

Winston Churchill Memorial Trust Report – Erica Sosna, WCMT Fellow 2012

“Life Skills Development in Transformational learning environments –US and Norway 2012”

Background

Ever since I was little, I have been fascinated with people, their behaviour and their life choices. How do you decide what to do with your life? How do you find out who you are? How do you make a difference? In my twenties, I started up a social enterprise called The Life Project, to help me explore what the answers might be to these questions, for myself and others.

As I got further into my explorations, I discovered that there was very little in the way of this kind of personal development education for young people. Somehow, they were just expected to know who they are and what they needed to do next, without anyone having had the conversation with them. And when they found themselves off course, there were limited opportunities to find environments that would help them to turn their lives around.

I began using my coaching background, the books I had read and my creative theatre training to develop short courses that would help address some of these questions for teens. Over the course of three years, I designed and delivered programmes on finding your purpose, careers coaching, employability, project planning and emotional intelligence for young people and delivered these in both the UK and abroad in Kosovo, New Zealand and the US. In 2011 I also began writing a book called “How to Be A Hero”, a leadership guide for teenagers.

The aim of my Winston Churchill Fellowship was to find out more about ‘what works’ in delivering transformative educational experiences with a view to seeing what could be transferred to the UK education system.

I had a few ideas that:

- The more interactive and creative the learning is, the more effective it is
- The more participants ‘self-manage’ i.e.: decide what they learn, the more motivated they are to learn it and
- That it’s not just what you learn but how you learn it – how it feels to be in the learning environment that makes a crucial difference.

So I headed off to find out what I could learn from others.

This talk for TED and other interested parties highlights what I discovered and incorporates my findings from other learning visits.

TED TALK ON FUTURE OF UK EDUCATION

Colleagues, friends, ladies, gentlemen and students it is a huge privilege to be with you today and to be invited to share with you my thoughts and feelings about the future of education in the UK.

I have been tremendously fortunate to have spent the last six years exploring 'what works' in delivering a whole-person education that prepares our future leaders and citizens for a successful life. As a learning designer and education researcher, I have had the opportunity to spend time in some of the most exciting learning environments in the world, studying and learning from inspired educators who believe passionately in developing relevant and exciting models for learning. I have had the opportunity to design curricula for government departments, Universities, secondary and primary schools as well as training teachers, youth workers and adult education professionals in interactive styles of learning.

In this talk I will be sharing with you some of the current challenges within the existing education system, starting with its origins, purpose and intentions. I will then take you on an exploration of what a future life skills based curriculum could contain and finally provide some thoughts on the idea that 'how' you learn is as important as 'what' you are learning and will end with some ideas on how we might adopt some new approaches within our mainstream education environments. Throughout the talk, I will be illustrating these concepts with stories from the learning environments I have visited and asking at the end for your feedback and ideas about what the UK's next steps might be

Let's start with the origins of mainstream education. If we trace back the social history of the school system, we find it to be more recent an idea than you might expect. Until the industrial revolution, a classical education was considered the preserve of the elite classes and was as likely to be administered by a private tutor in the home as in the hallowed halls of an elite secondary school – the likes of Eton and Marlborough. Definitions of what constituted an appropriate curriculum varied for each gender too, with young ladies studying ways to make them more alluring and young men utilising school to advance their power and position in society. Further down the social classes, education often took the form of the apprenticeship, wherein a young person would be partnered with a skilled craftsman, to learn their trade. The children of the poor would work alongside their parents at whatever their toil – manual labour, agriculture or at market – anywhere they could make themselves useful.

Mainstream education was introduced after the industrial revolution, when the mechanisation of production meant that there were fewer jobs. This reduction in opportunities meant that the Government was forced to initiate a job creation strategy and, as with every Government decided it would be a good idea to fiddle with the stats! The answer then, was to find a way to delay the entry of children into the workplace, so that more adults could fill the smaller pool of work roles. School was introduced both to give children something to do when their parents were at work, but also to create the kind of person you want in a factory – someone good at following orders, respecting authority and being self-disciplined.

This purpose actually worked rather well whilst we remained an industrialised nation, but in the 70's and 80's this began to fall apart. With Thatcher's dismantling of the docks, the mines and heavy industry in the UK, we were left with a group of young people without the get up and go confidence or wherewithal to navigate life on their own terms. Bred to have the creativity shaken out of them, to follow orders and memorise instructions – in the absence of a place for this skill set, disengagement, unhappiness and worklessness spread amongst many young people.

There are three principal organisational constraints that currently prevent young people from experiencing a fulfilling educational experience in the UK. These principally originate in an inability to see beyond the structure and format the industrial revolution gave us for learning. They are:

1. The National Curriculum that is, the idea that everyone ought to learn the same things and be assessed in these subjects in the same way – which completely neglects that people have different interests and learning styles from an early age and a one-size form of assessment - for students in the form of grades and schools in the form of OFSTED and league tables. This monoculture approach makes it very unlikely that the system will suit every student, increasing the likelihood of disaffection for those whom this system does not suit;
2. The size of classes, which limits the ability of even the most industrious teachers' ability to personalise learning and
3. The fear of change – every year, 16-18 year olds will be transitioning from school to either higher education or vocational opportunities – both parents and schools regard this as a critical time, which makes them nervous about any changes in the assessment or teaching style in the classroom, for fear that 'another trial run using our students as guinea pigs' may damage their opportunities for progression.

These constraints prevent us from really actively exploring what can be done to provide a more engaging education, that focuses on the wellbeing and essential skills of a person, not just their ability to memorise standardised data.

We are in the information age, not the industrial one and the skills we need to thrive in this age are different. We need more entrepreneurial skills and innovative ways of thinking and applying technology. To be adaptable in an environment where more and more work will be done in short term contracts and multiple careers will be the norm, we need an education that develops transferable skills, project management and relationship building. We need an education that helps us develop a niche through opportunities to uncover and nurture our individual talents. To recover fully, as a nation and as individuals, we need to rediscover the joy of creating, initiating and exploration. These skills create enterprise, initiative and resurgence in production within our economy. Arguably, the purpose of a 21st century curriculum ought to be the development of capability, confidence and the life skills to create a constructive future for oneself and others. An education that includes creativity, care and collaboration.

And what would that curriculum look like?

Ken Robinson's breakthrough talk on RSA Animate was concerned with how schools 'kill creativity' and looked at how ability to think 'divergently' - that is, to come up with alternatives and options - is radically reduced over the time we spend in school. Though very creative at four years old, our sixteen and eighteen year olds leave with a reduced ability to know their own mind and show initiative. In a recent visit to Norway, on travel bursary very kindly given by the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust, I had the opportunity to spend some time at Ronningen Folk High School. Folk Schools are residential schools which give young people on what we might know as a 'gap year' the opportunity to explore who they are, what they love and what their next choices steps be, whether academic or vocational.

If mainstream school kills creativity, the curriculum at Folk Schools prioritises it with—arts, music, performance and media providing a strong creative backbone. The aim of the environment is to give young people the opportunity to explore a wide range of aptitudes that may not have been available them in their mainstream education and to grow their ability to function as a member of a community. The Folk High Schools are committed to offering very varied and broad curriculum to ensure the young students get access to as wide a range of possible interests and skills as possible. Research has shown that this

exposure to the world and different skills and roles in it is still a huge differentiator in individual success in the UK. The extra-curricular exposure we receive from our parents, our hobbies and our schooling, to exciting environments, museums, travel, the theatre – without these our latent talents and direction in life may take some time to be discovered and evolve. Ronningen and the other Folk Schools, aim is to lower the risk that young people remain unsure of who they are and where their talents lie. Hence the curriculum counters this by introducing students to everything from sculpture to astronomy.

The young adults, ranging in age from 17 to 24 come from around the world to spend time at the schools, where they get to manage their own time, choose their subjects for study and produce end of term projects. There are no end of term assessments or exams, beyond your personal reflection with your tutor, on your achievements. A wonderful example of this independent learning in action would be the annual musical. The whole school, all 200 pupils are involved in the writing, design and production of an original musical, based on a biblical theme. They are then responsible for putting together a national tour for this production, including booking, marketing, and ticket sales and liaising with the venues. To quote Sven, the inspiring and high energy head at Ronningen: “This is a project that enables everyone to find a role that suits their skill sets, finds their opportunity to make a unique contribution and create something together, so our students learn how to be a successful, productive and collaborative community members – that is the main purpose of their time here”

The value of learning through doing is also in evidence at the Esalen Institute, in Big Sur, California. Esalen was another location on my Winston Churchill research trip. The institute is one of the oldest personal development environments in the world and sits on a cliff face in very beautiful natural surroundings. Like Ronningen, people of all ages flock from around the world to take a course at Esalen, whose curricula ranges from mindfulness to mind-altering substances and from dance and intimacy training to shamanism.. The curriculum at Esalen has emerged over years of trial and error and continues to evolve. The content is dynamic, what is on offer one year may not be available the next. The Institute also offers a number of year long residential programmes for young adults, where they take a part in maintaining the community, working the gardens, serving food and providing customer service. In talking to the young people in the programme, it became clear what an enormous difference this residential community environment was making to their thinking. The speed of activity, the purpose of their activity, their relationships with group members and visiting course participants, gave them exposure to both the experience of work and a safe introduction to the adult world of responsibility. By providing this unique opportunity to live in a community and be accountable for your activity, young people learn how to manage their time, manage finances and accounts, relate to others, initiate their own projects and see them through to completion.

Another interesting aspect of a wellness education, that seems to be much in evidence in alternative learning environments, is disciplined, challenging but fun, physical exercise. At the Acorn school, in Gloucestershire, charismatic Head Graeme Whiting has all his students engage in gymnastics training first thing in the morning. Graeme believes it is crucial to make sure that young people are fit and active and learn to embed a ritual of taking care of themselves first thing in the morning. The young people themselves also told me that they felt the early morning acrobatics helped set them up for the day, discharging some of the physical energy and leaving them better able to concentrate throughout the day.

This is not the only unusual activity within the curriculum at the Acorn school that is designed to improve calmness and personal focus. When I visited, Graeme took me to the crossbow room and shared with me that every child will learn to shoot one during their time at the school. When I asked why, he shared that he had found it was the best format he had yet discovered to teach a person to focus their mind.”When you are trying to teach skills for the mind”, he told me, “you have to get creative with it – you

can't just say – this is how you focus, you have to give them a practical experience of it – hence the crossbows.”

The Acorn also offer a very varied and broad curriculum to ensure the young students get access to as wide a range of possible interests and skills as possible. Research has shown that class is still a huge differentiator in individual success in the UK. This has a lot to do with the extracurricular exposure we receive from our parents to exciting environments, museums, travel, the theatre – without these our latent talents and direction in life may take some time to evolve. Graeme's curriculum counters this by introducing students to everything from sculpture to astronomy.

Last example – the Glide Memorial Church - set in the Tenderloin, a run down and drug affected area of upmarket San Francisco, at 10am and 12am of a Sunday, a congregation of mixed faiths, Jewish, Muslim, Atheist, Christian and nationalities from around the world – on the day I visited the congregation included a large delegation of French tourists, making a pilgrimage of sorts to Glide. Hundreds of us joined together to dance and sing accompanied by a ten piece jazz band. The Minister, a charismatic and warm black Pentecostal man called Cecil and his wife Janice, a community poet of Asian origin, started the church in the 60's with a view to serving the community and transforming the suffering of the most vulnerable communities in town. Their vision: A radically inclusive, just and loving community mobilized to alleviate suffering and break the cycles of poverty and marginalization.

They now run over 400 outreach and education programmes, turning hundreds of lives away from drug and alcohol addiction and toward education, employment and social contribution. Their current curriculum focuses on the personal skills that enable someone to navigate the modern world and includes: effective money management, men unlearning violence, community leadership, youth empowerment and how to be of service, with a focus on the interpersonal and soft skills that so much of mainstream education does not focus on. As Janice says: “We combine support with the practical skills you need to get by and create a future for yourself and add in a dash of love and care. We believe anybody can have hope, change and move forward as long as they are in a loving and positive environment. We believe it is actually our belief in and care for every one of our congregation, no matter how lost or hopeless they may have been, that enables the power of salvation. “

This belief in the power of change was evident in a number of powerful youth leaders and creative teachers across California. All, without exception, described the most potent and influential factor in their teaching success as the ability to really believe in and see the best in their students. Nola Lesange, from Youth at Risk describes it thus: “A lot of our students, they have been failed by the system, told they are failures or incapable by their teachers and their parents. We counter that with a real belief in them and a whole load of encouragement. Personally, I think that is the most important part of education – not just praising willy nilly, but teaching a person how to have esteem and acknowledge themselves. All the rest, the self – disciplined, the learning, follows on from there.”

To summarise then, my observations have led me to some clear views on the content of education. I advocate for project based learning, carried out in groups and individually, that allows a person to develop a range of interests and learning through doing. That a curriculum needs to think as much about the mental and physical wellness of each young person as the development of knowledge and theory. I believe in exposing young people to a wide range of opportunities, perspectives and subjects and including both physical activity and movement and song, to stir and engage the soul, heart and mind.

What about the style that we teach and learn?

So we have talked a bit about what a curriculum could include, so now let us focus on the format of learning – the how, if you will. Who says that learning has to be confined to a classroom? Were you in a classroom when you first learned to walk? Did you get graded on learning to share a snack or a game with your siblings? Adults in the room, do you find you only learn new and useful things when you are in front of a desk or a computer? Or course not! Learning happens all the time in all sorts of places. And some of the most exciting learning environments I visited really harnessed that possibility.

Educare ,a personal development charity based in Santa Monica, has over twenty years of documented evidence that their alternative learning programmes really shift attitudes and behaviours for troubled teens. And where does this education take place? In the wilds, at camp, in the back of beyond and most recently, in Tanzania, where a group of teens fundraised to get themselves over there to help build a school and mentor some of the students. The experience taught them interpersonal and cross cultural skills, entrepreneurial skills and project planning, as well as understanding more about their personal motivations and limitations. The Educare foundation also sets a lot of stock in the provision of rituals and rites of passage for young people. It's co-founder Candace Semigran describes with passion “how important it is to give young people a sense of their development being marked and recognised, the importance of a symbolic representation of their progress”, so Educare have a number of formal and informal rituals that enable students to share their stories and experiences and acknowledge themselves and others for this progress.

At the Riverside school in Ahmedabad, 60% of education takes place outside the classroom. In fact, each classroom has its own outside space, so the teacher can move the learning or shift the energy by taking the class outside to learn. In addition, a wide range of field trips are organised, with a full briefing and reflection session before hand, with older buddies accompanying younger students and, after the event, a full facilitated debrief. This approach to field trips gives context, build excitement and helps students to extract the most from their learning experience. The fact is, a wood can be a classroom, a dance hall can be a classroom and a community can be a classroom. And for boys, who are often more kinaesthetic learners, the more space, things to play with and opportunities to interact there are in this ‘classroom’ the more successful and enjoyable the learning is likely to be.

And it's an old chestnut and one that the public sector always struggles with, but the ratio of students to teachers makes a huge difference too. The environments where there was a 1:10 ratio of educators or assistants to students, had the most energised and effective impact. Visiting the Youth at Risk programme in L.A, I was struck by the importance of individualised attention. Some people manage to focus and direct their learning, others, many of whom may have been discouraged or ridiculed in the past, need a lot more encouragement to help them focus, progress and re-engage with learning. A great example of achieving this outside of the classroom came from 826 Valencia, a community reading project in San Francisco set up by bestselling author, David Eggars. On passing the project, you are greeted by a shop window filled with ‘pirate’ paraphernalia – eye patches, plastic cutlasses, stripey t-shirts. But behind the playful facade are a number of large wooden tables and, at them, volunteers from all parts of the community sit alongside young people who are struggling with their literacy and together they work to improve the young person's reading. This project sits outside the formal school environment, but complements it, in a way that sports groups, Scouts and Brownies or religious education might be seen to. And it brings education out beyond the school walls, inviting professionals and community members with the time and inclination, into a part-time teaching role. This personalised time and attention enables those students who might fall behind, to receive the remedial support they need to stay engaged in the mainstream.

Another reminder that anyone can be a teacher, old or young was illustrated to me by the peer project: Students Teaching Students. This project, based in the US, gives students as young as ten the skill set to be able to design a class on anything that interests them, from skateboarding to physics and teach it to their peers. Research evidence from the project shows that participation and engagement in the classroom and across the entire school grew, as a result of young people realising that they had expertise and experience worth sharing too – that teaching need not be only one way and carried out by an adult.

So these exciting environments, with their rites of passage and out of the class learning and their provision of personalised learning attention provide us with lots of ideas about what is possible and what can work. So let's look at some recommendations to explore how you might take these concepts and embed them into our mainstream school culture without too much upheaval.

1. Think about the real world – and what matters to young people right now

Teachers can help students engage in learning by remembering to connect what they are learning to things around them in their environment, society and future. Explaining why something is useful to know and explaining how the information is applied to a real world environment, can help engage and inspire the learner, through context.

2. Teaching style – contextualise and recap

This follows on from point 1 – the most effective teachers I observed on my travels took time to contextualise each learning module with the students – so they understood where it came from and how it fits into their world. They would then ask the group to recap and reflect at the end of the learning session, articulating what they now understood and what the key points were. This can be done in fun ways, like asking groups of students to produce an advert for 'oxbow lakes'.

3. Get out of the classroom

School trips can be a real logistical challenge and an expense, but learning can still take place outside of the classroom without great expense. What is going on in your local area? Are there care homes, woodlands, community centres within walking distance of the school? What about an office that might allow a few students to visit? Local field trips as well as moving the class itself to the tennis court, or the library, can create a different and fresh dynamic that supports innovative thinking, for both the teacher and the class.

4. Who is the teacher?

Invite students to run classes or part of classes in an advanced 'show and tell' style. The novelty of being taught by a peer often engenders a very different energy in the classroom and teaches organisational, project and communication skills, whilst simultaneously helping students understand just how challenging teaching is!

5. Invite in the community – it takes a village to raise a child

If getting out of school is too tricky, why not invite the world in? Ask parents, Board members or alumni to come and run talks and workshops, to demonstrate their career skills or share their story at assembly. See if you can find a group of corporate professionals who might like to volunteer their time in a school environment. This is a great way to expose young people to the broader 'life lessons' without having to

find excessive extra time within the school day. After school clubs can be another great opportunity to 'bring the outside in' and build community links.

6. Spend time exploring personal development and careers options

It is so critical that young people learn how to understand themselves and others and are given the tools to find their niche. This can form part of PSHE, tutorial time, assembly time or can be built into lessons such as human geography or biology. Consider where and how you can allow for this crucial specialist education and how everyone can play a role in ensuring this occurs. There are some great thinking skills programmes and books available, like the Seven Habits of Highly Successful Teens or Bright: Teach your child to think.

7. Include rites of passage and 'development markers'

We do have prize giving and other awards at school. What other markers could you put in place to celebrate 'life achievements'? Ask the students what rituals they would like, let them design and own them. Again, a great exercise for them in building community and establishing something meaningful in a collaborative way.

8. Assessment by contribution and outcomes, rather than memory alone

We are not going to be able to singlehandedly dismantle the qualification system and neither should we. Nevertheless, during term time, can we find practical and kinaesthetic ways of measuring success, testing understanding, so that children do not lose this ability? An example might be an 'innovation competition' to see who can use what they have learned in science or CDT to design something of value. Check out the Design for Change for more of examples of how you can encourage your students to use their initiative.

It's the small things that can make a big difference. Whilst the freedom of independent charities and small schools makes it easier to take bold steps, I hope that this talk and these tools have proven that you, as an individual, can already make a big difference to the educational experience in our schools and colleges. Go on, be the change, I dare you.

Any questions?

Before I sign off, I want to make sure that every one of you has a good awareness of The Winston Churchill Memorial Trust. Winston's bequest was to enable UK citizens, of all ages, to take a once in a lifetime trip, overseas, to explore an area of passionate interest and bring their learning back to the UK. The UK based charity gives out over 100 grants every year for a wide range of social, creative and environmental projects, with an average value of around £6000. My trip, to explore transformational education methods and life skills was only made possible by such a grant and I cannot urge you strongly enough to grab this opportunity! Applications, in the form of just two pages of A4, are available in June and the interviews take place in Feb 2014. If you would like advice and support on shaping your project, please do get in touch with me, or take one of the flyers I have left in the hall. "If there is anything you have dreamed of in life, begin it. Boldness has power and magic in it. "

Thank you.

My Next Steps

So what will I be doing with what I have learned?

Well, I am excited to share that I have recently signed a publishing deal with Wiley, the world largest non-fiction publisher, to write a book called “My Life Plan: How to be the hero in your own story”. The book will allow me to share lots of the methods and tools I have learned with a wider audience from teenagers to adults of all ages and will be published in 2014.

Secondly, I am integrating the learning design principles I have picked up along the way into all the materials I design and the workshops I run, whether for big companies through my work at QA through to my intimate workshops for volunteers, offenders and vulnerable youth. I have been blogging, writing newsletters and delivering talks at assemblies and to educators, to share what I have learned. I plan to make a short viral film that will be posted and shared online.

Lastly, I aim to connect with educational institutions that train teachers – Government departments and Universities, to share what I have learned about how to bring life skills into the heart of what we learn and how we learn. I believe that if teachers are equipped with the skills and confidence to integrate life lessons into academic ones and with the tools to make learning a pleasure, the outcomes, options and achievements of every student they touch, could be transformed.