

WHAT I LEARNT AT SCHOOL

MICHAEL ROSEN HAS NEVER BEEN AFRAID TO ASK QUESTIONS – AND HE HAS SEVERAL CONCERNING OUR CURRENT APPROACH TO THE BUSINESS OF TEACHING AND LEARNING...

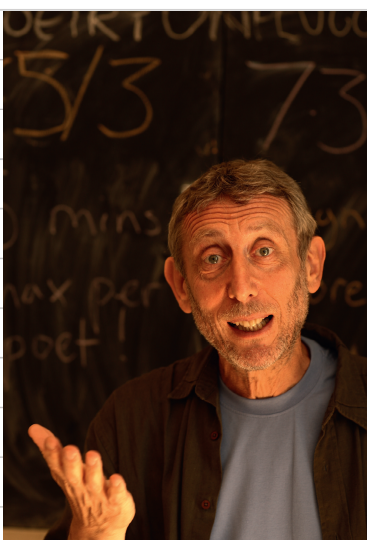
My memories of my school days are mostly positive. With all this talk about curriculums and tests, it's easy to forget that our experience of school is largely seen through how personal relationships were handled; those children who reflect on their education in a negative way quite often had a bad time with other kids. I was a sociable guy, who always had friends.

It was my parents, though, rather than the school, who had the greatest influence over me growing up. They were not only poets, storytellers and academics, but also school teachers of a particular disposition. They taught me two crucial things: to be endlessly curious, and to believe I was entitled to access and interpret any cultural form out there – be it a comic, Bob Dylan's latest record or a Shakespeare play.

To enable that nice, warm wind of interpretation to waft into a classroom, you have to acknowledge that every student in the room has interpretative powers. Very few of my own teachers realised this. One of the best teachers I ever had thought he was one of the worst. He was genuinely stumped by an obscure Milton poem and asked my sixth form class for help. I met him 25 years later when he was a headteacher. He came running up to me and asked me if I remembered how we all cracked Comus together. He said it was one of the best experiences of his life.

Often – and often inadvertently – we convey the idea that some culture is crap whereas some culture is very special and only an elite set of very clever people can access it. This could be by virtue of a piece of writing or art being made more difficult or dry than it need be, or by asking very specific questions that require very specific answers. The scope for personal interpretation is narrowed as a result, and the process becomes more about retrieval and inference instead.

People keep on thinking art should be



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michael Rosen is a novelist, poet, broadcaster and columnist. His classic work, *We're Going on a Bear Hunt*, celebrates its 25th anniversary this year, and to mark the occasion, he is being joined by Walker Books and RNIB in an attempt to break the Guinness record for the world's largest reading lesson, at 10am on 15th July. Find out more at jointhebearhunt.com/rnib. Michael's latest book, *Good Ideas*, will be published by John Murray (Hodder) from September 2014.

interpreted by interrogating it with a particular kind of language, but this is one of the fallacies of Western culture. In fact, the best way to interpret a piece of art is with another piece of art – dance, say, or music. For example, when teaching poetry you've got to think in terms of turning it into performance and making it fun. Give children freedom to own the lines themselves. If young people can find a dance for a poem, or take a dance and write a poem about it, or write a poem from the point of view of someone in *The Tempest*, then what you do is show how all these art forms all merge

into each other as acts of human interpretation. It isn't airy fairy – these are quite difficult and challenging things to do – but I'm afraid that the powers that be have come at this literature thing and treated it as if it's a kind of encyclopedic knowledge; a body of high art that must be injected into the children.

Of course, some teachers already nurture a spirit of interpretation and I'm not criticising those who don't, either – the weight of the curriculum on teachers' shoulders is so heavy it's difficult to find the time. They know they want the next part of the lesson to be a debate, but they also have to press on with the next ten targets they've got to tick off by the end of it. This is so sad because it's often during the moments of interpretation when learning really takes off.

A lot of it comes down to the Protestantism embedded in European culture, telling us that you can't have pleasure before you've had pain; that we must do very dull and industrious things and be moderate all year and only then should we allow ourselves just a very small drink of rum at Christmas. It's absurd because we learn through pleasure – the pleasure of interpretation and reflection. It's only through thinking about and devising our own questions we build up the confidence to move onto the next body of knowledge. Quite often we think of knowledge as the stuff we're asked about, like Mastermind, but any good teacher knows the key thing is to get the children to generate their own questions, talk in pairs and groups and try to come up with answers themselves. It's an incredibly powerful pedagogical motor and we neglect it with great loss to individuals and society. We have to learn how to ask questions of our environment and of other people. And do we have an educational system in place to enable us to do that? Sadly not.