

NET

National Education Trust



COUNTERBLASTS

Sparkling Classrooms

by Roy Blatchford

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The Counterblasts series exists to challenge orthodoxies and champion best practice in education. The pamphlets are conceived and written by leading thinkers in their fields of expertise. The texts are accessible, free of jargon and intended to excite the interest of the reader. They do not necessarily represent the views of NET, but they do seek to help shape our responses to current issues.

On our website you will find the opportunity to respond, if you are moved, to the arguments put forward in this pamphlet.

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INTRODUCTION

Since leaving secondary headship, I have had the great privilege, afforded to too few people in education, of visiting over 7000 classrooms during the past seven years. I use the term 'classroom' in a generic sense: it includes workshops, laboratories, gymnasias, sports fields, outdoor settings, dance studios, music practice rooms – wherever that great double act that is teaching and learning is taking place.

I have entered teachers' classrooms as an HMI, a reviewer, Blinker (see Appendices), inspector, trainer and coach in special schools, primary and secondary schools, early years settings and further education colleges - from Mumbai to New York, Barcelona to Birmingham, Jeddah to Jarrow. I would like at once to thank all the teachers, children and students who have shared their classrooms with me, albeit sometimes for as short a period as twenty minutes, long enough at least for me to capture the essence of what is being taught and whether it is being learned.

The purpose of this 'Counterblast' is not a polemic on whether teaching and learning might be improved in the classrooms of the UK and internationally. Of course they can be – that is the human condition to strive to improve. Everyone is interested in doing something better tomorrow than they did it today.

Rather, my aim is to capture the essence of what I call 'sparkling classrooms'. These are the vibrant classrooms which teachers create because they are spending many of their waking hours within them. They are the places where young minds flourish. These classrooms are places and atmospheres which remain long in the minds and spirits of the learners.

I began my working life in education in HM Prison Brixton. All educators should spend time in the education department of one of Her Majesty's prisons. It is a poignant reminder that basic literacy is a birthright that should be denied nobody. In my days at the National Literacy Trust, I used to give talks entitled 'Have you ever met a mugger who's read Middlemarch?' - my way of saying that whatever else we do for children and young people in classrooms, we must give them the dignity of being able to speak, read and write with fluency to make their way in the endlessly fascinating global society which they inhabit.

Roy Blatchford, Oxford 2011

1. The journey to the classroom

From the point of view of the learner, it is surely the journey to the classroom that shapes a mindset and feelings. I used to say, unkindly and provocatively, that there were some corridors in some secondary schools (home and abroad) where you would not want to entrust your own child. Those days are largely gone.

It remains the case however that the 'corridor experience' is not a consistently stimulating one for many pupils in our secondary schools. At their best, the language of mathematics, geography and physics shine forth from displays of pupils' work alongside well chosen commercial posters.

To walk towards some classrooms is to be taken on a memorable learning journey: 'work of the week' or 'wow work' or 'outstanding achievement' notice-boards celebrate what children and students have recently produced. In many primary schools, with a healthy and proportionate approach to risk, corridors become rainforests, desert landscapes and undersea exploration zones – all in the best interests of giving a stimulating context in which to explore new skills and knowledge.

And on some classroom doors, pupils are met with fascinating photos which draw the learner in, or mathematical challenges which get them in the mood for subject learning: 'The answer is 28. What's the question?'

2. The fun and fundamentals of learning

It is a truism that what knowing parents give to their children is, in equal and balanced measure, roots and wings. So with teachers: they provide for learners activities and experiences which provide the roots and wings of learning.

In sparkling classrooms, there is that judicious balance of the fun and fundamentals of learning. Fun, humour and warm relationships abound. So too does an unequivocal focus on practising basic and higher order skills. Great teachers accept no substitute.

The sparkling classroom provides a climate for learning which engenders confidence and motivation amongst the learners. It is one in which, critically, there is no fear of failure because the teacher and fellow pupils alike support one another's little triumphs and disasters. Opportunities for risk taking, exploration of new knowledge and concepts, and experimentation permeate. Learners' potential is spotted and encouraged. In the true sense of the word, education – 'to lead out' – underpins the learning environment.

3. Values and expectations

All teachers know that expectations matter profoundly. What you expect from children you will surely get. If expectations of pupils are low, then little will be achieved. When expectations are high, both the teacher and the learner surprise themselves. It is as simple and as complex as that.

Values are a different story – and equally important.

Firstly, it is surely incontestable that not only what we teach but how we teach can make a great difference to our students: whether by precept, example or demeanour, teachers exert a moral influence, for better or worse. A former HMI colleague quotes the RE teacher who went round the class saying ‘Remember God is Love’ while vigorously striking the pupils on the head with a Bible.

Secondly, any selection of teaching methods or learning approaches makes its own value assumptions and by implication transmits these. It is easy to see this if one studies how the aim of unquestioned or unquestioning indoctrination is best achieved through certain highly structured and authoritarian teaching methods, including a heavy dose of rote learning. Open questions would plainly be counter-productive.

Conversely, learning by enquiry or research is likely to imply a commitment to following truth wherever it may be found, to basing actions on evidence and exploration, to a willingness to doubt, test and evaluate independently. Use of practical methods is based on a recognition that often we learn best by doing - an old truth, but often a true one.

Thirdly, the whole way in which learning is organised and managed rests on fundamental educational beliefs about the learner and the learning process. It is for this reason, in effect, that people such as HMI bang on endlessly about ‘differentiation’.

It is not just that doing things differently for different people relieves tedium and is more efficient as a means of instruction. Above all, it is the fact that the key moral value is that each member of the class is an individual with her or his own rights, character, disposition to learning and level of understanding.

(With acknowledgements to David Taylor)

4. Knowing your subject

At the heart of inspiring teaching is the teacher who has a passion for their subject. Ask any group of pupils, from age 7 to 17, what makes