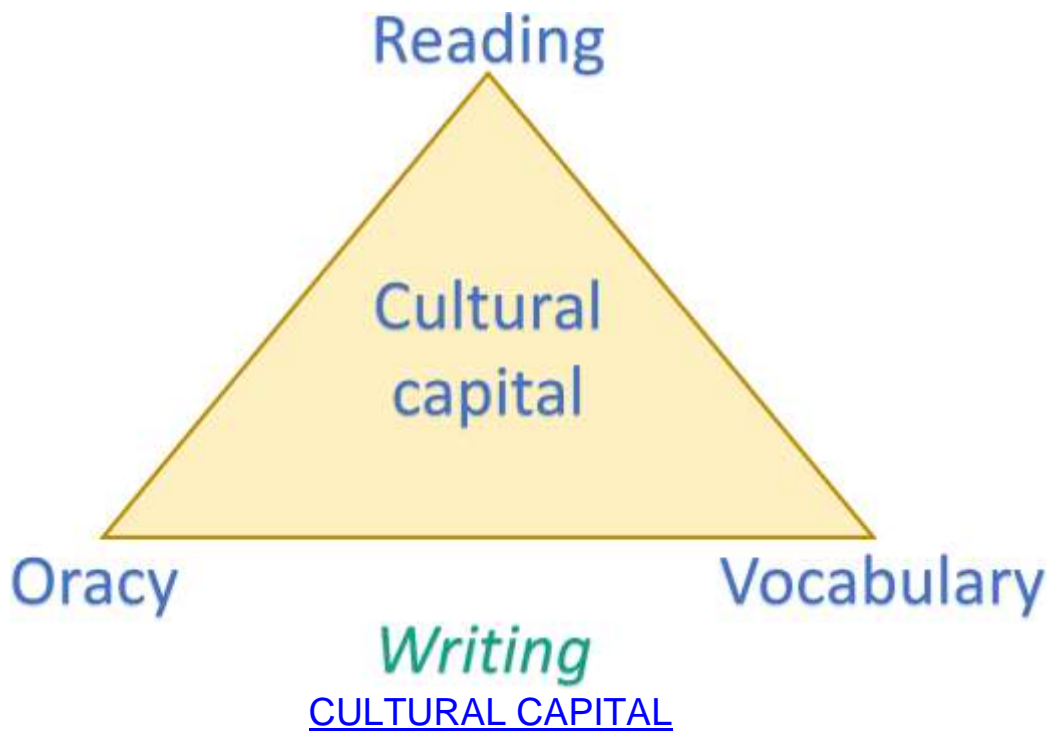


The best that has been thought and said.

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It is the human condition that - as we grow - we think and dream, we speak, we read and then write. Our natural language acquisition device kicks in alongside the development of memory and conscience.

In school classrooms, the magic trinity of oracy, reading and vocabulary traces how we learn, with the expectation that we write to demonstrate what we have learned. And at heart of all this lies our cultural knowledge.

Contemporary understanding of knowledge and cultural capital (and as interpreted by the national inspectorate) is derived from the following wording in the national curriculum:

It is the essential knowledge that pupils need to be educated citizens, introducing them to the best that has been thought and said and helping to engender an appreciation of human creativity and achievement.

It is worth reminding ourselves that ‘the best that has been thought and said’ are the words of the 19th century poet and social commentator Matthew Arnold. In his famous book ‘Culture and Anarchy’ he argued against elitist definitions of ‘culture’, and that the opposite of culture was ‘doing as one likes’, his term for individuals who act out of self-interest, without regard for the greater good.

Thinking about classrooms - whether in early years learning or at GCSE and A level - cultural capital encompasses the collective of skills, knowledge and experiences which the teacher wishes the learner to grasp.

Schools sometimes struggle to articulate how they are interpreting and promoting cultural capital, recognising how important this aspect is for all learners - and especially for disadvantaged children. Here are ten starters for teachers.

Ten Provocations

1. **Call ‘cultural capital’ General Knowledge.** That used to be the common term in schools - and children and families can grasp its familiar resonance. In that way ‘the best that has been thought and said’ can be brought to life, encouraging families to learn together with books, films, visits, conversations.
2. **Know that one person’s cultural capital is not necessarily another’s.** In a multi-cultural and pluralist society, yes there are common values and ways of doing; yet belief systems and thus appreciation of, for example, celebrated music, art and literature will vary. *Does Taylor Swift beat Mozart?* - a question glimpsed recently on a music department notice-board.
3. **Teacher, feed your own soul and intellect.** Fit your own oxygen mask first. Great lessons are rooted in the richness of tasks and activities set, whether for 5 or 15 year-olds. And that richness is ever rooted in the teacher’s own knowledge and understanding of a subject or topic.
4. **Keep a large, spinning globe on your desk.** Remind children and young people they are global citizens, entrusted with their fantastic world to pass on to future generations. Enable pupils to understand time zones, weather systems, planet degradation and the irrepressible movement of peoples, in peace and war.
5. **Assumicide: don’t assume that children know or do not know something.** They may or may not do. Children surprise us with what they know, and with what we think they should know and don’t know - or knew it once, but have forgotten it. Building and embedding cultural capital is a slow burn. In teaching and learning, make the implicit.....*explicit*.
6. **‘C’est la language, stupide’.** Contemporary classrooms are so very often today a linguistic gymnasium; it is rare to step into a monoglot class of 30. Harness the diverse languages in a class to learn and relish common words in

different languages; and, by extension, beliefs, customs and appreciation of alternative cultural capital.

7. **Climb inside another's skin.** What is it like to be someone else? To enable children to answer that question when acquiring new knowledge is critical. That way there is sincere appreciation of what other cultures value and how different interpretations of the same 'facts' can too often lead to confusion and conflict.
8. **Embrace the fun and fundamentals.** Deep learning and understanding of how artists, writers, inventors, musicians, scientists have, over time, shaped their worlds and our world demand careful study, revision and revision. If teachers make the acquisition of the fundamentals *fun*, then children flourish.
9. **Connect, only connect.** Apply the learning. Gaze out of the window. Too often learning in classrooms fails to strike a chord with pupils because they do not see the stuff as relevant. Great teachers constantly make connections *between* subjects and make links with the world beyond the classroom. Share, read about and discuss the daily news.
10. **Classrooms without walls.** It is the daily diet over 190 school days that matters in building pupils' cultural capital, 'the best that has been thought and said' in many contexts and cultures. The school which can extend children's experiences beyond the school gates is affording memories for life.

This arena of cultural capital is a slow burn; once begun, there is no turning back.

Roy Blatchford's latest book is ['The A - Z of Great Classrooms'](#), published by John Catt/Hodder.