

GUEST COLUMN – September 2023

Looking back, thinking ahead David Chidgey

It is often said that history repeats itself. In our household, history is more revisited than repeated.

As we both taught for many years, the substance of our conversation occasionally revolves around ex-colleagues, pupils, and those who taught us whilst we were on the learning side of the classroom. Remembering some of the valuable knowledge from decades ago does mean that we are able to use lessons taught, theories explained, examples given: from physics (levers, pulleys, moving heavy objects) to English (who in public life may we compare with Goneril and Regan?).

What delights at times is remembering those teachers who made a difference to our lives, why and how.

Mr Hargreaves was an inspirational teacher who led me to some success in A level chemistry a few decades ago. He was young and enthusiastic, creating multicoloured Banda sheets (a forerunner to laser printers, Google 'Banda spirit duplicator' to have a giggle) by the ream. The whole class looked forward to his lessons: he was clear about class rules, demanding in the amount of homework and revision we had to do, merciless on those who didn't, and supportive of all his students.

Mr Smith, similarly so, in my understanding of physics. In his case a tyrant of a man with a short temper. We didn't relish his lessons, knowing full well that fellow students who had failed to keep up with the mountain of homework would receive short shrift. But when the lesson got under way the detail and reasoning became clear, delivered with a sparkle in the eye and a deep understanding of the subject. What does come to mind when looking back are the basic principles behind the modules, rather than rote learning of formula: these principles are applied by ourselves today in so many practical ways.

Both math teachers' names slip my memory, not for their lack of presence, rather memories more focused on the subject matter taught. This will date my learning: much of the applied math was geared around the trajectory of Apollo Lunar Module Eagle, great fun but not entirely focused on the syllabus, necessitating rather too many 'after school' lessons to catch up.

Mr Anderton (known by all as Joe Plank), the woodwork teacher from earlier years, is remembered mainly for the embarrassment suffered by my parents when they went looking for 'Mr Plank' during one of their infrequent parent evening visits. Fanny Castile taught French - she also drove a VW Beetle and was famous throughout the school for asking how she might 'top up the radiator'. Apocryphal one may assume, but one will now never know for sure.

Today Facebook (for all its ills) brings occasional messages from ex-pupils commenting on their paths in life, mentioning events which happened in the classroom or on residential trips. It is humbling to think I may have stirred an interest, lit a flame, or suggested a path which now brings some delight to others.

Joe was one of my sixth form students, talented in his academic subjects, an accomplished artist, and a young man with a thoughtful disposition. As we sat down to discuss his future after sixth form, it became clear he was uncertain as to which path to take after his 'year out' travelling. Often at this point parents would have recommended their alma mater, students would look to following up their favourite subject/ teacher, or simply not have a clue. What advice to give - the academic subject studied at degree level may have a good chance of employment, the art degree fulfilment, but could he make a living out of his art?

The advice I did give was to look at the consequences of each decision, where it may lead, and what opportunities it may provide.

Several years later I met Joe's father. He was terribly nice and spoke in detail about his son's excellent progress and happiness at university, success in finding employment, and a blossoming career in business, finishing our conversation with thanks for advice given as to which course to study as he progressed onto the next stage of his education.

Perhaps this young man will remember me in 20 or 30 years as I have remembered Mr Hargreaves. I wonder.

David Chidgey has been the webmeister of the *Blink* website since its creation. He can be found relaxing on his smallholding at [Cadbury Cottage](#).