
Working with Michael at Harwell School

DAVID COX

I am a storyteller and sculptor, and in the mid 1990s I spent some time working with the children and teachers at Harwell School, on an art and craft project called 'Upsetter Stories', initially set up by my friend, the late Richard Speed, and funded by Southern Arts.

Richard and I arrived at the school one afternoon, for a meeting with Michael and his colleagues, to discuss how things might go. The project was to be constructed around stories to stimulate the imagination and inspire the children in their creative endeavours. As we all know, Michael loved a good story and we immediately hit it off.

He and his staff couldn't have been more accommodating to my ideas and offered to suspend the curriculum for the duration of the initial stage of the project. 'Upsetter Stories', was a great success, due to the incredible enthusiasm and support from Michael and his colleagues, the help and guidance of Richard Speed and, of course, the aptitude, talent and imagination shown by the children.

Southern Arts offered more funding, and I was able to travel, off and on, to Harwell School for the following year. It was a delight for me to see how, week after week, the school picked up the ideas I had fostered and made them their own. During that time, I was able to appreciate and admire the educational ambience that Michael fostered. It was evident, by his patience and kindness (and that of his staff), that he really cared about the children and was truly interested in the way imagination was crucial in education.

When Michael was approaching retirement, I was honoured to receive a commission from the pupils and staff at Harwell School to make a farewell present for him. On a lovely, sunny evening, I collected Richard Speed from his home and we drove to Harwell, where I handed over 'Little Stepper', a dancing automaton, to a pupil for presentation. It was great to see and talk to many of the young people I'd worked with. I remember Michael catching my eye and laughing as the gift was handed over. I was pleased when he told me that he would display it in his study and I like to think of him at his desk, overseen by 'Little Stepper'.

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I last saw Michael after he phoned to arrange a visit to our home near Bath. He'd devoted a chapter in his book *Children Writing Stories* to the 'Upsetter Stories' project. It focused on the stories the children wrote in response to the tales I had featured throughout the project and he wanted to talk a few things through. I collected him from Bradford on Avon station and we drove back to our house, where my wife, Julia, Michael and I chatted over a lunch of bread, soup and salad. Michael, as ever, was erudite and funny. After the dishes were cleared away, we got down to talking about the issues and implications of the kind of approach that we both valued when working with young people. I have my copy of *Children Writing Stories* by my side now and have turned to the page where he has written, in tiny handwriting, 'For David, recalling those memorable days, Michael. April 2006'. I can truly say that I found him inspiring and although I only met him on the occasions I've described, I thought of him as a friend, a mentor and someone I very much was glad to have known.

Correspondence: dcox.modernart@gmail.com