

Kate Smith's Boston Blog



by Kate Smith

Kate Smith is Nieman Foundation Fellow 2013 at Harvard University, Boston. She is Programme Leader for the BA Journalism in the School of Arts and Creative Industries at Edinburgh Napier University. Prior to joining the University Kate worked at Stirling and Sheffield Hallam Universities and was a freelance journalist and columnist writing regularly for The Scotsman, Scotland on Sunday, the Sunday Herald, the Herald, The Guardian and a wide range of magazines. Before that Kate ran her own international magazine publishing company with offices in Edinburgh and Moscow. Kate was nominated for a British Press award in 2008 for an article on the 2008 Global Food Crisis.

As I prepare to leave Harvard this week, one of the big ideas that I will take with me is educational opportunity, one of the key debates following the Trayvon Martin tragedy. The fact that the US discusses and promotes educational opportunity so carefully and seriously gladdens my heart. Harvard publicly asks itself the tough questions: can they do more to widen access (which they do through summer schools for High school students and financial scholarships)? How can any class, colour or religious barriers to accessing education be removed?

One of the reasons I was delighted to be offered a Fellowship by the Nieman Foundation for Journalism at Harvard is that it gives me a chance to demonstrate aspiration to students and potential students. Knowing what is possible is a large part of doing what is possible. If, like me, neither of your parents went to university (despite their smarts) or you went to a school like mine, then Higher Education in Scotland alone

is an alien world. International education is for other people. It pains me to admit I spent (squandered?) a good few of my undergraduate years trying to prove I was too cool for school, which was the learned behaviour of school. When I see this in any new students, I smile. Knowing that when the spark of a theory, an idea, a different perspective or their innate passion for justice ignites, cognitive change happens. They start to take their learning seriously, engage and want to learn to see. Knowledge enables them to see the world as it is and that another, better world is possible. Education is emancipation and fair access to educational opportunities benefits everyone, not just the learner. At this learning stage encouraging confidence and self-belief is so important to engendering aspiration but confidence alone is rarely enough to succeed.

University education in Scotland is good. The Scottish Government's commitment to no university fees has been key in continuing this. But across the UK as a whole, one of the tough questions to ask ourselves is education fair? Is educational opportunity class-based? If so, then which measures should be taken to mitigate it? Judging someone on their background is the same as judging them on their colour, creed, gender or sexuality. Limiting access to all varieties of education on this basis is not only discriminatory but perpetuates elites, elite policy and erodes good society. Rather than good governance, bad governance results, distracting the people with bread and circuses. With riots as expressions of dissensus on the inequity.

Perhaps it is easier to ask the tough questions now: how can the full range of educational opportunities be more equitably accessed? Inequity serves no one well, especially not the future. Elite schools and universities need to open their doors wider and find the funding to do so. One of the cornerstones of educational opportunity here in the USA is philanthropic giving which provides scholarships. Changing

the UK tax laws would allow more of this. As also happens in some States here, the socio-demographic credentials of successful applicants to schools and universities should be openly disclosed. Education is not only about employment but about altruism, participation and progressive change. Not politely closing doors in the face of aspiration. Not communicating by silences that someone does not fit or has been judged as not suitable. Education is enabling the potential of people from all backgrounds. Fighting for the plurality of good democracy. As America knows, this is the way forward. The UK needs to start a BIG honest discussion about the class barriers to education which blight our youth. For the stakes are high.

Martin Luther King Jr, who got his PhD from Boston University said:- "The saving of our world...will come, not through the complacent adjustment of the conforming majority, but through the creative maladjustment of a nonconforming minority."