

Can we teach CULTURE?

If you want to ensure a rich future for your students, make sure they possess cultural capital, advises **Hannah Day**...

Cultural capital' has made it into edspeak. Something of a buzzterm, it's not specifically mentioned within Ofsted inspections currently, but it came up frequently in conversations around the regulator's 2019 framework, and its detail that inspectors would be looking for schools to offer a 'rich and broad curriculum'. So what is it? And why all the fuss?

The term was originally coined by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, and is perhaps best understood if broken down into three applicable sections – 'objective', 'embodied' and 'institutional'.

Objective capital

As educators, the institutional element of cultural capital should be second nature to us. This refers to the type of sought after qualifications leading to positive post-educational outcomes we're all helping students to achieve. But what of the other two?

Objective capital relates to less quantifiable qualities, such as being well-read, knowledgeable of the arts, well-travelled or well-versed in other nations' cultures, histories or political structures.

As an A Level art teacher who's passionate about the contextual aspect of art provision, I often see marked differences in students' objective capital. Take Bauhaus – someone with

limited objective capital will be able to assess the visual aspect of said art movement, noting its clean lines, limited colours and simplicity. Someone with high objective capital will be able to engage with, and explain how its founders responded to their time in the WWI trenches and return to a broken Germany by formulating design principles that aimed to make life flow and function accessibly for all.

Understanding people, theories and events in relation to wider contexts can only be achieved by students practised in objective capital. Students able to widen their understanding of topics, beyond what can be covered in class time, will connect more deeply to them.

Contextual understanding

We can help this process along by signposting excellent documentaries, similar to a reading list. Beyond the more common historical dramas (which are known to sometimes play fast and loose with the facts), there are many fine arts documentaries broadcast by BBC 4 and Sky Arts, both of which are free-to-air channels. Those no longer available for catch-up viewing or download can often be found on YouTube.

But watching is not engaging. This should be a family homework, assigning programs for all with key discussion points set for afterwards. The aim is not to

produce 'right' answers, or even to assess learning, but rather to encourage a culture of reflection, discussion and debate.

At Ludlow College we have a long history of deeply taught contextual understanding. Alongside our lessons we produce mini packs that are sent home via email, which help students explore topics further with the aid of additional information and dinnertime discussion starters. A good example is the 1915 photograph 'Wall Street' by Paul Strand. Questions such as, 'What is capitalism and communism' are asked; 'How might these ideologies impact a viewer's thoughts about Wall Street? Where does Strand stand politically? How are his views expressed in the image?'

Many families won't complete the tasks set, but among those who do, their objective skills will grow.

A fuller understanding

Within school, a key way of increasing cultural capital is to organise various trips and speakers. Who can you access? Who will give your students valuable insights

into life beyond your walls?

For the past 10 years we've organised an annual careers day each November, and have been lucky to have had many gifted people visit us. One particularly memorable talk was given by an internationally renowned illustrator, who generously brought along his own A Level work (which, by his own admission, was awful). The look on the students' faces, when they realised that his career had

involved a lengthy journey that they might be able to undertake themselves, was revelatory.

A varied curriculum will also help students build a fuller understanding of the world. The current focus on STEM subjects is limiting – I would hope to see teachers and school leaders adopt a more rounded focus by placing STEAM at the heart of our institutions.

Finally, let students question. Give them open-ended topics and time to explore. As I write, our first year A Level photography cohort have been set a one-week challenge of taking their darkroom knowledge and devising new, creative ways of generating photographic imagery. Some

DOWNLOAD

A sample 'mini pack' for students and their families, as used by Hannah and her colleagues to support the building of subject-related discussion skills

bit.ly/ts108-cc



flounder, but oh, how some do fly...

Embodied capital

Embodied capital deals with what can sometimes be referred to as 'soft skills' or 'social etiquette'. It's an area of cultural capital that deals with language, behaviour and mannerisms, as well as knowledge of what to do in different work and social situations.

In my experience, private education places a laser focus on embodied capital. Visits from alumni don't just involve talks, but will also include lunch in the head's office attended by select groups of students who excel in the related subject and will be expected to participate in an adult discussion. Then there are the regular public speaking competitions, as well as constant linking with the world beyond the school – all of which contributes to making students feel part of the wider culture, rather than simply looking at it from outside.

Privately educated alumni

8 WAYS TO INCREASE CULTURAL CAPITAL

- Widen students' contextual understanding with a home 'watchlist', signposting high quality documentaries and films
- Organise ways for students to meet individuals from different backgrounds and communities and get them conversing
- Familiarise students with public speaking by assigning class and assembly presentations
- Organise weekly visits to the school library, where students can select books based on their own interests
- Use role play and improvisation to better engage students with poor literacy skills
- Find out what students love – recognise and encourage these interests
- Challenge students to talk to older members of their family and find out about their childhood
- Present students with a viewpoint you know they'll disagree with and challenge them to come up with three valid points in its favour

will often feel comfortable in themselves, in the situations they find themselves in and when facing various challenges. They're nurtured to enter the world with ease.

When you have visitors, do you use the post-lesson time? Is there a space usually off limits to students that could be used to give the occasion a greater sense of prestige? How can you go about building a similar sense of ease among your students?

We can build this muscle by assigning students certain subject-related responsibilities. Could your business studies students run a stall at the local market? Could your history students undertake some form of work in partnership with a local museum? What other outside agencies could help you get your students out and engaging with the wider world?

Listening and learning

Discussions around cultural capital should also be sensitive to matters of social diversity. As society has become increasingly fractured, we've seen a growth in initiatives aimed at bringing together people from different backgrounds.

Could your English and drama students talk to

residents at a local care home to gather and record their stories? You could also hold a 'Talking day', where people from all walks of life are invited to openly discuss their backgrounds and livelihoods with students, either one-to-one or in small groups.

This is about listening and learning – not about being right. Help students learn that connections can be found with most people, and that bonds can be formed with those we disagree with – a valuable lesson for almost any career.

By encouraging students to talk to, work with and help people from different backgrounds, sectors and cultures, we will be preparing them for the unknown.

Qualifications, however important, are only part of the story. The reality is that cultural capital is a form of wealth we all need more of.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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