

The Uses of Idiocy

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In the novel by Aldous Huxley one aspect of the *Brave New World* involves a lesson whose subject is a flower. The first half of the lesson involves a meditation upon its form and beauty, followed by a dissection and a naming of the parts: an expansive approach. In *The Dead Poets' Society*, the inspirational teacher urges his students to rip out the introductory pages to the poetry collection: those pages which concentrate upon analysis. The act is flamboyant and perhaps inspirational, but it means that one side of the picture is lost, albeit the more arduous one.

The two-fold Huxley way seems a fruitful one. One wherein we play with a text as well as work with it. A good teacher will always want to encourage this. Although, a teacher may not feel encouraged to do so by the way things are.

Some of those teachers who see the value of playfulness in English have given me the chance to work with their students. Sometimes I have gone in, in a free play way, not knowing what is going to happen. On other occasions I have been asked to deal with specifics, on one occasion with the subject of Peace.

I was told that a peace organisation in Leeds had provided the funding for my visit and was asked if a broach of The Peace would be possible. I assured my employers that Peace-study would certainly be a component of the session, alongside a song about a dog that is continually and involuntarily breaking wind. Before discussing Max and his bowel disorder, we dealt with the subject of CONCILIATION. The New Pudsey pupils surprised, impressed and exhilarated me with their knowledge of trouble spots around the globe and with their suggestions of how protagonists might move things forward.

But back to the wind-break dog. I usually bring him into a classroom with mandolin accompaniment.

Max

(likes to be with people but people don't like to be with Max)

Max is a dog with a problem
the sort of problem it's a job to ignore
the first time they all thought it was funny
but not any more.
Picture the scene this home loving hound
Is sleeping by the fire with the family round
He wakes up and makes a little sound
Little Albert gets it first
He's nearest to the ground.
Albert's Mum gets wind of it
And she says open the door
And whatever we've been feeding him
I don't think we should give him no more.
Max does another one like old kippers
Wakes up Daddy in his fireside slippers.
Daddy wakes up and says open the door.
Albert says it's open Dad I did it when he did it before.
Then Mum says it's hard to relax with Max about.
Yesterday it happened while we were out in the car
And it's a small car
And Granny she was sick.
She's not used to it like we are.
Maybe we should swap him for a budgerigar.
Max is smelly.
He can interfere with your enjoyment of your telly.
But luckily
He's not an elephant.

On occasions pupils will hear the song and then tell the story from the creature's angle, occasionally letting rip with a rap. Seeing the situation from the less focused-upon perspective and FEELING the situation from the less focused-upon perspective of the dog. The underdog.

Here is how Year 7 pupil Olivia Graham saw Max's viewpoint.

I can't help it but they have turned against me and the people think that I am smelly. It was only yesterday the little boy fed me 2 Mars bars and a packet of Maltesers, and they wonder why I am how I am.

Sometimes there is just the song without such afterthought. Especially if the class has just spent half the lesson getting to grips with the realities of CONCILIATION. On that occasion we might have followed up with drawings of Max clearing a room with his gaseous emissions.

I work frequently with acrostics. Touring with the Scottish Book Trust, I had asked each pupil in an Alloa school to make up an acrostic using their name. For some reason the pupils struggled. Some stared blankly back at their pages, as the ages of the morning slouched past. I thought, I am failing. And, I was. But, hopefully, I was failing and learning.

The next day at a school further north, we started work in the morning with a COMMUNAL acrostic with a name common to all.

Action
Banana
Eats
Red
Doughnuts
Every morning, noon
Evening, and
Night.

Action Banana possibly has an eating disorder—but the 'Action' in his name suggests he is an active, functioning over-eater. One could get Action Banana to discuss his problem with King Lear. I think the monarch would be more understanding and caring *AFTER* the humiliation and rejection by his daughters. Beforehand he might be rather supercilious but an order of free doughnuts might still result.

Largely, I come into a school to bring an element of playfulness in language. At best I impart a wising-up as to what can be done with language and how one may use it to approach a subject from another angle. What rhymes with conciliation? I use the phrase 'wising-up' here after reading my parish newsletter for the Feast of the Epiphany. It offers

some thoughts about the Wise Men which I felt illuminates the relation between the two modes of learning: what one could call the Studious and the Ludicrous. The newsletter describes the Wise Men as scientists, astronomers, who saw a heavenly body outside their knowledge and who followed an instinct to follow it, ludicrous as it may have seemed.

‘They were men guided by scientific fact, but they were also guided by call-me-crazy curiosity’.

The final thought in the newsletter is a beautiful piece of analysis of the advancement of learning.

‘Perhaps the greatest thing we can learn from the story is that knowledge is not worth very much without wisdom’.

And here is a Christmastime verse I created with my friend Jane Ireland.

Peter the Orange Parrot

Peter the orange parrot
had a very tiny beak
unlike the other parrots
he was never heard to speak

but they were never nasty to him
Peter the non-talking parrot
they just thought that he was
a very very fluffy carrot

then one sunny jungle day
Santa Claus got lost
and Peter with the tiny beak
suddenly was heard to speak

and he directed Santa Claus back to Lapland
to be in the lap of all the other lovely Lapps
while the other parrots had been talking
Peter had been reading maps

Analysing Peter's situation, I'd say that, although he was very unlike his fellow creatures, he was *allowed* to be different and to develop at his own pace, and in his own direction. This proved, eventually, to be of benefit to his fellows. Had he been coerced to conform there is no knowing that the arrival of Father Christmas would have been possible. I have not yet done the drawing of Peter. Possibly some students will assist.

Now talking of parrot-fashion drawings, when I ask students to draw a dog, I point out that there is a dog design which in the past has oft been repeated. It is a cartoon style of dog involving dotty cheeks and floppy ears and long eyes. Pupils know the one I mean. There has always been a student willing to come out and draw such a creature. This way we can celebrate the archetype and move on to our own type of dog. Otherwise, for those who copy the template, an opportunity for invention has been lost.

I do a lot of work with drawing.

Shoe Drawing

I will frequently get 'poetry pupils' to draw before they write. They have after all been drawing longer than they have been writing. Play to their strengths, why don't we?

An image of my own, which I give out, depicts a man with a shoe on his head. A pupil at Davenport Girls' School drew a second person with a shoe on their head with a speech bubble indicating that once other people were looking daft, you didn't feel so daft anymore. Or, at least, not as lonely. This suggests discussion about wider issues of fitting in and conformity. When everyone thinks the world is flat, you are thought to be an idiot if you wear a shoe on your head.

A little idiocy can be a way into a Big Country. During my recent residency at John Keats House, I discovered that the poet had once swashbuckled with his neighbour Mrs. Dilke using celery sticks. Such zany aspects can be good inroads into a subject which might seem off-puttingly worthy, wordy or just down-right hard-worky. We proceeded to compose celery couplets, some of which when combined make quite a crunchy sonnet...



Working with a group of students from Lea Manor School, Luton, who were visiting Keats House and coming across the romantic for the first time, I introduced him to them as the salad swordfighter. I then handed out a celery stick to each pupil and we went into the garden and the command was given *celery on heads* and beside the mulberry tree we engaged with the vegetable and each other on the lawn. The pupils sympathetically obliged and later also obliged, off the top of their heads, with some couplets.

CELERY

ASHLEIGH	Now us, from the great town of Millinery, We went outside to dance with celery.
CONNOR	We all had the dance of the tasty celery We did it under the mulberry tree
LATIA	Celery are veggie, but weapons too, I know you don't believe me, but it's true.
SEAN	In the heat of the battle celery is drawn In John Keats's garden standing on the lawn.
ELLA	I'm dancing with my friend and celery And I like to make up words like jelery!

WINSLEY	John Keats was a romantic, more and more With celery we danced, to prevent a war
LISA	A bit of flying nasty celery I'm glad we're playing with it—he he he!

One might indicate that we have created a communal sonnet and then move on to some examples of the form written earlier by John Keats.

Finally, here is some work I have done which relates specifically to a syllabus character. I read and sang to the youngsters of Healing School in Lincolnshire, concerning the censorship of D. H. Lawrence's work.

Dear Mister Lawrence

I'm a former pupil of yours. I'm relying upon this letter reaching you, just like you used to reach us boys when you were teaching us in Croydon. Your country's turned its back on you, turned your paintings to the wall: unfit for admiration, so, we must admire their gall.

You have been hurt by England, but to me you're still SIR though your temper was short and there was that time you called us *a right shower*, but still, you brought out our reluctant rainbows. And I'm writing, Sir, to register my support.

Together, we created an acrostic to encapsulate the song. It went

D ear
H arrassed
L egend.
A re
W e
R ainbowing
E nchanted ?
N O!
C ome on
E ngland.

The pupils came up with Harrassed, Legend, Rainbowing and Enchanted. I was enchanted myself, I must say. Here's to rainbowing enchantment, Action Bananas and celery alongside analysis in English education.