

In “The Art of Possibility”, Benjamin and Rosamund Zander share 12 Practices that offer the means “to sail into a vast universe of Possibility”.

The Zanders’ premise is that many of the circumstances that seem to block us may only appear to do so because of the assumptions we carry with us. “Draw a different frame around the same set of circumstances and new pathways come into view.”

We have shared understandings about what should be done arising from conditions of the past. This is how a culture of a place, a school, a community, is built. But oftentimes, the circumstances under which these practices came about have changed while the practices continue because they are so reassuringly familiar.

The Zanders describe their practices as transformational and even counter-intuitive to our normal understanding of how things operate, initiating a new approach to current (not past) conditions.

THE FIRST PRACTICE : IT’S ALL INVENTED

“We perceive only the sensations we are programmed to receive and our awareness is further restricted by the fact that we recognise only those for which we have mental maps or categories.”

The catchphrase “It’s all invented” is a recognition that we create our own reality. It is about the stories we tell ourselves and others, which is founded on a network of hidden assumptions. If we learn to notice and distinguish these stories, we will be able to break through the barriers of the boxes we put ourselves in, boxes that contain possibly unfavourable conditions. We can then create other conditions or narratives that support the life we envision for ourselves and those around us.

Let me give you an example hopefully no longer valid : teachers who only see students in terms of their academic results or their behaviour. They put students into boxes – one for bright hardworking students, another for hopeless lazy students. You can guess how they behave to students in these two boxes. In the second box, because they assume the students are lazy, they themselves do not exert the effort. Or they exert the effort but show such negative body language that the student feels condemned already.

Now what if they changed the story? If they could build a different narrative that students are not achieving because they could not grasp the concept; that concepts were best illustrated with analogies rather than just plain statements, might there not be a world of possibility there?

As you go into a time of self-appraisal with your middle managers, think about the story you are telling about what education is about. Do you feel constrained because you have made certain assumptions? Could a change in those assumptions help you tell a different story about your school, your teachers, your students or the parents of your students? Can you invent a different story?