

MY SECONDARY SCHOOL

I love comprehensive schools and mixed ability learning. We often use the term 'mixed ability teaching' but that is to overlook the extent to which children can help each other to learn, irrespective of specific aptitude.

At the age of 13 I offered to cheat in an art examination and pass off a painting of mine as belonging to my friend Bob. It certainly deceived the teacher (or did it?) who gave it a higher mark than the one I submitted in my own name.

That was not quite what I meant by mixed ability learning. It was more like mixed ability cheating. The memory popped into my head and I could not resist including it here. Nevertheless, I think Bob did learn something about painting in the process. There was no educational theory involved, merely instinctive fun.

I now believe that I was very lucky to have been classified at the age of 11 as lacking sufficient general intelligence to receive the kind of education provided by grammar schools. Cyril Burt was a member of the eugenics movement that believed in promoting the best racial specimens and his research as a psychologist indicated that approximately 80% of us were ignorant and worthy only of a poorly funded education. The reliability of his research has been attacked (and defended) but for me more bothersome are the assumptions of social and racial unworthiness that accompany intelligence tests.

Despite the assertion that no one passed or failed because they were simply allocated to the school most suitable to them as a result of a very silly intelligence test, I went neither to a grammar school nor to a secondary modern.

By the time I was 11 my father was earning enough to pay 8 guineas a term for me to go to a small private school full of boys who had been classified as I was. We had only just moved to live on The Wirral and my father got lost driving me to take the entrance examination. We missed it. So John Philip Fogg, the head, asked me if I had a hobby. I said yes, painting in oils. Then he took me to a classroom and asked me to write about it. I can't remember what I wrote but I know the writing came easily and I probably mentioned that it was wise to paint from dark to light. Anyway, either that or the thought of an extra 8 guineas each term got me in.

More than 60 years later I discovered that my doctor (he looks about 15) went to the same school. I told him that I felt that the school discovered what you were interested in and grew you from there. He said it was the same for him. It really did understand the meaning of the word 'education'. And here am I who disapproves of private education writing fondly about how, when the social stratifiers have conquered public values, such schools can sometimes stand for a social good. I wish they did not have to.

The Wirral continues to operate a eugenic education policy. Theresa May's husband went to one of its grammar schools but Daniel Craig, 007, went to one of its secondary moderns; so much for eugenics!

MY FIRST O-LEVEL EXAM

I was 14. Our history teacher was rubbish. When I became a teacher I swore to give up the job if a class ever behaved towards me as badly as we behaved with that teacher. One day I happened to be in the same classroom where I had written about my hobby when I walked the head.

'You like history and you are good at it so I have entered you for O-Level.'

'But it's a 2 year course and I've only got 2 months to get ready.'

So I got ready. I ignored the teacher, bought a booklet with the questions from the previous 5 years, spotted which questions were likely to come up, got up at 6 every morning, scribbled answers, went for a run, then a bath, then breakfast and into school. The evening was a repeat except that the last thing I did was to read through everything. Any blots on the pages I left because having them in my head aided my memory, I thought. I went through lots and lots of quarto paper.

On the day of the exam, 27th June 1957, I opened the paper and found 8 questions that I could do. You had to do 5 in 2 hours 30 minutes. I picked my second best to do first, believing that this was like mental sports day and I needed to warm up. Then I did what I thought was my best, thinking that if I could get to my peak I might be able to sustain that standard till the end.

The pass mark was 45% and I got 60% and for a few days felt that I had the answer to life, the universe and everything. Typical of O-Level type learning I very quickly forgot most of what I had learned. That was just as well for when I began A-Level History I had to think rather than memorise.

LEARNING FROM GETTING TEACHERS OFF THE SUBJECT AND TEACHERS GETTING ME OFF THE SUBJECT

Many of my teachers had been in the war. Mr. (Spike) Elton was deputy head and taught maths, rather too quickly for my liking. When the quadratic equations were doing me head in the technique was to say,

'Eh Sir, wasn't HMS Illustrious at the Battle of Cape Matapan?'

As expected, he would rise to the bait and reply,

‘No she wasn’t. She had suffered damage and had been replaced by HMS Formidable. Let me tell you all about it.’

No more quadratic equations.

For Brian (Bunny) Warren who taught geography and games there were two distracters available, his time as a prisoner of war and his time in bombers. As a P.O.W. he hated Douglas Bader because he specialised in the trivial piss taking of German guards, which often resulted in the prisoners losing their Red Cross parcels. This was a useful counter to the adulation given to Bader by books and film. He was an official British hero now debunked for us.

On returning from bombing raids Brian told us that any plane that had lost an engine would radio in and be given priority for landing. The crew would, therefore, be first in the pub. One night a plane radioed that it only had two engines so they were given priority while the others were forced to circle. The plane was a Vickers Wellington. How many engines had a Wellington? Two! First in the pub maybe but I think they should have bought the beer for the later comers.

Donald May was the local Methodist minister. He taught us what back then was called Scripture. During the war he had been a navigator on heavy bombers so, naturally, we wanted to know how he reconciled that with his Christianity. He told himself that what he was doing would shorten the war and was, therefore, justifiable. We now know that this was not the case.

He also explained about respecting girls sexually.

Eric William Ernest Mallet taught French but was crucial for me because when applying for university it was suddenly realised that I had to have Latin O-Level. I had dropped it years before. He got me through. Learning by heart a huge chunk of Virgil helped. There is still some Latin homework in a pocket of my school blazer.

Eric was from South Wales and told us what it was like there playing school rugby: warfare. Being short and slight he was used to getting battered. But one day the lad he was marking was smaller and thinner than him. This, he thought, was going to be his day. His opponent scored 55 points in the match. Eric said that when he tried to grab him the other lad would kick the ball over his head, run round him and pick the ball up. After the match Eric asked who the boy was. It was Cliff Morgan, later to be captain of Wales and the Lions.

From Eric I learned a lot about French artists. He introduced me to Delacroix, David, Ingres, the Barbizon School and more. He also pointed out the significance of the Paris Salon of 1824 at which Constable exhibited the Hay Wain. I doubt if any of this added marks to any exam I ever sat but it certainly enriched my understanding of the political history of the 19th century.

Denis Martin taught me A-Level history. He introduced me to the work of G.R. Elton, (Ben Elton’s uncle) on the Tudors and to the writings on Italy of his own

tutor at Cambridge, Denis Mack Smith. From Elton I learned about the constitutional significance of Thomas Cromwell and from Mack Smith I learned not to think of Mussolini and the Fascists as aberrations.

By then I was writing really long essays and, having discovered every type of punctuation mark, I used them all; that is until Denis said,

‘Jones, reading an essay by you is like reading Morse Code.’

Maurice Sykes taught me English at A-Level. ‘Read round the subject’ was his watchword. As a result set books were almost lost in a sea of literature and music. I was listening to Tchaikovsky’s Violin Concerto (Oistrach father and son) at the same time as reading George Eliot’s Middlemarch and trying to include or somehow reflect their themes in the pattern of my, too long, essays.

Pretentious? Ambitious? Yes, but why not?

Cliff Jones 19th October 2017