
The Canary, the Curriculum and the Pupil's Choice

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It only occurred to me recently how my academic and professional life have been linked with *FORUM*, Symposium Books, Michael Armstrong, Professor Clyde Chitty and Professor Brian Simon – and progressive education.

In 1970, after four years of teaching an innovative social science curriculum at a forward-looking secondary modern school in High Wycombe, I was sort-of head-hunted by Brian Simon, who invited me for interview at the School of Education, University of Leicester to undertake a unique role as a teacher trainer in social science for half the week and to teach social studies at a radical school, yet to be built. I got the job – and remained in the joint appointment for 13 years.

The school was Countesthorpe College, a 14-18 upper school and community college, in the Leicestershire comprehensive plan, a school labelled – from the start by local media – as the school you'll love to hate. This is where I encountered Michael, just one of a large staff of talented and innovative teachers. But Michael was more than just one: he was unique, eloquent, scarily intellectual and committed to individualised education.

I well remember the intellectual tussles we had, including one about a pupil who wanted to do a project on his canary. I could not see the educational value of this and wondered whether Michael would interject more or persuade the pupil to adopt a wider context. Michael said no – and defended the right of the pupil just to write about his canary! Of course we all realised that what we were debating amounted to fundamental philosophies of learning, education and his defence of individualised, pupil-centred learning.

Although I was a university academic, with a public presumption of special intellectual or academic wisdom, I mainly kept my mouth shut in school staff discussions, partly because of the powerful opinions and rhetoric of the staff but also because of the eloquence and persuasiveness of Michael's standpoint on key educational issues. We disagreed fundamentally. I was committed to and had written about my notion of a 50/50 curriculum,

promoting the importance of some pupil choice but within a context of teacher-led subject structure.

I never witnessed any bile or prejudice or unkindness from Michael towards pupils, staff, people, or the world. His position on education and world issues was always liberal, humane and well argued. I do not think he had an aggressive or illiberal thought in his head. I would not say he was organised or efficient in his conduct as a teacher – but he was exuberant and compelling and full of life – perhaps that’s why his love of Italy mirrored his personality!

He went on to run a primary school in Oxfordshire – I wish I had visited. I went on to teach at three universities in the Leicestershire area and to research and write about education into my seventies – and still going. Countesthorpe today does not acknowledge on its website its glorious radical past: Kasabian, the rock band formed at the school, is more worthy of celebration. The Leicestershire Plan has morphed into a hands-off no-plan, encouraging the schools to go it alone as academies run by entrepreneurial men and women in pinstripe suits. What education in the United Kingdom now needs desperately is hundreds of thousands more Michael Armstrongs: he’ll be much missed.

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