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## Just a Few Giggles? Teachers and the Howler

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**ABSTRACT** In this article the author considers some aspects of the egregious error or 'howler'. What effects does the 'howler' have as a social practice? What questions are raised when a teacher shares beyond his or her own school a student's mistake for the amusement of others?

It is like what we imagine knowledge to be:  
dark, salt, clear, moving, utterly free...  
'*At the Fishhouses*' (Elizabeth Bishop)

As a college student I helped produce a short-lived arts magazine. Proof-reading at the last minute a litany of praise for some band's debut album, I made sure the piece found its place in our opening number with every mis-spelling corrected. Unhappily, among all the editorial team I alone did not know that 'On Through The Night' was indeed and unerringly by 'Def Leppard'...

We all make mistakes, and no doubt we've all been laughed at for doing so. Who does the laughing, in what spirit, to what end and with what consequence, can matter. Particularly in schools, where the power of laughter to cohere or destroy is something teachers and students are tuned to daily. John Holt argued decades ago in 'How Children Fail' that where a premium is placed on knowing the right answer, students evolve strategies to cope with being wrong, and with the fear of being shown publicly to be wrong. For Holt, fear destroys intelligence, and one big fear in school is the fear of being laughter's object. Teachers take responsibility for creating and maintaining a classroom which dilutes this fear, the better to remedy inevitable ignorance and error.

Are students wrong to worry their classroom mis-step risks inviting a laughter which mocks? It seems to me they anticipate a learned response which passes itself off as a natural reflex. Students learn that to laugh at someone in school is excusable, even expected, when that person commits an error or

blunder judged to be egregious. As the 'howler', this extreme error is readily assimilated into a tradition which assigns roles and behaviours to all those present. The error-maker is cast as the perpetrator of a howler, and so positioned to be treated in the customary way. One malign effect of this social practice is to further a particular view of knowledge and knowing which teachers have an interest in helping any members of a class to unlearn.

### **All the Funny Things**

Teachers aim to make their classrooms places of trust and safety. They do not mock their students with laughter. Paradoxically, many also co-operate in the exchange and circulation of howlers beyond their school. Norfolk NUT bulletins regularly carry a selection of howlers allegedly made by students which their teachers have chosen to circulate. Until recently the *Times Educational Supplement (TES)* sported in its 'Fact or fiction' column examples of school-children revealing their ignorance in howler-esque ways. The second-largest continent? Disneyland. The moment many Christians believe life begins? At contraception. The lyrics of that smug Assembly perennial? 'All things bright and beautiful/All creatures graded small...'

Are such items anything other than harmless fun? Kids have been saying the silliest, aka the funniest, things for as long as teachers or parents have been around to store them up and pass them on. Surely you'd have to be as mirthless as Malvolio to object? Yet as I don my yellow stockings and criss-cross my garters I'm given pause by this practice of telling for others' presumed entertainment what a student erroneously, naively or foolishly thought. The teacher in me wants to correct the error, make sound the knowledge, repair the understanding, not dwell on the mistake. Or rather, not dwell on it for amusement. Part of me tends to wonder what it is which leads a student to think the way they reveal, through the 'stupidity' of their response, that they do. Is that response born of ignorance, or misunderstanding, or desperation, or does it appear in the circumstances which pertain at the given moment plausible and reasonable to the student who makes it?

I confronted myself with all this once more when I followed up a reference in the *TES* magazine last June. Writing for a 'Subject Special' about English, the *TES* website community producer drew attention to a discussion-thread markers had been spinning out of 'all the funny things' they'd read in the KS3 English NC tests. (*TES Magazine*, 'Word on the street', 27 June 2008, p. 27). The thread ran from Friday 23 May through Friday 20 June, and contained 227 postings by 57 differently-pseudonymised contributors. The great majority of contributors posted fewer than five times, with most posting only once or twice. An engaged handful posted between twelve and twenty-two times. Some contributors stayed active on the thread across more than a fortnight. The bulk (though not all) of the postings appeared to be from those marking that summer's test-papers, with contributions appearing from KS2 SATs markers later in the thread. Postings usually contained quotations from

candidates' answers. These were often readable as 'howlers', and were called 'howlers' by three posters.

In her article the *TES* columnist publicised three examples from the scores of quotations posted. She made no comment about the online discussion beyond saying the thread was 'buzzing'. I took the bait, clicked the link and was struck straight away by the sense of anticipation among some contributors. In response to the request (from whom?) for markers to supply 'all the funny things you read', the initial poster wrote: 'This is my absolute favourite thread ever and hope you'll be doing it again this year.' A quick search of the site indicated how late I had come to the party. In 2007 and 2006 snippets from students' answers to the KS3 Shakespeare NC test-papers had also been posted here, enabling journalists to quote examples in the national press. As this year's thread developed, other posters commented on how much they were enjoying it, or how eagerly they awaited the latest contributions. As for the 'funny things' themselves, many derived from a candidate's failure to write in the register deemed proper for an exam, from anachronisms when answering on the Shakespeare play, from mis-spellings, double-entendres, or bemused or incoherent attempts to answer a particular question roundly castigated as inaccessible by several posters.

### **A Calling-out**

I followed the lengthening thread and the quotations hung up there. Along the way some contributors described how hard they laughed at what they read. Others appeared to patronise candidates: 'Bless that poor student', 'Oh ya gotta luv em', 'Bless.' Suddenly, a week into the thread, on 28 May, someone strikes an oppositional note. This poster, whose pseudonym is THE SYSTEM, offers the first fundamental criticism of what everyone else seems to be engaged in, and does so flamboyantly, through capitalised rhyming couplets: 'SAD WHEN KIDS WHO SIT A TEST/FIND THEY'RE LAUGHED AT FOR THEIR BEST/ ANSWER... POOR KIDS. POOR MARKERS. BORED/ENOUGH TO START THIS THREAD. OH LORD!'

Despite this four-square iambic stand against the thread, embodied visually in the tightly-blocked presentation of the post, no-one responds to THE SYSTEM directly. So THE SYSTEM returns on 30 May in even punchier style: 'WOULD YOU LIKE IT IF OTHER TEACHERS/ WERE LAUGHING AT YOUR SILLY FEATURES?/ RESPECT THESE KIDS... DON'T PEG THEIR IMPERFECTIONS SMALL/ OUT ON A LINE FOR ALL TO SHARE/ NO CONFIDENTIALITY? IS THERE?' Apart from offering a direct challenge, a calling-out which wants its answer, the recourse to 'how would you like it?' seeks, I think, to close that gap between poster and candidate whose disrespectful opening facilitates the parading in public of minor errors, an activity THE SYSTEM likens to pegging out washing. These postings are an unwarranted display of what ought to be regarded as private. The image taps into one of the ways in which acquiescing in the thread could be regarded as

shameful: making public people's errors carries the potential to embarrass them. It is an exploitative act whose intrinsic antagonism the preservation of the anonymity of the student cloaks but does not alter. And it breaches the trust reposed by the candidate in the examiner, the confidence that what is written, however inadequate, will be treated with dignity. Such a belief would seem to be the bedrock for any exam.

THE SYSTEM's questions start others for me. To whom do the answers written on the exam-script belong? Does anyone own them? What constitutes legitimate use of those answers, or their elements? Penned for one purpose, how is it proper to use them for another, undeclared at the time of the exam, and without permission of the author? THE SYSTEM's deployment of questions signals a refusal in advance to accept the predictable riposte that the thread is only a bit of a laugh. Not so, implies THE SYSTEM. The existence of the thread raises serious issues to do with how students are to be regarded, and how their work is to be treated.

The succeeding post, by Porphyria, also a new voice to the thread, supports THE SYSTEM's view and makes a number of further points against what posters to the thread are doing. Porphyria begins by apologising if she (or he) sounds 'like a killjoy'. She labels some comments on the thread unprofessional, asks posters how they would have liked having their university exam-answers cited in similar fashion, asserts that publicising 'funny' mistakes is not a good way to help students avoid making those of their own, and claims that posters are gaining pleasure from humiliating people: 'It's easy enough to find someone not as well-educated/knowledgeable as you are and point out their failings – but is this really something we should be doing, as teachers, on a public forum?'

### **Pious**

This questioning draws out five direct responses. All but one are posted within the next twenty-four hours, and all give the criticisms short shrift on grounds that the thread is not malicious, preserves everyone's anonymity so no-one suffers, and provides for markers welcome relief from the tedium of their labours. The first response comes from a very active poster (nine previous posts on the thread) who claims that the thread is 'light-hearted sharing' of anonymous material and not the targeted mockery of an individual. Critics, consequently, should 'lighten up'. But this poster does not post again, so perhaps some of the criticism takes effect. The next response tells the critics to 'stop being so pious', and counter-claims that sharing 'howlers' with students, as the poster knows from experience, does help them avoid making any of their own. This is the poster's sole contribution to the thread. The third response is from a very active poster who stresses the anonymity of the posting-process for all concerned, student, school and marker, and believes that this is what makes the thread not 'too bad'. The unease this formulation signals seems to me well warranted, for preserving the candidate's anonymity withholds the personhood

of the candidate from being given full due. So the candidate is distanced from the words he or she authored, and these become more readily-available for another's use and manipulation. Anonymity on this thread is not a requirement ethically extended to protect the interest of the student, but an encouragement to the marker to post. This poster also justifies the thread on the grounds that it provides evidence that many students found one of the test-questions inaccessible. True enough, but the thread provides this evidence only incidentally. Its intention is elsewhere. The fourth response claims that laughing at the material posted 'keeps us going', 'us' being 'caring teachers in need of a bit of light-hearted humour.' The critics, this NC test-marker says, should 'get a life please'. The final response comes three days later, and is the only post from its writer. It says: 'Thanks for the laughs. I agree that sharing a few anonymous giggles is harmless fun. We teachers/markers need a break now and again!' Yet teachers best know that 'we were only joking, only having a laugh' is a suspect defence. Precisely because it can present itself as innocent, lightweight, un-serious, and so make any attempted analysis appear risibly beside the point, laughter can work powerfully for dubious ends.

Neither THE SYSTEM nor Porphyria returns to the thread, and no-one else joins their attack. The thread continues for a further fortnight or so in much the same way as it began, increasingly taken up with material quoted from KS2 SATs. Near the end, as the marking-load lightens, someone posts a query about payment.

I think the *TES* should not have made its site available for the spinning of such a thread. Because it has the power to circulate postings initially among a 'virtual community' numbering thousands, and beyond them to any internet-user, the thread seems to me to strengthen all the unacceptable effects of the howler as a social practice. An error made, however glaring, is not born a howler. It is baptised one by the way it is received and responded to. No howler without others howl. There must be an audience, and a reaction of a particular kind, one that bestows a taint of shame on whoever made the error. Then the error, now a howler, can take its place and be confirmed among all the others in what John Yandell calls the 'dishonourable tradition'. Dishonourable to those who perpetuate the tradition, not to those who make the error.

### **Those Who Know**

When the *Independent* lined up howlers from the 2006 vintage, courtesy of the *TES* thread, it paraded stand-out examples from earlier years as well. Such sharing and recycling predisposes teachers to recognise an error as a howler, rather than to make a more benign and more educationally-effective decision. Sharing the error as a howler validates the genre and keeps it alive. This in turn serves a particular view of society, groups and individuals. The appearance of another howler reinforces the certainty of those who, with *Private Eye*, know we live in Dumb Britain. It bolsters a belief in the timeless fixity of a person's or a

group's perceived lack of intellectual 'ability' and hence the impossibility of the teacher's task. The howler helps police a questionable view of knowledge and knowing, for it often turns on the assumption not only that a certain store of knowledge is widely held, but also on the implication that it should be, and that ignorance of such knowledge is therefore culpable. Being laughed at is the forfeit paid for not knowing what others deem you should know. By derisively distinguishing the un-knowing or less-knowing, howlers re-affirm the superiority of those who know.

Teaching is other than this. One task of teaching is to correct misapprehension, rectify error, ensure sound learning. Error and ignorance revealed are not to be connived at in class. But how in class the revelation of ignorance and error is met and moved on from is a complex and skilled undertaking. It requires teachers, against the pressure exercised by the tradition of the howler, to think about the student, and about the nature of knowledge, which in the poet Elizabeth Bishop's words is like the sea's water, 'flowing, and flown' rather than a sediment or a fixed store. Coming to knowledge, working at the limit of their knowledge or understanding, attempting to combine the 'known for a while' with the 'newly-known' or 'about to be known', students as individuals reveal themselves. The erroneous, ignorant or foolish answer or attempt made in good faith in the pursuit of learning exposes the student. As such it is not to be subject to ridicule. But here is the risk the student runs, for to be meat for the social practice of the howler what the student says must be what the student honestly thinks is correct or sensible. It must be disclosure rather than performance.

How to receive this revelation of where the student is in his or her knowledge and learning makes all the difference. But the howler as a social practice has already infiltrated classroom and school: a common recreation, it has prepared the ground and coached the model response. The student is delivered unwittingly up to antagonistic laughter, which the howler normalises and makes all the harder to banish.

### **Found Wanting**

As a social practice the howler attempts to train teachers in its own maintenance. It provides, even sanctions, a way to respond to ignorance and error. Consequently it betrays teachers. For there are ways (including kinds of laughter) to respond to ignorance, error and stupidity which nevertheless preserve the student's fearlessness in the face of what they do not know, or what they know wrongly, and so help make them likelier to want to overcome their current state and move beyond it. These ways preserve the willingness to disclose in class rather than merely to perform. They keep the student available to his or her inner impulsion to grow in learning.

The howler takes its place with those other practices which foster a deficit-model of students. Where students are regarded however affectionately as lacking or unable, the howler will work to confirm this diagnosis, rather than

challenge the school or the teacher to intervene and improve the possibilities for the student to learn more, and better. The howler directs attention to its own content, deflecting consideration of the broad context in which it is perpetrated. It was, I think, the German critic Walter Benjamin who dubbed howlers the truth of the system. By purporting to offer teachers a few harmless giggles as light relief from the daily grind, the howler diverts teachers from more radical consideration of that system.

The howler betrays teachers and their students one further way too. It fosters a view of knowledge-acquisition, of learning even, in keeping with the ladder-model enshrined in the National Curriculum and its ascending levels. One implication inherent in the howler, and which helps construct the error as a howler, is that the student ought, at their age or stage, to know by now what evidently they do not know. The howler insists that the student should have grown beyond making the error he or she has made. So the arbitrary system is validated, and the living student found wanting.

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