

OTHER CONTRIBUTIONS

Silence in the Village: The Place of Silence in “The Village Project”

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I want to talk about the Village Project. This is a project that we do in my school where the whole of Year 8, that's 52 children aged 12 and 13, build a village in the school grounds. They then live in it for a week and sleep in their huts, cook their own food, decide on the form of governance they want and they don't go to lessons or mix with the rest of the school. This screened-off settlement becomes a place apart where they form their own community through a process that is facilitated by the staff. I want to talk about why we do this and what it has to do with notions of silence. But first, to say something about the context.

My school, The King Alfred School in North London, was started over a hundred years ago by a group of Hampstead parents as a reaction to the schools of the day, which were characterised by a strict, heavy-handed form of Christianity, an over reliance on exams and compartmentalised subjects.

The original conception of the school sprang out of the Rational Movement and Theosophy with its emphasis on the “Brotherhood of Man.” At that time King Alfred's was called a Rational School, one of the first to be co-educational and in fact was opened by one of the leading

suffragettes of the day. As a 4 to 18 school it emphasised a liberal, outdoor education with minimal exams and a cross-curricular approach. Today, what was conceived as a non-denominational school tends to be viewed as a secular progressive school.

My role in the school is, and has been for the past 25 years, Head of Design and Technology and Personal, Social and Health Education.

A few weeks ago, a small team from the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills, led by Professor John Perkins came and spent a day with us. They wanted to know how we taught DT and how we inspired students to become design engineers.

I think the answer we gave took them by surprise.

To start with, we like to work with what we call primary, secondary and tertiary processes. Primary meaning using materials directly from their source, for example wood split from a whole log, iron from ore, raw wool and so on, formed by using basic technologies. Secondary involves using materials from a shop and modern tools and machines; and tertiary is CAD, CAM or using computers to design and machines like lasers and 3D printers to make. For us,

all these are important and form part of what we mean by an integrated approach.

Our visitors saw examples of all this but they also saw students building huts for the village and later in the day they saw them chairing a whole year meeting where they were trying to work out the form of governance they wanted for the village. This, we said, is all part of the design process for us and, in fact, increasing numbers of our students go on to follow careers in design.

So, to get back to the village, we first did this project 23 years ago and completed our 4th village just recently. The aim of the project is to ring fence a place and time in the school when the students can learn in a different way. They are freed from the normal demands of school—no lessons and homework—but in other ways the time is far more demanding. Each day a wide range of activities was on offer from blacksmithing—making accessories for their huts—and pizza making—they built a couple of bread ovens—to writing a village journal, storytelling with a professional storyteller, bushcraft, rough science, foraging, astronomy, music and pottery. They had the freedom to choose any of these activities or none but they had to produce something to represent their time in the village and put on an exhibition at the end.

They were all allowed knives for whittling and general use and each hut had to make their own fires to cook their meals. Most huts ended up lighting three fires a day and there were 12 huts. On the first day there were one or two huts that struggled with the fires and went a bit hungry. There were also about 5 cut fingers that day as they got used to the knives in spite of the training we had given them. But there were

no more cuts after that and they became expert at the fires.

The main role of the teachers was safety and controlling noise after 9.00 at night, and gradually the students took on more responsibility for running the village.

Perhaps the most challenging rule imposed by the staff was that the students were not allowed mobile phones or any other piece of electronic equipment, apart from torches. However, it was surprising how quickly they adjusted to this.

The main aims of the village were to learn something about independent learning, how to build a community and what is involved in what the Design Council call “big design.” During the week, the whole village met first thing in the morning to hear about the activities on offer that day and to discuss any issues that had arisen: and there were many. They had another meeting after lunch for the same purpose, both being chaired by the students. Before each meeting we had a short period of silence to allow them to collect themselves, think about what they were doing or just be aware of the sounds around them.

This then brings us to silence and its place in the village.

There are a lot of different types of silence in a child’s life. There is the draconian controlled silence, the: “Be quiet and get on with your work” type of silence. Then there is the passive, watching TV type of silence, and finally there is the punishment silence: “You have all behaved so badly that I want you to sit in silence until the bell goes.” So children have a strange relationship with silence.

When I asked a class if they ever sat in silence out of choice, perhaps when sitting in the garden or in their rooms, there was

some puzzlement about my question. Their response was that, in any situation like that, they would listen to music or go on the computer. Most, rarely, if ever, experienced boredom. Then one boy said: "There is one time when we are all silent and that is on Remembrance Day when we are silent for one minute." So, one minute, once a year. We then tried a silence for 2 minutes, after which they said they would like to do it again at the start of the next lesson which surprised me.

The point here is that these students were not averse to silence, they just didn't know much about it and it certainly didn't play any part in their lives.

During the village the silence they had before the meetings in the whole group of 52 students was awkward to begin with but by the end they had learnt to be still as well as silent and many said they enjoyed it and that it helped them to become aware of where they were and what they were doing.

But that's not the end of it. These silences were just punctuated moments, they were there to set the tone. The fact is, the village was set up to provide the conditions for entering in, these were the preliminary conditions for a more fertile type of silence. I am not here talking about a contemplative silence, or a kind of Buddhist suspension of thought. We were more interested in the type of silence that can be a source of creative thought.

These conditions were an emphasis on self-reliance, a freedom from coercion—they could choose what to do and when. They were responsible for time and how they used it, there were good procedures for resolving conflicts, and they were clear about what they were trying to achieve in the week. All of this released them to some extent from their usual anxieties, and in

that sense the free flowing nature of the village was providing the preconditions for a type of silence, and receptive stillness.

There were moments when some were seen from time to time sitting around silently drinking in the atmosphere. This was especially so with those who were first up, sitting silently by their fires waiting for the others to wake. But then there were other times of sitting that became an encounter with boredom and we made no attempt to shield them from this. I remember one girl from the 1990 village who said that she discovered that boredom could be a kind of creative pondering. She later went on to Cambridge and became a vet.

However, I particularly like the response of two very academic girls who said that they spent one day doing nothing just hanging about or sitting up trees watching the rest of the village. They explained that it was the most important day for them because they hardly ever experienced doing nothing, as their lives were always full of something.

What is interesting here is that even though they might have been quietly chatting or moving about in some way, they were brushing with silence and it seemed to be nourishing.

I would say that they were almost ready for the kind of silence that can be a source of creative inspiration. The kind of silence that some people can access when they are on holiday, especially if they are naturally creative, only in this case they were not on holiday, quite the opposite. But, it is the kind of silence that can emerge when an individual feels comfortable and recognised in the community group. The social receptacle seems to be important. When an individual's differences are accepted or

even celebrated, when they feel trusted, when they feel they have a voice and when the community group is clear about its purpose, it can generate that general sense of well-being.

This is a silence that is free from anxiety; a silence that is characterised by an experience of stillness. This is very much an inner stillness and does not always refer to an absence of movement. Then again this is not a vacant silence or a dreamy silence. Neither is it a silence where the mind is busy with some thought or problem. It is also not a contemplative silence where the focus might be on the breath or the stream of thoughts or the suspension of thought altogether, important though this might be.

This is an accessible poised silence characterised by its immediacy and stillness; one in which the attention settles on whatever it wants but in a light, uninvolved and relaxed way.

When this kind of silence is possible people sometimes talk about the creative flow that seems to come as a result.

A second type of silence in the village is the short silence before meetings, which is best described as a tuning silence as it functions as a moment of preparation before action. A moment when individuals can be aware of where they are and what they are doing, it is also a moment of being aware of themselves in that setting. In this sense it settles and tunes them and perhaps helps them to be more resonant.

A third form of silence we encourage is what I would call a clarifying silence. A type of silence where someone finds a place on their own and then uses their time to hold an unresolved problem in silence, without thinking about it, just holding the tension or the overall sense of that state.

This again should be a state that is free from the anxiety of solving the problem, more one where it is being held or even gently toyed with, not unlike that state just before falling asleep, where if a problem can be mused over without anxiety it can lead to surprising breakthroughs.

So what has this got to do with inspiring kids to become design engineers? The answer is that the profession is changing, as is the training of designers. At least that's so in places like Goldsmiths, Northumbria, the Royal College of Art and the Design Academy in Eindhoven. There is beginning to be less emphasis on specialist areas such as automotive design and furniture design, and in its place is, what Goldsmiths is now calling, the post-disciplinary approach. The role of the designer is also predicted to change as their skills become more widely understood and used in a much broader range of fields, many not normally associated with design. Designers now take account of the political, the social, the economic, the psychological, the ethical, in fact everything that might impinge on a situation

The qualities expected of a designer are also changing with someone as eminent as Ilsa Crawford at the Design Academy in Eindhoven saying that the most important attribute and starting point for a designer, whether design engineer or fashion designer, is empathy. You only have to look at the design of some computer programmes to see what happens when it is absent.

So the Village is like a laboratory where the students can try things out and learn about all aspects of the design process; whether it's personal, political or practical. They learn how engineering fits into the whole scheme when they are building their

huts but they also learnt about town planning when they chose their plots. They design all aspects of living in a hut and their living and cooking spaces outside. They also have to design their form of

governance. In fact, they learn about everything needed to build a community.

I hope this gives some idea of what we mean by another way of learning and the growing place within that project of the place and function of silence.

Author details

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