


**Teacher Network** Inspiring teaching

## Should we look to the German education system for inspiration?

After a recent trip to Leipzig, **Tricia Kelleher** reflects on what we could learn from German schooling and culture



 The BMW plant, built outside of Leipzig, is an education in future thinking, according to Tricia Kelleher. Photograph: Alamy

**Tricia Kelleher**

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I had the joy of listening to choral music by the great Tudor composers Thomas Tallis and William Byrd last weekend. What made this experience of the Elizabethan Renaissance so special was the location: the performance was in a church in [Leipzig](#), Germany.

The cultural vitality of Leipzig is a hallmark of its greatness. Even the post-war German Democratic Republic, toppled by popular revolution in 1989, couldn't muzzle the creative life of this historic city.

Yet, while revelling in the history of Leipzig, it is the future beckoning the inhabitants of the city and its environs which I found most compelling. A tour of the award winning 'state of the art' [BMW plant](#), built outside Leipzig, is an education in future thinking.

The principles underpinning the production line of [Henry Ford's Model T](#) are recalibrated to create a very modern working environment. The car remains the star - however, configuring each car for the individual is the guiding principle of the BMW approach. Form and function are harnessed in a very 21st century way. This holistic approach to manufacturing represents to me creative thinking of the highest order. The process I witnessed in this inspiring building - to call it a factory is too 20th century - demanded design which transcended convention.

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Why does this matter? It matters because the manufacturing plant outside Leipzig is arguably a beacon for future learning. BMW, like other global corporations, understands that to succeed tomorrow it must push the boundaries of invention today.

The reason I am so struck by this is because the education debate in this country is stuck in a past paradigm where discourse has become mired in arguably an old-fashioned factory model with emphasis on process. In my view this is a very limited vision of what the future may hold for young people. So how does this compare with Germany?

Given I was enjoying the hospitality of an old university friend and her family while in Leipzig, I took the opportunity to find out more about her personal experience of the German education system. First I learned that Germany, the great economic powerhouse of Europe, is also obsessed with its position in the [Programme for International Student Assessment](#) (PISA) table. Due to the decentralisation of education to the states, however, this particular hobby horse cannot be wielded by central government to effect change in schools (even if they wished it could).

Secondly, both academic and vocational education are genuinely valued within schools: university and apprenticeships are equally valid routes for young people. And thirdly, and apposite in the education of my friend's children, the importance of curriculum breadth until 18.

Inevitably the Saxon education system is not nirvana. For example, I also heard grumblings about limited digital resources in school. And I am aware that there is more general debate taking place about the German education system and whether it is fit for 21st-century purpose. The all too familiar discussions about the Asian education system and the much hyped success of Finland are part of the German discourse too.

My brief sojourn in Leipzig was interesting on many levels. On a personal note, I have returned home culturally invigorated. Professionally, I remain convinced we must continue our debate in this country on what matters in education. What is best for young people is too important to become a hostage to political posturing of any persuasion. In our globally connected world, what can matter more?

*Tricia Kelleher is principal of [The Stephen Perse Foundation](#). This blog was originally posted on the [Stephen Perse blog](#). Follow Tricia on Twitter: [@StephenPerse](#).*

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