The Unexamined Life

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IBSC Conference, Baltimore
June 2017
The Unexamined Life

- The judgement of Socrates
  - Right about life after school
  - Wrong about life at school
  - The contrast of ends and means

- Headwinds and challenges
  - Academic ambition
  - Parental expectation
  - Extra-curricular endeavour
The Unexamined Life

- What forms can it take?
  - Reading for pleasure
  - Formal courses
  - External talks
  - Internal talking

- The life of the mind, for boys
  - Role models inside and outside the school
  - The pressure of the peer group
  - The school of life
Reading for pleasure

- Different types of reading
  - Within academic disciplines
  - Prescribed in syllabuses
  - Stepping stones to learning
  - Fiction and other genres

- Why does it matter?
  - Subject knowledge
  - Vocabulary and grammar
  - Writing ability
  - Cornerstone of scholarship
Research on reading

- Cognitive benefits
  - Improving memory, focus and concentration

- Health benefits
  - Reducing stress, delaying the onset of dementia

- Life benefits
  - More important for educational success than family’s socio-economic status (OECD, Results from PISA)
Reading and the purpose of school

- **Learning**
  - Reading is integral to scholarship
  - Reading satisfies and stimulates intellectual curiosity
  - Reading fosters independent thought

- **Personal fulfilment**
  - Finding out about the world
  - Understanding the human condition
  - Learning empathy
  - The power of imagination
Reading and the community

- Children’s reading is influenced by relationships:
  - Between teachers
  - Between teachers and children
  - Between children and families
  - Between children, teachers, families and communities

- As a result:
  - Current reading can be part of the e-signature
  - Teachers can read the same books as their students
  - Reading can be included in reporting
  - Reading can be discussed at parents’ meetings and other informal events
Reading and the community

- Parents have a big part to play:
  - Encourage parents to read to their children, young and old
  - Ask parents to encourage boys to read at home
  - Let boys read what they want

- And so do teachers:
  - Providing time for independent reading
  - Talking about books with boys
  - Promoting reading aloud
  - Recommending books to boys
  - Reading with boys in school, and to them
Reading: a ten point plan

- New boys’ reading list (1)
  - Answers on a postcard
  - Public displays

- Timetabled lessons (2)
  - For all boys, every week
  - DEAR
  - Pavlovian psychology

- Reading lists for everyone (3)
  - New boys, Summer, Winter lists from the library
  - Departmental lists available online

- Teachers reading too (4)
  - The same book as their students?
Reading: a ten point plan

- Keep a record (5)
  - Online tracking
  - And not just the title….

- Heads of Subject (6)
  - Incorporating the reading habit
  - Reporting every year

- Teachers encouraging reading (7)
  - In the form room
  - In silence
  - Out loud

- Other Libraries (8)
  - In houses / dormitories
  - In departments
  - Boys choosing titles
  - Boys running lending
Reading: a ten point plan

- Encouragement in the evenings (9)
  - Before academic work
  - During academic work
  - After academic work
  - Before bed

- Talking about books (10)
  - Discussion
  - Simple questions
  - Individual boys
  - Groups of boys
Formal unexamined courses

What are the challenges?
- Boys’ attitudes
- Teachers’ approaches
- Time in the timetable…
- …and priorities outside it

And what are the answers?
- Freedom of choice
- Frequency of rotation
- Putting them at the centre of planning
- The cultural landscape
Formal courses: Harrow’s Electives

- The meaning of Electives
  - In both senses in the Sixth Form: boys and beaks
  - In one sense in the lower school: beaks only

- The nature of Electives
  - Horizontal and vertical extension, catering for all
  - Light but regular prep (homework)
  - The starting point for the timetable
Formal courses: Harrow’s Electives

• Some examples in the Sixth Form
  • Super Physics
  • Philosophy
  • The Art of Programming
  • The History of Political Thought

• Some examples in the lower school
  • Introductions to History of Art, Politics, Economics
  • Critical thinking and evaluative reading
  • Oratory, Infinity, Etymology, Feminism, Rhythm & Poetry
Formal courses: practicalities

- Freedom of choice for teachers
  - Teachers invited to submit multiple proposals
  - Staffing requirements include examined and unexamined courses

- Freedom of choice for boys
  - The psychology of choosing their courses....
  - ..and the number of them

- Freedom of timing
  - Different regimes for different boys
  - Allowing boys to prioritise exams, inevitably
Formal courses: good practices

- Initiatives for teachers
  - On-line, pre-prepared courses
  - Harkness-style teaching
  - Mixing business and pleasure
  - Emphasising the visual
  - Ensuring a range
  - Different learning environments

- Activities for boys
  - Presentations
  - Posters
  - Flipped learning
  - Light learning
  - Peer assessment
  - Independence
  - Fear of failure…
External talks: outside the timetable

- **External to the timetable**
  - Twilight and evening lectures
  - Cross-curricular lectures

- **External to the school**
  - Visiting subject experts
  - Speakers with a high public profile
  - Balance to strike and bias to avoid
External talks: motivating attendance

- The challenges for boys
  - Competing demands on their time
  - Peer pressure
  - Lemming effect

- The solutions to those challenges
  - Courage in the curriculum
  - Mentoring schemes
  - Accounting for their time
  - Accounting for their parents’ money
External talks: hybrid model

- The Lyon Lecture Series
  - Rotating through subjects triennially
  - University lecturers invited for two days, resident
  - Compulsory lessons and optional lectures
  - Celebrating the academic life of departments
  - Inviting parents, other schools, other teachers
Internal talking

- An unsuccessful model
  - Why are they making us do this?
  - What is the point of this?
  - Why can’t I just get on with my work?
  - Do you remember….?

- The objective
  - Discussion among boys and teachers
  - Anticipation for the next event
  - Pride in attendance
  - Do you remember….?
Internal talking, both boys and teachers

- Cross-curricular lecture series
  - Themed, allowing boys to relate one to another
  - Evening lectures, but multiple speakers
  - Internally organised
  - Attended by teachers

- Structures for conversations
  - Informal, at the start of lessons and training sessions
  - Regular and formal, through teachers, tutors, house masters
  - Among groups of boys
Internal talking, among teachers

- Why did we choose our subjects in the first place?
  - Rediscovering and maintaining enthusiasm
  - Keeping up with scholarship and research

- The collegiate environment
  - Presenting to our peers
  - Enjoying the company of other practitioners

- The foundations for next year’s programme
  - Future unexamined courses?
  - Future lectures and presentations?
In summary….

- Reading: the cornerstone of conversation
- Unexamined courses: the life of the mind
- External talks: only as good as their audiences
- Internal talking: boys learning from each other, their teachers’ work done
And finally

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