

Somerville Suppers: An Appetite for Learning!

By Dr Rebecca Jones

Discussion is an exchange of knowledge; an argument an exchange of ignorance. Robert Quillen

In September 2014, Malvern St James, a girls' boarding and day school in the UK, began a supper club with a twist. The aim of the suppers was to create an atmosphere that was designed to stimulate academic discussion and give the dinner guests a chance to think about issues on a deeper level that promoted questioning and curiosity. The only permanent members were me, the Learning Enrichment and Support Co-ordinator, and the Headmistress who hosted the supper.

The name of the suppers evolved from a meeting that the Headmistress had had with Dr Alice Prochaska, Principal of Somerville College, Oxford, an institution that has had a longstanding and unwavering commitment to providing women with access to academic life. In this spirit the Somerville Suppers were born. We decided that the dinner guests would be pupils from year 9 to 13, who had either been selected or recommended by staff. I would lead and mediate the conversation and a special guest would be invited to enrich the experience.

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The first supper consisted of a mix of year 12 and 13 pupils selected from those who had identified themselves as being interested in applying for Oxbridge (Oxford Royal Academy, 2014) and those who were applying to prestigious and highly competitive universities. The rationale behind this was that these were individuals who already had high aspirations for their academic career. The adult guests were a subject specialist from the teaching staff and a governor. The meal was scheduled to last for two and quarter hours (6:45pm-9pm). I set a focus question for the evening that the conversation would start with and each pupil was then sent an invitation by email arranged by the Headmistresses PA. Each pupil was then invited to consider the question, from whatever perspective they wished, and to find some sort of stimulus material that they could bring to the supper and to share with the group. The remit was left deliberately wide in order to gather a range of responses, as this would encourage debate and discussion. As director of the group, I also brought my response to start the conversation. The question was, "How should we act and what change should we be looking to make?".

The supper was held at the Headmistress's house which is on the school site. The building has a large but comfortable dining room with a table that can seat up to 20 people. Catering provided the two-course supper and the evening was arranged like a dinner party with everyone assembling in the living room before the meal to chat informally. The pre-dinner conversation provided room for everyone to introduce themselves, including the adults, and for me to outline the expectations of the evening. These expectations included the understanding that every student would introduce and set up discussion surrounding the article or item that they had brought. They were also encouraged to voice their opinion and ask questions about the topic or raise an alternative interpretation on the issue; in short the evening would be a success if the discussion was taken on by the table. The ground rule of respect for each other's contributions was agreed and everyone's status was emphasised as being equal. However, it was also noted that each person had the responsibility to speak up if they wished to add a point. The girls were arranged randomly around the table, with the adults dispersed evenly in-between. The party was international in its nature with pupils from Europe, Asia and Africa hence there was a wide range of cultural diversity.

Highlights from the First Dinner

The evening opened with my article, 'Does Feminism need men?' (Lipsitz, 2014) which was an opinion piece that suggested that, "women should start asserting our rights and stop waiting for a few good men to recognise them". This sparked discussion, for example, the suggestion that women have to be more like men to be effective within the world of business, was raised. There was the idea that men might not understand what it means to be a feminist and that women needed to stand together and challenge the assumptions of

the patriarchal system. One pupil suggested that how you were brought up was important and remarked that she felt that boys were raised with different expectations. This then turned to whether women should be 'glamorous' or if attractiveness weakened feminism, which then sparked debate about dress codes. The feelings of entitlement that were felt by the sexes were linked to religions, the predominance of male figures, and to masculine roles. Female politicians were mentioned along with the implication that to be taken seriously, in some countries, a woman had to be married with a family.

The issue of responsibility was raised in relation to clothing and the cultural forces that control how women look. 'Who do you dress for?' The girls challenged the assumption that it was just for boys but noted that being judged on appearance was suffocating. This notion of 'playing a part' was linked to the characters in *Lady Windermere's Fan* and the expectation of conformity to preserve society. A poem was read out that emphasised the impact that change has on one person but also the community around them and, more importantly, the fear of being 'othered' socially if you try something new. Often, one pupil noted, a person can think that it is others that need to change where, in reality, it is oneself. The evolution of self was considered as important.

How can change be implemented? How can we make an impact and what is the notion of judgement really all about? This idea of whether we should be optimistic or pessimistic about the possibility of change was emphasised by the poem, *I Am Part of a Lost Generation*, by Jonathan Reed which is a reversible poem that completely changes the point once it is rearranged. So perhaps the aim as previously suggested was to change yourself – "be the change you want to be". However, the alternative perspective was presented using Mathew Arnold's view of high culture suggesting that art and culture that has been valued for decades should not necessarily be steamrollered simply because we live in a generation that highly values individualism.

Being left-handed was raised as an example of how perception has changed over time (Lieberman, 2010), from the preference being viewed as 'sinister' to a general acceptance of this difference as being benign and simply part of the diversity of being human, although the comment was raised that using chopsticks left handed could be problematic if historical biases still remained. This then moved on to the impact of touch screens, with the suggestion that this technology promoted equality as using a dominant hand would no longer have the same context.

Another aspect raised as an agent of change was that of love, with quotes from Martin Luther King being used as an example: "Yes, it is love that will save our world and our civilisation, love even for enemies" (Luther King, 1957). The point was made that people should show love and solidarity as human beings. Warmth can easily be conveyed with a smile. However, it was pointed out that in some cultures smiling was not the norm and that perhaps this needed to change.

One barrier to collaborative change mentioned was competition and the fact that comparing oneself to others was pervasive, especially online (Lenheart, 2011). The girls felt that it was difficult to opt out and ignore the versions that others portrayed of themselves through posts and pictures. There was also strong agreement around the table that pupils could be reduced to being valued by their grades: "the scale that we judge ourselves on is messed up", commented one girl. There was also disagreement about the value and impact of role models with the suggestion that real role models were more powerful and influential than media generated ones. The Year 8 work on display in school was mentioned as being about family members rather than famous faces. Another commented that often role models were actual 'models' a fact that leads to an over emphasis on physical beauty and appearance. However, whatever the effects, the table agreed that the social and broadcast media did matter.

An experiment that showed that people did not sit together if they had a choice was mentioned as it revealed the invisible barriers that exist in open spaces.

The evening ended with the thought that change was an inevitable part of life and that as individuals we can both make and take part in changes that we want to see in our society.

The Next Step

The suppers have continued to grow and surprise us with each meal. The invited guest is generally one of the school governors and this has had a really positive experience on both sides. The students have enjoyed having someone outside their everyday school experience attending and it has given the governors an opportunity to engage with pupils on a more informal basis. It has also allowed governors to share their expertise with the girls. This has ranged across a range of areas including business acumen, project management, education, religion and general world experience. This breath of experience has been invaluable and has been the catalyst for interesting sub-topics and interconnected conversations.

After the initial experiment evening, we have begun to develop a format for the evenings. The first part of between 15-20 minutes allows the guests to settle and become acquainted if they do not usually socialise together. It also allows the adults to mingle before the supper starts. This then leads to general introductions around the room and the guest provides some background about themselves and their interests.

I have continued to introduce my article as a starter to the evening as this has proved to be a successful way to begin and to warm up the table. I have also improved the introductory email that is sent to each pupil that details the expectations of the evening along with some suggestions of how to respond to the question in broad terms.

The suppers have also started to become designated for different year groups at different times in the year:

Autumn 1	Yr. 12	Oxbridge/Russell Group Applicants
Autumn 1	Yr. 9/10	Group that attends a visit to a university
Spring 1	Yr. 11/12	Oxford Lecture group
Spring 2	Yr. 12/13	Discussion Topic
Summer 1	Yr. 11/12	Discussion Topic
Summer 2	Yr. 9/10	Discussion Topic

Discussion Topics

The suppers have covered a range of topics including:

- Are we mentally obese?
- How do you know your perceptions are real?
- Is reality self-defining?
- How do we form an identity?
- Will the world be united under one world view?
- What will be the most important development in the future?
- Can we trust science?

Each supper has its own flavour. From experience, the most productive evenings have been those where the guests have a common theme to discuss be this from a central question or as a result of attending lectures or conducting specific investigations. The least cohesive event was one where Year 12 students were asked to identify a current issue in the subject that they were intending to study and to introduce it to the group. This version was more challenging to manage as, depending on the appeal of the topic, some items took a considerable amount of time to introduce and develop as the context was not known by the other guests. This meant that more input was also required by the adults to move the discussion to a place where others could engage.

Feedback from Pupils

The voices of those who have attended confirm that value and the impact that these discussions can have on individual pupils.

'I found it fascinating to learn more about the different politics and cultures between the West and East and by learning more about people's topics and opinions, I feel as though I have deepened my understanding in certain areas, which I previously had little understanding and knowledge on.'

'I would definitely come again if given the opportunity and if you needed the help from a 6th Former, I would be more than happy to pose a question and 'lead' a debate.'

'Would I come again? I will say absolutely yes! I enjoy it very much and it offered me a great chance to communicate and learn from several serious topics and views.'

'I want to come again since next time I want to talk more about my own opinions. The topic I have mentioned is a novel called The Galactic Empire Trilogy – there is a mathematician who can calculate the possibilities of everything.'

'I would absolutely love to come again! Perhaps we need to lengthen the allotted time for more open topics? Technology – Have we gone too far? – Which reality is the real reality? – Have we made ourselves more vulnerable?'

'I really loved the supper last night and I found it so interesting to hear other people's ideas. I'm so glad we have an opportunity to do something that makes us think beyond the restrictions and boundaries of the curriculum, and I love questioning my own opinion and developing my ideas (as well as thinking outside the blue box).'

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'Thank you again for organising and the invitation; comments wise I would say having a visitor was really excellent and added to debate and I'd be interested in attending another Supper.'

'When I left the dinner I thought more about the conference, in particular the first lecture about the different eras and how each era is represented by its fashion, music etc. This led me to thinking about my own generation. It frustrates me how, in my opinion, my generation cannot be represented by either its fashion or music. My generation is now copying fashion from the earlier generations instead (i.e. retro) of creating our own fashion. Additionally, we have no major music genre to represent us as a generation. For example, in the future when people speak of my generation are they going to think of 'One Direction' as the main musical influence? If so, this does not compare to great musical influence of previous eras such as the influence that Nirvana had in the early 90s and the influence of The Beatles in the 60s. Furthermore, this lack of main music genre is also turning us to listen to music of different genres, because, again, this is thought to be 'retro'. Now, I am hoping for the days for when my generation will come into its own and have its own style and will be able to stand out from earlier eras. However, in the back of my mind I now question is it is too late for this to happen.'

'I supposed that the last question that has been left behind after all the discussions is how amazing our brains are as they enable us to think of extraordinary things, although the secret about our brain is still unresolved.'

From a parent of a Year 9: 'She came home buzzing with the evening and hoped that she had been a valuable part of the conversation.'

From a governor: 'I really enjoyed the whole experience, and was very impressed by the girls, and their contributions to our far-ranging debate. Whilst the supper serves as a form of preparation for girls who are considering Oxbridge or other universities where interviews form part of the admissions process, it is clearly of benefit for all those who take part, by stretching their minds, encouraging them to think more widely, and to become persuasive communicators of their own ideas.'

Points to consider when setting up a supper:

1. Where to hold the supper – consistency and status of venue has been important
2. How long – the evenings are slightly shorter for year 9-10 pupils

3. How many – the optimum number we have found is twelve pupils and three adults
4. Tone of the discussion – as the leader, be prepared to take controversial positions and introduce more difficult perspectives to manage. Set up questions for the table whilst also addressing individuals if they need specific encouragement
5. Moderate the adults – interpret or widen the points made by guests to help pupils understand the point being made or invite pupils to question.
6. Encourage all to speak and to jump into the conversation. It can be tricky if a couple of pupils find it easy to take part whereas others are more hesitant. Part of the process has to show that speaking up is exciting and if you don't then you lose your voice.
7. Mix up the invites: pupils perhaps attend 2/3 times over two years to make sure that the experience is still fresh and stimulating.
8. Invite feedback: I always ask for comments after the supper which can be positive or points for improvement. Pupils can also state if they wish to have another go or if there is another pupil they feel should be invited.

Obstacles faced:

1. Poor replies to invites
2. Timing of the suppers/clashes with other school social/educational events.

Conclusion

The discussions can go in any direction; it is important to let the topics flow and revisit points later in the supper if it is relevant, as sometimes people can have ideas further down the line that are pertinent.

In terms of staff members the suppers have benefitted from input from the school Chaplain, science teachers, boarding house staff, the careers advisor, teachers who are responsible for specific clubs and members of the senior management team. Having additional staff is particularly useful when discussing subjects that require specific subject knowledge. I have found support for topics that require more detailed scientific knowledge to be particularly useful.

The suppers have become an established part of the academic enrichment of the school and allow pupils to have the opportunity to find their voice within a group, to air their views, share their responses, to challenge, agree or change their initial response. Each evening is an exciting unknown that has its own dynamic energy.

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I can be contacted at: library@malvernstjames.co.uk and I would be interested in hearing from anyone who is interested or who has started their own form of discussion supper.

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