

## Address by Mrs Jane Lunnon to the Wimbledon Philosophical Society – 09/11/16

### The Challenges of C21st Education:

Welcome to WHS – I'm Jane Lunnon – 12<sup>th</sup> head of WHS – my third year here – been here for two years and absolutely honoured and delighted to be talking to you all today about Education in C21st and some of its challenges. Before I do that – one of the challenges of C21st education, is an obsession with health and safety – and comfort . With all those in mind, I do want to remind you, in a disappointingly unphilosophic way, that the visitors' cloakroom is over there / that we'd love you to help yourselves to refreshments as and when you like and finally, that we have no planned fire drill this evening, so if you do hear the alarm – the fire exit is the door you came in – please head that way!

So back to the main point. It is a real delight to welcome you here and it's a particular pleasure to be welcoming you all here today in particular. For three reasons – firstly, because today of all days, after this morning's rude awakening – it feels important to connect with people, celebrate ideas, the things that matter and the life of the mind. And in a post-truth Trump world – any organization which invites us to consider what is true and real and worthy of our consideration, is of enormous importance. So thank you for being such an organization and I'm so glad to be spending this evening with you. Secondly, today is our birthday. WHS is 136 years old today – and in many ways, I can't think of a better way of celebrating than to be welcoming this august group of people – committed to the joy of ideas, the challenge of debate and the fun of thinking about thinking. You are the perfect people to have with us as a birthday treat. So thank you very much indeed for coming. Thirdly, it seems to me that there is considerable synergy between our two organisations.

The motto of our school is : “ex humilibus excelsa “ which I know you are all falling over yourselves to translate – “from small things, greatness”. On one hand, this motto reflects the apple symbol of our school – a symbol derived from the first lesson taught in the school – back in 1880 in the house still standing on W H Rd – taught by Miss Edith Hastings, first head – who waxed lyrical to the 9 students who made up the school – about the virtues and properties of the apple. That has become our school symbol, you will find it all over the school – and I am eternally grateful, therefore, that she did not choose to teach her first lesson about the virtues of the humble earthworm or snail... much less forgiving and much less fruitful as a symbol.

Because, of course, from that first apple – an entire orchard of learning has grown. And from those first 9 girls, and one Victorian house.

we now have a thriving, happy, successful school of 940 with a national reputation for pioneering and outstanding teaching and learning. Very proud of that. And at the heart of that journey – lies what I imagine is at the heart of your organization too – and that is, a reverence for learning, an active curiosity in the world around us and a desire to question, interrogate, reflect and keep developing our minds. And how vital that we should. Those of you who stayed up all night last night to watch events unfolding across the pond, or indeed, who have watched with growing incredulity the astonishing rise of the Donald over the last six months – might find yourselves in ever increasingly sympathy with Einstein's observation:

“Two things are infinite: the universe and human stupidity; and I'm not sure about the universe”  
Indeed. Certainly has felt like it at times. Even if you don't take quite such a bleak view – we surely agree on the vital importance – so richly and fervently understood by our Victorian founders – in the power of education to change minds, attitudes and therefore the world. As Thomas Paine – the great C18th English-American political activist and revolutionary, pointed out in a letter about the affairs of North America in the mid C18th pointed out:

“The mind once enlightened cannot again become dark.”

Well, I have wondered, recently, how true that is – thank goodness lightness – or at least, light greyness, has prevailed in America.

But that's our aim – in educating our girls – as, presumably, it has always been for all educators, to enlighten – to shed light on the world around us and to improve knowledge and understanding in the process.

I imagine that that is a key focus for the Wimbledon Philosophical Society – and that is the second reason why it's such a pleasure to have you with us today.

So, to the challenges of C21st education. What do I intend to cover in the next 20 mins or so:

**To major provocations:**

- 1. A little knowledge is a dangerous thing – education in the hands of us all...**
- 2. The brave new technical world – a wild west?**

**Provocation Number 1: A little knowledge is a dangerous thing**

So, I've been asked to talk to you for 30 mins or so about education and in particular about C21st education and I'm very willing of course to do that. But one of the things that all trainee teachers are told nowadays, is that learning should always be active not passive. The idea that one would simply sit and listen to one individual at the front pontificating for 30 mins, is absolute anathema to a modern educationalist. So, with that in mind, this is the bit where I ask you to do something for me.

Because I'd like to undertake if I may, a little research. And it's to do with your memories. You all have a piece of paper and a pen on your chair (which in itself of course, is so old school!) – could I ask you to use that to write down – or to draw, if you're that way inclined your most vivid memory of your time at school. Could just be a word, or a quote, or a phrase that you heard over and over or a quick summary of something that happened to you – or a drawing... everyone go now...

Hands up if that memory is particularly vivid?

Hands up if it's embarrassing.

Of course it is. We all have one of those. I might share mine with you later if we have time...

Anyone prepared to share their memories...?

The key thing here though is how pervasive these memories are.. We all have profound and vivid memories of our schooldays which stay with us throughout our lives, no matter what happens to us and where we go in the future. Our school experiences become a key part of the furniture of our minds and are utterly key in creating the people we become. And our memories have we've heard, invariably tend to be about both specific events or things that happened to us when we were at school and also, memories about ambience and feel and tone. For me, for example, there's both the powerful moment when I was asked to sing a solo in the school nativity in front of what felt like thousands of people in the school hall and opened my mouth to sing and literally nothing came out. But it's also about the smell and slightly warm always not quite sour taste of the milk in those funny little milk bottles, the sound of the pencils as they turned in the obscurely impressive pencil sharpeners screwed to the desk, and the incredibly satisfying point of the pencil once it had been sharpened..

It's perhaps an obvious point that our experience at school stays with us. In what I would argue is an unprecedented and unique way. Second only to the influence of our parents and family, our schools shaped us. And for almost all of us, that early experience of heading off to school, is utterly seminal in part because it is our first big individuating step. That first moment when we headed out,

independent of our mother's hand, to make our own way. To take our first steps on our own. And whatever else does or doesn't happen at school, whether we like it or not, we find in it, ourselves.

Why is this a challenge? Well, on one level of course, it isn't at all. It's a great joy (and incidentally in a world where there are still 61 million children unable to access school worldwide) it's also a great privilege to share educational experience in this way. But it can be a burden. Because, everyone went to school and everyone remembers school, everyone therefore thinks that they know about schools. Our 12 year experience of being at school means that we have views about education in a way that we perhaps don't have about other things. Education is, in that sense, unique in the field of public discourse. We may never need or use a hospital (I hope you don't!), we may never own our house, we may not care about party politics, we may not engage with the financial markets, or be involved in devising strategy for national security or advising farmers or any of the myriad tasks which fall to our government, or take over the arts, or manage communications or transport or prisons or the police, or any of the myriad elements that make up our complex lives, but we will all go to school and we will all experience being educated in this country for at least 12 years and we have all had hands on experience. And therefore, it is easy to think that we know a fair amount about education too. And about how education should develop and how education ought to be.

In the political framework – that often finds expression in policy that is heavily influenced by personal nostalgia and long-held, highly personal and perhaps untested and uninvestigated beliefs. I don't intend to be particularly political tonight – because Philosophy is a much purer, more beautiful, shiner discipline than the rusty realities of party politics – but it is not difficult to miss the impact of powerful personal experience in Theresa May's grammar school crusade or, earlier, in Michael Gove's misty-eyed passion for the Classics in the curriculum. My point is not, necessarily, anti either of these moves – indeed, I am, in fact, broadly in favour of both Gove's reforms (which were primarily about increasing rigour and aspiration in our curriculum by reducing dependence on re-takes and coursework in public exams), and I favour anything that increases choice and access and opportunity in our education system and I am prepared to agree that grammar schools might help to do that. But the challenge I'm referencing here is much broader. There is no government department that has been subject to such constant change, tinkering, reviewing, refreshing, updating, revising ... as the D of Education has. There has not been a year, since the "great reform" of A Levels in 2000, when there hasn't been some fairly significant change or other for the teaching establishment to address, get their heads round and then deliver.

This has been exacerbated of course, by the relatively recent (again over the last 17 years or so) rise of the government and media league tables – which have led to far greater accountability and scrutiny than they had ever really known. The focus on school outcomes and by extension therefore, school methods – is now ubiquitous and exhaustive. And it is absolutely right that it should be.

But there is a risk that something has been lost along the way. What is sacrificed in a relentless government drive towards higher standards in education I wonder. In A & C, Anthony's most un-Roman response to Cleopatra when she asks him to say how much he loves her: : "if it be love indeed, tell me how much" he famously replies: Anthony's inarticulate Roman attempts to quantify his love for her:  
"there's beggary in the love that can be reckoned"

Deliciously poetic and Egyptian rejection of the attempt to reckon or measure what, essentially, cannot be measured. And as ever, 400 years old though he is, Shakespeare had that absolutely right of course. The same can be said of education. The process is about enrichment, enlightenment, the journey to understanding, the development and growth of mind, heart, character – the forging and shaping of human beings – and to suggest that league tables can truly measure that process – or that a school's' success can truly be assessed on that basis alone, is reductive

indeed. And, to hoist myself with my own petard as it were, our current standing on the PISA league tables – the global league tables which measure learning outcomes in each country (the UK is 23<sup>rd</sup> for reading, 26<sup>th</sup> for maths) suggests that it isn't currently working either.

So, that's challenge number one – lots of people think they know what schools should be, education is deeply political, and whilst the will to improve and develop our education system is whole-hearted and undoubted, I'm unconvinced that our government's fretting, measuring and revising of the education system, is having the impact that they intend. What it is undeniably doing, is subjecting current (and perhaps more worryingly prospective potential) teachers, to very high levels of stress and anxiety in many cases and turning people away from the profession. There is a real crisis in recruitment in some key subject areas: maths, science, MFL – and endless tinkering, measuring, hectoring – is not going to solve it.

What is needed is imagination and a re-assertion of the great joy involved in teaching and learning. We are extremely lucky in independent schools to be insulated to some degree, from some of the pressures I've just described and I am particularly fortunate to be running this school – if there is a nicer school in the country – with better, more committed staff, or with more talented, warm-hearted, unpretentious, dedicated, committed, ambitious, energetic and fun children in it, I've yet to find it. But even before I came to this school, which, after all, is still relatively new to me – I'm like a newly-wed – it's all still massively exciting (!) – I still felt the same about education. I can remember, my first few terms of teaching – joined Wellington College as an English teacher (at the time a big boys' boarding school in Berkshire in 1993) - (apart from the assault in workload – marking and planning lessons literally until 2am, and the astonishment that Tom Brown's Schooldays was alive and well in the Victorian quads of the school – I nevertheless was very sure that teaching was the best kept secret around. The best job ever. For someone who loves their subject as I do – being paid to read books and talk about them – was just the greatest of gifts... and it has remained the case.

So, that is what we need to remind our young graduates and young staff – all the time. Teaching is about joy and discovery – not about measurement of outcomes. If we get the first bit right – the second bit will surely follow and we must have the courage to reflect that in our approach.

## **Challenge number 2: the brave new world**

But it's not just the input of politicians that is creating real challenges in education at the moment. Just like every other sector in the world – the greatest challenge we are all wrestling with - is the impact of digital technology on schools and on our sector.

What role do schools have when information is ubiquitous and immediately accessible. What place is there for the nuanced instruction of teachers, when there is endless online noise through social media messaging, notifications, updates.

We all know that we are in the midst of a revolution – and I thought it might be worth sharing just some of the most alarming stats with you to help contextualize how profound, rapid and universal these changes are.

12-16 year old girls spend an average of 7.5 hours per day on recreational screen time (not working – online chatting, gaming, viewing, emails, )

5-11 year olds – 4.5 hours

The average 10 year old has access to five screens

16-24 year olds spend more time online than asleep. Social media use has tripled since 2007. Much of this chat happens at night. Two global research bodies: TIMMS and PIRLS have found that the majority of students are sleep deprived – largely as a result of recreational screen use. The link between sleep

deprivation and depression is very strong – 5 x more likely to end up depressed if you are not getting sufficient sleep.

And of course, it's not just the fact that our children are constantly online – instead of doing other arguably healthier things – chatting to family, reading, playing, sleeping, socializing etc. It's also about the activity itself. This under the duvet behavior is arguably intrinsically damaging messaging is endless and challenging. Porn and sexualized content is again ubiquitous and entirely accessible. (And by the way, it's not just our children – apparently there were 100k hits on porn sites in parliament during the working day last year... - just saying!)

The impact of this is to distort our children's sense of human relationships / to provide at best unhelpful and at worst debilitating comparisons with unrealistic body shapes and aspirations / and to give often untrammelled or loosely policed access to a whole world of assumptions and values systems over which we have no control and no agency.

Is it any wonder that our teens are in the middle of a mental health crisis? The huge increase in levels of mental health disorders: anxiety, anorexia, self-harming, depression in both our girls and boys is well documented and it is a real concern. And there is plenty of research out there presenting a clear (if not exclusive) correlation between the increase in online activity and the increase in low self-worth anxiety and mental health decline.

So, what's to be done? This is clearly not merely a challenge for educationalists. This is not purely a school problem – but it is, undeniably, a real issue for anyone who cares about and is involved in the business of helping young people grow, develop and learn. Any school that steps back from this entirely – that argues that this is primarily a home issue and that parents need to get a grip – are really missing the point.

This is a revolution.

And like all revolutions – there are people on the frontline – pioneering, pushing boundaries, moving things forward – and there is everyone else, racing behind, trying to catch up. But in our case, of course, and part of the challenge, is that the young are the guys in the front. They are digital natives – switching with great agility from one chat mechanism to another as soon as their parents have cringingly joined whatever platform they were on – they move... as move they should. I have described it before as being very like the wild west... the kids are way out front, Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid – galloping over the Snapchat horizon – we're like the tragic sherrifs – trotting up just a few hours too late to save the day – but just about staying in touch... Indeed, one child described Facebook as like being stuck in a never-ending, excruciatingly upbeat family dinner party.

To say this is the big challenge for our time, then, is not, I think to overstate it. And the only solution to addressing these essentially social and pastoral challenges, is through discussion, open communication and training. At WHS, we have developed our set of digital golden rules – through dialogue, research and open discussion with parents, staff and crucially, studnets. We've all had the same training, the same workshops and the same survey. And from all of that, we've come up with a set of agreed guidelines and suggestions about how we might all best manage digital tech in our lives. And we know we will need to keep revising and revisiting this.

BUT, despite all that I have said, it's not the unmitigated catastrophe it may sound. Indeed, far, far from it.

Technology is truly magical and we should never lose sight of that... I am still filled with wonder when data is entered into an excel spreadsheet and becomes, instantaneously, the most elegant of graphs. I'm still staggered by fax machines mind you – still think that's incredible – goes into a machine at one end – comes out at another WHAT???

As an English teacher – cloud technology – everyone accessing the same document at the same time from wherever they are in the world, amending it, editing it, reviewing it, working on it – is astonishingly empowering and liberating. It means, for example, that an entire set can work on planning an A Level essay title together – they can watch each other – reflect on each other's observations, correct them, amend them, debate them. A few years ago, my Year 9 set, wrote an entire novel between them – each of them wrote a chapter – all on the same google doc. So empowering. I've set up partnerships with studnets in Harvard – mentoring our A level candidates online. Year 9 pupils have worked online with Year 6 children at prep and primary schools to support their learning of “Of

Mice and Men". Teachers are now able to assess work online – as soon as it happens, which means not only do our pupils get feedback instantaneously but also, that this can inform the teacher's planning of the next lesson – targeted and focused on precisely what they can see the kids are not quite getting right (or have entirely nailed) in their work online.

I could go on – there is real, real magic here. My last example makes the point most persuasively I think because it reflects most clearly the way we choose to use technology in the learning at WHS. It is not about tech at all costs – and I don't expect our girls or staff to use it slavishly or inevitably. Nor should it or will it ever replace the fire in the eyes of our teachers... the intense power of one individual's enthusiasm and expertise communicated to another. That can't be done online and I don't think it ever will be. BUT judicious, skillful and imaginative use of technology can inform the learning, can be integrated into lesson plans – tech can be another weapon in the arsenal.

So, let me, as my last eg – describe a perfect C21st lesson which I had the great joy of observing last week. It was an A level maths lesson on parametric differentiation – not an area of huge strength for me. The lesson started with all the girls, on their own, doing two quick sums to review what they'd learnt in the previous lesson. They then learned and performed together – a brilliantly witty version of the Christmas Tree song to cement a key integration rule (don't ask me to sing it – but they did beautifully). The teacher then went through the next thing they needed to learn on the board – standard  $q$  &  $a$ . The girls then got up in pairs to work on the floor to ceiling whiteboards - in a competitive paired solving of various equations. The joy there is – they're on their feet, the teacher can see what they are all doing – and comment as they go along and they can learn from each other even as they're racing to get the right solution – GREAT FUN. And then, they sat down, got their devices out and worked using software, which draws the most beautiful graph lines for them as they enter the correct algebraic formulae. A stunning, stunning lesson – my feedback was – simply – poetry – “the right things in the right order” and I never thought I'd be saying that about a maths lesson.

So, tech can be a challenge. It is presenting social and pastoral challenges to the business of schools which we all have to address. But it is also amazing – and if you adopt, it, as we have at WHS, as a key weapon in our arsenal rather than the single answer – then real magic can be achieved.

## Conclusion

And in the end, I don't think that's all that different from what happened 136 years ago in this school – or indeed, what has been happening to children being educated for hundreds and hundreds of years. Finding ways of communicating what there is to know – in the most compelling, engaging and energizing of ways – whatever that might be – that's the real challenge of education. And it has been forever. It's also the real joy of it. There is no better moment than the moment when a child sees the beauty of a line of poetry, or understands finally a complex law of physics, or beautifully parses a line of Latin, or completes a beautiful painting... those moments of discovery, and the powerful emotional pull when that happens are what it's all for and what it's all about and are, at their heart, profoundly simple. My children here laugh at me because I quote T S Eliot so frequently at them - but he has this absolutely: “We shall not cease from exploration, and the end of all our exploring, will be to arrive where we started, and know the place for the first time”

And to go back a whole lot further – Aristotle put it even more succinctly – “educating the mind without educating the heart, is no education at all”. Which is why the W P S – with your heart for inquiry – is such a very welcome guest for us, on this our 136<sup>th</sup> birthday.