

## The Art of Giving Lightly

I am what most people would deem an educated person. I have a little pile of certificates somewhere that provide evidence of my educational experience – Intermediate and Leaving Certificate, Degrees, PhD etc.. I also have a pile of odder qualifications and awards – Irish Dancing, Italian, Cookery, First Aid, Ethics, Young Printmaker of the Year, that sort of thing. This accumulation of pieces of paper suggests a conventional and successful engagement with the educational system. What they do not show is the lived experience, the fear of school that resulted in a chronic suspicion of authority, the days spent hiding in a field behind our house because I was afraid of yet another public humiliation at the hands of Mrs Buttimer or the Sisters of Mercy, yet another whack with a ruler, another hour spend standing on my desk as punishment for being me. These early experiences of education did not however put me off but instead made me increasingly determined to prove that knowledge comes in many forms and from the most unexpected places – and that I could acquire it. While I would rather not have had the experience of Glasheen National School and Mount Mercy College, they were not all a waste and may in fact have made me a better teacher. They taught me that rules should be questioned, a perfect grounding for deconstruction, and that respect is not given automatically by virtue of the position someone holds but is something that one earns every day. They also taught me to recite poetry by heart and to perform mental arithmetic, which have proved endlessly useful.

One would imagine that given the bad start that I would have escaped the system as quickly as possible. On the contrary, I have spend most of my life in education one way or another, more as a student (22 years!) than a teacher. I realised that I loved learning and sharing the pleasure of learning. In hindsight, the shift from problem child to star pupil seems swift and exciting. One day I was destined for delinquency, the next I could do things, I could do them well, and I was praised. In reality this transition took a little longer and a lot of hard work. The experience of being valued for what I had done was all the more significant because it had been so rare. When it came it brought with it a sensation of being somewhere that I belonged, I was home. In art school, I encountered people who did not teach as much as give me the skills and confidence to learn myself. Rather than being based on an explicit educational philosophy, for some of the teachers I encountered the knowledge of the benefits of this approach came naturally, for others it was a successful strategy adopted because of laziness. This teaching wasn't always done in lectures or classes but through conversations in the canteen or the pub, a recommended book or a piece of music.

These seemingly slight encounters acknowledged a trust in my commitment and dedication to my subject as well as valuing my ability to acquire knowledge independently. Of course, there were wasters, it would be romantic and deceitful to suggest that art education in Ireland and England in the 1980s was not without its problems; there were the

lechers, the incompetents, the lecturers who liked to talk so that they could talk about themselves, and the ones that just liked to talk, but fortunately art school allowed one to pick and chose, and to give some a wide berth.

In 1983 the printmaking tutor at the Dun Laoghaire School of Art arranged for me to spend a term at the Edinburgh College of Art and a summer staying in her brother's flat in Amsterdam. She sent me off with a portfolio full of paper and copper plates and phone numbers of people I should contact. This proved to be a decisive trip that helped to form a way of thinking about art and the world, as well as to consolidate often thought but badly expressed ideas that I wanted to work on. That tutor does not know that she changed my life, nor do any of the other people who have made a significant contribution to my education over the years. The gift of education that was given was not the gift of Marcel Mauss that required reciprocation, but the free gift, one in which the giver and recipient are unaware of the gift at the time. There is no obligation to the giver in the free gift. However, in the knowledge that comes with the free gift there is an understanding of the importance of giving lightly, without the need for acknowledgement, obligation or credit. When we share our knowledge lightly, as lecturers we run the risk of our contribution being unnoticed, however this allows the learner to own the learning. It encourages students to be active learners, to be awake to the possibility that learning happens all the time and not just in timetable slots. In the list of people who have contributed to my

education – Zygmunt Bauman, Robert Neimeyer, John Dewey, Mark O'Neill, Maire Noone, Carol Shields, Samuel Beckett, Marsha Meskimmon, Tom Waits, Simon Pattison, Denton Welsh, Nanny Mulder, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart – there are very few lecturers. In fact most of these people are long dead, but the gift of knowledge can survive us and impact on people in another time and place. What my lecturers gave me was the opportunity to discover the tribe of people that I needed to tap into the world of knowledge and benefit from the wealth of riches that exist in literature, art, theory and music.

Students outgrow many of their teachers, and this is how it should be. But in the process of outgrowing it is important to remember that without the encouragement and opportunities afforded by them it would not be possible to make the leaps in the present. In the current risk averse contemporary educational landscape which encourages students to constantly evaluate and focus on concrete learning outcomes, it is increasing impossible for the slow percolation that has been my experience of learning. Contemporary forms of education required immediate impact based on proscribed learning outcomes. What it does not acknowledge are the unexpected and informal moments of insight, the epiphanies, where information acquired years before can be transformed into knowledge because the moment is right. I am not advocating a return to 'the good old days' but wondering what new strategies we need to adopt to facilitate unstructured forms of knowledge acquisition. In the

commercialize education system that treats and fears students as powerful consumers rather than as powerful participants and co-creators of their own educational experience I also wonder what has been sacrificed

The obverse of my experience of assisted self-education is what I have learned by having to teach. My early experience of being judged a failed learner inspires me to try at least to see the material from the point of view of students. Despite the difficulties of the predicted-outcome-measurement system, learning can be interesting and open to unexpected insights. Praise when it is earned can be a powerful motivator. The presence of students, in class, in tutorials, in my mind, forces me to articulate things more clearly, to see it from different perspective. While my practice – the production of academic papers – is a solitary process, it is constantly fed by the engagement with the learning of others, and the way it forces me to see the material from different perspectives. As the old Buddhist saying goes; ‘you best teach what you most need to learn’.

I have not mentioned any students here because I do not know yet what impact I have had on them – percolation is a very slow process and it is too soon to tell. But I hope that I have given lightly in the spirit of the gifts I have been given.

**Mary O’Neill**