

Unlocking cultural capital

Sarah Phillips, chair of the NSEAD Special Interest Group for Cultural Capital and head of History of Art at Godalming College, argues that cultural capital can not only encourage teachers and pupils to find their own voice and sense of belonging but can offer a way to bring communities together

‘Cultural Capital’ was a term first coined by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu in 1977 to describe the education, understanding and skills acquired by an individual, which are used to achieve economic advantage or social mobility. Bourdieu used the term to explore and explain the variations in performance and achievement of children in the French education system. In 2019, Ofsted added the phrase to their list of required achievements by schools, defining it as ‘the knowledge and cultural capital they need to succeed in life’.

Ofsted’s new requirement for cultural capital is an interesting one. The idealist in me would like to see it as an implicit acknowledgement that we do, in fact, need ‘things’ (not in the materialistic sense) that show value over price. After decades of hollowing out our education communities under the charge of market competition and relentless data chasing, cultural capital can offer a way to bring our communities together. When the focus shifts from ‘owning’ to ‘sharing’, cultural capital can encourage each of us (teachers and students) to find our own voice and sense of belonging. Never has this been so important and never has art and design been more important.

Today, our understanding of what cultural capital is needs to be fluid and to suit our individual schools and cohorts. It must include ideas and inspiration from local, global and specific sources (across colour, creed, class and gender), as well as those traditionally covered in canonical studies. This means that we need to make sure that the phrase does not get turned into yet another box-ticking list which implies that everyone is (or will be) motivated by the same cultural capital.

In *Morality: Restoring the Common Good in Divided Times*, philosopher and theologian Jonathan Sacks writes of the need to rebalance our communities away from the ‘I’ and towards the ‘we’. Perhaps more than any other departments in our schools, Art and Design offers an exciting way to do this. In Music and Drama, the individual is less than the whole, while in Art and Design, the individual is always different – restlessly seeking out new ideas, new solutions and techniques. There’s no rote learning here, just a genuine education in those vital life lessons that sharing and working together means being part of a bigger whole rather than dominating a tiny, lonely puddle. At its best, cultural capital offers a way to find that hugely important sense of belonging. Since the pandemic we have acknowledged our need to be social and realised that creativity and imagination are just as important as grades in our humanity (and humility).

In 2019, NSEAD formed a Special Interest Group (SIG) for cultural capital. Its remit was to look at the term ‘cultural capital’ and particularly to explore the myriad of ways it is addressed by art educators, with the

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intention of offering ideas (and confidence) to all. Several members of the SIG had already worked on this topic as part of the Leeds University Cultural Capital Thinktank. That early initiative sought to define the term and break down the ways it could be linked to work in a range of education settings.

Our Special Interest Group invited art educators to share ideas about what cultural capital looked like – or might look like – in their school or community. Across the UK and beyond, teachers have shared their conviction that cultural capital is important – and different – in all environments but that these ideas can and should be shared to motivate us all.

In Norwich, Amy Lee, art teacher and head of creative faculty at Hewett Academy, saw the potential of strong visual work inside her school to build community and increase access to cultural capital for all. Her ideas encapsulate our Thinktank’s definition that cultural capital can both nurture inclusive communities and provide the curiosity and confidence to make connections from school to the wider world. She has been given the go-ahead to re-introduce both GCSE Photography and Graphics to her department. Quotes, from a diverse range of artists and thinkers, now fill her faculty’s corridors (fig. 4), ensuring that this kind of cultural capital provocation does not become monotone or singular.

NSEAD itself is sharing a series of short films, all responding to a call out by the SIG to illustrate the myriad of ways cultural capital is, or could be, embedded in a breadth of educational establishments. These include:

Colin Davis’ film *Curriculum Mapping* looks at how curriculum maps can reflect students’ whole learning across their time at a Gloucestershire secondary school. Colin argues big picture thinking goes beyond the artificial limits of key stages, but recognises the need for multiple inspirations from cultures that were local, national and global.

Shiva Zarabadi in *Exploring fluidity of identity* (fig. 2) argues that cultural capital is profoundly affected by our understanding of relationships. She worked with groups of British Bangladeshi Muslim year 12 (ages 16-17) schoolgirls in North London to create photo diaries of moments, places and ideas that were important to them and could be used to explain their cultural heritage to others in a way that valued the exchange of experience rather than competing on a fixed cultural capital ladder. Shiva explains that the context of this study was affected by the participants’ personal experience of the Prevent policy in school which led them to feel threatened by increased surveillance and restricted freedom of speech. The opportunities offered by a creative focus on Cultural Capital provide a legitimate way to explore and share the importance of family, religion and ritual.

Kate Fellows in *Cultural Capital and the Leeds Curriculum* argues that arts and cultures should be seen as a golden thread woven throughout the curriculum to bring a sense of pleasure and belonging. To this end, the resources offered by *mylearning.org* will be useful to many.

Laura Drinkwater’s film, *Social and cultural capital*, examines how cross-curricular cultural learning and subject expertise have been used by her school to develop learner confidence.

Sue Gibbons in *Using a school trip to develop cultural capital* (fig. 1) shares her own experience of taking year 10 (ages 14-15) students from Malmesbury to the Kara Walker exhibition in the Tate Turbine Hall. She tackles the need to

overcome the widespread fear of getting it wrong (for teachers), while her video explores ways of provoking a spirit of discovery in students and making their learning effective.

Sandra Vacciana in *Nurturing Cultural Capital with Partnership for Young London* speaks about the work of the charity, Partnership for Young London, and looks at the importance of understanding intersectionality in a school setting as a way to reduce inequality. She draws on the inspiration of Maya Angelou for building a sense of student responsibility and ability, and looks at the ways cultural capital can be used to boost both self-esteem and resilience.

Anne-Louise Quinton in *A Cultural Capital Sketchbook* participated in the Brooklyn Library Sketchbook Project, showing the wealth of cultural capital that comes from sharing. Her work emphasises the participation and belonging aspects of this concept, as well as demonstrating effectively how a cultural capital school project can span the whole curriculum and departments.

Rebecca Glover in *New Woodlands Cultural Capital: Art’s Cool* talks to two of her 16-year-old students at the SEMH school in South East London about how their art experiences have enhanced their learning, their pleasure and their understanding of each other.

Clare Stanhope’s *Conversation around Cultural Capital and Art* (fig. 3) explores her ongoing journey through the world of art education and cultural capital. From the fundamental right of every individual child to explore their creativity, Clare looks at the knowledge, new challenges and gaps in the ‘art adventure’, in addition to the difference that cultural capital makes to our lives, industry and economy.

Thank you to every art educator for their films and case studies submitted. We hope that the conversations around cultural capital continue. ■



A selection of cultural capital films are available here in NSEAD’s YouTube channel: bit.ly/3mvG7AT

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