

Learning To Not Think

Ross Welcome to Renegade Inc. In the nepotistic UK, it is not what you know, it's who you know and where you've been to university. The aura that surrounds Oxbridge shines brightly. But scratch the surface and you find a different story riven by snobbery and backbiting. So are universities educating our best people or have they become mere networking facilities for big business and politics?

Ross Lisa McKenzie, you've written a piece saying, I used to push for working class kids to go to university, but no longer. They are toxic institutions of prejudice. Are they?

Lisa McKenzie Yeah, well, I think so, yeah. I went to university as a mature student in 2001 and I feel that in 2020 prejudices, racisms and bigotry, I think universities are almost allowing these things to grow within them by not challenging them, actually. So for being you know, being working class at university now is really tough. I think it's also about the school system as well. And I think if you ask any teacher at school about what they now teach and how the curriculum looks, they'll say, you know, from 20 years ago, they've got much less space to teach critical thinking to schoolchildren. What's happening is critical thinking takes much longer to learn. It's harder to, you know, put a number on it. How do you critically think you know? Are you were number 10 or a number one? And I think, you know, because we're looking at numbers, we're looking at jobs, we're looking at money. Everything is about how much you pay for something versus what you get out at the end. And actually, the learning experience and the knowledge is not as important as the relationship between the job and the university degree at the end.

Ross But this is an absolute gift for corporates, isn't it, and employers, because of the sausage factory starts in school. You don't have to think don't worry we've got you back. Then you go through uni and that's then basically emphasised and doubled down on. And then you're job ready. And then you're off into the workplace and you're a useful economic unit and off you go. So that critical thinking aspect has deliberately been taken out of universities.

Lisa McKenzie I don't think anybody, purposefully, is sitting around and saying, you know, well, let's have no critical thinkers. Because one of the things that business actually does complain about is that when they get students right out of university, that they don't do much alone thinking, that they have to be told everything. So I don't think anybody is actually purposefully doing that. I think that the system as it is - and a sociologist I might explain this with the Weberian bureaucratic system. Because what Weber said is you've got an ideal type of bureaucracy and then it squeezes everything. It squeezes all the good out of it and it just becomes about the system. So the system works only for itself. And, you know, the beginning and the end doesn't really matter anymore. It's about the system. And I think that's what's happened to education at schools, but also at universities as well. And I've got students that they're paying so much to be there and they're put under so much pressure to succeed and in their mind, not to fail. So what they're not going to do is they're not going to ever take a chance on writing an essay on what they think. It's quite astounding, actually, when you work in universities and you get that question, am I allowed to write I in my essay? And then you also get other students when you say you must put your own opinion in this. That is very frightening for them because they think what if my opinion is wrong?

Ross See, when it comes back to a critical thinking, you have to create an environment where people can fail because ultimately, as we all know, there have been millions of failures in all of our lives and we've learnt way more from them and we've become more resilient. This headlong rush to succeed, to get it right, it creates very, very fragile students who, when they do get into the world and inevitably fail, fall over often never to get up.

Lisa McKenzie Yeah. And I also think. I mean, one of the things about success and failure is these are almost classed terms. So, you know, if you look at the class system in Britain, to be working class is failure. To be middle class, is more successful or to be, you know, the one percent is extreme success. But to be at the bottom of society as the working class, that means failure. So if everybody is thinking, I've got to be in this middle space, and then you've got the middle class saying we've got to stay in the middle space and keep everybody out because it's getting crowded, what you get then is you get education that is based on almost like success and failure stereotypes rather than a process of knowledge. So knowledge is about arguments, debates, as you say, thinking differently. But when that is such a risk to students they don't want to take it. How do you ever push them to think about injustices or inequalities or, you know, freedom of speech and what that means? How do you ever get that when they are so terrified of failing?

Ross One of the bits that we haven't touched on is culture - the culture within these organisations. What you're saying is that it's toxic and it's full of prejudice. How does that look, specifically through a working class lens?

Lisa McKenzie Well, for a start, when you first go to university and you are working class, you know, when you are first filling in your UCAS form, somebody will be telling you where you should be going. And if you're working class and you're at a sixth form or you're at a FE college, you're more likely to choose your local college, your local university. You don't want to perhaps travel further. If you're at one of the private educated schools, they will want you to apply for Oxford and Cambridge and get a place at Oxford and Cambridge, because that's how they get their bums on seats. You know, this term this many people got into Cambridge or into Oxford. And therefore, people put their money into those schools in order to get into that. So if you happen to be a working class person and you are in a post-92, for example - which used to be the old polytechnics - they'll probably be lots of working class people in that university. However, the university system and the apparatus and also what's connected to that, which is usually big business, will devalue your degree. So if you're doing sociology at a post-92 and you are paying nine and a half grand, but then you are doing sociology at a Russell Group, you're still paying nine and a half grand. The Russell Group piece of paper will be valued more than the post-92. And even though all the universities will deny this, it's undeniable because that's actually what happens in the transference of the real world. That's what happens. If you are working class and you end up in Russell Group universities, there's probably not gonna be many of you. You are going to have a different accent. You might have a local accent. When I went to Nottingham University, I was the only student there with a Nottingham accent, believe it or not. I was the only student there that lived in the city, who was from the city. And so, therefore, you know, you're pretty much on your own.

Ross When it comes to employers, you mentioned that employers aren't getting the best students or the best out of students, because when they come to do their thinking alone or

critical thinking alone or thinking differently, they're not coming up with any new ideas. They haven't tested stuff out and they haven't tested their own thinking. Ultimately, then, universities are doing a disservice to employers because those students aren't going into those companies and creating value.

Lisa McKenzie Yeah. I wish somebody would notice this. I wish somebody, you know, not me, because obviously my voice never really carries you know, it doesn't carry to the upper echelons of IBM or whatever. But I wish someone would actually stand up and say, what we don't want is a load of same first class students from Russell Group universities that can write the perfect essay, that can reference in Harvard style perfectly and knows the formula. Actually, that's not what we want. I wish somebody would say that because, you know, what we need is we need students from all sorts of backgrounds, that have got all sorts of experiences, that perhaps they're referencing and their grammar is not that great, but their ideas are fantastic. The universities are not allowing those students to come through now. So the university is not only doing business a disservice, it's doing the whole of society a disservice, actually.

Ross And then if you look at our political composition, the sort of inner group, if you like, the Brains Trust, as it might be called when we look at politics: Boris Johnson - Classics, Balliol, Oxford, Rishi Sunak - PPE, Lincoln College, Oxford, Michael Gove - English, Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford, Matt Hancock - PPE, Exeter College, Oxford, Dominic Raab - Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford. Where is the diversity and the provocateur in any of those to say, hang on, we need to think differently about this, we need to take a different approach? And more importantly, in all of this, how much failure has gone before? So they got to the top, as it's called, and succeed. But they're failing drastically.

Lisa McKenzie Well, I mean, now after, I don't know, 10 years of this particular type of politician at the top of all government with David Cameron and Osborne, you know, we've had this for 10 years now. It's undoubtedly that they're failing. They're not understanding what's happening throughout the country. I mean, Brexit was a great example of that. You know, Cameron went, we'll have this vote, nobody will care about it. You know, he absolutely didn't understand the population at all. George Osborne, oh, we'll just say this thing, we've got to fix the roof while the sun is shining. It won't affect people in that way. The fact was that, you know, there is now a million children who live in poverty. And these are all the people that have no clue of actually how 95 per cent of the British public live their everyday lives. So the provocateur is not there. I think you're right regarding a diversity of thinkers. And I think that over lock down, one of the things that hasn't been surprising at all is, I suppose, the level of introspection that the middle class has been looking at itself when the sort of the Black Lives Matter campaign was really starting to take off. I just found it hilarious that the amount of sort of middle class, white comedians, you know, were going in front of the cameras and begging people for forgiveness. And they're so sorry that they didn't know that a blackface was wrong. And, you know, and most of these comedians have come through these same sorts of backgrounds as the politicians, again. And I think it shows that not only is this lack of diversity, a lack of diverse thinking, lack of challenging been happening in politics and through education, it's also happening in culture, in entertainment, in the arts. Britain is so bland and boring because these people have been allowed to stick their elbows out so wide that no one else can get in. I'm not a great advocate of government in any shape or form. I won't change. So I've watched what the furlough schemes have done

over the last few months. And I remember the days, you know, in the 70s and in the 80s that people did have the space. And I think the last three months have taught us, or four months, that giving people some space with a little bit of financial security, creativity can flow. And actually what we've been doing over the last 30 years, which has been battering people with welfare cuts, removing free time and space away from them, taking everything so all they are is a hamster on the wheel is actually bad for all of us. It's had the worst effect on everything.

Ross Paula, welcome to Renegade Inc.

Paula Byrne Thank you for having me.

Ross You have an amazing story, really. You've broken cover with it. Your husband went to head up one of the colleges at Oxford University. You went there as his spouse and you were on the receiving end of a, well, it can only be described as a hate campaign really, a bullying campaign. Tell us about it.

Paula Byrne Yeah, I mean, part of the job description is that you have to live in an Oxford college with the job. So I was living in an Oxford college with three small children in this very ancient hierarchical environment. And I was made to feel, really, that I didn't really belong. I mean, you know, there were many people who were very kind, but there were some bad apples who clearly felt that I wasn't one of them. And I was made to feel unwelcome because I think because I'm northern, I've got northern working class accent and people weren't quite sure what to do with me, you know, what is the role and how do we make this person feel living in that? Well, you know, there's no escape. You can't go out and shut the door. You're in there all the time. It's a goldfish bowl. Whatever you do, you look at people gossiping and getting what you wear, what you're doing. So it was just like living in this, you know, goldfish bowl where there wasn't really a great deal of support for the spouse as I say, sort of living there. And I think I was the first family in 100 years to have small children. And again, I think it's quite a misogynistic culture, Oxford. And I think there were a lot of raised eyebrows about a family being there and they didn't always treat me with kindness.

Ross It wasn't just what you wore in your downtime or, you know, around the place. It was also that you wore a Liverpool University gown. And, apparently, that also raised eyebrows?

Paula Byrne Yeah. I mean, you know, Oxford is very formal - think sort of Harry Potter. And at high table gowns were mandatory. And in my naivete, I thought, well, I've got a PhD from Liverpool University. I'm very proud of that. So I thought I was being polite. And so I wore my gown. And then some delegates came to complain to the provost, who happened to be my husband, about somebody wearing a Liverpool PhD gown. And I said, that's absolutely fine, I've got lovely clothes, I'll wear my gown. But it's sort of indicative of this kind of bullying, hierarchical culture that somehow a Liverpool PhD is not as good as an Oxford PhD. So it's all these sort of little tacit rules and regulations. And so I didn't know what the rules are. So I don't know when I'm breaking them. Nobody sat me down and said these are the rules - the port is always passed from the left, you shouldn't wear a Liverpool PhD gown because it's different to an Oxford gown. So I was living in this Alice in Wonderland topsy turvy world. I really felt like I'd fallen down the rabbit hole. And then there I was in this Oxford institution where I kept breaking rules that I didn't know were rules. So it did feel a very old fashioned environment where it would have been kinder if

people had not sort of gone behind my back. If somebody had just confronted me and said this is not how we do things. But there was a lot of a back biting. I don't think my face fitted. I think my accent certainly didn't fit. And at the same time, they were trying to be so right on with diversity and we really want to attract people from the north. But there was a lot of hypocrisy, too.

Ross But when you look at who's running the country at the moment, it isn't dissimilar. The Houses of Commons aren't dissimilar - the bullying, the toxicity and the small mindedness isn't dissimilar to what you're describing at Oxford University. It seems that a lot of the political class have just transposed what happened at uni into the House of Commons.

Paula Byrne Yeah, and I think that's to do with hierarchies. You know, we talk about going up to Oxford. And even in the very language is embedded that sense of hierarchy. So these small, petty slights, they go a very long way. You know, and if I broke one of the rules, I'd say, what's going to happen next? We shall write to you. And it was quite, quite funny, you know. But they mean it. They mean it. And I think there is an endemic sort of bullying culture. It is very masculine. I mean, it harkens back to the 13th century when Oxford was all men. And this didn't change until the 1930s, don't forget. So they're not used to seeing a woman in any kind of position of status or power. There is an obsession with status and power, which I find boring. You know, it doesn't really interest me. I think for me, because I came, you know, I've got my own career as a writer, I have my family. I've got a strong sense of self. I wasn't bowed down or cowed by those traditions or by the rules. I didn't doff my cap.

Ross Being a best selling writer probably didn't help you, did it? Because these professors and academics write for an audience of about five. You've sold millions of books. That must be a little irksome for the competitive, insecure male?

Paula Byrne But I think absolutely the opposite. I think in their mind, they just think how horribly vulgar. She sells books. She sells books. She makes money out of books, you know. So it's sort of, again, the topsy turvy Alice in Wonderland world where rather than saying, wow, she's a success in her own right and something to be proud of, in this topsy turvy land, you're perceived as being vulgar because you write this. And I reviewed for the Saturday Times. That is perceived as really vulgar. You know, I should be writing academic tomes that nobody reads and they should be there in dusty libraries. So I think there are some people that are just stuck in, not even in the 18th century, I'd go back to mid mediaeval times. So I think, you know, for all sorts of reasons, it was an ill fit, you know, it was an ill fit. And as I say, they could've handled things differently. The milk of human kindness, I don't think runs in many people's veins in Oxford, you know, just politeness and kindness and a sense of decorum and good manners. I just kept coming up against a lack of it, a lack of civility. And it's like they get away with it. They get away with it in these institutions and people don't call them out and everybody's behaving badly. And you do need to call people out if you feel they're being rude. You should call them out. And I'm not afraid to call anybody out if I feel that they're being unkind or rude or if they're pre-judging. There's so much prejudice. There's class prejudice as well as the misogyny and I felt on the receiving end of that.

Ross One of the things that the British don't talk about at all, even though we're a class obsessed society, is a little old thing called accent prejudice. And accent prejudice is so

insidious because as soon as you open your mouth, people will say pigeon holed, that's you, that's where you're from, I can put your side now, I've locked it all down. We are from roughly the same area of the country. When I say that, people say, oh, you don't sound like you're from Liverpool. I moved away earlier. But the point is that nod to that prejudice is alive and well, isn't it? And surely you must have run up against this sounding as you do from the north?

Paula Byrne I mean, I do think it's like the last bastion of discrimination - accent. I know people mocked my accent. I know that they did and would exaggerate my accent. And again, I think the prejudice was rife. Because as soon as you open your mouth, you're judged. So you're not judged on your eloquence or how articulate you are or whether you've got anything interesting to say or how funny you are or how witty you are. You're judged as you open your mouth. You're judged by your accent. And people will form a set of opinions and prejudices against you. And I think I came up across that in Oxford.

Ross It's interesting, isn't it? Because there's a certain politician in the UK at the moment who is in the cabinet. And he started in that position with a broad Yorkshire accent. And now he sounds like he's been pulled through a Noel Coward play. And it must be that he's been around these Oxford types. And, you know, with received pronunciation and he's trying to ape it to fit in. Amazing that you - not amazing, just wonderful - you said, no, I'm not going to try and fit in. This is me. Take it or leave it.

Paula Byrne And you know, one doesn't want to be too arrogant about that because, you know, I think - and thank you for saying that - but I think people want to fit in. And, you know, sometimes people fit in by, you know, unconsciously changing their accent to suit the person they're with. And we all do that to some extent because you want to sort of be accepted. And I think some people who, you know, play that sort of working class card too harsh, it can be a little bit annoying as well. But it's just simply this is who I am. I'm not, you know, I'm not going to fit in. I'm proud of where I'm from. And also, I'm educated. So I don't think it really matters as long as I'm articulate and as long as I'm making myself understood, you know, there are some accents that sometimes you can't be heard. So sometimes you have to adapt a bit. But I did see evidence - and I'm very good at nosing these things out - you know, at a lot of high table dinners. Always my number one question is, where are you from? And there were some very surprising answers. And, you know, everyone can say something interesting about their childhood. And it's quite interesting at the amount of people that had in some ways that there'd been some kind of transformation, maybe even a sort of shame.

Ross Could you just tell us that if somebody is in one of these bullying cultures now, toxic cultures, what are the couple of practical steps that you'd give to them so that they can get themselves out of that situation as elegantly as possible or at the very least protect themselves against all the vitriol that's flying around?

Paula Byrne I think it is really hard to protect yourself when you are in a toxic environment. I mean, in my case, it led to a stress induced heart attack. There's no question that it was stress induced. And I think I thought I was coping better than I was. Mentally, I was coping with it. But obviously there was a physical toll on my body. But I think we're all better with mental health now. We're all better at talking. And I would say to anyone in that position, it just is really good to talk to people. It's really good to call people out. It's really good to

support and encourage and find out there is definitely support out there. You know, hopefully my story and calling it out, I hope it will help other people. You know, my door's always open. People can always contact me and to talk about that shared experience. And I think just from the letters I've got, one is from a 90 year old man who had suffered at Oxford for being working class. He was in his 90s. He'd never forgotten. I think even just reaching out to me, sharing stories, one hopes that there's some catharsis. You know, I felt it was very cathartic for me. There's no question it was a cathartic experience. Burying it and pretending I often just laughed at it. And sometimes that's probably not good enough. You probably do need to talk about it and you do need to talk to other people who've experienced it and share stories. I think I've become better at reaching out to people. And I think that's what if I was giving anyone advice, I'd just say, just talk to people. Don't take it. Just don't take this burden, this bullying culture. And don't take this burden on yourself. So I definitely think reaching out and talking is the way forward.

Ross Paula, thank you very much for your time.

Paula Byrne Thank you for having me.