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Education as a Practice of Freedom
Professorial Lecture
February 2023

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Thank you Lynne for such a kind introduction. It is an honour and a privilege to be asked to speak today. Thank you also to the team that work hard to organise these events.

Several months back, when I was asked to give this lecture I had trouble deciding on what I should speak.

I've been very lucky in my career and have been able to participate in several interesting research projects, I've worked in multiple sectors including crisis intervention, engineering, further and adult education, and for the greater part of the last decade, higher education.

When considering the various subjects I could talk a bit about I realised that for perhaps the greater majority of people, much of what I find I intriguing, wouldn't really make for an interesting public lecture!

However, in contemplating an appropriate subject upon which to focus, I realised that there would potentially be one thing that linked all of the different jobs and sectors that I worked in, and that is what drives me to continue to work in education and research.

When I worked in crisis intervention in support of young people who were facing issues and problems that to this day, I find difficult to talk about, I quickly realised that despite every possible intervention that could be put in place, without these being undertaken from a place of care, genuine care, they would amount to nothing.

The young people I worked with had faced significant trauma and amongst the many things they had in common, sadly the most prominent was the neglect they had faced. They needed time, care, and attention. Whilst it wasn't all plain sailing it was rare for a young person not to respond positively to somebody that was genuinely willing to listen and demonstrate to them that they had worth and that they were valued.

In my subsequent work with engineering apprentices and then a variety of teaching and learning positions in further and higher education, I realised that actually many of the same underpinning principles apply. My background in crisis intervention work meant that inevitably, I had the privilege of working with a great number of classes that were labelled difficult or challenging.

And whilst yes on many occasions the classes were, I think I'll call it 'boisterous', when the same care and attention was given you could see a change in a reasonably short period of time in how these young people responded. That coupled with the care of an array of professionals made for some a lasting impact.

I am fortunate enough to have been contacted in the last few years by some of the people I taught from some of the most boisterous classes and whilst our relationship in the beginning was challenging and difficult at times, the message that I received years down the line was simply and universally that in later years they've grown to appreciate that there were people who clearly cared ,and it mattered, a lot.

Most of them did not end up working in the discipline that they studied but, that didn't matter either. It was being there and the engagement in that community and wider work that made the greatest impact.

Whilst drawing on my early experiences to introduce this lecture today, I'm not going to focus on a run-down of my career, instead I'm going to focus on the enduring belief that I have developed over the last three decades in the real power of education.

The power it has to enable people to enact change in their own lives. Further to this I firmly believe in the requirement incumbent on any civilised society to provide entirely equitable access to anyone, to a place of learning, and by place I am not limiting this to buildings labelled as schools, colleges or universities.... But more on this later.

I will touch on today many of the positive aspects of education and where I believe it has consistently demonstrated how necessary it is for the enactment of what we label as community and society.

I will also share some things that trouble me, much of which is focused on the more recent (and when I say recent I mean last 50 years or so) shift in the discourse around education and how so often now it is described in the language of economics and transaction. I will try to keep it light and as interesting as possible but of course, I will let you be the judge of that.

In the process of undertaking this journey we will visit ancient Greece, modern engineering workshops, , community groups, charities and of course schools, colleges and universities.

To begin then, we need to ask ourselves a series of fundamentally important questions, the first of these is principally 'why do we as a society place so much emphasis on education?

in 2023 alone the budget for education in the United Kingdom was 104.9 billion pounds. This is the second largest element in public spending (behind health) and more than is spent on defence (it's something like 5% of national income). The fact that more needs to be spent remains.

Education forms a significant part of every major political manifesto and famously several politicians have publicly staked their careers on their investment in education. Tony Blair's famous 2001 speech where he stated that:

"our top priority was, is, and always will be education education education" is a leading example of such public commitment.

Education establishments play a huge part in public life and have significant influence on communities and local economies. Whilst I freely admit this model is now somewhat in decline, for several centuries the fundamental model for many villages and small towns was built around the three pillars, being, the church, the school (despite inequitable access) and importantly the pub.

However, we still see the impact on what are perceived to be the best schools on house prices. Where schools have received significant accolades or are deemed to be of the highest standard through measurement by inspection and league tables, the houses that fall within their catchment areas have in places been as much as 30% more expensive than neighbouring localities.

As a nation we by and large subscribe to the provision of education whether it be for our children, young adults, or indeed those of us more mature in years. I acknowledge that this is not universally

the case, however I have yet to hear an argument presented that convinces us that we do not indeed need our investment in education.

We look internationally to league tables and track how our education system is compared to that of other nations in international league tables such as PISA.

Famously, Finland and Singapore interchangeably by and large are the two countries that come out on top of most international comparisons.

However, it has been comprehensively demonstrated that emulating their results isn't as simple as copying what they do... yes, some things work but, politically, culturally, demographically, historically, socially and any other 'ally' you care to mention, we are different.

As such, what is perceived to work in one place, does not translate through directly to another... and consequently therefore, perhaps neither do the metrics forming the comparison... not entirely at least.

On top of this we subscribe to and pay attention to National League tables whether they be for the best secondary schools' further education colleges or indeed universities.

There is significant pride attached to the achievements needed to ascend the league tables and where that leads to real time improvements for student experience, I'd be inclined to support the outcomes they bring. With a list of caveats that will take me longer to list than I have left in this lecture.

However, simply the purpose of education is not to be measured and compared, several people have famously said that weighing the pig does not make it fatter, and I believe that many of the metrics used to label schools and colleges as being the best are flawed and do not reveal fully the really incredible work that is being undertaken with individuals within learning spaces which can be incredibly hard to capture.

I will stop here before I launch into an entirely different lecture... but you get the gist!

So, what is it about education that leads us to the unquestioning support for its provision?

As a nation what do we collectively believe education is for?

And importantly how is education framed in the national discourse and how is it presented to us?

I will attempt to draw certain conclusions around these questions; however, I will stop short of claiming to be able to give any answers, but we'll see.

Now, for some whimsy and a brief trip down one of the many side tracks we will inevitably be pulled along in the next 40 minutes.

In the mid 1990s (which amazingly is approaching 30 years ago) a man sat at his kitchen table with his son. Clutched in the teenage boy's hand was a brown envelope. This envelope was the focus of all attention, and the father eagerly anticipated the peeling back of the fold to reveal the contents within.

As the boy's hand moved to open the envelope his mother joined them at the table and exchanged furtive worried glances with the father. The contents of the envelope were already known to all three, however, the exact wording and the message contained within would in theory (or so he had been told) indelibly shape the young man's future.

Having shown distinct promise in his examinations at 16 years old the boy had decided to follow in the family trade and study the required A levels needed to go into engineering. Ticking the selection boxes to take maths, physics, and chemistry, had felt like the right thing to do.

Now, faced with the prospect of finding out the exact results of his A level examinations the boy didn't particularly feel nervous, as that emotion had been overshadowed by the impending sense of doom.

Deep down the young man knew exactly what the contents of the envelope were going to reveal and that his two years of supposed study had amounted too little more than some spectacular failures, at examination at least.

The man or my dad (as I shall now refer to him) had no idea and was anticipating a repeat of previous successes. As I held the results of my A levels in my shaky sweaty fist and glanced at the column of capital letters descending the right-hand side of the page, the irony that they spelt out (END) was not lost on me then, and is still not lost on me now.

I read out the results and waited for the response. I should point out here that Mum and Dad (who are sadly no longer with us) were universally lovely and extraordinarily supportive of their somewhat wayward teenage son.

Dad blinked paused and nodded. Mum rose from the table and put the kettle on. We sat there for a few moments while we all considered the next best thing to say. My Dad was the first to break the silence and I can still remember the slight smile on the edge of his mouth as he turned to me and said 'well I guess that means you're not going to UMIST' (University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology).

However, as I hinted at earlier, I already knew that I had failed all my exams, because in the two years leading up to the examinations, I had become involved in what would become a lifelong love. My brother and I along with his wife and musical partner Andrea had begun tentatively making music and had formed a band.

I had spent a great deal of my study time teaching myself to play the drums, rehearsing songs, playing some very very early gigs, and venturing for the first time ever into a recording studio. To say that my heart was not in my A levels is something of an understatement, music wasn't the only distraction to a teenage boy, but it was certainly my first love.

As I said, this lecture is not going to be a walkthrough of my career and failings. I have started my talk today at this point as in later life, I have realised that this was a critical point in my considerations about the purpose and nature of education.

I have often reflected on how frequently I was told that if I messed up my A levels, I would mess up my life and that I would never get a 'good' job. However, despite the result of my two years of study I do not see that time spent in sixth form in anyway shape or form as being a waste of time. That time in that school with those people I have come to realise taught me a great many other things.

I forged lifelong friendships, I was encouraged in my interests, and I learned the importance of community. Here I experienced some of the best teaching I have ever encountered and to this day I still think to myself in difficult situations both in the classroom and outside, what would John Davis do?

(Interestingly, John Davis was the physics teacher and my form tutor, and unbeknownst to me at the time was the only reason I achieved a D grade. He had made an appeal on my behalf to the examinations board because on the way into my final physics exam I fell and broke my leg, without him it would probably have also have been unclassified).

That intervention aside, he was an inspiring teacher and universally everyone I ever speak to about him remembers him fondly for being both firm and fair (you did not want to get on the wrong side of Mr Davis). But hugely importantly, I remember him being really interested in all the people he taught, and to this day I am grateful to him for helping me develop one of the underpinning principles of my own teaching, that being of care and being interested.

It is the care shown to me by educators that has had the lasting impression on my life and gave me the confidence to explore the opportunities I was presented with.

If we fast forward 17 years, I found myself charged with looking after a very large curriculum area of a very large college. The college served the whole of a very large city and as such covered a huge array of courses and welcomed through it's doors representatives of every possible community in the city.

However, every year for approximately 5 years I had the same robust (but friendly) conversation with a colleague in the Quality department. The subject was always the course that stood out as a big red box in the middle of the red, amber, green spread sheet that visually displayed the average metrics of each course (successful completion, attainment, retention etc etc).

Each year I was asked why it was a failing course and each year I gently guided my colleague to the workshop where the group in question were busying themselves with filing, drilling, welding, giving each other dead arms, etc etc they were engaged.

However, the sheet was red because only half of the group ever made it to the end... this was because they were from the most difficult of situations and the fact that they were in the workshop at all was a miracle... the fact that half of them were still there after 12 weeks was testament to the dedication of the teaching staff. It was a success. It could always improve along with all courses but, it made a huge impact.

Each year in this conversation instead of relenting and cancelling the course I pushed for more resource, counselling, advocacy, access to health care, links to social work teams, and it worked.

Slowly the figures increased by small increments but, it still stayed red. And do you know, I loved seeing that red blotch in the middle of the green column because it reminded me of why I was doing what I was, and that the work wasn't over yet.

Alongside all other ideas I present here, the practice of caring education (which can often be very tough) underpins it all. It isn't just about subjects.

Following on from my failed A levels, in the good old days of the 1990s when such things still existed, we signed a record deal and off I went for four years touring, recording, writing and seeing the world (albeit, mostly at night time and from the back of a van).

I mention this because, whilst enormous fun, that four year period has also in later life had a huge influence on my thinking about education, the importance of learning and access, the foremost place that the arts needs to hold in society, the nature of employment, teaching and learning and finally ,our cultural inheritance as humans, and indeed, our collective societal legacy.

The people I met on those travels were some of the most passionate and interesting people I have encountered and their ability to produce something from nothing and create movements and creative spaces was inspirational. It still is (you may be aware it is independent music venues week... go and see some bands!)

Music is storytelling and the creative process I learned as a musician has a direct impact on my teaching practice and also, in my previous work as an engineer, current community work and as a researcher.

Whilst I have developed a some understanding and ideas in relation to my own teaching practice I am now comfortable with the fact that as a teacher we are always learning,

The big question here is, that's nice, but so what?

What has this to do with the earlier provocation of, what is education for?

Amongst the many things that have troubled me, the enduring problem, is that I still can't fully independently answer that question, but thankfully, I have encountered the work and thinking of far greater humans and intellectuals than me, and this is my attempt at summarising what I think I have learned so far.

As an aside, I will avoid this becoming a woke lefty political rant (although I have quite proudly been accused of being both). But as education itself is a political act I cannot avoid looking at and critiquing both the current and historical political discourse in relation to education and how I see several aspects of current policy being damaging to the fundamental principle of education as a human right (because I firmly believe that it is).

That being said, there has been very little educational reform post industrial revolution that we could all universally agree on, wherever it's come from... so I will tread carefully.

It will be useful at this junction to look at a couple of definitions and how formalised education has been framed. If we are to attempt to understand what it is for, we need firstly to begin to try and understand how it is defined.

What is it for, and what is its purpose are the questions at the heart of this lecture, but this is the way into the subject, and hopefully the beginning of the path through it.

Firstly, I'm going to introduce you to the description of the importance of education given to the House of Commons in 2015 by the Education Secretary (at that time) Nick Gibb. This is what Mr Gibb had to say:

Education is the engine of our economy it is the foundation of our culture and it's an essential preparation for adult life. Delivering on our commitment to social justice requires us to place these three objectives at the heart of our education system. We all have a responsibility to educate the next generation of informed citizens, introducing them to the best that has been thought and said and instilling in them a love of knowledge and culture for their own sake. But education is also about the practical business of ensuring that young people receive the preparation they need to secure a job and a fulfilling career and have the resilience and moral character to overcome challenges and succeed.

By and large, I don't disagree with him, however, whilst he was speaking to a particular brief, I think this does reveal a quite narrow view of education.

I fully appreciate that these are the spoken words of one person however as a senior party representative and the individual with responsibility for the education brief at that time, I think it's fair to surmise these particular views are reflective of the broader government of the day.

We can see that there is an attempt to acknowledge the cultural importance of education and there is even mention here of social justice, which are both laudable inclusions in the description given. However, these really are just footnotes as the repeated message within the statement is,

'education is the engine of our economy, yes it's important for culture and social justice, but essentially, it's about getting children ready for jobs and supporting the economy'.

Of course, as a professional researcher I would be foolish to present the account of one individual as the entire evidence required to come to such conclusions.

I'm not going to spend the remainder of this lecture listing sources that either prove or disprove the subtlety of language when education is discussed in political spaces, however a quick review of renewed policy legislation and published bills including:

- the schools bill (May 2022) which states the following in its introduction, 'Education remains at the forefront of the government's agenda because by ensuring every child receives an excellent standard of teaching in a high-performing setting, they will be given the opportunity to fulfil their future potential and secure the jobs needed to support our economy' .
- the skills and post 16 education bill 2022 which defines Further education entirely as a sector purely for training, and finally,
- the higher education reform consultation (which incidentally mentions employers 74 times and the economy 38 times and the arts, once),

These are all randomly selected examples of legislation and policy published in the last couple of years that whilst seemingly devised to provide an improved education, the underpinning reason for that improvement seems to be based on economic factors.

A further caveat I need to supply here is that (perhaps surprisingly) I am broadly in favour of education having some focus on employment and employability, but, where I begin to ask more probing questions is when this becomes the driving motivation for the provision of education and the national investment in it.

So what you might quite rightly ask, it's tax payer funded, we pay our taxes to ensure public services, law and order, justice, healthcare and so on and so forth. Will people not just take from education what they want? Why be concerned about the subtle shifts in language when the provision is the same? or is it?

This is why...

In my view by framing education as a provision designed to support training for work, with the primary and fundamental purpose of driving the economy, we change not only the perception of education itself but also, its priorities, structure and subsequently, the curriculum.

The issue with viewing education as an economic investment is that it becomes a commodity. A commodity that is subject to the same economics as every other, (profit and loss, efficiency, product, competition and market economy).

In simplistic terms and reduced to the lowest denominator, we are faced with the reality that education is now frequently viewed as a transaction. A customer base accessing a product for which the greatest value and return on investment is sought. Education is now often discussed in the same manner as buying a car or selecting an energy supplier. Value for money and return on investment.

Of course, this is not the case for everybody, and I would not make that sweeping statement however we are now faced with the effects of an economic crisis which in recent times has led to the discussion of what is being framed as 'high value' education.

High value... that is the courses that are seen to be able to provide the greatest return on investment. What then happens to the courses and subjects that are seemed to be of lower value, who makes that decision and what is it based on?

The recent contested suggestion that everyone study maths to 18 highlights where these values lay or where a return on investment is most likely.

To demonstrate this issue we can look briefly at the impact of funding cuts on arts provision in recent years, (this is across multiple sectors and also impacts community groups and places like theatres etc)

1. targeted reduction in government funding for university arts provision has led to a decline in funding for the arts and humanities.
2. there has been a growing emphasis on the study of science technology engineering and mathematics as these fields are seen as more practical and relevant to the needs of the modern economy.
3. The decline in funding for the arts and humanities has led to a decline in enrolment in these subjects as students opt for subjects that are seen as more practical and relevant to the job market.
4. There has also been a shift in cultural attitudes towards the arts and humanities with a growing perception that these subjects are somehow less important and less relevant to the needs of society.

The decline in perception of the value of the arts has serious implications for society as the arts play an important role in shaping our cultural identity, fostering creativity and importantly, developing critical thinking and promoting social and cultural diversity.

The decline of some these subjects also reduces the number of individuals who are equipped to understand and engage with the world's cultural heritage, and it limits the ability of future generations then to create new works of art and to appreciate the cultural achievements of the past.

In 2021 a government spokesperson from a relevant department (I'm being deliberately vague) made the following statement.

"The reprioritisation of funding [from the arts] is designed to target taxpayers' money towards subjects that support the NHS, science, technology and engineering, and the specific needs of the labour market including archaeology, which is vital to key industries such as construction and transport."

Sadly, the inclusion of archaeology as a worthy subject was a last minute change of mind which came too late to stop significant damage being caused to provision across multiple sites.

I raised this as it is an incredibly poignant demonstration of how the humanities, arts and the sciences are needlessly separated. I'll go one stage further and state publicly that I believe there would be very little advancement in science and technology without the creative input of the arts.

The false dichotomy being played out within education policy and rhetoric between the arts the sciences is based on nothing more than ideology. Increasingly neither one can thrive or survive without the other. It is as false as the equally unhelpful 'academic' and 'vocational' divide which in itself continues to be perpetuated. These divides do little to enhance any aspect of education, of any type, and do a great deal to harm it.

Let's just pause and take stock of where we are. We've looked at the importance of engagement with formalised learning, reviewed aspects of policy and the emphasis on the labour market and economy and briefly touched on some of the impacts of reduced choice in education and the reduction of funding to arts education. (I told you we would stop off in lots of places!)

I've highlighted that what I believe are some of the problems with an economic driving force underpinning the investment in education and discussed why I believe this is problematic. But, what is missing thus far is people. Let's assume then that education has a greater part to play than supporting the economy.... I think we are on safe ground there...

If education isn't just about getting a job or getting a better job or the economy or return on investment, why as a nation indeed as a species are we so invested in it? While the national discourse from government may be increasingly focused on economy, I don't actually believe that's why as humans we engage with it, develop it, provide it, or indeed, entirely why we seek out learning, whether we know it or not.

Humans are by nature incredibly inquisitive. Whatever you believe about Darwinism and evolution the evidence of the last 500 years of post renaissance, scientific revolution (famously associated with Isaac Newton, John Locke and Copernicus to name a few) and following the enlightenment period (Descartes of, Cogito, ergo sum, "I think, therefore I am" fame) development has increasingly accelerated through and beyond the first industrial revolution (some, such as Professor James Avis argue we are currently in the fourth industrial revolution).

Humans have and continue to demonstrate our incredible capacity for adaptation and invention.

Not only have we mastered the manipulation of the world around us, reached out into and now beyond our own solar system and landed on other planets, we are biomechanical organisms that are self-aware. We have uniquely been able to develop sufficient technology not only to begin to heal ourselves, but also to extend our own lives (albeit marred by inequitable access and impact).

This is however not all positive as we are now as a species sufficiently impactful on our own environment that we are living in what has been named the Anthropocene, in other words we are having such a significant impact on the planet we live on that it has caused an indelible scar in the geological time frame of this planet, humans are now the most significant influencing factor in the shaping of our environment.

Whether for good or ill, it is through our ingenuity and learning as a species that has enabled every possible advancement we have made. It is also this ingenuity that has led us to the brink of the precipice we face in terms of having brought the planet to the edge of the point of no return, beyond which, for humans at least, we will have made our own environment uninhabitable.

A burning question is are we able to bring this back and seize the last possible 'point of return' that we may have?

Now you're sat there wondering, where is he going with this? I thought this was a lecture on Education... well.... Let's briefly consider a few things.

How have we ended up in this situation?

What attempts have been made to avoid it?

Have they worked?

May we well need to consider possible different options?

I firmly believe that whilst our collective endeavours in society are framed by government and focused on growth in economy, we will never be able to tackle the enormous issues we face on a global scale. The current structures we have in place prioritise profit over humanity and wealth above the provision of basic needs and the sanctity of human rights.

The evidence of this is writ large across the globe and we now only need to look at the devastation of wealth inequality in our own communities right here on our doorstep to begin to understand that we need fundamental change, and a huge part of that is how we perceive education.

The environmental issue alone is an excellent example of how the arts have continued to step into new spaces and embrace the challenge of capturing the imagination of the public and working with communities on a global scale to tackle environmental issues.

Whilst our greatest scientific minds focus on the technicalities of how we reduce our impact on the planet, examples such as huge advances in energy technologies will eventually reveal new and accessible sources of power (my own brother works in nuclear fusion development).

We are seeing increased awareness about global issues brought about by the work of artists, activists and community groups. You need only look at the work of artists such as David Cass who's work not only reflects his own deep concerns about the environment but also acts a collaborative catalyst and has brought together a global community of artists, scientists, geologists, and

educationalists (to name a few) who are finding ways to engage the public, develop learning and harness the power of thousands of small changes, equalling a big change. (I advise you to look up his work, it's really very good!). There's a link at the end.

This work however, is all undertaken through collaboration and from decentralised spaces that pay little attention to constructs such as borders, party politics, religion (to name but a few), but are driven by humans wishing to work collectively in pursuit of a shared belief in the power they have to enact real change outside of formalised structures.

This introduces a whole new angle on the discussion related to what education and learning actually is. In order to begin to understand the power of these works and acts we need to consider other perspectives and views on education, where it happens and why.

We've already asked, what is education but, where does it happen?

There are the obvious sites such as schools, colleges and universities which all do fantastic work (I'm aware of the extreme privilege being afforded to me today as a member of a university). I need to reiterate, I'm not criticising any colleagues in any parts of education, I'm undertaking a critique of political influence and the trajectory of current discourse!

There are few more actively engaged in enacting change than those who work in education and community spaces. My role here today is to shine a light on that work.

In addition to the already discussed schools, college and universities, we can add to that several other key sites of learning...

Workplace education (apprenticeships, CPD etc), private training provision, specialist consultancy, research work, military, healthcare (you'll all be sat thinking of examples)...

But, what about the following?

Community initiatives, prisons, 3rd sector charitable organisations, What about the deeply impactful learning that goes on the community space? I mentioned my work in archaeology earlier on, who do you think is responsible for an enormous cross section of cultural, historical, archaeological, and environmental learning and work? Volunteers, led by small community groups and activists.

You can't visit a village in the Scottish Borders (where I live) without either meeting somebody, reading something, seeing something, or if you stand still too long, becoming involved in something to do with community, history, arts, cultural endeavour, music and dance etc

I would argue that within most communities the same passion for community learning exists, it may take different forms and have different foci and challenges but even in areas suffering from the greatest levels of inequity and deprivation there are always groups that provide or at least are struggling to try to provide, learning and support for members of the community.

Why is this important?

It's important because socially, and politically we are now primarily encouraged to focus on and consider formalised education when we talk about learning. But historically and culturally it is important to not only recognise but re-embrace that education outside of formalised provision is

responsible for a huge proportion of learning accessed by those seeking change, support, development, personal interest, healing, counselling, creativity... the list goes on, a long way.

It's time for me to start to pull together all these threads, and to do that I need to turn to the great minds that I alluded to earlier on and ask questions of their concepts of education and to look at how that marries with our own current systems, the extended work that goes on within communities and to look at how we might begin to reframe education, as we march on with our inevitable exploration and human inquisitiveness.

My great friend colleague and mentor, Professor Maggie Gregson, often draws on what we might call the classics when she is exploring the idea of knowledge and learning with our student community. And I think it's important here to very briefly trackback and look at these underpinning and fundamental philosophies.

If we go back some 2500 years to the ancient Greek era, we are able to draw on the works of such famous thinkers as Socrates. As with many great works from antiquity Socrates left little writing so we can only try to understand his thinking from the interpretations as they were presented by those that had worked with him or were his students, for example Plato.

Socrates believed that there were different kinds of knowledge important and trivial but the most important of all knowledge is 'how best to live'. For Socrates, as we understand it, the goals of education were to know what you can and even more importantly, to know what you do not know.

The Socratic method of teaching within a dialogic space and using questioning and discussion as the basis for learning and the exploration of assumptions and the development of a critical mind, takes its name from Socrates, and we will return to this shortly when we eventually begin to consider the thinking of somewhat more modern educational philosophers.

But before we do that, we can turn to the thinking of one of Socrates own students Plato. Plato regarded education as 'a means to achieve justice' both individual justice and social justice.

According to Plato individual justice can be obtained when everyone develops his or her ability to the fullest.

So for Plato a just society was founded on learning and that individuals potential would be fulfilled through learning in order that they could lead a full life, and using a modern phrase which I quite like, lead their best life.

If we jump forward about 450 years, and skip empires, we encounter thinkers such as Marcus Cicero. Cicero was responsible for an enormous proportion of the writings that existed in his time and the researchers amongst us will be grateful that his work gave us the foundational principles in language of words that we use daily such as qualitative, quantitative and more broadly in education 'humanities', amongst many others.

Cicero did not remain universally popular and was eventually beheaded by the order of the emperor Mark Antony. However, he kept his head on his shoulders long enough to share his thinking around education, and for many of you who may well be familiar with his broader writings it comes as no surprise that in summary Cicero thought the purpose of education is to 'free the student from the tyranny of the present', that is to imagine a better and different future.

Here we can begin to see an interesting bridge, if we take the work of Plato and Socrates who focus on personal development and how best to live and then we take Cicero's later development of this thinking in relation to the struggle for developing a better future, we can see the modern bridge between education for the development of work and for financial security, and the education for personal betterment and community. It is possible to do both, and thankfully, we see much evidence of that around us.

You're probably and quite rightly thinking when is he going to get to the point and the title of this lecture 'education as a practice of freedom' ? and when is he going to stop talking about dead white men...? That is a fair criticism.

Here we need to turn to an incredibly (and sadly now lost) thinker and activist, from whose book, teaching to transgress: education as a practise of freedom, I have borrowed this title.

bell hooks, was an American author and social activist who was the Distinguished Professor in Residence at Berea College. She is best known for her writings on race, feminism, and class. The focus of hooks's writing was to explore the intersectionality of race, capitalism, and gender, and what she described as their ability to produce and perpetuate systems of oppression and class domination.

She published around 40 books, including works that ranged from essays and poetry to children's books. She published numerous scholarly articles, appeared in documentary films, and participated in public lectures.

Her work addressed love, race, class, gender, art, history, sexuality, mass media, and feminism.

hooks stood for education as the practise of freedom because she saw the classroom as a location of possibility, but only if it was with the dialogic space in which both the student and the teacher were empowered in collaboration and shared experience. This relates to the work of Paulo Freira the author of the very famous work pedagogy of the oppressed in which Freira outlines the key purpose of education is to liberate human potential, which could be achieved in part through the development of critical consciousness.

Both of these approaches and philosophies speak to the reduction of inequality and as hooks wrote extensively on, the removal of class and race barriers (amongst many others). This offers us a further bridge between education for prosperity and education for wellbeing and personal and community fulfilment. As a society we must embrace a broad and multi-faceted approach to learning that encapsulates and sees as equal the work undertaken in both formalised and localised settings by and with communities.

For me this is in part about the emancipation of self through the engagement of learning that is empowering. Here however a brief warning to those in the position of 'providing' education that we are not emancipators or transformists, for that leads to disempowerment and infantilisation, sadly that is an entirely different lecture, but indeed very important food for thought when we consider our position in society and as people who work in educational spaces.

To begin to conclude and pull this together, we have seen that structurally we have an enormous investment in education that I believe is hugely important and to be clear, I'm confident does incredible work. There is no part of me that wants to see anything less than a massive increase in education provision both in the UK and globally.

I have been privileged to work with many hundreds of teachers, lecturers and researchers all of whom for which I am full of nothing but admiration and indeed spend my career actively trying to work with them. We need more and we need to keep the ones we have. On top of this though, I believe we have a lot of additional work to do.

I believe that politically and socially we are being driven down a path that narrows our perspectives on education and the possibilities that it must hold for us to ensure any kind of future, and to that end I believe we should consciously advocate for the power of a broad and collaborative education at all levels and all sites that equally values the vast spectrum of learning.

If we are to achieve this, we are able to reimagine the purpose of education once again and detach it from just the economic model of investment and return.

In order to do this, I believe we must resist the false delineation of the Arts and Sciences and the hierarchical nature of that developing discourse.

Further to this we must also recognise the power of education within communities and look to invest in, support, develop, and nurture what we now have come to think of (rather ironically and inaccurately) as non-traditional sites of learning.

Expansion of resource, collaboration with and learning from these broader sites is a hugely powerful tool in re-imagining how we may tackle the challenges that we now face.

In a recent seminar in Barcelona where I was privileged to work with a number of colleagues from European universities.

I was invited to discuss the future of employer engagement with university education on a panel with Monsieur, Lauren Mismaque who is head of artificial intelligence development for Siemens and Kirstin Sonne, a colleague who was a recent post graduate student.

Almost immediately, Laurent stole my thunder as in response to the question, what does business and industry need from graduates and how can they be supported, he went on to almost immediately state that what he and the wider engineering industry needed were graduates who were both reflexive and critically creative, able to think outside the box, adapt quickly, see many solutions and work in several different ways (logically, creatively, collaboratively etc). This was my argument, and I was a little surprised to hear it from Laurent (although delighted).

While we are busy preparing the next generation for their economic contributions what they actually need (from the horses mouth) is engagement with the arts. We need creative people, artists, musicians, actors etc as much as we need engineers and scientists and even more importantly, we need people who combine both!

Further to this, we need to fund it. The arts and education should not be the purview of those able to afford it, we need to flip this on its head and view education from the perspective that as a society, we simply cannot afford for everyone not to have full and equitable access.

The power of arts based methods used in understanding educational phenomenon in research alone, has been revealed powerfully to me by one of my own doctoral students who will one day understand that I have learned more from her and her work, than she from me. Imagine how powerful this is and could be if we seek ways to engage artists more thoroughly in the development of solutions to the global problems we face.

Thankfully, they're not waiting for a polite invitation.

Despite popular repeated claims that 85% of future jobs haven't even been invented yet (which we cannot possibly know) we can actually prepare students for fulfilling careers and lives by continuing to develop and embrace collaborations between creative arts and the sciences embedded within a wider exposure to humanities and the cultural arts. There are thankfully many many great examples of where this work is being undertaken and my view is that we should embrace that wholeheartedly and as educators with a practice of care.

Education as a practice of freedom is that which empowers individuals and communities to secure equal opportunity for a fulfilled life. A civilized community ensures that equal and free access is given to ensure that we have a collective future and individuals are free in their pursuits. We are some way down that journey but I fear that progress is slowing and in some spaces, regressing.

In order to see how a future such as this might be enacted and the power of it fully harnessed, I believe that we must draw on all aspects of human endeavour and all sites of learning. Equality in access, support for space, creative collaboration, enhancement of community and partnerships between formalised education, industry, artists and communities on a global scale is perhaps our only hope of embracing and seizing on what David Cass calls 'points of return'.

To finish, I will leave you with the rather stark words of Chris Hedges, the American journalist, author and social commentator:

We've bought into the idea that education is about training and success defined monetarily rather than learning to think critically and challenge. We should not forget that the true purpose of education is to make minds not careers, the culture that does not grasp the vital interplay between morality and power which mistakes management techniques for wisdom which fails to understand that the measure of a civilization is its compassion, not its speed or ability to consume, condemns itself.

Thank you.