A Letter to my History Teacher

This is an amended version of an actual letter sent in 2024.

Dear J,

This ‘out of the blue’ letter will come as quite a surprise. Way back in time, between 1966 and 1970, you taught me at O level and A level and this letter is to say ‘thank you’. You may not recognise my name, given the hundreds of A level students you taught, but hopefully a ‘thank you’ from the distant past is welcome whoever the sender may be.

So here goes – if this was an essay the question would be:

Why were you such an important and beneficial influence on me?

The answer in outline is that you gave me confidence and made me feel valued. To explain why this was so important I have to risk being autobiographical – but I’ll try to be brief!

I really struggled at grammar school after doing well at primary school. There were no motherly teachers who taught us all day every day but a different and often forbidding male teacher for every subject. There was intense rivalry among the 90 boys in each year over sporting ability and class rankings and I was the youngest and almost the smallest in the year. And nobody called me by my first name for seven years – I felt like a number, and that still sends a chill through me – so much so that I struggled for years to write and read articles in Teaching History where contributors are expected to refer to other teachers and authors by surnames.

I also missed a lot of time through illness in my first year and ended up repeating that year. Thus my second first year meant another new class of 30 and year of 90 names and faces to find my place amongst. More changes of classes meant that I didn’t feel really settled until Year 10 and that was partly because I had a growth and speed spurt which saw me play for the school football team – a huge status boost – and the cricket team. At the cricket trial Mr E, who chiefly ran the First XI – watched me bat and said, ‘You’ve got real natural talent’. Talk about ‘walking on air’!

© Ian Dawson 2024

Far more important, however, (more important even than cricket) was that in Y10 I had you for History and NR for English and I stayed with you both for the next four years. That continuity and stability was so important in my ultimately doing well at A level because it gave me something that was often missing at home – life at home could be turbulent and my mother was expert at 'taking me down a peg or two' so the confidence I built at school was crucial, a counterbalance to experiences at home. Not that I did well at O level – just about OK in most subjects, but a 5 in Eng Lit and 6 in History were big disappointments after I'd had really good marks in class. *[The top O level grade in 1968 was a 1, 6 the lowest pass].*

I am getting to the core of my essay answer – honestly! The two years that followed at A level were, along with my PGCE, the most important years of my education and maturing. I loved the A level courses in History and English, thanks to you and NR. This wasn't the result of you having wonderful resources or using varied and exciting teaching methods but the product of your personality – that twinkle we saw when you commented on work or ran revision classes, the sense that you cared about how well we were doing and how we were developing as people. You made me feel encouraged, supported and valued – and that I wasn't getting too 'big for my boots' in applying for history at university. As a result, I always felt academically confident at university which was important because, like many of my generation, I was the first in my family to apply to university and it would have been easy to be over-awed.

And, yes, I worked hard but that for me was another product of the confidence that you and NR generated. It was at A level that I realised that I enjoyed writing for its own sake. You helped us learn how to plan essays and write them effectively to time but it was more than that – in a very early essay for you I included the word 'internecine' which I'd read in a textbook and then looked up in a dictionary and decided to use in my essay – and I got a tick and a positive comment in the margin, a very simple thing but a boost to my new interest in experimenting with language.

Of course, there were other factors in my emerging with grade As in History and English, results that were special back then. There was a school culture of working hard but that work was made easier by being happy amongst a good group of friends, especially now we were a comprehensive school and there were girls in the classes. They even called me by my first name! B and I were the two who wanted to study History at university and saw ourselves as 'the cream' though only one of us passed S level and it wasn't me! *[S – Special – level exams were taken in the hope they impressed universities]*

© Ian Dawson 2024

Now for my big finish when I repeat my key points! Thank you for providing that continuity and encouragement, for building my confidence and for making me feel valued and respected. Years later, I always told my PGCE trainees that the most important aspect of teaching was showing students that you respect them. For some students, perhaps most, that respect is as important as the grade they achieve and for many it's the thing they'll remember long into the future. That, above all, is what I learned from you.

One final story – in the 1980s I met a teacher who'd been at our school a few years after me. He'd been taught by someone called Mr S and kept telling me how inspirational he had been. Each time he told me this I could feel my 'hackles rising' – how could he know what a good history teacher was like at A level when he hadn't had you? I never met Mr S – he may have been brilliant for all I know – but that didn't matter.

You were the gold standard by which I judged History teachers.

Note: some references above may puzzle anyone under the age of 60.

I went to a grammar school run by the local authority – it wasn't an independent school.

Around 15% of 18 year olds took A levels and fewer than 10% went to university. There was no A grade at A level – only around 8% of candidates received grade A.*

Exam teaching was very different – specifications were very brief and, unless they were examiners, teachers did not have access to exam board mark schemes. There were also no sample exam papers or sample answers and no CPD from exam boards. Teachers prepared students for exams by looking at past papers and using their own experience.

© Ian Dawson 2024