

Trapped into Secondary Learning

There is a memorable sequence in the eighties comedy series *Not the Nine O'clock News* where Rowan Atkinson's Bean-esque character is walking down a busy street. He turns and notices us watching him from the other side of the road. He smiles and watches us back as we, the camera, follow him. He is fascinated by us. He asks questions with his eyebrows. As we continue to follow him, he chances a wave. We continue to track him. He stares, gripped by our presence.

He then walks straight into a lamppost and immediately collapses to the ground. We move on, leaving him and his pratfall behind. Cue: hilarity in the form of canned laughter.

The fascination here exists between the character and the 'camera'. We are fascinated by him, he by us. The feeling is mutual, although it is we that maintain the control and the power. Sound familiar?

Catching the attention of learners has become an essential part of a teacher's armoury. The skill that it takes to move children from what Sir Ken Robinson calls 'dis-enthralment' to a state of engagement is not something that is naturally engrained in either teachers or learners. This is a skill that has evolved relatively recently, probably since the abolition of total fear from our classrooms with the disappearance of the cane. We have to work harder to ensure and maintain engagement and so our starting points need to be at the very least, interesting.

When I was 13 and in Y9, our ancient music teacher kept us quiet by making us draw French horns whilst listening to classical vinyl. Have you ever tried drawing a French horn? Of course, when we had finished it, we got to colour it in. He wasn't a particularly nice teacher – he resembled an extra from BBC's *All Creatures Great and Small* – but, to be fair, it must have been quite memorable drawing that French horn because I'm sitting here writing about it now, 25 years later. What did it teach me? Well it taught me that French horns were very difficult to draw. It also taught me that he – the teacher – didn't really care.

So it takes more than just a challenge to rein learners in. The French horn didn't have a point and, as we sat there sharpening yellow pencils in silence, we had no investment other than to get the job done or we'd be in real bother. Thinking about it, it would have been great if the teacher had turned up with a real French horn that we could look at. And if he then placed it to his lips and played it, well, who knows how exciting that could have been? I know I would have been hooked because I had an interest in music. He didn't know that though, because he'd never bothered to find out.

And so, to be enthralled. Can you remember being enthralled by something? It might be a book you have read or a film you have seen. The reason we sit through the movie or keep turning the page is because we've been lured in. Now I really loved the first *Lord of the Rings* film and I remember the feeling of despair as the credits came up and my friend told me I'd be able to see the next one in two year's time. Two years! I was hooked! The same thing happened to me when I was younger with Stephen King and his series of novellas titled *The Green Mile*. He released one a month for six months until the story had been told. It's a story we may all be familiar with because of the Tom Hanks film – itself, an epic. Did you know he'd done that to his readership - lured them in? It's also a good way of selling cinema tickets and paperbacks.

It's a great way of selling ideas.

And so, to our classroom. I suppose you're reading this because you're a teacher or you have an interest in education. Maybe you like the French horn story, or perhaps you enjoy the pop-culture references. Maybe you just like Tom Hanks. Whatever it is, here's my bottom line: luring learners into learning is NOT rocket science. If it was, we'd all be wearing white coats, carrying clipboards and gazing upwards at some disappearing craft.

No, capturing learners is not difficult *once you get the idea*. An old colleague of mine, a terrific teacher of Maths, enthralled his students by putting a poster of then-pop-phenomenon The Spice Girls up on his classroom wall with the sign reading '*The Spice Girls Got Their GCSE Maths*' in bold letters. He also put Yoda up there saying '*Learn You Will*'. It caused a scene within the department but basically, all the students wanted to be in his class. Doing Maths! The Spice Girls retired early from the Maths wall as a senior colleague labelled the poster sexist.

I can't remember if Yoda was allowed to stay up.

If you're lucky enough to have your own classroom, then ensure it reflects your philosophy and your commitment to your young people. I worked with an NQT who was really struggling in his classroom. When I met up with him *in his crib* I could see the problem immediately. Now I'm not saying that teachers should be expected to paint and polyfilla their own classrooms – far from it - but I do think you've got to have a go at taking some ownership over it. The teacher here had done nothing. If you can picture a cold, run down secondary classroom with a frightened teacher at the front, you've got it. It was depressing and lacked any spark of colour, imagination or life. My advice to him? Own the room.

He did. He simply got a load of quotes from his favourite books and films, stuck on some clip art and put them up on the wall. The children reacted positively. The displays became talking points. Suddenly, the young people were offering their own

quotes and so very quickly the space was being co-constructed and seen as a shared and organic entity. This enabled him to get on with his core business of teaching and learning. And on top of that, relationships improved.

Those of us familiar with Mantle of the Expert and working in role will know how important the idea of a fascinating lure is. The attraction offered by working within contexts can really help us establish powerful hooks into learning. Getting students to invest on the lines of *'I like this, I want to know more'* can transform the way learning looks in our classrooms. We know our questioning has to be sharp, our organisation keen and our manner calm. We also need to understand that we, as sellers of learning, need to be *attractive*. I don't mean that in a Pitt/Jolie kind of way, I mean it in terms of the messages we send to young people even when we are (em-)motionless. I don't believe children should call us by our first names and that we should borrow cigarettes from them (*I don't smoke*), but I do think we should open up our classrooms - and ourselves - to being places where young people can *understand what they don't understand*. And one way of doing this is to stop them in their tracks; by getting them to walk into the lamppost.

Whilst cutting back some long grass at my second student house in 1991, I found a large old chunky rusty key. There was no keyhole in the vicinity where that key would comfortably fit so I simply kept it. I was a student after all! Through my teaching career, that very key has formed the basis of a lure approach in many lessons, from Drama to Science. Most recently, I used it with a Y8 thematic learning group where History and Drama are taught using Drama as a vehicle. I placed the key on the floor as if it had been dropped. I welcomed the students in as usual and they took their places. One or two of them noticed it. One boy saw it and approached it. Others followed. They then started asking questions:

'What's that?'

'Is it yours, Sir?'

'Why is it here?'

'Where's it come from?'

'Where's the door?'

Where's the door? I'm not sure. It is mine. Thanks for finding it.

(I turn on the projector revealing a picture of a dark satanic mill circa the Industrial Revolution)

I found it in my garden.

(I motion towards the picture being projected on the whiteboard)

Look at this.....

And so it goes. A double *attraction*: the key and the picture. These are cheap, versatile resources that suck the students into learning – like a cuddly black hole. In this case we're going to explore...well, what do you think? It could be the Industrial Revolution, it could be child labour, it could be Victorian architecture... the list goes on.

Any primary practitioners reading this may think 'so what?' and I understand why. Luring children into learning has been the mainstay of the good primary classroom for years, but something alarming can happen once they start secondary school and the grip of curriculum takes hold. We secondary practitioners can learn a lot from our primary colleagues.

An enquiry project in Tameside in October 2009 looked at children's definitions of a good teacher. The lure was a letter from 'the government' which stated that all teachers were going to be replaced by super robots but that the children's opinions were needed on the final programming stage. Clearly, they lapped this up. Until, of course, they realised that their fabulous class teacher was going to be replaced. Let the games begin!

The outcome of the work in Tameside was this: oh, before I share it with you, could you take off your white coat, put down your clip board, and look at me? This is what the children said they wanted: they wanted teachers who were imaginative and friendly, whilst at the same time they needed someone working with them who could slide appropriately on the emotional spectrum between **STERNNESS** and **SOFTNESS** whilst displaying kindness, fairness and understanding.

What's the opposite of rocket science?

So the next time you're planning a starter, as you may need to do four or five times a day, seek out something simple that will distract the children and trap them in your intended learning. Choose something that provokes questions, captures imagination and demonstrates a link to a real world outside the classroom. The young people will thank you for it.

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