

Enabling Something Amazing to Happen: a less proscriptive approach to teaching

FRANCES HOLLOWAY

ABSTRACT This article identifies some of the frustrations felt by a classroom practitioner as a result of the restrictions generated by current demands for accountability, and the limiting effect these can have on children's learning experiences. It goes on to consider the liberating impact of a more organic way of organising the curriculum, which allows teachers and students to collaborate in choosing the issues they will address together, and which encourages teachers to plan material which engages the hearts and minds of their classes.

There is available a T-shirt – you've maybe seen it – the front of which consists simply of a list of jobs, written out prose-style and including such entries as 'nurse', 'referee', 'minder' and so on. Somewhere around the wearer's left hip, the list ends with the phrase: 'but you can call me "teacher"'. This list is familiar to anyone who's ever taught, and probably to anyone who's been taught as well. Most would agree that in the course of the average day – if such a thing exists – a teacher fills dozens of roles and does so differently for each child taught. No teacher I work with would ever describe their job as simply that of imparting information. Teachers are, as that T-shirt implies, multi-skilled. But what is it like to try and fulfil all these expectations?

If we consider the raw material of a teacher's trade – young people finding their way through a world by turns exciting and terrifying – then it is clear that any adult engaging in that exploration with them is in a privileged position, with huge opportunities to guide and encourage; to question and promote questioning; to give a creative stimulus and marvel at the direction in which those students take it. This kind of opportunity has to be what makes teachers use phrases like 'never the same twice', and 'the chance to make a difference' to describe their work. It is the interaction which ensues that makes teachers and children memorable to each other.

‘What Will These Tests Tell You about Me that You Don’t Already Know?’

The importance of that raw material also makes it right that there is accountability – but that accountability should surely be first and foremost to the children themselves. It is to them that I should first explain my thinking about a forthcoming chunk of work; with them that I should discuss the likely outcomes and with them that I should first review their progress. It would clearly be foolish to ignore other stakeholders in this notion of accountability, but it seems more foolish to allow these others to become so important a part of the process that those key people – the children we teach – are overshadowed, and that we move as a result even further down the road where standardisation and worse, the need to be even better ‘standardised’ than your neighbouring institution, is the driving force (and where *are* these ‘standard’ children? I teach people who are joyously and infinitely individual, and who do not slot tidily into a standardised mould ...). Two years ago a Year 9 student asked me, ‘What will these tests tell you about me that you don’t already know?’ A perfectly reasonable question to which I answered, ‘Nothing.’ If you can look pitying and resigned at the same time, she did, and walked off to take a test which neither of us could really justify.

And then there is that other chilling phrase which I hear quite a lot round about the end of May. Asked as an Advanced Skills Teacher to do outreach in other schools, the focus of such work is often on re-engaging demotivated Year 9 boys in modern foreign languages (MFL). I don’t have a definitive answer (though I do know it’s a lot easier in a World Cup year!) but it is hugely about subject matter and the kind of spin you put on the activities. So usually, having met the teachers (and the boys!) I spend some time planning and dreaming and come up with some piece of ‘Who stole the Trophy’ (Inspector Clouseau meets Match of the Day) group work which people look longingly at and then utter those awful words: ‘Oh, I’d love to try it, but you see, *I need to teach to the test.*’ But if the test (if there has to be one) doesn’t engage the students, how can the results accurately reflect what they can do? If there has to be a test, why can’t it be one for which students enjoy the preparation? If they must prove that they can function in the past tense in a foreign language for instance, why shouldn’t it be in a creative, off-the-wall task which they *want* to do? Given the choice between What John Did on His Holidays and What Happened When the Polar Bear Attacked, it would not be surprising to find John left quite alone, and polar bears attacking from all directions. And yes, that was the task my own Year 9s addressed, and very effectively.

Teaching in a Creative School

It must be clear by now that I am fortunate enough to teach in a school where creativity is a by-word, where Standard Assessment Tasks (SATs) are certainly not the be all and end all, and where the accent is on our children as far from standardised individuals. My notion of what it’s like to be a teacher is

influenced by a freer, less proscriptive approach, where we nonetheless seek rigour.

My school is organised on a collegiate basis with the college made up of three semi-autonomous 'mini-schools'. Each of these will, at capacity, only have a maximum of 300 students. By and large – the exceptions being in Key Stage 4, where some will be taught by subject specialists elsewhere in the college – a comparatively small team will teach the curriculum to those children. This means that I am a part of a small team – that I know the others well, and they know me well. I also teach only some 90 children a week – an almost unheard-of luxury in the state secondary system. The relationships that we are able to form between us are the hub of the way in which our school functions. They are especially important given our challenging catchment: in some parts of it a recent survey estimated child poverty at 48%.

This small teaching team breaks down into an even smaller, tighter team teaching a particular year group. Those five or six teachers produce together an outline plan for each half term's thematic teaching, but only ever identifying 'anticipated' activities and outcomes, since these can and do change along the way as we work with our students. Our curriculum is organic; creativity is positively encouraged and curriculum mapping helps ensure that coverage and rigour are there.

We are perhaps at our most creative during the last three days of each half term, when the college is divided vertically into ten faculty groups. A group of four or five of us work together to plan a three-day project, which over a two-year cycle we will work on with each faculty group. It's an extraordinary opportunity to work with staff from the other schools within the college with similar enthusiasms to one's own, and to watch the endless inventiveness of children who, given the same brief as last term's group, will produce a totally different outcome: so far, for example, just in my faculty, we've looked at the impact of 1066 five times with five different groups. One of the options each time has been to produce a radio play from scratch, and each one has been entirely different from the others. We've had the Battle of Hastings as a football match; as a game of 'rock, paper, scissors'; William the Conqueror crowned to the theme tune from *Coronation Street*; a heavy (and disbelieving!) focus on the forced march to Hastings from Stamford Bridge ('Are we nearly there yet?') and finally, a heavily Goon-influenced play featuring the death of Edward the Confessor (who, having died, sat up and announced: 'I told you I was ill!'). These days come at a time when we are at our most tired, and yet every time we end on a high, and that triumph comes from the stunning work that we are offered, and the sense that we have enabled something amazing to happen.

Involving the Community

Being a teacher to me also means involving the community, and involving our students with the community they live in, as well as the wider community to which we can give them access. They love to welcome visitors to the college,

and are as comfortable with Tony Blair as they are with one of the elderly ladies from the Family Support Day Centre on site. They have huge curiosity, and setting up opportunities for them to satisfy that curiosity, on visits, at conferences, listening to visiting speakers, working with visiting artists, going to France and staying away from home perhaps for the first time, these are key times when teachers feel the success and impact of their roles as enablers, and they are the moments we catch and keep to re-live again and again. Perhaps because we are small teams planning closely together, we are able to create more of these opportunities without irritating colleagues by stealing their 'teaching time'. What we feel we are doing is in fact creating enhanced 'learning time'.

I resisted the idea of teaching as a career for some years because I had the idea that each year would be the same. Once I began to teach, I realised how ridiculous a theory this was, of course, but after a number of years at the same school, and a great deal of freedom and encouragement to experiment, I nonetheless did start to look round and wonder where the next challenge lay. I found it in my current school, in a curriculum framework which enables me on a day-to-day basis to teach outside my own specialism, and this is an opportunity which I relish. It is demanding, and it is challenging – but that's exactly what I was hoping for when I applied for my current post. As I support other non-specialists teaching my subject, so they are there for me when I step outside my own safety zone, and our learning goes on, together.

Working Together, Giving and Receiving Trust

Working together as a team which includes both adults and students, with the aim of enabling those students to take a place in society which they may have once thought beyond them, means caring for them beyond their academic targets and achievements. Being a teacher also means remaining unfazed by the hugely varying needs which students have, and providing for each one the consistent, reliable, honest advice and support which they seek. I can think of three students who, confronted by almost unimaginable problems in their home lives, turned to the college as a place of safety and security.

Our students give us their trust, and it is incumbent upon us as teachers to respect and return it. It's what being a teacher is all about.

FRANCES HOLLOWAY is a secondary Modern Languages Advanced Skills Teacher and leads one of the three 'Schools within a School' which make up Bishops Park College in Clacton-on-Sea, Essex. She believes strongly in generating engagement of students through challenging, relevant, themed teaching, and in the power of allowing teachers to be endlessly creative. *Correspondence:* Frances Holloway, Bishops Park College, Jaywick Lane, Clacton-on-Sea CO16 8BE, United Kingdom (stfholloway@bishopsark.essex.sch.uk).



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The Annabelle Dixon Fund

We mark with sadness a year since the passing of a dear friend and colleague Annabelle Dixon. Annabelle was an inspired and inspiring teacher and educationalist – a researcher and writer: contributor, campaigner and co-editor of *FORUM* - the journal for promoting 3-19 comprehensive education. She joined Lucy Cavendish College, Cambridge, as the Times Educational Research Fellow in Educational Policy during a distinguished career in early years education. This spanned the domains of research, publication and the policy environment as well as the classroom she enjoyed so much. In the Lucy Cavendish newsletter of 2005, a piece on Annabelle concluded with the words 'her work continues' and this is demonstrably the case. In this time two books jointly authored by Annabelle have been chosen as the *Times Educational Supplement* Book of the Week. *Learning without Limits* was reviewed by Tim Brighouse, who declared that everyone in education should read it and consequently provided a copy for every school in the London Challenge.

Annabelle's classroom was, in the words of a friend, 'a place of genuine intellectual search.' As a psychologist and teacher she was committed to offering inspiring but grounded experiences to children as the essential basis for such a search. The second book, *First Hand Experience: what matters to children* is dedicated to Annabelle, who died while the book was in press. Tim Smit stated 'this book could save lives' and hosted a two day conference around the publication at the Eden project he created in Cornwall. A bursary scheme for teachers to attend was set up by the authors in Annabelle's memory.

A fund has now been set up at the College in Annabelle's name, with initial donations from three former fellows of Lucy Cavendish. Collectively we sought some way to continue the spirit of generosity, collegiality and intellectual curiosity that she encompassed. We propose to use this gift to establish an endowment fund to enable the College to make modest grants to students. In consultation with friends, family and colleagues it was decided to make an annual award to a student who has made the most of her time at Lucy Cavendish during that year.

**If you would like to make a donation to the fund please contact
Head of Development at Lucy Cavendish,
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