

TRIVIUM_{21c}

preparing
young
people
for the
future
with
lessons
from the
past

Martin Robinson

foreword by Ian Gilbert

 Independent Thinking Press

First published by
Independent Thinking Press
Crown Buildings, Bancyfelin, Carmarthen, Wales, SA33 5ND, UK
www.independentthinkingpress.com

Independent Thinking Press is an imprint of Crown House Publishing Ltd.

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First published 2013.

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue entry for this book is available
from the British Library.

Print ISBN 978-1-78135-054-6

Mobi ISBN 978-1-78135-084-3

ePub ISBN 978-1-78135-085-0

Edited by Peter Young

Printed and bound in the UK by
Gomer Press, Llandysul, Ceredigion

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Introduction

An Unexamined Life is not Worth Living

It is our moral obligation to give every child the very best education possible.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu

It has often been said that history is written by the winners. The same could be said about education. Articles, books, exams, courses, academic studies, textbooks, books on pedagogy, and even policies, are usually written by those who have a clutch of worthwhile exam results at secondary, university, and post-degree level. This, of course, makes a great deal of sense, but it does mean the system has a flaw. The voices of those who have not benefitted from schooling are not usually heard in the great education debate. If real change is going to happen, then those who have struggled in the system need to be heard; their experiences and ideas should be at the centre of the debate and not ignored at the margins.

I was what you would call a school failure. Yet somehow I ended up as an advanced skills teacher and an assistant head in East London. This introduction is not the story of how I arrived at those dizzying heights, but some background detail that explains why I have written this book.

Failure

My parents moved house when I was 12 and I took the opportunity to reinvent myself. My first year at secondary school in a large comprehensive on the outskirts of Oxford had proved instructive. I had been a good student: I did my classwork and my homework and I played the violin. In 1974 this was not a good combination and I had been marked out as an easy target for those who, shall we say, had a slightly more philistine view of the world. Although they were not outwardly violent, the threat was sufficiently compelling to force me to cut the horsehair of my violin bow and to acquiesce to having my exercise books ripped to pieces and thrown out of the window of the school bus. Even though this wasn't the reason my parents decided to move house, I was glad that we did. I started at my new secondary school, a rural Oxfordshire comprehensive, with one thing on my mind: I did not want to be the target of any vitriol due to a love of learning and playing a musical instrument.

Grammar School for No One

Luckily for me I wasn't challenged in my new school to do much study. It was 1975 and the school had recently become a comprehensive: a girls' grammar had amalgamated with a boys' secondary modern with predictable results. This traditional 'grammar school for all' hadn't bargained on the 'all'. The senior management team were almost entirely drawn from the girls' school and had no idea how to cope with boys, let alone those who'd had their expectations shaped by being confined to a second-rate education. It was glorious, awful chaos. As I was a new boy, untainted by any particular history, I was immediately put in the bottom set for everything, until they realized that perhaps I had 'potential', and I was then immediately moved into the top set for everything. Even though I had missed out a couple of months learning, no one thought to help me catch up. I didn't care anyway; I had already ingratiated myself with some of my fellow bottom-setters; two in particular had already asked me for a fight. One of them

I dispatched with relative ease in the school washroom, and the other, who had challenged me on the staircase, foolishly from a lower position, was easily toppled. This was going to be easy!

The chaos of the school continued in the classrooms. Teachers who could hack it were OK; those who couldn't weren't. And there was never any backup for those in need. When it came time for the headmistress to retire, the school staff made it very clear what they wanted: a traditional, disciplinarian head who could sort out the boys. I was, by this time, coming up to my O levels and hadn't done much apart from cultivate a rebellious nature, so that when the new head arrived we were not destined to hit it off.

I was not the sort of rebel who would burn down the school; I was far subtler than that. I started a school newspaper, I set up a debating society, and I was trying to set up a branch of the National Union of School Students. In lessons I would ask questions and challenge what was being taught. I was most probably a proverbial pain in the posterior. Despite being put in detention on occasion, and even whacked with a slipper, no one seemed to worry unduly about my incomplete classwork and lack of homework. I sat my O levels and got three at grade A–C and one CSE grade one, which was an O level 'equivalent'. I stayed in the sixth form to do A levels and to resit some O levels; I achieved two more in November 1979. However, my attitude wasn't liked, my refusal to wear the newly introduced school uniform for sixth formers wasn't going well, and when I was told off for not wearing the new tie, I turned up the next day wearing the tie but no shirt. I was sent home.

Rock 'n' Roll

This was all very wearisome, both for the school and for myself, but the roots went further back. At no point had I seen the purpose of this poor 'traditional' education I was being offered. Perhaps, had I arrived at the school five years later, the more ordered atmosphere that was being brought in would have inspired me to be the academic student I needed to be, but I shall never know. After a meeting with the headmaster at the end

of 1979 I left ‘by mutual consent.’ I had five O levels and one grade one CSE. This was my winter of discontent. My education was to be found in the pages of the *NME*, the lyrics of the Clash, Ian Dury, Elvis Costello, and the theories I had come across while researching David Bowie, piecing together learning based on a left-field look at the arts, resistance, and pop culture.

Away from the world of sex ‘n’ drugs and rock ‘n’ roll, I worked in Oxford Polytechnic Library, then spent a year trying to get A levels at the college of further education, a place where ‘progressive methods’ held sway in the arts and humanities. Looking back, I see another wasted year. I was incredulous at the behaviour of some of the lecturers who thought nothing of luring their young female students into bed. I even had the wife of one of these lecturers trying to do the same with me, though somewhat unsuccessfully.

My social life at 17 was far more important to me, so when I got a job at a market in the middle of Oxford selling joke items and novelties, this seemed to me to be far more useful. I worked six days a week, had money in my pocket, and was having fun. The stall’s turnover doubled, as did the stall. I discovered I had a gift for retail and stayed there for two years, only leaving it for a job as a window salesman! Again, I was a success, and quickly promoted. However, I knew this wasn’t the career for me, so I set up my own business promoting bands and, in between times, being a parcel delivery driver for Securicor.

University: An Act of Belonging or Subverting?

Although I was often in Oxford, my only firsthand experience of the university had come from attending a party at a college where an acquaintance was studying. This was quite eye opening. A student came up to me, ‘Where are you from?’ I said, ‘Oxford.’ ‘Oh,’ he replied, ‘which college?’ ‘Er,’ I said, ‘not the university, I am *from* Oxford.’ If looks could kill – he stared, incredulously, ‘Oh ...’ And at that he walked off without so much as a by-your-leave – the town versus gown atmosphere of Oxford in the 1970s and early 1980s was so marked. My vision of what a highly educated person

looked like and sounded like was shaped, indelibly, by seeing them walking around town as if they owned the place – maybe some of them actually did!

It was at this time that I saw an advert in *The Face* for a degree course at a polytechnic in London, a course called cultural studies. It seemed tailor-made for me. The course director took a punt and enrolled me onto the course despite my lack of qualifications. At the age of 23 I was studying again, for the first time since I was 11 years old. I struggled at first: because I had no academic grounding to fall back on, I had no way in. My poly was an old cigarette factory in Stratford, East London. This was education that didn't look like education; this was education as subversion – just the sort I liked. Miraculously, I got a 2:1 BA honours degree, something I never thought would happen. In my spare time I set up an arts group with others, called The Big Picture, and we wrote, produced, directed, and performed in plays, including a punk musical I wrote that went on to be performed on the stage of the Theatre Royal Stratford East. Now, I was waiting for the world to open its arms and invite me into its inner sanctum. As it turned out, I became an advertising salesperson at *Marxism Today*.

Working in the hub of the Communist Party of Great Britain was fascinating, especially as I was the 'capitalist' wing. I loved the dichotomy. I sold more advertising space for the magazine than anyone else had done before. Strangely, *Marxism Today* seemed to be employing the same Oxbridge types I had come across before, only these were lefty ones. I realized that no matter what your politics were, it was your education that held you in good stead. Yes, I could sell advertising space, windows, and novelties, but being a salesman wasn't going to satisfy me sufficiently; I needed to do something more positive. I was headhunted by a national newspaper – the sales manager had heard I was good at selling. I met him in a pub in London's West End, dressed as poorly as I could, looking like the worst sort of lefty nightmare someone in advertising could come across. It worked; I had broken my ties with that world. I resigned from *Marxism Today* and applied to take a PGCE in that most subversive of subjects, Drama.

Teaching

I did my teaching practice in what was called then a 'sink' school in Canning Town. I did well as a teacher and, at the end of the course, I got a job and spent the next 20 years of my life as a drama teacher. Early on, I also doubled as an English teacher, not that I knew how to teach English. In drama I was successful, becoming a head of department, head of faculty, advanced skills teacher, and assistant head teacher. Ofsted always judged my work to be outstanding. Yet, as I continued teaching, I became more aghast at what was happening to education. It had become the opposite of the sink-or-swim experience that I had grown accustomed to during my schooling.

Now, the whole system was so controlling of knowledge that pupils had become totally dependent on their teachers. Data followed each child; if any were in danger of getting a D they would be tracked mercilessly. The exams changed and became exercises in writing only what was deemed acceptable by the exam board. It was the awarding body who told teachers what they wanted to see, and who sold them the textbooks they had produced in order to do it. Successful schools seemed to be those that best played the system. Alas, the children who seemed to do well were those who acquiesced the most. I didn't want spoon-fed factory fodder. I wanted a flicker of rebellion alongside the ability to traverse within society as full citizens. I wanted creative sparks who could also contribute.

Parenting

Then I became a father. Having seen what was happening in education, I now was wondering: what kind of education do I want for my daughter? Certainly not the one I'd had, and also not the systematized schooling that we educators are churning out now. Was there another way?

This then is my aim: I want my daughter and other children to have an education that will enable them to live 'a good life' and attain the necessary

wisdom that will equip them for the challenges of the 21st century and yes, though it seems a long way off, beyond.

The Quest

The purpose of education is to change people's lives. How it can best do this is the subject of this book. The question is: how do we want to see our young people change? This book examines some of the history of education to find out what is still valuable and explores how we might use the rich tradition of the trivium to help understand the roots of great teaching and learning. I hope that readers of this book – whether you are students, teachers, or parents – will find something of interest between the covers.

In the process of writing this book I found myself reading books I wish I had been directed towards at an earlier point in my education. I have explored philosophy, classics, art, science, literature, European studies, linguistics, logic, politics, and cognitive psychology, as well as revisiting areas from cultural theory, theatre, and pedagogy. I have been extraordinarily lucky on my journey to be able to count on people with real expertise in all these areas, who were most willing to enlighten me with their knowledge and thinking around the issues I was encountering, many for the first time. Without being able to talk things through with them, I would not have been able to attempt the book and my quest would have remained unexamined.

Chapter 1

A Trivial Pursuit?

Ringmaster: (*with a monkey dressed up as a man*) Roll up, ladies and gentlemen. Examine this beast as God created him. Nothing to him, you see? Then observe the effect of art: he walks upright and has a coat and trousers ...

Georg Büchner, *Woyzeck*

Drama Teacher

Those who can, do; those who can't, teach. With that hoary old adage ringing in my ears, at the age of 29, I entered the teaching profession. Good grief. What was I, an educational failure, doing here in the very profession that had managed *not* to educate me all those years ago? But here I was, employed as a teacher of drama and English. I quickly went about ensuring I got my classroom survival sorted out: not smiling before Christmas and negotiating that bizarre relationship between one adult and 30 teenagers, based on 'Somehow, together, we have to get through this' and, well, generally, we did.

One thing became clear to me: my main subject, drama, was not really a subject in the usual sense of the word. Somewhere along the line it had become 'educational drama,' a methodology for exploring sociological issues. On my PGCE I had been introduced to schemes of work covering

homelessness, drugs, suicide, and all sorts of other explorations of the seamy side of life. This was drama as social commentary. I was introduced to ‘freeze-frames’ – where social relations between the powerful and powerless could be explored, and ‘conscience alleys’ – where two lines of children would watch the protagonist walk between them and they would call out what was in the protagonist’s head (usually some utterance about misery due to homelessness, drugs, or suicide). It was deadly and strangely uncreative, and I struggled with this approach during the early stages of my teaching.

In the GCSE drama exam children had to work in groups to prepare, through improvisation, a devised piece of original theatre. I went to see what work schools were producing for these final exams. There would be many chairs, with kids sitting on them, talking of misery. Every now and then a character would die, usually at the denouement, and there would be much wailing and gnashing of teeth. Drama education seemed to be firmly stuck in the black-and-white social realism of the 1960s. Paradoxically, it was also extraordinarily unrealistic and it did not move me; its inauthenticity shone through. I decided then and there that this was not what I wanted to be teaching.

Creative Liberation

My first move was to ‘ban’ chairs – a ridiculous act, but a liberating one. This was the time when physical theatre was all the rage and I wanted to embrace that energy. Instead of issues, I wanted physicality; instead of talking, I wanted activity. Theatre is a physical subject; I summed this up with the phrase ‘Movement First’. Our drama lessons were physical because acting is the art of doing. In discipline terms, this became problematic so I introduced stillness too: the act of ‘centring’ where the actor stands still with their eyes closed for a period of time. This then became the beginning of lessons. I would wait until every participant had centred before the lesson would start. We were all actors, so we all had to ‘act’. I got rid of unnecessary homework: writing about misery and colouring in pictures of misery, and replaced it with a notebook in which kids would be expected to

Education policy and practice is a battleground. Traditionalists argue for the teaching of a privileged type of hard knowledge and deride soft skills. Progressives deride learning about great works of the past, preferring soft 21st century skills such as creativity and critical thinking. By looking at the great thinkers from Ancient Greece to the present day and through interviews with opinion formers, policy makers and practitioners, including Alain de Botton, Daniel T. Willingham, Matthew Taylor and Elizabeth Truss MP, this book explores whether a contemporary trivium (Grammar, Dialectic and Rhetoric) can unite institutions, teachers, politicians and parents in the common pursuit of providing a great education for our children in the 21st century.

Martin Robinson sets out on a quest to discover the kind of education he wishes for his daughter and we all learn a great deal in the process. I love his writing: wise, well informed, provocative, thinking-out-loud. Robinson engages his reader from first to last. A terrific feat.

Melissa Benn, writer and author of [School Wars: The Battle for Britain's Education](#)

Trivium 21c is essential reading for all educators and observers of the seemingly endless public debate about education who wish to go beyond simplistic polarities and find a way to integrate and relate in a historical context seemingly contradictory approaches.

*Ian Bauckham, Head Teacher and President,
Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) 2013-14*

In schools today a focus on contemporary relevance too often trumps educational depth. Martin Robinson makes a compelling case that turning instead to the tradition of the liberal arts can open the minds of a new generation.

Marc Sidwell, co-author of [The School of Freedom](#), Managing Editor City A.M.

For the open-minded reader there is much to learn. I agree with Robinson that for students to acquire a sound blend of knowledge, questioning expertise, and communication skills (i.e. the trivium) is the basis of a great education.

Dr Jacek Brant, Head of Curriculum, Pedagogy and Assessment (CPA), Senior Lecturer in Business Education, Institute of Education, University of London

Anybody interested in education, citizenship, or how we want our children to learn would find this a thought-provoking read.

Sunder Katwala, Director of British Future, the independent think tank

After 20 years working in London in state schools – as teacher, head of department, AST, senior leader and QCA associate with a focus on creativity – **Martin Robinson** is now a parent, writer and consultant with an interest in how the arts should influence education.

 www.independentthinkingpress.com

ISBN 978-178135054-6

US \$30.95



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Education