



## WHOSE CULTURE?

**A transcript of a presentation given by Jacqui O'Hanlon, RSC Director of Education,  
at No Boundaries, A Symposium on the role of Arts and Culture, September 2015**

Hello. I'm delighted to have the opportunity to speak to you today.

### **First encounters matter and they are most likely to happen at school**

I'd like you all to take a moment to think about how you were first introduced to Shakespeare. Was it through family or through school? Where did it happen; in the classroom or in a theatre? What was the experience like? Did you hate it or did you love it? Did you immediately connect with the play? Or did your appreciation grow over time? Who or what helped you develop your knowledge and understanding?

For the majority of students, and this has certainly been true over the past 20 or so years, school is where first encounters with Shakespeare and other great works of art and literature are guaranteed to happen. School is where we decide whether Shakespeare and, if we're lucky, theatre going, music, dance, film and visual arts are things we feel confident about engaging in and want find out more about or things we feel excluded from.

So in our work we place a significant emphasis on the school experience of Shakespeare and our education activities now reach around 530,000 young people each year right across the UK.

**Today, to give you an overview of the presentation** I want to talk about the key factors that have shaped the RSC's education strategy.

Then look at some of the challenges we've experienced in implementing that strategy along with the opportunities that relationships with schools have opened up for us.

I will sum up with some final thoughts on the lessons we've learnt and what they might tell us about how we go about securing the very best cultural education for all young people.

### **What happens when an artists' work is a compulsory part of the curriculum**

Shakespeare is really an interesting case study because his work is part of a shared cultural inheritance but also a compulsory part of the school curriculum. He remains the only named author whose works all students have to study from the age of 11.

There is a widespread belief, isn't there, that the way we can guarantee a cultural education for all young people is by ensuring arts subjects are included as discrete and compulsory elements of the curriculum. Something I hear people say is: *'it's alright for you because you've got Shakespeare'*.

So let's have a look at what happens when an artist's work is on the curriculum and everyone does have to do it.

What I can categorically tell you is that having the work of the artist or art form that you champion as a formal requirement for study by everyone does NOT equate to a golden ticket that opens up relationships with all kinds of schools, teachers and young people across the country irrespective of the context that the school operates in. It definitely helps, but it isn't the answer.

It is actually incredibly challenging to persuade some schools to work with us. That's not to say that we don't have lots and lots of schools who want to work with us. But when we look for a socially diverse selection of schools that represent the country we live in, things get harder.

I'm proud to say that we do have a thriving network of over 400 state-maintained schools across the country that work in long term partnership with us and we do some extraordinary work together.

But they didn't come knocking on our door. In the majority of cases we went knocking on theirs because we were looking for schools with above average %'s of students with eligibility for FSM who were in areas of socio-economic disadvantage with limited access to culture. The Shakespeare ticket didn't automatically guarantee an 'in'.

I'm interested in why? What makes schools decide whether or not something has value and meaning for their students and communities?

**Is it about lack of evidence?**

We have a lot of evidence about the impact of our work. We have incredibly compelling case studies and formal evaluations that describe in forensic detail – using qualitative and quantitative data – impacts on students and teachers. From increases in attainment to greater levels of confidence in hard to reach young people, from the isolated student who didn't engage and now does, to the C/D borderline student who achieves a better result.

In all cases the teacher cites the RSC's work as the contributing factor that made the difference.

**Is it that we aren't very good at communicating impact?**

We don't talk that much about the fact that schools tell us our work helps improve attainment because that's not a reason to work with us. If we say come and work with us and your exam results will improve, we are probably inviting people in for the wrong reasons. It's not our job to help students pass exams; it's great if they do, but it's not our driver.

**Is it about feeling disenfranchised?**

Is the issue really about who feels entitled to this body of work and therefore to a company that is called the Royal Shakespeare Company? We believe that Shakespeare's work, and the work of other writers presented by the RSC, are part of a cultural inheritance that belongs to all children and young

people. But we know that Shakespeare can be daunting and needs some careful introduction. That is what we are here to do.

We connect children and young people with the world of theatre making at the RSC, and we specifically aim to connect them with Shakespeare's world and work, hopefully opening up a life-long relationship with the plays through performance.

But if Shakespeare's work wasn't compulsory, how much of it would proliferate in some schools?

Would all schools still choose to do it? We regularly hear about the perceived differences between the experience of young people at independent schools (who tend to be the ones who go on and run our country and, sometimes, our major arts institutions) and those students attending state-maintained schools. And of course one of the things we notice is the difference in attitude to the arts and culture.

In the independent sector it's entirely accepted that students at those schools need to have a thorough grounding in Shakespeare and the arts.

Could we and would we say that is true of all schools?

If it were, cultural organisations would be overwhelmed with demand from the education sector and that isn't the case. Just recently, we've seen reports on reductions in the percentages of schools booking visits to see live theatre. This is just one example of many where supply is outstripping demand.

The supply of cultural opportunities in this country is extraordinary. The demand seems to be reducing.

What can government do about that? Generally governments will respond to educational issues in one of two ways: either they adopt an interventionist approach or a free market one. I do think policy makers need to be pro-active about ensuring a real and meaningful access to the arts is part of every child's experience of school. But I don't think top down intervention is the only way to achieve that.

### **What makes the difference to schools?**

The way to increase demand for the arts and culture in education is to create more platforms in which head teachers and teachers talk about why it's worth it.

Schools believe other schools. Head teachers and teachers believe their peers. If a head teacher stands up and talks about the changes that have happened in their school as a result of a partnership with a cultural organisation, that convinces other schools. We need platforms on which our teacher advocates talk about why cultural partnerships and an arts rich curriculum matter; why they're an essential part of their school's development as well as the benefits they bring to children in their classrooms.

We need to identify and celebrate those leaders from within education who are demonstrating on a daily basis how to integrate and embed rich and meaningful arts experiences in their schools'.

Irrespective of what is happening top down, irrespective of whether it's an Ofsted criterion or not.

We need those leaders to talk at head teacher's conferences, teaching union conferences, subject association conferences.

It is not about the cultural sector saying it's great. It's also not wholly about Ofsted and a compulsory curriculum. It's about schools and teachers being given a platform to be heard by their peers.

There are around 24.5K schools in the country. If 10% took on an advocacy role for the arts and culture, they could each give that message to 10 other schools and we could reach them all. That's how we are going to get demand to match or outstrip supply.

### **Why do partnerships with schools matter to us?**

I mentioned earlier that we enjoy long term partnerships with over 400 schools across England.

Those partnerships are remarkable. They have taught us more about the relevance of our house playwright's work to the world we live in today; they have shown us the incredible connections that can be made between the artistic practice of our theatre company and the teaching practice of primary and secondary school teachers. They have shown us the difference that exposure to Shakespeare's work and live theatre can have on the lives and aspirations of young people of all backgrounds and abilities.

We now have a national network of teachers, school leaders and young people who care passionately about Shakespeare and live theatre; they have become our own version of the national grid – a set of high voltage cultural connectors across the country.

As well as teaching us about why Shakespeare matters, partnerships with schools open up other opportunities.

The diversity we look for in our audiences and work force is already in our schools. We have started to link up our work experience programme with partner theatres around the country, identifying young people from under-represented groups with the talent and aptitudes to think about a career in theatre. This year we are piloting a joint programme with Hull Truck Theatre and our partner schools in Hull, Birmingham and Warwickshire.

We are also starting to develop our audiences through our school partners.

Families we might not otherwise reach will believe a school when they say *come and see the RSC, they're performing in our school and you should come along*. Taking our work out of Stratford and into the heart of the communities that our school partners are in has been an incredibly important part of developing relationships with new audiences as well as deepening our relationships with those school partners. We are running community buses from partner schools in inner city Birmingham to Stratford. Our FOH staff visited the school and introduced themselves to parents at an after school meeting. Now nearly 60 mums and dads are coming to see *Henry V* in Stratford, having their first experience of the RSC's work in our theatres.

Those kinds of partnerships with schools take time to build. They take time to nurture and develop but the rewards for both sides are extraordinary.



Everyone in this country is a stakeholder in our publicly funded organisations. Everyone therefore should feel confident about accessing the work of our organisations. Otherwise the arts become something for the few as opposed to the many.

Partnerships with schools make cultural ownership on a mass scale possible. And when school partnerships are put at the heart of our organisations, when they are connected to audience development and talent development as well as rich learning relationships, then we can begin to see systemic change happen.