

I WAS A TEACHER ONCE!

Hard to imagine, but I was a full time teacher once, god help the poor pupils who were entrusted to my charge! It was a long time ago. It was not in the UK, it was in South Africa, Cape Town. I had just left a boy's only public school in Kent, with a handful of A Levels of reasonable distinction - including Music - and was wanting, in that era of "gap" years (when there wasn't that relentless dash to complete a university course and join the scrum for the paltry number of job vacancies for young people), I was wanting to see the world a bit, and make up my own mind about South Africa. It was at the height of the whole apartheid controversy, with all the boycotts and protests. Coming from a liberal, but relatively sheltered background, I hadn't really grasped the full horror of the situation from leafy Maida Vale, and so set off first to stay with my cousins in Newlands, and then to see the country, warts and all.

After a few weeks of acclimatisation, I managed to get a job, believe it or not, as Assistant Director of Music at Bishop's, one of the poshest boys public schools - strictly whites only, of course. I was to be there for three terms, teaching 30 plus pupils a week the piano (having only weeks before been a pupil myself), playing the organ in chapel, training the choir and so on. It was bloody hard work, and you needed the patience of Job and tremendous concentration - all of which you all know only too well, and for which I admire you so much. Which is why I never stuck with it, probably to the betterment of thousands of subsequent music students.

During those months in South Africa I also played for dance classes in the townships, travelled through the (then) Zulu homelands subsidised by my school salary, and travelled to Rhodesia, then in revolt against the UK through PM Ian Smith.

What I learned, I guess, though it might not have been apparent to me at the time, was how important the personality of teachers is to a pupil (and I'm not just saying that to get a cheap round of applause) but also how the arts permeate and inspire societies even in conflict and disharmony, and also how important the arts and humanities are in addressing issues of social injustice. The last point was only a very gradual revelation to me, but it had its roots in that nine months I spent as a teacher and social observer in Apartheid South Africa.

I never went back, at least not until very recently: and now at the British Council we are doing one of the most innovative projects in our arts programme - building creative links between young people of the UK and ZA, a lot of it through interactive and digital engagement: between countries where the relationship over many decades had been one of mistrust, indifference and controversy.

Music has always been part of MY life, and forgive my if I approach this from a very personal perspective: answering Sarah's brief "the importance of creativity in all spheres of life, the importance of arts and humanities to society", answering that brief - enough for a day and a half - in 15 minutes! Sarah, as you might know, used to be my Assistant at the Barbican, where I was Artistic Director for 15 years - she stuck with me for a couple of years, but then went on to greater things in our Theatre and Education teams...a more interesting after dinner speech might have been from Sarah on "Working for Graham".

The turning point for me in Music was a pretty poor set of A Level results - ok they were in Classics which were hard, but they weren't good enough for Oxbridge, and I had to move quickly. Walking up the aisle for a face to face with my Headmaster (Michael McCrum MA - Cambridge - 6ft 6in with mortar board, about to become Headmaster of Eton) I told him I wanted to do Music instead to A level, which in those days was tantamount to an act of treason.

But my enthusiasm and passion for Music had been unlocked by a fantastic Scottish music teacher, who had an effervescent way about him and wrote very modest but catchy "happy clappy" music which he inflicted on all of us at every opportunity.

It was he who lit the arts light in me, told me to try to get into Edinburgh and set me on that road - forever in fact. His personality, the personalities too of my long suffering classics teachers who fostered in me a deep appreciation of classical civilisation - if not Greek grammar - an English lecturer at Edinburgh who didn't formally teach me, but got me going on Opera and also taught me how to appreciate Elgar - the influence of these and many more went far beyond the shackles and stricture of the blessed National Curriculum, which seems to change by the week, a plaything, a bauble for the most shallow of politicians.

So, reflecting on how to approach this evening, my memories tell me that the quality and inspiration of what you impart to your pupils **outside of the box (outside the formality of the classroom)** is just as important if not more than the syntax of the lessons themselves. At least that's what did it for me. **NO ONE REMEMBERS THE LESSONS THAT WERE IMPARTED, BUT RATHER THE QUALITIES OF THEIR FAVOURITE TEACHERS - MUCH LIKE THE ARTS AND ARTISTS.**

I have also been fortunate in that I have basically been able to go on learning - as if at school - in every job I've done. I continued my study of music in my career at the BBC, and got paid for it, I learned about world music, jazz, art and audiences during my years at the South Bank, and I learned about theatre, dance and film as well at the Barbican, since I had to run departments of specialists in those disciplines.

My knowledge of the history of the world really works in relation to an artistic and musical timeline - I'd be lost without it!

In my last three years as AD of the British Council I have also been able to repair my modest knowledge of Geography through visiting over 30 of our offices in far flung corners of UK influence overseas. On Thursday I travel to Istanbul, Sarajevo and Tbilisi.

Notwithstanding my career in the arts, these recent years have been by far the most fascinating, because they have taught me just how important the arts and humanities are for societies of all races, creed and stages of development: in an increasingly unstable and volatile world, the arts are one of the few ways we can continue to talk to one another, understand one another, challenge dogma, address difficult issues, bridge divides. This is the era of soft power, not to dismiss the ongoing turmoil in Syria, Ukraine, Iraq and parts of Southern Africa. But most nations can't afford any more to fight major wars, most seek other ways to resolve differences and build bridges - through the arts, through critical debate, through "offensives" of other kinds - in education, skills, learning, work in creative economy and trade. We need to teach students how to interact with each other and understand and live with their differences. Enlightened teachers and enlightened articulation of the arts and humanities by them, by you are critical.

These are the currencies of foreign policy that are increasing in value, whilst those of expensive military hardware decline in effectiveness. Nations such as China, Brazil, India demand creative education on THEIR curricula, they SEE the power of the creative economy in the future, the need for young people to have creative skills for employability (for goodness sake how many more bankers, lawyers and accountants do we need?)

This is why the areas the British Council works in - English, Exams, Education, Society and the Arts - that's why they are so important, and why demand for our skills are so high. The House of Lords recently issued a report on Soft Power (it's actually quite a good read for a HoL report) and it states just how important these areas are for the UK - and that implies a much higher rate of return on a proper investment in the arts and humanities as part of our Education system. They are not peripheral: they are central to this nation's continuing prosperity and influence - I wish someone would tell Mr Gove that.

Other areas such as mental health and wellbeing are also increasingly seen by the professionals as benefitting from a serious arts input and dimension: all this implies a continuation and growth of

this sector, not a retreat from it. Other countries get it...why can't we? Why for example do universities (like UEA, from where my son has just graduated in Music) close down a Music Faculty that has given distinguished teaching for many decades? Too expensive, not enough foreign high fee paying students. I think it's a scandal. We need together to reverse the trend and, however old we are, recapture some of that militant revolutionary energy of our mis-spent youth. Soft power militancy - I know I am using the vocabulary of old hard power, but I think you get the drift!

I wonder if tomorrow evening's speaker Jeremy Irons will echo these thoughts - I wish I could hear him. Will he come in his Borgia Papal robes, will he bless you all, I wonder? Just be careful that he is eating the same food as you and that he tastes each dish before you do!