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A Retiring Education: on continuing to learn for its own sake

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ABSTRACT This article reflects on a fairly recent continuing education experience, seeking to identify some general principles for getting the most out of an approach to learning that has objectives which celebrate the acquisition of new knowledge *for its own sake*, rather than with a specific end in view, such as the attainment of a qualification.

The late Richard Peters famously once defined 'education' as fundamentally a process whereby learners are 'initiated into worthwhile activities that promote knowledge and understanding'.[1] This conception of a 'liberal education' is one that has regularly, even persistently, informed my own thinking about the ends of learning, both from the vantage point of being a teacher and lecturer and a pupil and student. It informs too how I currently approach being a learner in retirement, having given up full-time employment as a university professor in 2007. It does not, however, articulate well with the more utilitarian models of education that presently hold sway in the United Kingdom (UK), influencing attitudes at the highest level of policy-making that conceive teaching and learning in much more means-ends ways, either 'applied' or 'vocational', in which improved examination and test grades, linked often to the acquisition of specific employment-related skills, are given the greatest priority.

To be sure, I have, over the years, enjoyed acquiring a lot of qualifications. But it is equally the case that the means of obtaining them have preoccupied me as well. So, while I am very proud I have a doctorate, I am exercised also by the knowledge that obtaining it entailed serious and persistent study, in the course of which I was required to take intellectual risks and challenge myself in new ways generally. The process mattered as much as the product, in other words.

As was the case just over a year ago when I joined (for a fee) Oxford University's Department of Continuing Education's Summer School to study for one-week, in residence, a short course, at undergraduate level, on the 'History of the Piano Concerto From Mozart to the Present Day'. Although the course did not lead to a qualification, those attending it satisfactorily were able to obtain a 'credit' towards a full undergraduate programme. While I happily

joined the course merely to acquire a certificate of attendance, my real and much bigger plan was successfully to learn something new.

Attending, I should quickly say, was a lot more than about turning up and sitting in class looking interested. For a start, course members were each required to write two academically-inflected essays – one to be sent on for comment before arrival, and about a topic chosen from a list; the other to be written while attending, again for comment, but this time about a topic negotiated with the course tutor.

The latter was a very experienced and accomplished adult music-educator and highly competent pianist and composer. We had lectures from him in the mornings, each brilliantly illustrated from the keyboard, with very clever IT technical assists, beginning early at 9; then, after lunch, the expectation was that we would undertake private study in the library or in our rooms, arranging times for personal tutorials, as and when these were needed. We ate all our meals together. In the evenings, because of a very lucky coincidence, it was possible to attend master-classes and recitals which featured in an annual piano music festival held locally. I took advantage of four of these events, with the result that I was, for about a week, more or less totally immersed in the 'worthwhile activity' of extending my 'knowledge and understanding' of the classical piano concerto repertoire. I left the course then feeling thoroughly 'initiated', thinking I had learnt a lot, and also pleased I had satisfactorily completed its essay requirements, which for me were very demanding as I had never previously written academic pieces of any kind about any aspect of classical music.[2]

An illustration of what I learnt is the following description of the musical form and content of Rachmaninov's 2nd piano concerto, which is lifted from the second, on-course essay I wrote:

> As in the case of Beethoven's 5th, there is much evidence of very well-crafted piano writing, entailing remarkable figuration and the imaginative deployment of a variety of both 'melodic shapes' ('zig-zags', chants, and rising 4ths and 2nds) and rhythmic materials (anapests, syncopations, and dotted rhythms). The work's many 'inner voices' which this gives to are linked up in an assured fashion, with melodies sometimes sitting on a single note for a long time. The composer ends the concerto in bravura fashion, requiring the soloist to hammer out the notes in a way reminiscent of Liszt at his flamboyant best.

While I knew this concerto well as a listener-appreciator before arriving in Oxford, there is no way I could have written such an account of it without the benefit of attending the course.

I departed the course not only better informed musicologically about the classical piano concerto, but also wondering why it had been such a successful learning experience, reflecting also if my personal success on it might have implications for other adult learners. Four things came to my mind about this.

First, I was undoubtedly 'ready' for the course. Normally, I am a bit uncomfortable with the notion of 'readiness' when it comes to applying it to the learning process, thinking it may justify a delay in undertaking something new on the basis of little more than a hunch. In this instance that wasn't the case. I was very ready for the course, in the sense that I had, over an extended period, and especially since retiring, developed a good understanding of the classical piano concerto repertoire *as performed*; but I knew very little about the technical aspects of particular works, and this positively irked me. I wanted to know more about this aspect, including relevant history, which made me therefore a highly motivated participant.

But being highly motivated, annoyed even by my ignorance, is not the same as feeling at ease. On the contrary, there were many times in class when I became very aware of being significantly 'out of my [knowledge] comfort zone', feeling frequently exposed by my lack of technical knowledge. I can read a musical score, but not very well; and I do know some technical musical terms; but not that many. The result? There were occasions when the lectures, which were sometimes very technical, went 'over my head', which required me to study hard in the afternoons to fill out my lack of knowledge, and so to catch up. But I never ever felt as if I was intellectually 'drowning'; I was always 'on the surface', sometimes struggling to 'maintain my stroke', but not badly enough to feel – to continue and maybe exhaust the analogy – 'out of my depth'. And this is my second point: high quality learning is maybe strongly associated with being on the edge of what one already knows or feels able confidently to comprehend. Those familiar with the idea of Vygotsky's 'zone of proximal development' will know what I mean theoretically here.[3] Adult education 'leisure' classes often don't offer the same kind of challenge. For sure, they are fun; but they don't aim to expose, lacking the intellectual rigour likely to have this effect. Similar to courses in the Workers' Educational Association (WEA) tradition, my music one in Oxford was both enjoyable and stretching. Maybe that was what perversely I took pleasure in? I think it was, connecting with that doctoral learning process I mentioned earlier. I was extended; and I readily wanted to be; and so embraced it all joyously.

But this didn't just apply to me. It had application to all the other participants on the course as well. We were all 'up for it', sharing, discussing, reflecting, occupying together an intellectual bubble – what some education pundits call a 'learning community' [4] – collectively eager to take matters properly forward in unison. And the collectivist dimension was very important, manifest in the uncompetitive nature of the way in which we behaved towards each other, sharing our essay submissions and offering mutual support generally. The only person I competed with was myself, wanting to test fully my ability to grasp unfamiliar subject matter and confidently to discuss and ask questions about it. And there's the third matter: good learning surely requires collaboration, not to mention collaborative sympathy, making my Oxford experience of it an instance of democratic education in action. My tutor was a

key variable in this. He was 'up for it' too, which meant he always taught well. He got the best out of us; and we got the best out of him.

Mention of that 'bubble' a moment ago leads me to my fourth and last factor, which is to do with good learning and withdrawal. What I mean by this is to focus attention on the fact that getting fully 'initiated into any worthwhile activity' may require cutting oneself off for a while from ordinary living, the cares of which naturally enough intrude on serious study. In Oxford, I was living and studying away from home – its telephone, e-mail and domestic demands especially – giving myself up entirely to the job in hand. It's obvious really, but such time away, focussing on one thing, rather than a multitude of them, many lacking in serious consequence, allowed me, without distraction, to get down fully to extended learning. Such learning, removed temporarily from life as normally lived, entails moreover greater opportunity for those moments of illumination that are positively accidental, being neither easily anticipated nor planned for, and which take things forward in surprisingly interesting ways. One of my many serendipity moments included making in my imagination, without any direct prompting, a direct link between the opening toccata movement of Britten's piano concerto – which my tutor never mentioned – and the allegro movement of Prokoviev's 2nd, which he did. And then there was the experience of 'finding' a book in the library which I didn't know I wanted. In a rushed class, I probably wouldn't have made either connection. There were many others like it.

To those who say this is all rather 'precious' and very 'middle-class', I'd reply that 'learning for its own sake' is not the preserve or privilege of any group in society, but a joy from which anyone can benefit in life-enhancing ways, particularly now. The WEA tradition still then has much to commend it, and may need reinventing.

Notes

[1] R.S. Peters (1966) *Ethics and Education*, chap. 2. London: George Allen & Unwin.

[2] My essays were about Britten's piano concerto, in which I sought to explain why I thought it deserved a higher reputation than it currently enjoys; and about the 'worldliness of classical music', in which I tried to account for why particular piano concertos can be more than adequately appreciated without the benefit of technical musical knowledge, but that one's understanding of them is considerably enhanced by such knowledge. Each essay was thoroughly read by my tutor or teacher, who provided on-text comments, which were discussed at two personal tutorials, each of which lasted for about forty-five minutes.

[3] See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zone_of_proximal_development

[4] See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Learning_community

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