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GUEST COLUMN – October 2025

Culture
Guy Holloway

This is an extract from Guy Holloway's latest book 'The A – Z of Independent Education', published this month.

CULTURE

To what extent do members of staff in your school read, discuss and exchange books in addition to delivering their classroom lessons?

When was the last time you overheard teachers passionately debating a book, exhibition or concert in the common room? Do they swap or recommend novels to each other? We can't 'teach' culture exactly – but we can oxygenate the water in which we all swim by fostering an atmosphere where these things matter.

Some cultural reference points feature, of course, in prescribed exam syllabuses: Bartók's *Concerto for Orchestra* in GCSE Music, *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* in GCSE English Literature, or a mention of Hobbes' *Leviathan* in A-level Politics. But how can a school go further?

How can a school ensure that students and staff alike are immersed in the sweep of our cultural history?

And though it makes sense to focus more on the Western canon, reflecting our geography, let's introduce where we can elements from African, Asian, Ottoman and other cultures too. Not because it is fashionable or elitist to do so, but because acquaintance with our collective cultural heritage - its music, art, literature and political thought - is essential to understanding ourselves and the world we live in.

BEYOND THE SYLLABUS

School leaders are compelled to tick the boxes of inspection criteria (Independent Schools Inspectorate (ISI) and Ofsted) to meet the standards that define an 'outstanding' school.

How can we evidence learning? Has the assessment objective been met? And all that. Yet we all know that a cultured person is not one who has passed a test. How

many students have studied *Othello* to achieve a top grade at GCSE, only to never read another word of Shakespeare again? Clearly that's not a success.

First-rate examination results can be achieved, even by students of modest ability, by teaching the mark schemes. Naturally, the best teachers resist this reductionism, and the most memorable lessons are often those that, propelled by intellectual curiosity, veer thrillingly off track; where a literary reference leads to an unexpected detour into art history, or a philosophical question opens the door to political theory.

These are the moments where education transcends the merely functional. But for this to happen, you need to give your staff the freedom to fly - in and out of the classroom.

APPOINTING STAFF

When recruiting, seek these core key qualities in a classroom teacher:

- reflectiveness and self-awareness
- a deep subject knowledge (which needs to be tested at interview)
- a strong classroom presence
- a commitment to students' emotional and intellectual growth.

To these, add a fifth: cultural literacy. When choosing between two equally qualified candidates, the decisive factor should be their intellectual breadth. The preferred candidate is the one who has read more widely, possesses broader knowledge and nurtures passions beyond their specialist field.

Guy Holloway's *The A-Z of Independent School Leadership* is available now.