunity to inculcate the valuing of values. The reconciliation of values is largely dependent on learning "how to value". Such process entails reflecting and gaining insight on one's voluntariness, viable alternative options, and consideration of any arising repercussions (Gravina, 2003).

Values create controversy. It lies within the nature of SOK to address contentious issues on which people have divergent views and opinions (Gravina, 2003). Yet, in the examination of these controversial issues in class, debate and dispute are rarely allowed to surface let alone instigated. It is thus imperative that SOK does not shy away from examining and dissecting controversial issues but instead enables and instigates learners to discuss and position themselves on such matters.

Values are not emotionally neutral. Indeed, under the right pedagogical conditions, emotional feedback is to be expected (Gravina, 2003). This emotive response whether of joy, sadness or anger, could be channelled towards

supporting learners in their search for meaning and prompting proactive action towards this meaning.

Reflecting on values generates insight of one's influences and biases, but also recognition that values are dynamic. This reflection, which lies "at the heart of the Values Shift" empowers us to consciously pick our values, thereby enabling us to "choose a new set of futures" (Hall, 1994, p.14). As the search for meaning has become increasingly complicated in contemporary life, it becomes all the more imperative that SOK enables the uninhibited expression of ideas and supports learners in channelling their sentiments into meaningful experiences and transformative action.

Praxis: Theory and Practice

Knowledge content and the inculcation of values are of minor relevance in the absence of relevant skills, capacity and disposition to bring forth change through concrete action. Indeed, "'criticality' requires that one be moved to do something" (Burbules and Berk, 1999, p.46).

In banking education, curriculum content and learning is often 'deliberately' extracted from real-life leading to a "gap in kind...between...experience and...course of study" (Dewey, 1916, p. 11). A progressive pedagogical potential of SOK resides in its integration of "different elements of the learning experience" (Hughes, Munoz and Tanner, 2015) through the amalgamation of knowledge, skills and values. By connecting learning with real life situations, such as through the SOK project, experiential learning makes knowledge significant and relevant. The more that the gap between the classroom and the community is narrowed, the higher the relevance and contextualisation of the field of enquiry to real life. Apart from its civic action, the voluntary work experience of the SOK project helps to reconcile thought and action whereby links are established between academic and theoretical understanding and hands-on proactive action (Gravina, 2003).

Through the journal entries of the project, learners are expected to describe their experiences but also to reflect critically on what has been learnt and what could be done better. This reflective praxis "through the authentic union of action and reflection" (Freire 1970a, p.48) complements experiential knowledge, as learners become more actively engaged in the learning process and use their knowledge and skills to solve real-life problems. However, whilst most projects provide a good descriptive overview of the activities carried out, in general they tend to fare low in terms of reflective analysis and present a very superficial introspection of the learning experience. Moreover, this reflective analysis is rarely linked to the theoretical knowledge-base of the syllabus or examined in terms of ethical values and principles. It also tends to be limited in terms of presenting critique for progressive social change.

Despite the benefits accrued from the project experience, it remains the case that a significant proportion of initiatives are carried out within mainstream entities and organisations which learners would be already familiar with, thus limiting conversance with alternative viewpoints outside the mainstream and comfort zone. For example, the choice of project experience remains significantly gendered, with boys mainly taking on football coaching whilst girls engaging within the sphere of childcare services.

For reaping the full benefits of the project experience, it is thus pivotal that effort is made to encourage uptake of experiences outside mainstream organisations and the pursuance of novel enterprises. A good practice example in this regard was the Junior College's decision to proscribe 'voluntary' work with partisan student organisations as well as with private profit-based entities and to encourage uptake with organisations which the students are not already affiliate in.

SOK: A failed revolutionary pedagogy?

SOK thus upholds various attributes of progressive education - protractivism - by engaging interdisciplinarity, critical thinking and problem-solving, appreciation of values, and 'learning by doing' through praxis. It emphasises that:

An exemplary citizen is made, not born.... Just as we learn mathematics and languages, we should also become specialists in those lessons that are fundamental to living in harmony and social progress such as respect, empathy, equality, solidarity and critical thinking. Without these and other ethical principles that define us as human beings, it will be difficult for us to build a better world (UNDP, 2020, paras 14-15).

But is this revolutionary potential being reached? Is SOK education, the practice of freedom or the practice of domination? Does it contribute to people's subservience to repressive and oppressive structures or does it empower them to strive for humanization and social justice? Despite its restricted scope, an examination of the outcome of the subject's assessment should help to shed light on these questions.

The assessment of SOK comprises two main components; a written paper which carries 60% of the total mark with a remaining 40% of marks allocated to the project. The written examination is based on a three-hour paper assessing each of the four modules through essay type questions, whereby candidates need to respond to one question from each of the modules with each question carrying equal marks. For each module, students are granted a choice of 2 questions. Candidates are enabled to respond in either Maltese or English to facilitate language command and proficiency.

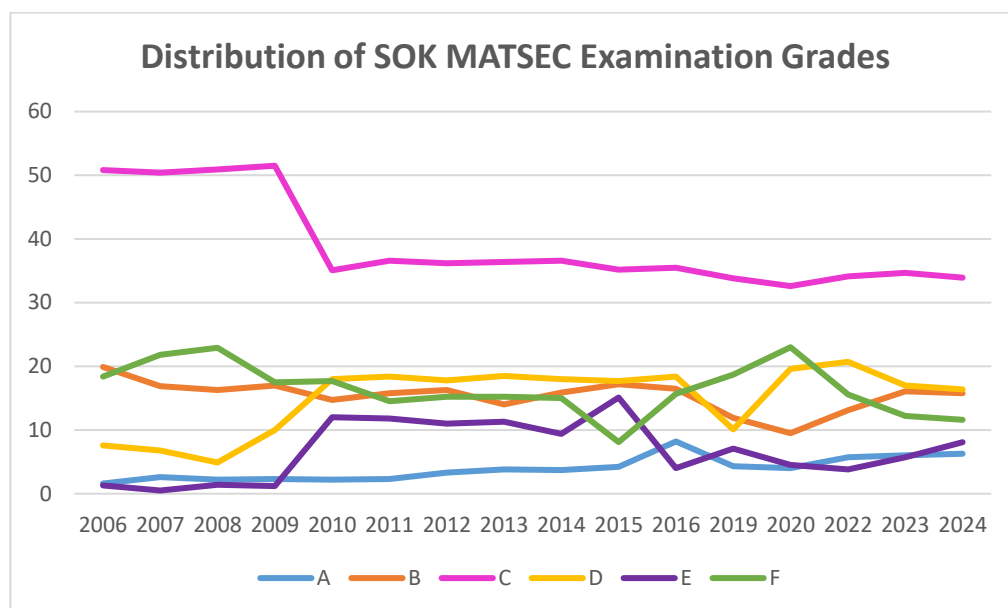
The questions focus on main areas addressed in the SOK syllabus and often relate to current issues of national or global concern. Thus, it is expected that candidates apply their theoretical knowledge to real life situations. Questions are very topical, demanding little in terms of learning knowledge by heart. Candidates are often asked to corroborate answers through relevant historical or current real-life examples to demonstrate applicability. Whilst examining both the advantages and disadvantages of a given issue, candidates are also encouraged not to shy away from their personal positioning and stance on the subject. Though expecting demonstration of tangible basal content knowledge, the marking scheme adopted generally enables wide interpretation of the topics concerned. Indeed, as originally set out, “guidelines are provided rather than exact prescriptions, since what is being examined is more the “candidates' ability to grasp, and experiment with, ideas and principles and not simply their capacity for memorizing facts” (Heywood and Serracino Ingott, 1987, p.181).

Table 1: Distribution of SOK MATSEC Examination Grades (2006-2023)

YEAR	A	B	C	D	E	F
2006	1.6	19.9	50.8	7.6	1.3	18.4
2007	2.6	16.9	50.4	6.8	0.5	21.8
2008	2.2	16.3	50.9	4.9	1.4	22.9
2009	2.3	17.0	51.5	10.0	1.2	17.5
2010	2.2	14.7	35.1	18.0	12.0	17.7
2011	2.3	15.8	36.6	18.4	11.8	14.5
2012	3.33	16.3	36.2	17.8	11.0	15.2
2013	3.8	14.0	36.4	18.5	11.3	15.2
2014	3.7	15.9	36.6	18.0	9.4	15.0
2015	4.2	17.2	35.2	17.7	15.1	8.1
2016	8.2	16.5	35.5	18.4	4.0	15.7
2017	No					
2018	No					
2019	4.3	11.9	33.8	10.1	7.1	18.7
2020	4.0	9.5	32.6	19.6	4.5	23.0
2021	No					
2022	5.7	13.1	34.1	20.7	3.8	15.6
2023	6.0	16.1	34.7	17.0	5.7	12.2
2024	6.3	15.8	33.9	16.4	8.1	11.6

Yet, a review of the Board of Examiners’ reports for SOK from 2006 to 2024 - excluding the years 2017, 2018, and 2021 due to the absence of publicly

available reports - shows that, in general, candidates are not faring exceptionally well in this realm. The very large percentage of examination marks fell in the C grade bracket, standing at an average of 39.0%. The average F rate is that of 16.4%, ranging from as low as 8.1% in 2015 to as high as 23.0% in 2020, significantly higher than the average A grades obtained, which stood at 3.9%, ranging from a low 1.6 in 2006 to a high 8.2% in 2016. Please refer to Table and Figure 1: Distribution of SOK MATSEC Examination Grades (2006-2024).



Apart from limited content knowledge, many of the responses lack a logical and structured approach, demonstrated insufficient use and understanding of relevant terminology and do not offer elaborate and detailed answers. Many essays demonstrated poor command of grammar and writing style and deficiencies in the effective expression and communication in both Maltese and English.

The SOK Board of Examiners' report for 1989 decreed that the examination results reflected fragmented and limited contextual application of knowledge, as "quite a few candidates gave completely irrelevant answers, compulsively regurgitating notes" (as cited in Giordmaina, 1999, p.10). Citing the 1992 examiners' report, it again transpires that candidates seem to "expect to pass this examination with the least effort, almost completely disregarding the set syllabus and simply answering questions from their often-limited background of general knowledge" (as cited in Giordmaina, 1999, p.13). This same trend is sustained across the years as ensuing reports call for "stronger argumentative, critical and analytical skills" (MATSEC, 2006, p.8) highlighting not only the superficial knowledge of course content and memorisation work but also "the

tendency to “play it safe” and stick to the set texts and lecture notes” (MATSEC, 2006, p.9), the “limited thinking outside the box” and avoidance of “controversial or less well publicly discussed issues” (MATSEC, 2013, p.6). Moreover, giving “more importance to the problem than to the solution,” responses often lack the relevant use of examples to substantiate their answers (MATSEC, 2013, p.5).

Recent reports (for 2022 and 2023) sustain this same critique, as in terms of content, most exam essays exhibited “lack of general knowledge” (MATSEC, 2022, p.2-3), were “short or inaccurate” (MATSEC, 2023, p.3) and based on “information presented directly in class and in textbooks” and “the memorisation of model answers”, with responses made to “fit at all costs” with these archetypes. (MATSEC, 2022, p.2-3). Indeed, many essays “did not relate to the specific demands” nor “meet the requirements of the question” ending up “out of point” (MATSEC, 2023, p.2-4).

Responses also demonstrate “compartmentalisation of knowledge” (MATSEC, 2022, p7-8), with limited “critical analysis and appraisal” and “application of...knowledge to real life situations” (MATSEC, 2022, p.2-3). This ineptness to relate to the factual is revealed in difficulties shown “when giving relevant examples” (MATSEC, 2023, p.2) since many made no mention or “gave irrelevant examples” (MATSEC, 2023, p.3). Moreover, most essays demonstrate “an inability to apply theoretical knowledge to current affairs,” (MATSEC, 2022, p7-8) offering “a weak and superficial discussion of possible measures that can be taken at national level” (MATSEC, 2023, p.3) to respond to contemporary challenges.

The project component was also subject to much the same critique, as in general submitted coursework “did not contain enough interdisciplinary understanding or evaluation” and demonstrated “lack of critical analysis and reflection”. Moreover, most coursework lacked “logical and thought-out claims” connecting theory and practice, presented limited attention to values, and demonstrated inadequate distinction between skills or attributes and values within the political, social, ethical or cultural realms. In addition, coursework was lacking in relevant citations and lack of discrimination in the validity of sources of information (MATSEC, 2022, p. 2).

Thus, it may be stated that despite its progressive pedagogical potential, the desired aims and objectives of SOK are not being fully reached, with learners demonstrating limited aptitude and competency in interdisciplinarity, critical thinking and the appreciation of values and praxis- essentially “the very nature and aims of the subject” (MATSEC, 2022, p.7-8).

SOK: To discard or reform?

Despite its various outstanding challenges, SOK offers a number of opportunities for radical praxis. Masked by intangible long-term ripple effects, such positive outputs are however difficult to qualify and quantify unlike the limited analysis of examination marks and other quantitative performance indicators.

A noble subject in terms of content but also pedagogy, SOK attempts to provide synergy between theory and praxis. Yet, its compulsorily tuition within the formal academic establishment compromises this potential as through indoctrination it is recast “not only into something dead but also unreal” (Gravina, 2003, p.26).

Various proposals and recommendations have been put forward to address these limitations and challenges; from leaving things as they are, disposing of SOK altogether, making it an optional instead of compulsory subject, offering elective units instead of preset modules, to various calls for the reform and revamp of its content, mode of delivery and assessment method.

Disposing of SOK as a compulsory integral requirement of the MATSEC certificate would defy its original purpose; that of ensuring that irrespective of their pursued area of studies, each learner at post-secondary level would have a basic understanding of different disciplines and appreciation of interdisciplinarity. Yet, reform of SOK is pivotal for accomplishing its aspired objectives.

It has been proposed that to truly reach its goals, SOK should be removed as an examination assessed subject. However, within a credential system, this may result in students allocating more time and resources to assessed subjects to the further detriment of SOK and what it stands for. While any ‘meaningful’ assessment proves challenging (Heywood and Serracino Inglott, 1987, p.181), the current examination practice of a written examination (apart from the project component) at the end of the course could be re-examined to enable continuous assessment on different components of the course; including the adoption of soft skills.

Due to its varied and wide remit of study, SOK tends to invariably be “on the verge of losing focus” (Gravina, 2003, p.17). While this focus is to some extent negotiated through an underlying historical analysis, this could be better achieved through a more profound analytical reflection which contributes towards the appreciation of commonalities. This endeavour constitutes an essential preliminary step towards the development of a unified interdisciplinary programme of studies (Gravina, 2003). As the challenges of

interdisciplinarity demand ‘ingenuity’ and ‘creativity’ (Broido 1979), it is worthwhile reviewing existing syllabi, teaching and examination methods which fully provoke this interdisciplinarity, including the feasibility of introducing specific programmes of study in interdisciplinarity for SOK educators.

Whilst addressing a wide range of topics, SOK also endorses varied issues which uphold overarching relevance across all areas of study. Better integration of the different modules through highlighting cross-cutting issues could help to further bridge between entrenched disciplinary silos. This could for example be addressed through the adoption of a wider and more in-depth historical or value-based approach or any other effectual method which addresses core notions of SOK (Gravina, 2003) in a complementary and cohesive manner. For example, through adopting a historical analysis as an underlying cross-cutting issue, one can come to better appreciation of how for example a particular historical epoch and philosophies of thought such as the Renaissance and Enlightenment led to huge parallel developments and innovations in governance mechanisms, artistic expression and scientific discoveries and innovations. By examining how different values intersect across different areas one could come to better understanding and appreciation of the transferability of values. Indeed, interdisciplinary approaches are the most effective approach for the tuition of values (Gravina, 2003). Similarly, by exploring research design and methodological philosophies, processes and frameworks and the relevance of ethical research, learners are enabled to transfer this knowledge to different research pursuits.

The symbolic importance of the subject needs to be pragmatically acknowledged through the allotment of additional time-slots per week, possibly in the form of seminar-based sessions, tutorials and activities which extend beyond the standard lecture schedule. Given that ‘time-spent’ does not necessarily correspond to ‘time-engaged’ (Renzulli, 2009, p.4), SOK pedagogy could be enhanced through complementing lecture-based lessons with more informal activities, and engaging and interactive sessions such as quizzes, role-plays, debates and discussions, visits and outings. Each module could have a practical component. The art module could be accompanied by the creation of artworks and/or visits to artistic exhibitions, and the environment module through visits to nature reserves, recycling plants and initiatives which embody action through praxis such as tree planting and beach cleaning activities, and why not, environmental protests and demonstrations. The scientific module could be brought to life through for example, the conduction of participatory action research, which encourages community engagement in the identification of problems and solutions.

Renzulli and Reis (2009) argue for an education which sustains the acquisition of high-end learning skills, such as the ability to amongst others, plan tasks,

consider alternatives, identify patterns and relations, ask relevant and meaningful questions, present explanations and arguments, identify discrepancies and biases, apply theoretical knowledge, draw conclusions and predict outcomes, and creatively resolve problems through innovative solutions. Relevant high-end learning skills also depend on mastering effective communication, collaborative teamwork, and active engagement in the act of learning. Such reforms demand acknowledgement that one should “cease conceiving of education as mere preparation for later life, and make it the full meaning of the present life” (Dewey 1916, 239).

Student diversity characterised by divergent experiences and backgrounds, impact levels of interest and motivation in the subject but also shape the learning experience (Gravina, 2003). Such personal experiences and circumstances make the learning process unique. Yet, the type of learning that often occurs in the classroom is a one-size fits all approach. The use of multiple pedagogies, self-led learning and design of classes “based on student capacity” (Uddin, 2019, p.115) combined with practical sessions should help to embrace student diversity and make SOK more inclusive, interesting and relevant to learners’ realities.

Many of the topics addressed in SOK are framed around local and global realities that young learners ‘are’, ‘should be’ or ‘are expected to be’ passionate about; climate change, equality, and technology to name a few. Yet, education is often designed and delivered in such a way that is cut off from the learners’ point of view and their construction of reality (Kincheloe, 1993). Education policy has tended to be developed and imposed through a top-down approach without adequate stakeholder involvement (Atkin, 1996). It is thus imperative that any reform in curriculum content and delivery should consider the views of young people themselves to make learning relevant since “more often than not, they know best” (Gatt, 2018, p.305).

If current approaches and practices have proved wanting, “perhaps it is time to examine a counter-intuitive approach based on a pedagogy that is the polar opposite of the pedagogy that Pavlov used to train his dogs!” (Renzulli, 2009, p.5). Yet, low achievement is often counteracted by a more didactic “‘drill and kill’ approach to learning; an approach that has turned many of our schools into joyless places that promote mind numbing boredom, lack of genuine...engagement, absenteeism, increased dropout rates, and the other byproducts of over dependence on mechanized learning” (Renzulli, 2009, p.3-4). Engagement as “the infectious enthusiasm that students display when working on something that is of personal interest” (Renzulli 2009, p.6) needs to underpin SOK reform. Empirical work on the impact of student engagement is unequivocal; high levels of engagement result in more favorable disposition toward learning and higher levels of achievement (Renzulli, 2009).

SOK needs to be transformed through motivational experiences that promote enjoyment, engagement, and enthusiasm for learning, as is generally experienced in informal and non-formal educational activities where learners have a choice in the type of engagement along other likeminded people. As argued Renzulli (2009, p.8):

How many unengaged students have you seen on the school newspaper staff, the basketball team, the chess club, the debate team, or the concert choir?...The engagement that results from these kinds of experiences exemplifies the best way to approach learning, one that differs completely from the behaviorist theory that guides so much of prescriptive and remedial education.

In this regard, reflecting on her practitioner's research in SOK, Gatt (2018) argues that that even simple little efforts can make significant differences in heightening learners' interest and engagement. Though it is difficult to change habits and patterns and "it will not be easy to turn around a school system" embedded "in one particular brand of learning,...the powerful influence of the textbook...a prescriptive curriculum and standardized test-driven approaches" (Renzulli, 2009, p.13), it is through engaging approaches that learners can be challenged "to 'stretch' above their current comfort level" (Renzulli, 2009, p.6) and seek new terrain.

SOK upholds a huge potential to liberate learners from the indoctrination of the classroom. This needs to take place within wider reforms of the education system. One cannot expect a life-time of banking education to be shed away on following SOK, as learners are often already too stuck in the normative experience of the classroom. Through its revolutionary pedagogy, SOK carries the potential to be a truly liberating experience acting as a good practice example for wider reforms in education. Yet, while "it takes courage to admit a need for change: it takes more to act upon it" (Gatt, 2018, p.302).

SOK: An overt anti-capitalist agenda?

As capitalism has taken over the values of democracy and active citizenship through individualism and competition, the natural environment ruthlessly destroyed through urbanisation and overdevelopment, art and culture commodified with aesthetics prized according to its popularity, and the ethics and neutrality of science and technology flexed according to its profitability, SOK cannot remain an 'apolitical' political subject.

As the nature of oppression has become one where we have become slaves to capital, learners have become:

commodities acquiring a marketable value on the one hand and consumers of services on the other. Likewise, academic staff become less valued for their qualities as educationalists vested with a responsibility to nurture inquisitive critical thinkers, but increasingly as 'service providers.

(Cowden and Singh, 2015, p.17-18)

In an increasingly credential society, education is being progressively downgraded into a private commodity and personal investment with educational institutions primarily targeted at promoting skills for employability rather than a tool for the public good. The progressive differentiation of the labour market also calls for greater specialization which in turn leads to a tapered curriculum, contrary to the embracement of a more expansive view of education which prepares learners for life through the transferability of skills and competences. Yet, as the labour market also becomes more fluid and more insecure and uncertain (Kalleberg, 2019), adaptability and lifelong learning become increasingly significant.

The appreciation of ethical, political, aesthetic and scientific values serves as an underlying integrative framework (Gravina, 2003), not only in terms of knowledge content but also for inculcating ideological and moral capital amongst learners from different area specialisations and diverse personal circumstances and backgrounds. Yet, this appreciation is embedded within an infrastructure which promotes a particular set of ethical, political, aesthetic and scientific values. This overarching value dominated by neoliberalism indeed shapes the value of studying SOK itself- its worth relegated to a pass mark in a MATSEC exam and a certificate for entry to tertiary education, reinforcing credentialism and corporatism.

As time becomes money and the value of education and knowledge becomes transmuted into profits and personal investment for employability, SOK attempts to present an alternative viewpoint. It continues to highlight the values of democracy and active citizenship, the value of the natural environment, and the value of unadulterated aesthetics and ethics in science. It also proffers a protest against pre-set banking education and commodified learning. Yet, by operating within the 'value-free' yet political context of formal education, it continues to perpetrate existing systems of oppression and domination. It is thus high time to acknowledge and appropriate the political nature and ideological ramifications of SOK.

This demands a cultural revolution, addressed at liberating people from the oppression and domination of the alienating forces of neoliberal postmodern society, the commodification of not only goods, services and knowledge, but also the commodification and neoliberalism of values themselves, often masked under the precept of relativism.

As critical thinking, values and skills have become subservient to capital, SOK needs to take a direct and overt ideological stance by positing itself as a counter challenge to the commodification of knowledge and values through a deconstruction of the capitalist agenda. Only can then SOK truly achieve its progressive revolutionary potential.

Through 'revolutionary pedagogy' (McLaren, 2000), SOK can empower learners "to govern rather than be governed" (Giroux, 1994, p.57). Radical pedagogy entails re-examination of the role of educators as "impartial facilitators" within a "value-free" setting (Giroux, 1981, p.80). Through 'eduvism' (education/activism) (Vella, 2023, p.35), educators need to overtly align with the counter-hegemonic struggles of civil society (Gramsci, 1971) with the aim of making the "pedagogical more political and the political more pedagogical" (Giroux, 2004, p.209).

Various educators such as Wain (1991) have argued that SOK needs to be initiated at an earlier age through the incorporation into the primary and secondary school curriculum. In 1999, Giordmaina argued that; "this idea, however, has not yet been translated into reality" (1999, p.12). We're now in 2025 and this inculcation of values and citizenship education has still not fully materialised. We're still one of the most partisan and politically charged people in Europe. Yet, we're still discussing whether politics should be introduced as a taught subject in our primary and secondary schools. In the meantime, the privileged have become more privileged and the oppressed more oppressed in the context of substantial economic growth, yet very little socio-political and environmental advancement (Borg, 2017). So, is it a question of too little too late? Or is it the case that in an increasingly commodified system, SOK has merely become another 'critical' 'alternative' pedagogy for the privileged? Another box to tick in terms of good governance and values education?

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