



Magic of the Mind at the Royal Albert Hall

Tony Buzan and Christine Miller share thoughts about learning

Regular readers of ReSource will know that one of my passions is for children to be ‘educated’ in the original sense of the word; that is, to have their inner knowing drawn out and to be encouraged to think, to ask questions of themselves and their teachers, and to fully employ their magnificent minds. So when Tony Buzan told me about a free event called ‘Magic of the Mind’, set to take place at London’s Royal Albert Hall, during which 8,000 schoolchildren would be exploring thinking skills, learning styles and memory techniques, I was delighted to be invited.

On April 28th 2005, 8,000 children presented themselves for two sessions, one of which I attended. The Royal Albert Hall was alive with 4,000 11 – 15 year olds and their teachers; each was given a starter pack of colour pens, paper and a free book from Collins, and as the auditorium filled, the noise level rose and the buzz increased. In due course, everyone settled and Tony and his co-presenter Lucie Cave took the stage and proceeded to enthral their young audience with an engaging programme which was designed to dispel any doubts these children might have had about the power of their memories. It was a great afternoon for all, educational and entertaining, and I left greatly encouraged that this event was a landmark in bringing the possibilities of ‘learning to learn’ skills to greater awareness in the public arena.

Tony and I took the opportunity to chat about the event the next day. I started by telling Tony how much I’d appreciated the event.

Yesterday’s event was a great success; given that they could have been a difficult audience, as they were what could be termed that ‘tricky’ age group, teen and pre-teen, they were completely engaged.

Yes, it was interesting because in the morning, just before I was due to go on stage, I read a piece by Boris Johnson in the newspaper, which described how terrifying it can be to work with an audience of young people.

This is how Boris Johnson began his article:

“Even if you have no children yourself, you have only to read Lord of the Flies to know the reality. There can be few experiences more terrifying than to stand before a crowd of juveniles and to try to command their respect and their interest; and as soon as you do it, you are lost in admiration for the daily achievement of teachers.”

(Boris Johnson, 28/04 2005, ©Daily Telegraph: see www.telegraph.co.uk)

Tell me about the history of this event, what prompted it?

It all started with educational debates in the 1960s, about the size of classrooms, how it was essential to have every class very small. I had been to various concerts, pop, rock and otherwise, with 100,000 people, and I noticed that when people left the concert they were always singing the songs that had been performed there. And therefore it was a classroom – because there were 100,000 people who’d come along, they called it a music concert, but actually it was a music class where they had learned to sing a song, and they had memorised the words and so on. I suddenly thought, well of course, all entertainment on one level is education, and much entertainment is quite educational.

I was in South Africa in the late 1970s and I met one of the senior people in the Ministry of Education. He was talking about the problem of teaching the children in Soweto, which at the time was an entirely black community, and it was a time when apartheid was still very prevalent. I said to him that I could teach 2,000 children at a time how to think. So he said, very good, why don’t we try it with 500. So we did it for 2 days with 500 children and it went wonderfully well. The kids were amazing. So the Education Ministry man said, well that’s proven it - we’ll do 2,000 for 3 days. So then we did 2,000 children for 3 solid days, from 9.00 am – 4.00 pm. **We taught them all the major learning skills – memory, Mindmapping®, speedreading, study skills, mind-body, left/right brain, communication, exam techniques, creativity and innovation, and it was really wonderful. I still have that on ancient video.**

That proved it could be done, so for a number of years I’ve occasionally done large groups – in Singapore I’ve taught 1,000 children at a time, and also 1,000 head-teachers; in Scotland we’ve done exactly the same, and likewise in Australia. In Mexico, we did 10,000 members of the United Nations at the 5th Annual Conference on Creativity and Innovation.

About three years ago the Royal Albert Hall had a new initiative to provide more educational events, and Alpha Plus, the educational group, wanted to help promote ‘Learning How to Learn’ throughout the entire educational system of England. So Caroline Shott, (*Tony’s management agent*) went to the Royal Albert Hall and said ‘look, you have this new initiative; Alpha Plus, London Gifted and Talented and Tony’s publishers, Harper Collins, all want to support this event

have it crammed in, inappropriately and linearly. The children will start to teach each other, and will teach the teacher, the class will become more organic, more creative, more innovative, much more orderly and well behaved while at the same time allowing for individuality and greater teamwork.

So all the advantages accrue when you add 3 hours - and when you add those 3 hours you can subtract 17.

I firmly believe that any government or political party that made education its real focus, not putting plasters on the giant sores, not arguing about more homework, or more hours of reading, writing and arithmetic, less hours of music sport and art, which spent less time trying to work out how to discipline children, spent less time on building structures to improve social behaviour - if any party said to all the people in the nation 'what we are going to do in our education platform is leave the curriculum fundamentally as it is, all the children are going to learn reading, writing and arithmetic, and they are also going to learn the creative and cultural arts; they are going to learn music; they are going to learn to sing and dance and play instruments, they are going to learn to draw and paint well, they are going to learn the foundations of those things. They are going to become wonderfully fit with daily physical exercise that's both aerobic and strengthens their muscles and gives them greater flexibility', you would find virtually every parent would vote for them.

It would be a revolution in political thinking and it doesn't take very much - it is not overhauling the curriculum. The only thing that would have to happen is that more would be taught in the same time. And that's what I believe that every government, every political party should have as its educational thinking platform. The first one that does, I predict will be elected - whether they are a ruling party or in opposition.

How receptive do you think political parties and politicians are at the moment to what would amount to new paradigm for them, of education becoming "education" in the true sense of the word, rather than dis-education which it is at the moment?

Yes, I agree with that. And I think they are much closer than they have ever been. Countries like Singapore are doing it - every child is taught to Mind Map in Singapore. Australia is starting to do it; China is beginning to introduce this as well - I'm just off to China this summer to lecture to 13,000 professors of foreign language teaching. They are going to base their new teaching on mental literacy and learning how to learn. And those 13,000 will teach other teachers to teach other teachers to teach the children. So it will be a supernova of thought in education. I've also been asked to be on the advisory board for the designing of new curricula for all primary school children, which is a few hundred million, so China is very much into it.

I'm in Scotland next week, with the Tapestry group, who are working with all the educational groups - universities, head-teachers and teachers unions, all the political parties - everyone has agreed, and has signed up to, Scotland becoming a learning how to learn society. So it is happening, and it is happening very fast - and the nations that get in to this movement first will inevitably lead.

How about the English, how are we doing?

We are also progressing. I am working with the government on "Learning How to Learn", in a project called the London Challenge. This involves teaching all these skills to the teachers in 35 schools, and then teaching them how to transfer the skills to the children, and how to maintain the application and practice of learning how to learn in the long term. It is being statistically analysed by the Institute of Education in London. Is it starting to move fast now. Many of the local education bodies are getting involved, for example, Kent is running conferences with the Buzan Group, offering teachers learning how to learn skills, as is the Manchester area.

The metaphor I use is that it is like a water table. When you are walking on the ground, if the water level is five feet below, you don't know that, if it's one foot below, you don't know that, but as soon as it's two inches below, you begin to see little puddles forming everywhere.

And the little puddles are starting to pop up everywhere?

That's right, and then all you need is one more inch - one more inch - and the whole land is flooded.

That's a wonderful vision to have the whole land flooded with people who have learned how to learn.

Yes, it is a lovely vision - which I believe, in fact, it's no longer a belief, because one observes, that it is happening, and it is very, very encouraging.

For example, the Alpha Plus group, which is the biggest body of private schools in England, are so interested in this work that they are not only applying it within their own schools, but even more significantly, they are freely donating events like the Albert Hall and my teaching state school teachers, that they are donating that to the National Curriculum. 65% of the schools that were there at both sessions were not fee-paying schools - Alpha Plus had invited them. Their thinking is that the National Curriculum needs this, we're already applying this in our private schools which are ranked higher, but our goal is not to remain ranked higher, our goal is to make sure that every child in England has these opportunities. It's more a philanthropic group than a purely profit making one.

It's a very exciting time, with everyone going in the right direction I believe..

It's encouraging that Learning to Learn is being readily accepted in mainstream schools, and I'll look forward to hearing the results.

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