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Viewpoint: 'The tempting range', *Middlemarch*, and me

By Ted Simonds

Preamble

As a student of English Literature, I am well aware I read more poetry, novels, and plays than I do much else; yet while my life revolves around literature, it doesn't mean my discipline and I aren't already linked to the rest of the world. For me, to study literature in any sense, to merely *read*, is to open one's mind to the lives of others living in other times and other places. To read is to learn, to widen your perspective. It is what George Eliot called the 'unravelling of human lots'. It is what I have gradually come to appreciate through my participation in youth-led projects, and has become a cornerstone of my personality and a guiding principle of the path I hope to take through life.

It begins

At the age of 11 I became a member of my county-wide Youth Council. The youngest from my school, I would attend bi-monthly meetings with other young people from other schools and groups in my county. We would set ourselves annual goals, on which we would work, from ways to encourage young people to use the Welsh language locally, to making sure looked-after children were engaged in changes to Council procedures. I was able to meet professionals, and make friends with people whom I would never have met, and work with them towards a common and, importantly, self-decided common good. Councillors, youth workers, and health professionals were there for us and with us. I was exposed to a world that lay under the machinations of the world I lived in. Vivally, it marked the point in my life at which I started to think more widely about my place in the world. There were people beyond my family, and beyond my high school, for whom I could improve things.

This was most powerfully brought to my attention when I was working with a group of looked-after young people (meaning they came from care and foster situations) with whom I worked in redrafting their 'Corporate Parenting Plan', to make it more accessible to those who were impacted by it. This document was huge, unwieldy, and heavy. Never before had I been made to address my underlying privilege in having been born into a family. This is not to say that the kids I worked with were inherently down-trodden. They were just like me, but where my relationship with my parents was unspoken, theirs was codified and over 40 pages long. The Local Authority was their parent, and the parameters had to be written down. Looking back, this experience is one I think of, among many, that is emblematic of the time I came to question the parts of myself that I was given, that other people have to work for. These weren't problems that I had ever been made to think about, it wasn't some distant land, it was my town and my county.

What lay beyond the bounds of my own context? It was seven years until I left the Conwy Youth Council, my work with them was formative not just in establishing the Youth Council's place in the County, but for me as an individual. It was when I was beginning to realise my own privilege, and potential to influence improvements that could have real life impacts on people.

At the age of 15, I was chosen to represent my local youth council at the National Youth Assembly in Wales. Not only was this a bigger organisation, but the capacity to influence change was national rather than regional. The biggest project I was involved in during my time on Funky Dragon (the name of the youth assembly) was my involvement in CATS.

CATS

Just after I was elected, I was chosen to form one of a group of young people who had been invited to participate in a conference in Switzerland called CATS – Children as Actors for Transforming Society. This was the culmination of all my previous experiences, and a moment where the speed at which the web of human lots was unravelled at its fastest. I arrived there and was met with a week of work and experiences unparalleled in my previous experiences. I will take just a few moments as illustrations.

In my community group there were ten young people (my 16-year-old self included). Four from Wales, two from Nicaragua, three from Peru, and one from Latvia. The only people who spoke English were those from Wales and Latvia, and the only ones who spoke Spanish were from Nicaragua and Peru. It was chaos, trying desperately to communicate and share our experiences of youth participation. In another way it was eye-opening (as any of us can attest) to see how much we seemed to understand each other.

A young boy from Peru managed to tell us about how his village flooded every year, killing more children than any other demographic. He'd worked with a group of other children to raise awareness of this problem. This was real life. It made us all think. Yet it wasn't just these cataclysmic differences of nature that provoked thoughts, there was a more nuanced cultural difference that is etched on my mind. *Usó Mi Voz Contra El Maltrato Infantil*. I saw these words written on the t-shirts, badges, bags of the children from Nicaragua, but I

couldn't speak Spanish. It was only after an attempted forum theatre that I realised the words had a saddening and empowering meaning. Child abuse is one translation, *maltrato* means mistreatment or maltreatment, so *el maltrato infantil* may not carry the same weighting as child abuse does in the UK, especially in the wake of the wave of historic *child abuse* cases of the past few years.

In the activity, we had to recreate an act of classroom advocacy: in our Anglophone conception it was about school councils, representation, and *Article 12*. In the Latin-American conception, it was the teacher who struck the child. *Golpear* was another word lost on me. Accompanied with actions of a fist (or an open hand) it all made sense. The commonality of the mistreatment of children was something institutionalised, in the family, school, and beyond – a far cry from the kind of experience I had ever had. It caused us to look at each other with mouths agape, but to them it was so normal it was pastiched with pantomime joviality. It was so normal to them. It was a process of learning that a different reality existed beyond the scope of my own.

I then went on to get involved in the running of CATS, something I still do. To me, CATS is a space for children to work together, united by an underlying sense of what they want to do while learning about the different lives they live.

Beyond my lot

Here, I return to George Eliot and her assessment of our capacities to understand other people's lives, of which she says in her novel *Middlemarch* (arguably my favourite) that in 'unravelling certain human lots... all the light I can command must be concentrated on this particular web, [meaning her lot] and not dispersed over that tempting range of relevancies called the universe'. This is where I depart from Eliot, whose project was a novel. I am not writing a novel, and that 'tempting range' is particularly alluring. My life and experiences have led me to peer out from my own particular web to catch a glimpse of that which can't be caught in literature. I want to be part of the machinations of the world I want to see, rather than merely be an observer.

Author

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