Speech

DEMOS

Building everyday democracy

Cultural Age – Education Seminar - Introduction

This paper is a transcript of the introduction to a seminar on 'The Cultural Age and Education', supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council and given at Demos on 4 June 2008. It was the first of two seminars on 'The Cultural Age', the second being on 'The Cultural Age, Integration and Cohesion'.

This series of seminars looks, first, at the changing importance of culture in the world today and, then, the skills we will need to accommodate and respond to that change.

From the outset, it's important to step back and situate that discussion in a wider context.

Many of the issues that the seminars will be tackling stem from a wider struggle to make sense of the world and the changes around us, and this takes place as conventional means of doing so seem less effective.

Senses of identities seem less secure, and global governance seems increasingly impotent.

The universality of organisations like the IMF, WTO and even the UN seems incompatible with the specificity of different cultural milieu and attitudes.

As the public, we are also aware of grand shifts in power: the US remains the world's superpower, but its dominance is waning.

The rise of countries like India and China has led to greater awareness of difference and the impact that it can have, which has resulted in the spread, mixing and scrutiny of conflicting ideals and worldviews.

On the one hand, we are very conscious that different people will bring different attitudes to the same issues or challenges and, globally, significant forces, from Chinese Development to radical Islam are challenging comfy consensuses around Western liberalism.

On the other hand, perceived boundaries between different cultures, nations and other groups are not always so useful in helping to understand the world.

Only last week, the Hollywood actress Sharon Stone raised a storm for suggesting that the Szechuan earthquake was a result of 'bad karma' ... the Chinese government paying the karmic price for treatment of Tibet.

Put another way that was a Hollywood actress, using Buddhism to criticise the government of a country whose own standpoint with regard the West is heavily influenced by Confucian and Buddhist thought, all communicated via global media networks from a platform provided by Western fashion brands.

There is a paradox of globalisation.

As advances in technology enable us to experience and encounter more and more cultures from around the world, people look to the familiar for security and reassurance.

As a result, senses of identity concretise just as global movement and communications are becoming more fluid.

We value individualism and the personal, but still need the security of collectivity.

Domestically, this is connected with worries about the decline of social capital. We recognise that the institutions to which we have traditionally looked for security – like the church, and even the state itself – no longer provide such surety, but we have yet to find ways either of replacing or refreshing them ... and we have yet to find ways to create new connections around which new concepts of a global society can be formed.

Similar challenges to identity are evident in government.

In tackling big social issues, the values of liberalism and the individual have clashed with the pragmatic need for intervention and mutual obligations.

To some extent, this has always been the case, but an emphasis on the personal and the sheer complexity of modern political challenges has combined to create a perfect storm.

When and how can governments act?

Recently, *The Observer* identified three huge issues that face Gordon Brown

These were Food, Fuel and Finance.

In each case, a senior expert was asked what the Prime Minister could do ... and in each case, they responded that he can't do much but deal with the **effects** of shortages and crises.

In other words, the big issues are out of the hands of any one government, let alone any one individual, and tackling them requires collective action and that means that we will also have to respond to change on an individual level

This sets a pressing challenge

Over the coming years – how are we going to provide people with the support and capacity to make the individual choices that will amount to collective change?

What skills will we need and where will we get them?

And what structures and spaces will we need?

In many cases, the effects and scale of issues makes our interdependence both clear and evident to all.

In itself, this emphasises the impotency of government, without collaboration and a sharing of responsibility with the public.

One example of an area in which this is occurring is terrorism ... another is climate change.

Well, the same applies to what we are calling here **The Cultural Age**

This is the importance of cultural understanding and interrelation to how we get along

Cultural interaction is coming to impact more significantly in political contexts, and the increased frequency with which we encounter different cultures means that it has become a feature of everyday and local contexts too.

The two are fundamentally inseparable.

Notoriously, Gordon Brown learned this lesson in the school of Big Brother

When Chancellor, he flew out to India to talk about trade negotiations, and in the time it took him to fly there and be briefed on the economics, Jade Goody had clashed with Shilpa Shetty about what were essentially cultural differences.

The resulting row had become a major issue in both the UK, and the wider world.

The result was that, when Gordon Brown landed in India, he didn't face questions about the economy, but about the impact of an individual clash of cultures in the public arena which had been broadcast rapidly around the world.

And the effect of this was amplified within the medium of popular culture and echoed as the story bounced from email to email and computer to computer around the world.

The incident revealed a good deal about the different levels at which culture operates.

It shows that culture is important as a space in which difference is encountered

And it shows how quickly cultural issues can morph and expand as a result of the very same technologies that have intensified cultural encounter.

It also shows how the prevalence and increased importance of diaspora communities created a global situation of an incident that occurred at a relatively local scale.

Overall, it emphasises the need to build both awareness of other cultures, and the capacity to accommodate difference.

These will come about by building cultural learning ... and active cultural engagement... into education.

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There is an important qualification to make: what do we mean by 'culture'?

The theorist Raymond Williams said that culture is one of the most difficult words in the English language to define.

It can mean anything from the habits, norms and behaviour of a given group, through to the more commercially-based definition of the kind of cultural engagements and products that people consume.

That's a very wide spectrum.

A definition that might help us as we try to put culture more centrally in government and educational agenda is of Culture as the everyday calculus of histories, behaviours, consumption and production that has made us - and makes us who we are - and identifies each one of us as being either different or similar to others.

It's evident as much in the objects we see in museums as it is in the objects and food we encounter in daily life and the products we create.

What connects these as a culture is the capacity to read meaning and identity in them.

The challenge now is to build those skills in reading across cultures, seeing difference as a starting point for conversation, rather than as a point for closure at which similarities end.

Too often, this is seen as a nuanced learning, limited to the academic study of cultures; but it is becoming clear that it will be essential to how we co-exist and manage relationships in the future

We need to find ways of making it more widespread.

We will **all** need skills of cultural interpretation and accommodation.

Major challenges, from global interrelation to community cohesion, will depend upon it.

It's important to think about this now because Communications technologies have become more advanced and more widely accessible.

And, as Travel is becoming easier, both in terms of the cost of transport and - within Europe - because border and immigration controls have been relaxed, Diaspora communities have become more prevalent and influential

The increased frequency with which we encounter different cultures means that there is more and more with which we have to cope.

Such an intensity of cultural encounter comes at a time at which the changes mentioned earlier are already challenging existing senses of identity.

Most notoriously, this has come across in the discussion of 'Britishness'.

The response to tragedies like the Tube bombings and other clashes of values has been to try to articulate and stipulate the values of what it means to be 'British'.

However, even if we *ever* could, we can't quite articulate what it means to be 'British': we know we're not American, French, or Italian, but what does being British actually mean?

In fact, that's where the problem arises in the first place, the multiplicity of values that people in the UK hold **cannot** be reduced to a concentrate of 'Britishness'.

Doing so misses the point entirely, it misses that the many cultures that comprise and make manifest those values are equally a part of the world in which we live today, and it emphasises the fact that many of the assumptions by which we operate and around which we structure our daily lives can't necessarily accommodate the very different values of many of our neighbours

What will matter is people's capacity to live in conversation with those who hold different values and form the social bonds on which community is based, and this boils down to providing them with the means to take action and make choices at an individual level that will contribute to the well-being and integration of the wider whole.

This is the case at the local level, in communities in the UK, and at the global level as we encounter many different cultures and many different understandings of different issues with greater and greater regularity.

To manage this, we need the skills both to find similarity in different outlooks, and accommodate difference without hostility, and as a starting point for conversation.

This can be called cultural literacy.

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This sets a new agenda

At the most basic level, cultural institutions present a good many of the cultural forms that can be both the means of overcoming – and on occasion a prompt for – debate and controversy.

As a result, the work that cultural professionals do to present that material in new and relevant ways - starting conversations - will become ever more important.

However, as well as providing information about different cultures, cultural organisations also have a role to play in helping build the skills to read cultures.

We need to think about what collaboration between them and educationalists and policy makers across all areas of government might look like in the future.

Similarly, research into cultures and cultural interaction can tell us much more about what sort of skills people will need.

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This agenda brings a new challenge, one that cultural professionals and academics are best placed to meet and one that requires bringing culture to greater prominence in education and other areas of policy..

By working with policy-makers, cultural professionals and researchers can help to ensure that the skills of cultural literacy are part of the learning of young people growing up in the UK today.

This isn't a challenge that will be met easily.

It raises questions about the traditional role of the expert and the trained professional and, in so doing, it presents a challenge to many within the cultural sector.

Expertise will become as much a matter of enabling cultural participation and incorporating the values that people bring with them, as simply providing information

The Cultural Age will require collaboration between professionals, academics and policy-makers in areas of government which might previously have had little to do with culture.

Perhaps most of all, it will require that we reassess many of the preconceptions that we have of what culture is, and similarly our expectations of the idea of cultural provision.

This is where we need research to provide an intellectual underpinning for such a grand project: and that is also where we can start.

Samuel Jones,

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