
A Great Debt

PETER HOLLIS

I first met Michael Armstrong in 1971 when I joined the teaching staff at Countesthorpe College in Leicestershire. Michael was Head of Humanities and had been a leading figure together with Tim McMullan in the setting up of the school and defining its educational philosophy.

It soon became clear to me that Michael's educational philosophy and practice of treating the work of his students as being worthy of intellectual consideration led to an atmosphere where all of his students wanted to discuss and consider ideas – both their own and other people's. His students developed an intellectual curiosity and from this a desire for knowledge. Michael gave his students the freedom and the motivation to express themselves. For some he deepened their existing interest and for others he awakened an interest in ideas and learning for the first time.

Michael introduced evening meetings of staff to look at, analyse and discuss students' writing – to consider the ideas that students were striving to express. Michael's ideas seemed to permeate the whole school, through all departments: involving and engaging students in the learning process in a deep and meaningful way. This philosophy became the norm.

Michael's ideas influenced a large number of teachers, many of whom took these ideas to other schools when they became head teachers and of course they then spread these ideas further through their own schools. Michael introduced the idea of 'mini-schools', when the incoming year of 480 students was split into three 'mini-schools' with their own base and were taught by a team of teachers, including specialists in English, Humanities, Maths, and Drama. Later Science was also introduced into the 'mini-school'. This allowed students to feel safe and comfortable within a very large school and most importantly to be very well known by their teachers. This innovation proved very successful.

Michael certainly helped to shape my educational philosophy and practice. I have just come out of an exercise class where two lecturers from the local university were discussing their students and in particular students whom they felt should not be on their course. One lecturer said, 'It feels like pouring

matter into black holes, and nothing can come out': just so far away from Michael's educational philosophy, valuing every student's contribution, thoughts and ideas – leading to a situation where students value their own ideas, and most importantly the ideas of others.

Among Michael's marvellous characteristics was that he always retained his own interest in ideas, and that he never stopped learning from others. He had a great interest in all subjects, including my own (mathematics) and was always eager and excited to talk about mathematical ideas, and in particular the mathematical ideas of students, which he found fascinating. So a student-centred approach was not only central to Michael's teaching but also central to his own interests and learning. Michael believed passionately in this student-centred approach and continued to do so throughout his life, whether teaching primary school children or graduates on an MA course.

He was an inspiration to so many teachers during his career and I think that this was his most important legacy. I certainly miss my conversations with him but I also owe him a great debt.

PETER HOLLIS worked at Countesthorpe College and was later head teacher of Oaklands Comprehensive School, Southampton. *Correspondence:* Peter Hollis, 22 Leigh Road, Southampton SO17 1EF, United Kingdom.