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Hywel - as forgetful as ever!!

Hywel Roberts

Ooops!

Helping children learn accidentally

Edited by Ian Gilbert 

This is about engaging children and young people in great learning so well they barely know they are learning, let alone learning well. Drawing on Hywel's years of experience using drama and 'The Mantle of the Expert' (and much more besides) to draw the best out of young people, this book is about the dance that happens between teachers and learners, it's about the importance of relationships in that engagement, it's about how to build and sustain rapport with learners. And it's about finding a delight and a joy in the process of learning, enhanced by those spontaneous, serendipitous events that help you remember just why you came into the job in the first place.

A book of happy accidents and improvisations that would be a lovely addition to any teacher's bookshelf ...
Ian McMillan, Poet, broadcaster and comedian

The voice of a true pioneer, clear and sure in the belief that teaching is an amalgam of so many things beyond 'subject knowledge'. The book races along at an almost breathless speed-just like the writer.
Luke Abbott, Director of Mantle of the Expert

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Contents

iii	Foreword
v	Acknowledgements
1	Stop Teaching Me When I'm Trying to Learn
9	The Human App
37	Liberating Your Subject
43	Accidentally Learning
97	Inspector of the Lure
123	Room with a View
143	Leave the Baggage by the Door
163	Holding Your Nerve
183	Useful Resources
189	Bibliography
191	Index

Stop
Teaching
Me When
I'm Trying
to Learn

When dealing with people, remember you are dealing with creatures of emotion, not creatures of logic.

Dale Carnegie

Get a room full of teachers together. Ask them to talk to each other about *teaching*. Watch their faces fall as they speak. Observe the heads that shake and the shoulders that shrug. Watch them indicate with their hands the current frustrations they feel – kids, government, leadership, time, resources. Listen as the silence falls when they look to you to move the meeting on.

Right ... Get a room full of teachers together. Ask them to share with each other their *guilty pleasures* (nothing too dark!).



Teacher guilty pleasures (that I've heard from teachers themselves)

- 1 *Carry On* films (in particular *Camping*, *Cleo* and *Screaming*)
- 2 All things David Essex
- 3 Reality TV
- 4 Bon Jovi
- 5 A chocolate fountain in the living room
- 6 Bubble bath
- 7 Dolly Parton
- 8 Black-and-white horror films
- 9 Line dancing
- 10 Musicals (not the namby-pamby modern stuff though)

Now notice how they behave differently to before. Look at how they chortle and talk. Watch how they animate themselves. Observe how they share funny stuff. Stop them and ask them to move to another conversation partner. Invite them to share their guilty pleasures whilst sharing what they've heard from their other colleagues. Let the gossip run and encourage them to wallow in the fun. Listen to the laughter. Notice the engagement. They're lured in: hook, line and sinker. You'll have to call them to order. Move on ...

Okay ...

So, what's this book about? Well, one of the toughest groups you will ever have to engage in learning are your colleagues. As Kevin Rowland of Dexys Midnight Runners said, 'Let's get this straight from the start'. If you can get *them* hooked into learning then the world is your lobster. Sadly, this book is not about engaging your colleagues. Thankfully, it's about engaging the children in your classroom. And they're the toughest group there is.

When I became a teacher I was given the schemes of work and left to get on with it, which I dutifully did. In a way it was a great way to get a career going in that you learned on the job. A bit like fishmongery. Or debt-collecting. Except with twelve weeks off a year. I taught English and Drama. They are the subjects I've stayed loyal to and in which I have seen numerous developments over the last couple of decades. I've also taught Media Studies, Dance (I know) and, due to a timetabling error, Music. More recently, I taught as part of a team delivering a 'blended curriculum' for 11- to 13-year-olds – more of that later. The reason I'm telling you this is because *I am a teacher* – I'm not just some bloke in a suit who has done lots and lots of research. I'm not full-time in one school now, but I am part-time in many.

Looking back to the time when I first stepped into a classroom, a key development has been the movement of focus in education from *teaching* to *learning and teaching*. This is what this book is about: engaging teaching that lets the children learn, often in unpredictable ways that no one envisaged, especially them. Hence the term 'accidental learning'.

What this book isn't about

- 1 Chucking out your current curriculum
- 2 Punching the air and shouting, 'Come on! Let's do it for the kids!'
- 3 Egg sucking

- 4 Ignoring the demands of subject coverage and external accountability
- 5 Upsetting your head teacher (if you are a member of staff)
- 6 Upsetting your staff (if you are a head teacher)
- 7 Making stuff up as you go along
- 8 Preparing for inspection
- 9 Using textbooks effectively
- 10 Playing the bagpipes

What this book *is* about

- 1 Raising your game in the classroom around learning and teaching
- 2 Being *brave*
- 3 Enabling independent thinking
- 4 Getting children to *expect* to learn when they're with you
- 5 Getting a bigger boat
- 6 Finding conventional curriculum in unconventional places
- 7 Tricking children into deep learning
- 8 Embracing the unpredictable
- 9 The choreography behind an engaging curriculum, tried and tested
- 10 Catchy lists

Here's a list of people I've worked with over the last few months who have helped me to hone the ideas in this book (so don't tell me they don't or can't work):

- Sixteen-year-olds on their first day as sixth-formers in a brand new building
- A team of teachers for a session on using the curriculum to manage behaviour. Among the assembled were teachers who teach all ages – from 4 to 16+, home tutors and a bloke who teaches sex offenders life skills. Now that was differentiation and personalised learning wrapped up in a five-hour session

I keep six honest serving men
(They taught me all I knew);
Their names are What and Why and When
And How and Where and Who.

Rudyard Kipling

Before the class arrive at your room, grab an imaginary spade and dig a deep hole. Then, as you hear them approaching, cover the hole with vines, leaves and branches – anything your imagination can find. As the class enter, let them fall into your trap. This is essentially what we should be doing as teachers. Trapping the children into learning – hooking them in and luring them into engagement.

You'll read in Chapter 6 about how we can use technology to support learning and teaching. Here, I want look at what you need to do in order to *engage* children in what you want to teach them. If you're an experienced teacher reading this, it may mean that you need to reassess your established schemes of work (projects). If you are new to the profession, or on the outside looking in, then you will get some ideas and thinking points from what I offer. This is a serious rule of engagement: essentially how we get kids to look in our direction and listen to what we have to say. Trust me, I am an inspector of the lure (if you're under 30, you might not *get* that).

Really ace questions

A 4-year-old asks the best questions. Here are some I've heard in my house:

- How do we get cheese from the moon?
- Why do we have bones?
- Why don't penguins talk?
- Does God laugh?

I'm sure you have great examples of your own. When young children ask questions they are genuinely voicing a mystery that has emerged in their minds. They can be open questions of the highest order which require (often from a tested adult) a detailed answer which itself is open in nature. If we're feeling brave, we adults may actually respond with a question in order to continue the conversation, deepen the curiosity, build on the enthusiasm and perhaps heighten the fascination:

Son: How do we get cheese from the moon?

Dad: How do you think we get cheese from the moon?

Pause.

Son: With a ladder.

Dad: Can you draw the ladder for me?

Son draws a ladder and passes the paper over.

Son: Here you are.

Dad sees this:



Dad: It's only got one rung.

Son: I know. The moon isn't that far away Daddy.

All very sweet and easily translated into any classroom. The act of *effort* though is seated with the teacher/adult. Compare and contrast:

Four-year-old: How do we get cheese from the moon?

Teacher: Don't be silly.

It is so easy to stifle and slowly destroy the capacity to imagine. When a young child asks questions such as this, they are being authentic. They could as well be saying, 'Tell me the answer and I'm going to go away and think about it. I'll accept it, but I'm reflecting on it.' As teachers we need to take this responsibility of responding to questions and supporting the development of imagination very seriously.



Reasons why imagination needs to be developed

- 1 James Dyson
- 2 Frank Zappa
- 3 J. K. Rowling
- 4 Bill Gates
- 5 Walt Disney
- 6 Charlie Chaplin
- 7 Kate Bush
- 8 Children's drawings
- 9 Children's stories
- 10 I believe the children are our future; teach them well ...

So, talking of cheese, what of the cheesy moon?

Teacher: How do you think we get cheese from the moon?

Pause.

Child: With a ladder.

Teacher: Can you draw it for me?

Child draws a ladder and passes the paper over.

Child: Here.

Teacher sees this:

H

Teacher: Wow! It's only got one rung. I wonder if it's enough to get us to the moon.

Child ponders this.

It is fair to say that as children progress through school, many adopt what we could call a *passive imagination* which really comes to fruition at secondary level. My evidence for this is that you never get 12-year-olds asking if the moon is made of cheese. Passive imagination can be blamed on all sorts of things, from computer games all the way to paint-by-number summer blockbuster movies that don't allow any space for the imagination to take root; rather, the viewer is simply shown everything they need to see. There is no shade. Simply light and dark. Black and white. The passive imagination is reinforced by traditional teaching models where questions are asked in order to measure learning, test attentiveness and act as tent poles to a previous lesson. Compliance and passivity take hold which match the development of adolescence and the locking down of enthusiasm and excitement: 'Just tell me what I need to know in order to get my grade. I'll accept what you say as you're the one getting paid.'

The ace up a teacher's sleeve is the ability to ask *really ace questions* that unlock the passive imagination and unveil a landscape of learning hitherto forgotten by the learner.

Let's consider types of questions first of all.

High, open and fat

These questions invite interpretation; there is no preconceived response and they stimulate discussion and the bouncing of responses around the classroom. These could also be called *fishing* questions because it's as if you are casting a net in order to get lots of different types of answers. If you want to lure children into learning, these are the types of questions to use. Here are some examples:

- How can young people be convinced to get the best out of their time in school?
- What messages would you like to text your 30-year-old self?
- How can we stop hate and prejudice?
- If we needed to build a plane from scratch, what should we do first?
- Should the old workhouse building be demolished?
- What is the hardest subject in school?

Lower, closed and skinny

These questions invite non-negotiable responses and recited answers. These do have their place in a teacher's repertoire but don't often make for exciting learning experiences. These could also be called *shooting* questions because you're essentially inviting the learners to hit the bullseye with a one-shot response that is either right or wrong. Here are some examples:

- What is the name of your school?
- In what year were you born?
- What is the current number one download?
- What is the capital of France?
- What is a Manx cat?
- How do you spell 'beautiful'?

Here are some other good fishing *questions about questions*:

- What is a good question?
- Who needs to be a good questioner?
- What does a good question do?
- When are questioning skills important outside of school?
- What are we looking for when children answer questions?



Questions I used to ask in my classroom back in the day

- 1 How are you doing?
- 2 Okay?
- 3 Got a pen?
- 4 Do I look like WHSmith's?
- 5 Do you get me?
- 6 Are you buzzin'?



Hywel Roberts is a creative educator with sixteen years experience in the classroom teaching secondary Drama and English in schools, both rough and smooth. Hywel is now a freelance consultant and Independent Thinking Associate specialising in Drama for Learning, Mantle of the Expert, Lures into Learning and engagement across all phases of learning.

Oops! is about principles. It's about a mentality that encourages us to drop the reins of rigid, boring schemes of work and instead create learning that is exciting and relevant!

Jamie Portman, Assistant Headteacher, Campsmount Technology College

Hywel Roberts' message is that engagement is the message and in delivering it he's sharp, he's intellectually underpinned, he's effervescent, he's the teacher you wished your teachers had seen teach.

Phil Beadle, teacher, broadcaster, author

If you want the children in your school to make great progress and remember you as a teacher who made learning fun, dip into this book for inspiration and ideas.

Diane Heritage, Deputy Lead Associate, North of England National College

This book had Hywel Roberts' inspirational stamp of wit and infectious enthusiasm running right through its core: I read the whole book with a huge grin on my face.

Ruth Saxton - Primary School Teacher and Chair for NATD

Whether you are a student teacher, NQT or school leader, this is a genuine guide to pushing your own practice.

Dave Whitaker, Executive Deputy Headteacher, Springwell Community School

Hywel makes the art of questioning, waiting and trusting learners to rise to the situation safer and less scary for teachers. Go on – try one or two of his ideas ... they really work.

Karen Araley, Karen Araley Associates

It's no accident that Hywel Roberts – himself a world leader in enthusiasm – has written a must read book for teachers. *Oops!* brings together insight, pizzazz, wit and quirkiness into one happy place, it's a joy of a book written by a great teacher.

Alistair Smith, learning consultant and author, www.alistairsmithlearning.com

Oops! makes you smile, wince, laugh, and ponder ... and, most of all, think; think how enjoyable teaching can be if we invest in ourselves as teachers.
Mick Waters, Professor of Education at
Wolverhampton University

It's fair to say that we sometimes get books that we think we ought to read, trust me this is a book that you will want to read! I read it in two sittings as I couldn't put it down - cliché? – well I challenge you to start reading it and see for yourself.
Jane Hewitt, AST Dearne ALC, Barnsley and affiliate of
Creative Teaching & Learning magazine

Oops! must be essential reading for student teachers. It is a dossier for practical teaching and describes the pedagogy of 'the buzzing' ... I am buying a copy for each of the team at school.
Richard Kieran, Headteacher, Woodrow First School

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