Crossing the Boundaries of Cultural Difference in a Free World

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Thinking, expression, imagination and creativity give individuals the intellectual opportunity to open doors to new worlds. The ability to employ these characteristics is prized in free and open societies throughout the world, and is actively encouraged in democratic education. Arts education has been the traditional ground where artists are encouraged to use artistic licence and freedom of speech to explore and challenge social issues.

In Britain the introduction of Citizenship as a national curriculum subject was brought in with high expectations to help foster a sense of community, social responsibility and awareness of cultural differences, yet Ofsted evidence shows that Citizenship is the worst taught subject in the curriculum at Key Stage 3 and 4 while Art and Design is the best taught subject at these levels (Smithers, 2005).

At the same time in Britain, reports suggest that freedom of speech and open intellectual debate is presently under threat as certain politically inspired groups seek to silence and control the way individuals work together to voice questions, concerns and beliefs about racial difference.

When individual free speech becomes threatened and we are not allowed to think and talk openly, and imagine new and creative solutions to problems, we are in danger of creating divisive boundaries within society. Boundaries act as deterrents to stop us moving forward to solve the problems we all face as a global society in our shrinking world.

Barriers are created because individuals experience fear and insecurity.

There may be many genuine reasons to create boundaries, and certainly there have been legitimate reasons for this as we examine world history. Physical structures such

as castles, moats and walls such as the great wall of China, the Berlin wall and the Israeli security fence were built to secure the lives of people under direct threat of attack. These physical structures guarded and kept threatened groups of people safe until such time as social and cultural differences were addressed and the physical barriers became monuments to past times and the victory of empathy, peace and understanding amongst warring peoples.

The phenomenon of peace is only possible if humans have the intellectual capacity to imagine it and the voice to express the need for peace in free societies. Individuals must be encouraged to examine and debate different cultural values and propose ideas about how to achieve cultural understanding, harmony and peace between different racial groups.

In developing creative imagination and encouraging the examination of cultural differences, education must provide tools for understanding and knowledge. Education must also provide a safe forum where issues can be discussed freely without fear of reprisal.

Jacques Derrida used the intellectual strategy of *difference* to encourage the examination of power relationships in society (Derrida in Easthope and McGowan 1992). An examination of *difference* in socio-cultural 'values' in education encourages students to take a philosophical approach to critical thinking. This is exciting, as it points out the variance of human perception in different historical and cultural contexts. Truth in contemporary Science is different from scientific truth of the past. Truth in Renaissance art is different from truth in Post-modern art. Truth in Christian and Islamic religions differ between different sects and creeds of Christian and Muslim peoples, as it does in all religions.

The exploration of the arts and culture in the history of civilisation is a pre-eminent subject in a national curriculum which aims to help develop understanding of how the world's societies have constructed and expressed their different belief systems. For each new generation of people, it is important to develop knowledge of how their own and other societies were structured, how they behaved and how they overcame difficulties particularly in times of crisis and indeed war. In British education Art and Design has been praised as the most successful school subject and one that

successfully raises students awareness to cultural issues from the past to the present (Ofsted 2005).

When groups of individuals and social groups feel threatened, they create walls of secrecy around themselves. This in its extreme sense can be passed on to the next generation by actively denying children access to historical factors and controversial opinions. This is well documented. For example; Japanese children were denied knowledge of the Japanese involvement in WW2; a generation of Australian children were denied access to the fact that at the same time they were growing up, Aboriginal children were stolen away from their families and brought up in "white missionary" families to be inculcated with Christian belief systems seen to be more "civilised" than the ancient spirituality of the Aboriginal Dreamtime. *Aboriginal people did not choose to live as a minority within an alien culture, while immigrant groups came to new countries either by choice or to escape more serious difficulties in their countries of origin (Irwin, Rogers and Farrell, 1999).* These countries however have now acknowledged these injustices, while others such as Burma remain shrouded in secrecy controlled by military rule.

The world has always been vulnerable to the pervasive and often destructive influences of missionary zeal in its many forms. Indoctrination happens when dominant power groups wish to dominate poorer and more vulnerable groups of people and when they wish to use people for their own ends. Today, throughout the world, the growth of Islam carries with it a growth in fear and insecurity which has polarised communities and different religious groups and resulted in wars and deaths. The difficulties associated with all fundamentalist religions, is that medieval doctrines dominate the religious belief systems. When those in power attempt to enforce extremist religious views, individuals are controlled and given little freedom of speech or freedom of individual thought. These extremist religious beliefs threaten the heart of democratic values and cause serious problems in societies throughout the world as we have recently witnessed in Iraq, where the majority of citizens of Iraq voted for democracy in their country amid extreme violence from terrorist groups.

In Britain, the Prince of Wales recently held a private summit of Christian and Muslim leaders to explore the centuries old Islamic law under which "apostates" face persecution and even death for converting from Islam to other faiths. This serious issue

has arisen as hundreds of Muslims who have converted to Christianity in a number of Islamic states including Sudan, have been executed by the enforcement of fundamentalist Islamic "Sharia" law resulting in serious human rights abuses.

Indeed, it is a revelation to learn that all the main Islamic laws state that apostasy- the abandonment of one's Muslim faith- is punishable by death, and any criticism which is perceived to offend the Prophet Mohammed or even a depiction of his image is wrong and the culprit must be punished. Salman Rushdie's book *Satanic Verses* was banned in 1988, when Muslims objected to his portrayal of the Prophet Mohammed. The difficulty with these extreme views is that we deal here with perceptions and an imaginative interpretation of right and wrong. Who is to know whether the Prophet would have been offended, rather, in our earthly circles, condemnation of certain individuals who are deemed to be infidels is judged by humans who really cannot talk on the Prophet Mohammed's behalf. Truth becomes nebulous and unlikely to be able to be proven in a court of law, when religious facts are indeed often imaginative perception and interpretation, and truth differs even between individuals within congregations.

The religious discussions which took place recently at Clarence House at the invitation of the Prince of Wales were reportedly positive, however during the summit the Prince was cautioned by Muslim representatives against speaking publicly on the issue (Petre 2004). In November 2004, the film director Theo Van Gogh was murdered in Amsterdam by Muslims because his film *Submission* exposed the abuse of Muslim women. Recently there were violent clashes at the Birmingham Repertory Theatre in December 2004 by 400 Sikhs who opposed the play *Behzti* by Guurpreet Kaur Bhatti (herself a young Sikh) which also portrayed violence against women in a Sikh temple, this is further evidence that the rise of fundamentalism aims to silence artistic freedom of expression.

Jeffries and Muller (1997: 331) agree with Anthony Giddens who pointed out that globalisation impacts not only on local life but on the intimacies of personal life which leads to the fracturing of communities and the creation of new conflicts. In this climate there is a tendency to resort to fundamentalism or violence.

The silencing of religious debate by threats and violence, is repugnant to all those who wish to debate issues openly in a contemporary multicultural world. Silencing is a

subtle form of control, which is against democratic law as it seeks to negate social equality and challenges freedom of speech.

Medieval threats, violence and revenge killings are unlawful acts in peaceful European societies, however religious and political gagging appears to be on the rise. Barriers and divisions are created by ownership and control. Like property, people have increasingly become commodities to be owned and controlled by religious groups.

Individual choice and indeed our individual voice in today's contemporary free world is under threat. Attempts to ban Israeli academics from intellectual activity at certain British universities because some political activists want to silence debate is anti-intellectual. Dialogue between groups with significant differences both within and outside societies is the only way forward to peace and understanding. It would seem that those who wish to exclude certain groups of people from cross cultural dialogue in any open university system are clearly being discriminatory, overtly political and it would seem racist in their beliefs.

Great Britain, and indeed the world, must continue to encourage open intellectual debate associated with the development of legal policies particularly in relation to laws affecting racial difference. Racial hatred is not new, it arises when particular groups of people attempt to dominate others and wars create a psychological malaise of fear and insecurity.

As individuals witness and are affected by continued violence within societies whose citizens' intent is to live in peace, questions arise as to how fundamentalist belief can fit harmoniously into the contemporary world. Individuals must not live in fear of being bullied, victimised, terrorised or killed because they seek to ask difficult and challenging questions.

Fears created post New York September 11, polarised world beliefs and understandings. As a direct consequence wars are being fought across the globe where we witness one religion pitted against another and some religions actively oppose the freedom of some individual's democratic right to their own choice of a belief system.

Democracy is founded on freedom of speech and social equity, and it has been proven that an open democratic society can establish harmonious multicultural relationships.

Silencing intellectual debate in a free democratic society must be seen as an unwelcome and subtle act of control and aggression.

Charles Moore explored the problems succinctly when he raised the issue about Islamists attempting to silence inter-religious dialogue in his recent newspaper article. He said: "*how does a belief system founded in part on conquest, and preaching of a virtual identity between religious and political power, live at ease in plural, free and secular societies?*" (Moore 2004).

Moore's article in the *Daily Telegraph* was later misinterpreted by the London based representative of the League of Arab States, whose published reply turned Moore's arguments around to focus on his own perceived persecution of Christians in Israel which missed the point of Moore's arguments completely, suggesting a serious need for the educational development of sound critical analysis rather than attempts to silence dialogue or shift blame to a scapegoat such as Israel. Indeed the Muslim Council of Britain' s choice to boycott Holocaust Remembrance day this year seeks to incite the same kind of racial hatred we all wish to avoid in a free world (Leppard 2005). When facts become skewed for the purpose of propaganda, cultural difficulties arise.

Great Britain has grown proudly into a sophisticated multicultural society where sixty one million citizens live in peace with a myriad of values and belief systems. Open dialogue and education has helped to resolve entrenched racial hatred on many fronts. As the world wages war it would seem this is now seriously under threat.

Education has a powerful role to play in continuing to explore cultural differences and maintain democratic values by encouraging individualism and free expression, through the examination of a variety of cultural and religious values and beliefs systems from the past and the present. Education must not be stymied by politically correct policy which seeks to silence intelligent dialogue. Education must aim to be inclusive rather than separatist in order that citizens can understand each other and live in societies free of racial, political and religious barriers.

The Arts help society to explore and challenge personal, racial, political, social and cultural issues. As Dominic Dromgoole the artistic director of the Oxford stage company stated in response to the Birmingham Sikh riots;

> *Now, more than ever, it is theatre's role not to be bullied by religious or ideological sensibilities. Now that various forms of fundamentalism are queuing up to close the shutters on the windows of enlightenment- and Sikhism ranks a great deal beneath Christianity for potent offence at this moment- it is more important than ever that theatre finds various ways of saying no to the various blind yeses that are so ardently promoted (Dromgoole, 2004).*

By challenging mainstream perceptions and increasing cultural understandings, arts education can help to minimise fears and strengthen national stability by encouraging students to understand other peoples' cultural beliefs and values. Developing cultural capital through education is the first and most important step toward national security in any country. Mason (Boughton and Mason 1999:16) argues that multiculturalism offers art educators a basis for asking questions about a variety of cultural issues related to elitism, identity, attitudes and perceptions of others. Mason explains that multicultural education proposed by UNESCO is one that promotes dialogue between cultures and obstructs cultural intolerance (Gagliardi,1995 in Boughton and Mason 1999: 15)

David Bell, Her Magesty's Chief Inspector of Schools, recently stated that;

> *Britain's diversity has the potential to be one of its greatest strengths. But diverse does not mean completely different and it certainly must not mean segregated or separate. Religious segregation, for example, must not put our coherence at risk (Bell 2005).*

Bell's directives suggest sound use of consociation strategies by politicians to manage potential tensions, anxieties and conflicts associated with cultural fragmentation (Dogan in Spybey 1997:311). Education which advocates and encourages open debate, voice and freedom of speech, opens the minds of individuals. The old saying the pen is mightier than the sword has profound significance. Education is the most successful and peaceful weapon of national security in any society. If peace is the aim of the society in which we want to live, then educators must use all their skills to teach children about their own as well as other world cultures by developing informed and questioning minds, able to examine and understand cultural difference.

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