

In a new six-part series, teacher **Joel Wirth** takes a look at common elements of classroom practice that we might consider changing in order to achieve better lessons and better teaching. First up is PowerPoint...

It had been a long day. I'd been shadowing the student (a White British, disadvantaged boy) across all his lessons, experiencing at first-hand his regular, daily diet of school. Now, last up, it was geography. There was a post-lunchtime sluggishness about the room, not helped by the bright sunlight outside and a general reluctance on the part of the class to recognise the apparent delights of coastal erosion.

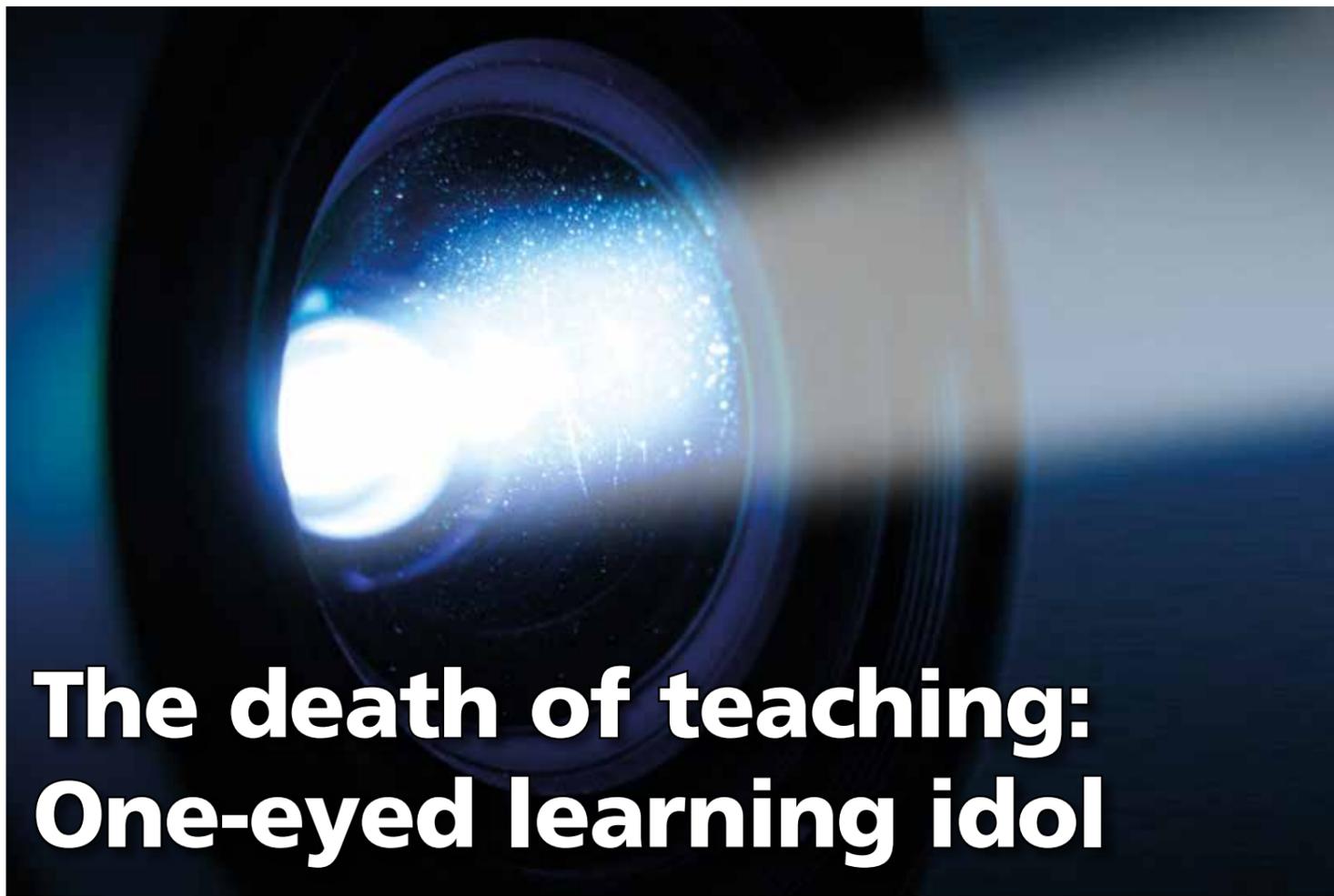
Ten minutes gone and the teacher was six slides in, gamely sharing a passion for stacks and stumps and wave action. But I could detect her dawning awareness that year 9 might not be "feeling it".

Scanning the room for a possible cause of this evident disconnect, the teacher eventually settled on that sun. It was, after all, May and temptingly bright out there. "Can you not all see the board?" she cheerfully concluded, taking purposeful strides towards the far wall. And turned off the lights.

This had now become a high-stakes game. Brilliant sunlight outside. Last lesson of the day. A room of permanently sleep-deprived teenagers cast into sudden, deep and tempting shadow. The teacher had banked on the manifest attractions of longshore drift somehow outweighing the now multiple inducements to drift off.

Within moments, I felt myself start to yawn. Around the room, inexorably, heads started to slump. In the gloom at the front to the room, the teacher moved in the penumbra, keeping herself in the gloom lest even she prove a distraction from the board. Groynes were mentioned. The tide of torpor ran high...

When did this happen? When did it become accept-



The death of teaching: One-eyed learning idol

able to condemn students to a darkened room where they couldn't even accurately make out the face of their teacher in order that they might worship this one-eyed god of learning? When did education become a slow death by a thousand PowerPoints?

This is not techno-fear. PowerPoint and all its many presentational equivalents are evidently excellent tools, but have they become the only tool? I used to tell teachers that they know they've made it the day they could

confidently be thrust into a year 8 classroom where no work had been set, armed with nothing more than a board pen and 60 minutes to fill.

As the years have progressed, I worry that successive cohorts of teachers might not be able to do so with confidence; that their over-reliance on PowerPoint might have deskilled them in the art of teaching. I will go further – I believe that nothing threatens teaching more than PowerPoint.

I asked one child in an outstanding school to log their experiences across a week: 25 lessons, 25 PowerPoints (even in art and PE). Copying something from the board in 16 of them. Lights turned off in 11.

That's the dominance and the effect. Ask teachers and they will often malign the impact that screens have had on the current generation of learners. The reality is that however we might mumble our collective concern at the potentially deleterious impact of the six hours of daily screen time of the average UK 13-year-old, we compound that damage by heaping on another five of our own at school.

Try this yourself. Walk the corridors of your school and see how many lessons are being driven by PowerPoint. Notice where teachers now stand, how they interact with classes. Open the door. Ask whether the PowerPoint is really necessary here. Could they not all be learning the fine art of actively listening to a fellow human being?

“I asked one child in an outstanding school to log their experiences across a week: 25 lessons, 25 PowerPoints”

Stay longer. See if you can spot the point where the teacher shows that they have over-relied on the slideshow. Where they reveal that they don't know the answer.

On the very day I wrote this article, a student asked a teacher: "Dulce et Decorum Est – what does that mean?" The word-for-word reply? "It means what it says on the slide." So, what's to do?

Re-empower the teacher

Take a random scheme of learning and review the accompanying PowerPoints. Remove anything that is a barely concealed instruction to teachers (those "now, get into groups" or "discuss..."). Most presentational tools allow for such instructions to be added as accompanying notes. Students need to see teachers as the source of pedagogical authority in the room, not the slideshow.

Words! Words! Words!

We used to obsess (rightly) about the reading age of textbooks. At their best (which wasn't often) they were at least professionally written and set out by equally qualified experts. That's unlikely to be the case with

your PowerPoints. The chances are higher than you might think that there will be too many words, or garishly distracting colours, or things that flash, or confusing layouts or, on occasions, combinations of them all. Reduce and simplify. Get the focus back on the real expert in the room, the teacher.

A picture paints a thousand words

We all understand that images can have a huge impact. So, why not replace as many word-heavy slides as possible with a single image? You will probably find this opens up more avenues for genuine engagement than a whole range of other pedagogical initiatives: "Okay. So, what's happening here?" "Who can guess from this image where we're going next?"

Try being PP-free for a day

This, of course, is the ultimate. Yes, it needs preparation but it is nothing like as hard (or with no paper and printing, expensive) as you might imagine. If you think this is a step too far, road-test it with staff and ask them what they would find difficult. There's a menu of professional learning activities in that task alone.

Turn it off!

So, the teacher needs the PowerPoint for the initial input. That's fine. But once the class are clear what they are to do, turn it off. Make your teacher and not the board the locus of pupils' attentions.

Get a policy

Students will tell you about PowerPoint, so start with them. Track their experiences and see what they see. Once you have done so, set a policy through your broader department or school-wide teaching and learning policy. Set advisory limits on the number of words/slides. Be clear about the impact of too many colours, memes, fonts. Insist that the light stays on! As in all things, establish very clearly the "this is how we do things in this school/department".

Shift the balance

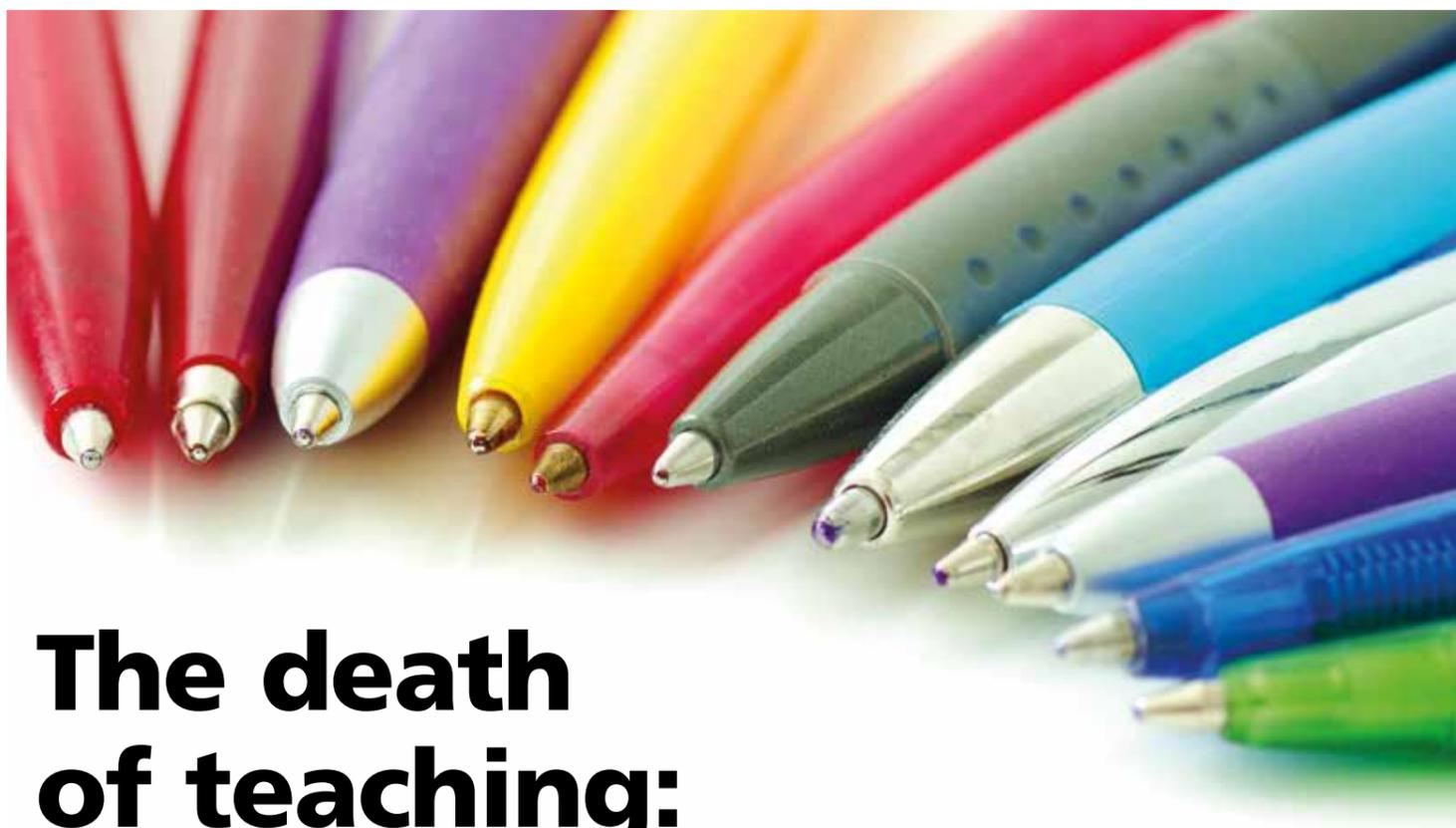
Of course, we didn't all go willingly into the good night of PowerPoint addiction. We were thrust there by the onerous demands of a welter of external factors. "Consistency" and "eradicating in-school differences" became axiomatic. National curriculum levels were removed and the rumours began that the inspectorate would only look in books, not at teachers.

And so we insisted that teachers mark and mark and mark. We misused (and perhaps misread) Sutton Trust research on the value of feedback to justify this, ignoring the fact that the single biggest impact a teacher can have is in knowing their students' strengths and weaknesses and teaching lessons that actively engage their interests. This needs courage from middle and senior leaders. Reduce the amount of marking you ask your staff to do. Tell them instead to plan exceptional learning experiences.

That probably starts by taking that off-the-shelf PowerPoint and eviscerating it so that it learns its place in the classroom: a useful classroom assistant, but not the commander-in-chief.

• Joel Wirth has 25 years' experience as a teacher of English and 10 years in senior leadership. He is currently a consultant headteacher.

In this six-part series, **Joel Wirth** takes a look at common elements of classroom practice that we might consider changing in order to achieve better lessons and better teaching. Next up is our reliance on the pen...



The death of teaching: The pen as anchor

So. The Battle of Hastings. It has to be year 7. Every school I visit, it seems, does it then. Flicking through the books, I see they've also done a lesson or so on Alfred the Great, which you don't always see, though I spot some colouring in of apparently Anglo-Saxon things which look worryingly Celtic.

The lesson unspools as so many do, following what one of my mentors called the "I do a bit, they do a bit" structure of learning. Today, the lesson objectives have been differentiated (Meeting, Above, Beyond) and GCSE equivalent grades have somehow been attached to these, revealing as much as we need to know about our profession's on-going failure to grasp the seismic shift that 9-1 grading represented.

Today, the class would be "exploring the importance of the battle" and of the defeat of the Anglo-Saxon way of life. This was the "bit" that the teacher did. As it transpired, "exploring" meant listening to the teacher as he read the PowerPoint slides almost verbatim, stopping only to clarify a point where the whiteboard had not been clear enough, much like a biblical scholar might give clarification on a point of divine truth.

Fifteen minutes later, the "they do a bit" was a newspaper report. It was to be a 40-minute task plus homework. Rulers came out to make columns in exercise books. There was support for those who needed it in the form of some printed sentence starters but nothing more general on how to write a newspaper report nor an explanation of why this form had been chosen as a means of assessing their understanding.

Stencils were administered for headlines. Things were measured. One student politely nabbed six pristine-looking colours. I wondered whether anyone would bother to ask whether Anglo-Saxon society actually had an economically sustainable mass circulation press in an era of low literacy. Coloured pencils appear. There's no talk of perspective or bias. Glue is requested.

History is not alone. Look and you'll see it in English, geography, MFL. It's there in RE and science

and most subjects whose defining purpose is not overtly practical.

Students see through it because they always do. They spot the "busy work" and even while they might engage with the task of writing a letter from Lady Capulet to The Battle of Agincourt, they know what's happening. Ask them what they're doing and they may be fulsome in their enthusiasm. Ask them why they're doing it and things get murky. This is the pen as anchor. The task administered to keep them in their seats looking like they're working.

You spot these tasks because of the allowable levels of social talk which help turn Postcards from my Antarctic Adventure from a mildly engaging but ultimately facile 20-minute writing task into a lesson-filling, homework-busting, hour-long extravaganza. We excuse this as a "working hum". It's not. It's the sound of children quietly and respectfully not working.

The teacher circulated. A tide of kids ebbed and flowed before the open tray of coloured pencils. Things got sharpened. One child's incorporation of King Alfred's jewel into the O in Anglo Saxon was publicly praised and extensively copied. No mention of anachronisms.

A good 20 minutes on average was spent ruling lines and lettering letters before the more enthusiastic writers began on the task itself. No planning. "No more colouring now, kids. It's time to get writing." No evidence that

then it must be done in silence. Not as a test but as a deep and meaningful pow-wow between a student's brain and their writing hand. The research is clear in this area. However students might declare that their music, background chatter, right to talk about something someone posted last night helps them to focus, the weight of evidence is overwhelmingly to the contrary.

Certainly students who inhabit a world of notifications and multi-sensory distraction might not be used to silence but that is where we fit in. Writing is an affair of solitude and loneliness and should be celebrated as something all the more precious and beautiful for it.

Prepare your students, of course. Make sure they have planned and that they have access to all necessary support (information, a writing frame, a clear understanding of purpose, form and audience as well as key stylistic features of the genre) but, that done, welcome in the quietness and let them get on.

Review key stage 3

Systematically review the key stage 3 units of study, one at a time – and ask yourself really fundamental questions. Why are we learning this? And why are we asking the kids to do this?

Don't allow yourself a cheap excuse. Don't accept that it's okay to ask students to write Caliban's diary for 40 minutes because it "develops empathy". Don't forgive that bit where students copy-out-the-Powerpoint-because-they-need-this-for-their-test. Don't allow your class to do the 30-minute letter from a Buddhist explaining The Four Noble Truths unless you can fully justify this as being the best way for students to deepen their fundamental intellectual grasp of the topic.

Once you declutter your schemes, purging them of all unnecessary busy work, watch the space that will open up for meaningful, deep, active learning.

Use the time well (or badly)

Follow a student for a day. It's pretty meagre fare. In lesson, there aren't many of the transformative experiences that get filmed and used in government adverts: such exploding rockets are quite understandably the exception and not the rule. But you can find that time. And, once you've got it, rediscover what it was that made you love your subject in the first place.

Historians – use the 20 minutes to bring in and analyse through discussion an artefact (get the kids to find one in their own home).

Geographers and scientists – ask the students to identify things they want to know about and run a short lesson on that non-related topic ("Where does my mum's morning cup of tea come from and how does it get here?" Or "Betelgeuse: Waiting for a Supernova").

English teachers – you love words and the nuances of language. Research word games that can be played as a class and fire their enthusiasm for the English language through experimentation and play. Teach them how to do a cryptic crossword (once you've taught yourself).

Maths teachers – get the logic problems out and share with them the joys of solving Sudoku, Kakuro and the like. Those are experiences that have the potential to become life-long passions.

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There are innumerable ways of engaging with the body of knowledge you need to explore that don't involve a pen

any transfer of knowledge from English about newspaper reports had made it back to the history of the mid 11th-century. But they looked lovely.

Go pens free

There are innumerable ways of engaging with the body of knowledge you need to explore that don't involve a pen. Test yourself, your department, your whole school: go pens free for a day. Insist the kids leave them at home. Don't get their books out either.

Use drama to assess their understanding of population growth through a series of tableaux, hot seat the characters from *A Monster Calls*, lead an extended class discussion of the slave trade allocating roles and attitudes to different learners, train students to properly peer teach forces, construct oral presentations (both individual and group). Get creative. Do all that before you ponder the potential benefits in terms of reduced marking.

Observe the sanctity of writing

If writing is worth doing, it must be done properly. If they need to undertake that lengthy analysis of the causes of the First World War (as they clearly do)

• Joel Wirth is a former teacher and senior leader who now works as a consultant headteacher. To read the previous article in this series, focused on PowerPoint, visit <http://bit.ly/2sovFQl>

The death of teaching: It's good to talk

Continuing his series, **Joel Wirth** looks at common classroom practices that we might consider changing in order to achieve better lessons and better teaching. Next up is how we manage classroom talk and discussion

That's right! And what about the xylem... Anyone?

At least no hands were raised.

The conversation, or classroom discussion, or teacher input – call it what you will – had been ebbing and flowing around the classroom for six or seven minutes. It was an unremarkable recap of the previous lesson on respiration, which I'd also observed.

But just like last time, the students drifted off, their small lights of learning gently extinguished through sheer tedium.

Of the hundreds of lessons I've observed, failures to manage classroom talk are the most common features of the most unsuccessful lessons. Of the last 30 lessons I have seen, shortcomings in the teacher's management of discussion/engagement of the whole class have been a feature in more than 20. Scale that up and there are many thousands of teachers who are getting this wrong.

Distilled from these experiences, here are the most common factors in mismanaged talk.

It's good to talk

For it to be a true group discussion, everyone needs to be involved. But the most common error is the teacher playing tag-wrestling with individual students and mistaking their response for a collective response.

There isn't always time to get the whiteboards or voting pads out to check that everyone's engaged, but there are some things that everyone should be doing.

First, we must insist that students answer in a "stage voice" so that everyone can hear. I tell teachers to walk away from students as they are asking them a question.

By speaking over the heads of more pupils, it subtly ensures their involvement in the question and will subconsciously make the student answering raise their voice to reach you.

Next, we need to get out of the habit of giving "feedback" or reformulating the answers we receive. This needs to be the work of the group: "Thank you, Beth, does anyone have anything to add to that? Do you disagree with that, Ben? Could anyone paraphrase what Beth has just said?" Everyone is now a listener.

Are we cramping the students' style?

Teenagers often amaze with their ability to suggest a complex answer in only four words ("It could be that", "sort of", etc.). They do this because, being teenagers, they are afraid of being publicly wrong. But teachers too often allow them to get away with it.

We must expect and encourage them to speak in full sentences in discussions to encourage them to explore their own intelligence. And by simply saying to a student, "what do you mean by that?" or "in what ways?", we can reassure them that they are onto something and open up their thinking.

Guess the answer?

Are we actually playing "guess the answer in the teacher's head"? Too many discussions inadvertently shut down really interesting responses which might open up more fertile discussion because the answer wasn't the one the teacher was looking/hoping for.

Alternatively, a discussion ends abruptly once the teacher hears the word they were looking for despite a host of alternatives.

At its worst, this results in such gems as: "Thank you, Ella. I was actually looking for a word beginning with H. Anyone?"

Or the dreadful neglect of professional and intellectual duty embodied in a teacher who had asked for an example of a "violent delight" in *Romeo and Juliet* telling a student who had replied "The hatred

that the two houses feel for each other" that no-one could take delight in violence or hatred.

An (old school) colleague of mine spoke of "chasing rabbits". Once you set a question running, she believed, you have relinquished ownership of the answer. If a student's reasonable response suggests we chase that rabbit in this particular direction, a teacher was professionally bound to follow.

In practice, this can get messy, but we should always be aware of the elasticity of young minds – that they will throw us answers which we've lost the ability to generate ourselves. Great plenaries are made of returning to these answers and peering into whichever hole the rabbit disappeared through.

Is there time?

Yes, it still happens. Despite everything we know. How many teachers are afraid of a thinking silence! For big questions, it is a minimum of 10 seconds, longer if possible. Big ideas need big thought and we should discourage students from saying the first thing that comes into their head. Such silences can be oppressive.

If you think so, a good technique is to ask the question – twice – then say: "I'm talking now only to give you all time to think of an answer to that question."

“Once you set a question running, you have relinquished ownership of the answer”

Is Hermione Grainger taking over?

Some students are never short of an opinion. In class discussions, teachers often – and correctly in my view – operate a mix of hands and no-hands, allowing all students the right to express an opinion. But in most lessons there's a student with lots to say. That student's confidence needs to be protected. But they need help to be more discerning in their contributions.

Give them three tokens (plastic milk bottle tops work well) and take one away every time they make a contribution. Far from restricting them, this will help her to make discerning judgements about when to speak and will make her an even more reflective listener.

What about the quiet shy ones?

There are those students for whom the very notion of publishing their voice to the febrile air of the classroom is anathema. They need a role. They need to be the MC of the discourse. They need to be charged with listening, possibly documenting the thrust and counterthrust.

Periodically, we return to them for a summary of what's been said and to ask them to judge the quality of the discussion, identifying good listening, etc.

Of course, there are some great things done by teachers in pursuit of deepened learning through talk.

The empty chair is perhaps the best example of this that I have seen. The teacher identified an empty chair in the room and brought it to the front of the class. The discussion continued as normal but when a student said something definite in response to an open-ended question, the teacher turned to the chair and asked the same student "what might this person



Image: Adobe Stock

want to say about that?" or "this person thinks something different: what might it be?"

At its most powerful, the empty chair becomes the silent voice that responds to any ethically or morally questionable contributions.

Rather than slapping such thoughts down (and thereby suggesting that such ideas are suppressed) the teacher points to the empty chair and asks the

student "what would someone who disagrees with you say?", seeding the counter-thought in the mind of the individual.

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• *Joel Wirth is a former teacher and senior leader who now works as a consultant headteacher. You can read the previous articles in this SecEd series via <http://bit.ly/2FERRgR>*

The death of teaching: Gone in 420 seconds



In *SecEd* this half-term, **Joel Wirth** is looking at common classroom practices that we might consider changing in order to achieve better lessons and better teaching. This week he discusses how we must handle the first seven minutes of any lesson...

Interview days with one of my mentor headteachers were always interesting. He had innumerable strategies to hurry things along (“no subsidiary questions for this one”) and keep everyone on the panel in check (“if I click my pen or put it down, we’re moving them along”).

Of course, he made a point of meeting all candidates first thing in the morning, keen to make and gauge that early impression.

He’d be all smiles and casual charm but, beneath this veneer, he’d be assessing the firmness of a handshake, judging the strength of eye-contact – testing the waters.

As he would say: “You can’t get yourself a job in the first 30 seconds, but you can certainly lose it.”

It’s the same in the classroom.

When I am invited to support teachers with their teaching, I always start by joining the class for the first seven minutes. I’m there when the door opens, and I walk in with the students. I will smile at the teacher, help hand things out.

I’m not averse to whispering an answer or putting a hand up to contribute. It’s always supportive, always relaxed and that’s because the teacher needs to be the professional they are every day of the week.

You can get a lot right in seven minutes. It can go just as disastrously wrong.

Be seen

There are three powerful places in your classroom and none of them is behind your computer or seated at your desk.

The first is at the door. Be there to welcome them in. The second is your power spot: that area in the room that only teacher occupies. It’s that space in front of the whiteboard where you do your teaching (as proof, watch how Jack runs his fingers across the screen as he makes his way to his seat – he knows he’s committing the ultimate trespass!). You move here from the door, reminding them who’s the sheriff in these parts.

For the experts, there’s a third, which you can try once they know you that bit better. It’s against the back wall, facing the board. From here you declare your ownership of “their” space too and subtly orientate the whole class towards the front and the learning

that is about to transport them into rapture over circle theory.

Be heard

I once witnessed a teacher open the door for students, welcome them into the room, before retiring to sit in front of their computer to summon the PowerPoint from the ether.

Students milled about in that student-ish way, doing sort of what they should have been doing (sitting down, getting equipment out, putting bags on floor, etc) at a pace befitting of 15-year-olds with far

settled and leave them in the full knowledge that yours is the voice they listen to in this room.

Try variations on: “Okay, year 8, while I’m (doing x) you’ll be getting settled with your equipment out, your books opened at a new page. I can almost hear the date being written neatly and underlined – also neatly – and I’m sure your bags will all be on the floor when I decide to look.”

Repeat it. Never leave a gap longer than 10 to 15 seconds without them hearing your voice in this initial settling period.

Be out and about

If you are lucky enough to have your own room or to have set up before they have arrived, make sure you own the space. Once you have got going, rather than stand near your desk or board, move between those three powerful areas of the room. Head for the back of the class and continue to teach from there.

This is especially powerful if there’s a task on the board (which, of course, there is) as it maintains the orientation of the students’ attentions and also gives precedence to the learning as opposed to the teacher.

To students, of course, you’re in their area: you belong at the front where that bigger desk and comfier

they will, if you do it with enough assertiveness), you restate your expectations and you don’t step back into your teaching space until it is all back on track.

Be vigilant

Nothing gets past you in the first seven minutes. Calmly addressing the chewing, bottle of Lucozade in the blazer pocket, minor off-task chatter here will head off many of whatever horrors are to come. Sweat the small stuff. But...

Never stop teaching

This is your domain and nothing stops you. Students should understand that your job is to teach and stopping you from doing that task will bring consequences. Of course, we avoid conflict where we can. A series of non-verbal cues work best and allow you to keep talking. A finger to the lips and “what are you doing?” eyebrows in the direction of a kid muttering to a mate will suffice.

Walking towards the kid chewing with the bin in your hand will fettle that. Keep teaching all the time. Four fingers aimed at the floor will let the kid swinging on their chair know what’s expected of them.

Calmly removing the tapping pen from Tom’s hand (keep teaching and don’t look at him while you’re doing it) will indicate that you even own their stuff. Uniform issues can be pointed out and addressed while you continue to gush about the Contact Process.

Exercise your authority

You own everything: what students do, where they sit, when they talk, who they talk to, the equipment in the room, who moves, and where and when. You hold the conch and gentle reminders of that are important in establishing your authority in an utterly non-confrontational way. Ask a student you know is a role-model (positive or negative) to open a window or hand-out books. Use “thank you” not “please”. Praise and thank them again once they’ve done it.

Put right what went wrong

If there was a problem with a kid last lesson, re-establish a good relationship with them before they have even sat down. Something non-public: a quiet word, a genuine smile, even a slight but obvious nod. Stand near their desk to speak to the class. Place your hand lightly on their desk while you’re doing this.

Know your kids so well that you can establish a point of contact that resets your relationship – ask about their dance classes, favourite team, television programme. Do it quietly amid your louder whole-class instructions. They will implicitly understand the bridge that is being built.

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more exciting lives than we have. It was two-and-a-half minutes before the teacher spoke at all. Two-and-a-half minutes!

Students had started talking about those very exciting lives, a few had not settled and were perched near or on the edge of other desks. A pen was borrowed by being thrown across the room.

Two-and-a-half minutes is a lifetime in the course of a lesson. A vacuum like that at the start will suck all the energy, pace and productivity from your lesson.

From the moment students enter, you need to be heard. You don’t need to be standing sentinel (though you might for some classes) and the vagaries of the timetable or the overrun of last lesson might mean that you are at your computer, rousing the Gods of Powerpoint from their slumbers, but yours needs to be the voice that is heard.

Develop a series of professional scripts, mantra you can chant unconsciously at classes to get them

chair are. That’s why Jack touched the whiteboard. That’s the set up they recognise – the fundamental opposition of the system (one person faces the back of the classroom, they all face the front).

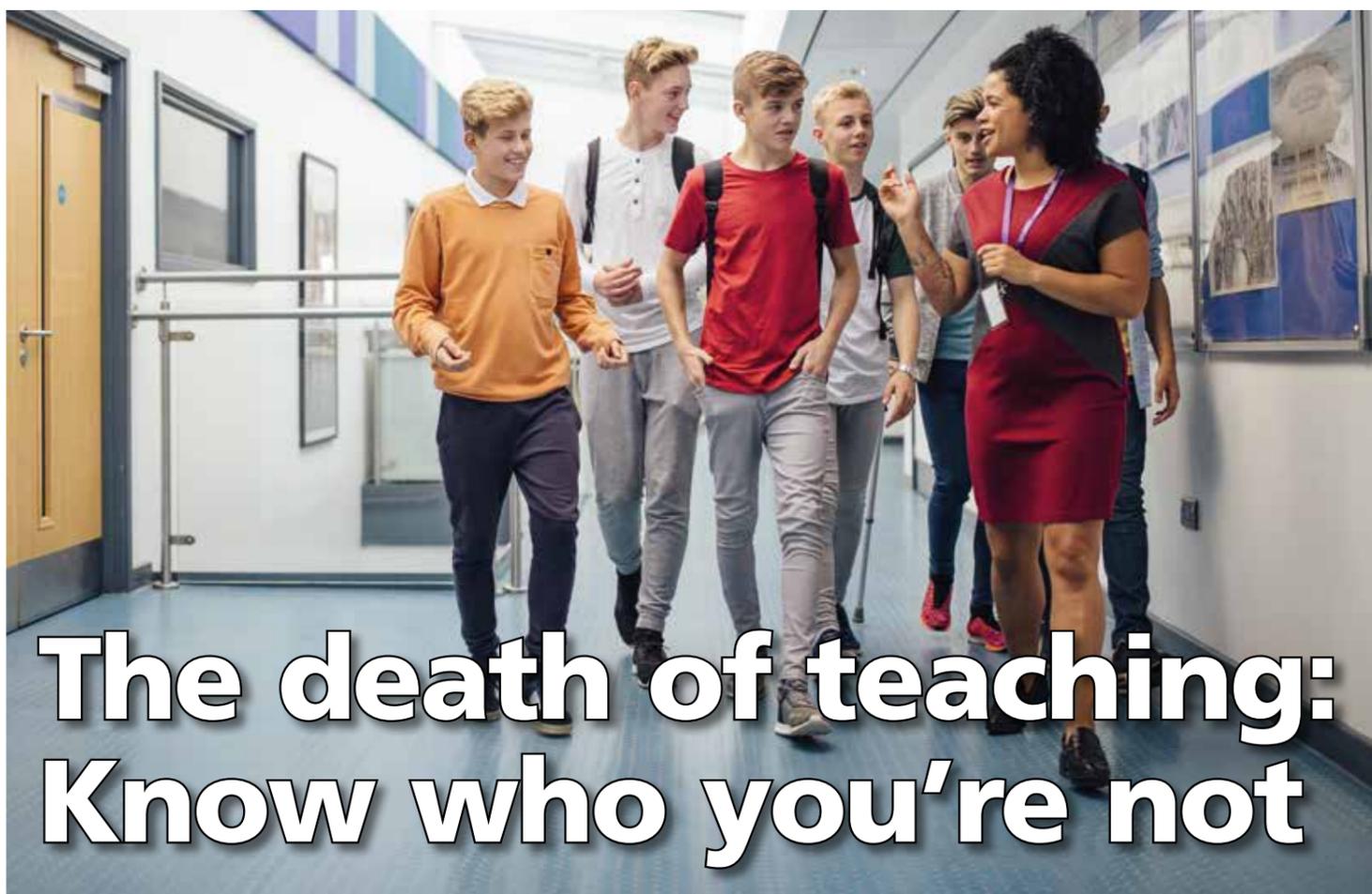
Breaking that both firmly establishes that, in fact, all of this space is yours and dissolves some of the inherent conflict in the system by creating a sense of a shared, collective learning endeavour.

In one of the more bizarre quirks of classroom dynamics, there is another space. It lies outside of that area in which you teach and is somewhere you choose: perhaps near the door, perhaps against the side wall. It’s the space to which you walk when you want to indicate that things aren’t going well. Too many interruptions. Too much fidgeting.

When the need arises, you walk there in exaggerated, studied silence. You stand there and you turn to face the class in silence. Questioning eyebrows are raised. From there, once they’ve fallen silent (which

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What common classroom practices might we change in order to achieve better lessons and better teaching. Continuing his series, **Joel Wirth** looks this week at rules, and why 'firm but fair' consistency is vital



The death of teaching: Know who you're not

Can we sit in our Friday seating plan? The question, asked by a student, was momentarily confusing. But as it transpired, this was a real thing. Friday is different apparently. "We do fun things and the atmosphere's a bit more relaxed..."

Nobody is going to deny Friday's special place in our affections nor pretend that it doesn't shimmer over the distant end of our collective working week in mirage-like wonder. That said, in every one of my 25-plus years of teaching, it has always struck me – despite the manifold glories of the weekend to come – rather self-evidently as a fairly regular day of fairly regular work.

But, for this year 9 girl and her friends, gamely trooping off towards the back of the class to arrange themselves as they saw fit, it seemed otherwise and disabusing them of the notion that Friday existed as a culmination of the working week rather than an annexe to the weekend was a matter of some moments' persuasion...

The experience marinated for a while but led me to question the teacher in the following week. "I just like a different atmosphere on a Friday. Sometimes we do fun things – it's just a bit more relaxed."

I am a passionate proponent of teachers' autonomy. Trained well and prepared always to learn, teachers will more often than not work out what is right for their students. But sometimes, we get it wrong. And we rarely get it more wrong than when we're pretending that we're something other than who we are: a teacher and all that entails.

And, of course, it is not just Fridays. Stand out on the corridors for a lesson and watch the kids who are out of class. Do it just after break. Occasionally you'll find a mildly startled-looking child who has been sent by a class teacher to fetch something.

They rarely see the empty-ish, mid-lesson corridors and look like the explorers of a new world. More often you will find that boy from year 9. He's no stranger to the fall into this crack in the world of learning. He walks slowly – he may swagger. He probably looks

into the occasional classroom, might even aim a wave/gurn/obscene hand gesture at a mate through the glass panels. When stopped and asked where he is going, he replies that he is going back to his previous lesson to fetch his report or that he needs to fill up his water bottle.

Or, the ultimate Get Out of Jail Free card, that he's been allowed – five minutes after break – to go to the toilet. He will wave an Out of Class Pass at you as though it were proof of diplomatic immunity. He's out, of course, because it's easier for his teacher to let him go than it is to say "no".

Now follow him back to his lesson. Students like this will be the ones surreptitiously (or openly) attached to headphones. They'll be the ones who ask you if they can charge their phones (counter to school policy) or if they can have a drink of whatever stripe of sugary drink they're not supposed to bring on site.

If you ask teachers what irks them most, apart from the manifold imbecilities of the senior leadership team, it will be the failures of their colleagues to follow the rules – and the accompanying failure of senior leadership to ever pick them up on it. Staff hate this inconsistency among their colleagues.

While there are those few at the other extreme who actively seek out confrontations with students, the professional majority diligently establish and police the school's rules in their own classrooms. They do so in the corridors, too. They challenge firmly but fairly the coat on inside the building, the running between lessons, the eating in the IT corridor that was banned last week after the Egg Sandwich fiasco – and they do so while managing to assure the students that they are somehow on their side.

It is not a capital offence to walk down the Science Corridor at break (despite what the lab technicians would have them believe), but they respond firmly and humanely where they see it happen. All are united, however, in the opprobrium they feel towards the colleague who allows the phone to be charged in lesson ("but Mr B lets us!") or the uniform infringements that Mrs Coppell seems to actively encourage in her room.

They really resent having to be the one who stops Frankie from chewing on the way to PE when she has already walked brazenly passed three members of staff ("Well, Mr Kimble didn't say anything...").

But it's not just the staff. If you want to experience the single greatest perversity in the jungle law of school behaviour, take the views of the five year 11s with the highest number of behaviour points. They have been the season ticket holders for senior leadership team detention since year 8.

Ask them to name the best teachers they've had in school. Every time – and I mean *every* time – they will mention colleagues who you know have exemplary behaviour management skills.

They're the "firm-but-fairers". The ones who show that they have the best interests of the kids at heart not by letting them jump the queue in the canteen but by expecting the very highest standards of self-regulated behaviour. They never choose the geography teacher who didn't challenge their lateness or the art teacher who routinely let them leave three minutes early for lunch because they asked and because standing against them was somehow too difficult.

Just Say No! No-one likes conflict. We understandably avoid it in our private life and squirm when it happens in public situations. But teaching is, by its very

nature, a matter of conflict. It's the intersection in that Venn diagram of conflict between the adult and the non-adult worlds, between learning and ignorance, between the insistence of the now and the demands of the future. We cannot avoid it and, as all the best teachers know, we must not see avoiding it as *de facto* "a good thing".

Teenagers will get it wrong – not always accidentally – and we must be there as gatekeepers of the adult world to let them know, with a smile on our face, how things need to be.

Dress in your authority

I have referred many times during this series to teachers' professional power (and we'd be lying to ourselves if we didn't see it as power). You are not "you" when you come into school: Jess Thomas at home, Ms Thomas at work. Ms Thomas is a teacher and she acts the role of the teacher every minute of her working day.

If you don't instinctively get this then consciously remind yourself as you put your work clothes on (Jess Thomas would never wear those trousers!) that Ms Thomas is now dressing herself in her authority; that Ms Thomas intervenes when Libby swears on the corridor, even though Jess Thomas would rather turn a deaf ear.

Be who they want you to be

You are not their friend. You never will be. However much they like you and you them. Even when Jamie who left three years ago tries to befriend you on social media, he still sees you as his teacher. That's who he wants you to be.

For all students, but particularly perhaps for the many students who come from chaotic backgrounds, teachers can embody something routine and dependable. Your willingness to overlook that student's misdemeanour is not doing them a favour.

Know your route to the staffroom

My first advice to new members of staff was always the same. Walk the route from your classroom to the staffroom with a more experienced colleague. Learn its nuances.

Ask that colleague which rules apply on the corridors, in the social areas, in the yard that you cross and outside the library. Envisage all the things that can go wrong.

Don't imagine break starting until you set foot in the staffroom. Until then, be alert and challenge what you see taking pace. You will quickly establish an unspoken status with the students for knowing your behavioural onions. This will not only help you establish yourself across the school but also, through the alchemy of students talking to each other, improve the conduct of students in your lessons.

You are a multitude

As a teacher, you are one of many in your school. You know that staffrooms are the most supportive, exhilarating, collegiate places. You know your colleagues will be there for you when it goes wrong. That togetherness is forged in the crucible of collective endeavour and it is that collective that is weakened if you don't play your part. Do it for them. SecEd

• Joel Wirth is a former teacher and senior leader who now works as a consultant headteacher. You can read the previous articles in this SecEd series via <http://bit.ly/2FERRgR>

The death of teaching: A race to the Bottom?

What classroom and teaching practices might we change in order to achieve better lessons and better teaching? In the final part of his series, **Joel Wirth** looks at key stage 3, which he fears is too often anodyne and pointless...

The discussion around the table was reasonably animated for a Tuesday afternoon at the fag end of April. As ever, year 11 had sucked up most of what heat and light the staff had mustered and spreadsheets had been extensively scrutinised.

At 4:10pm, the key stage 3 curriculum review session began (apologetically requesting just 15 minutes meeting time like the poorest of poor cousins). Ten minutes in and passions were running high on the subject of Shakespeare for year 7. *Macbeth* was proposed, a lone voice advocated *Henry V*, the majority wanted to stick with *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which had been trotted out in all its donkey-headed, fully-resourced-PowerPoint-a-thon glory for at least three years.

Understandably tired of endless years of change, voting teachers opted for the status quo. The logic seemed to go that year 7s are small, both physically and intellectually, and somehow "closer" to the world of fairies and periwinkles which had been equated with childhood because – well, just because. They will read a bit and then write something. The clock ticks round towards home time...

I can't resist this as among the finest examples from the many I could cite of the intellectual Race to the Bottom (I hope those of you familiar with the work of the Bard saw what I did there) that characterises so much of students' experiences at key stage 3.

Most English teachers know that *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is a complex play about creation and artifice, about love and its many delusions. "Doing it" in year 7 more often than not reduces it to a fairy story, and not a particularly good one. Bereft of its intellectual heft it is anodyne and, like so much of key stage 3, pointless.

Ask any child in years 7 and 8, or even year 9 (if you're not among the many schools who have responded to the fundamental inability of the profession to make key stage 3 meaningful by pretending that as much of it as possible is key stage 4). Ask your key stage 3 students why they're doing whatever they're doing. Ballads in year 8. The Elizabethan Age in year 7. Buddhism in year 9. It could be anything, the answer will be the same: "Don't know."

Some will tell you that it's on the test at the end of the year or that it will decide which set they go into next year. Both seem to me a distillation of the same thing: we don't understand the purpose of key stage 3 and, because we haven't invested time in solving its fundamental enigma, we feel free to fill it with GCSE-lite or (perhaps more neglectful but no less unimaginative) any old nonsense.

You could try asking the staff why we're doing this. I guarantee you that you won't get a satisfactory answer.

History provides the most egregious examples of

this but you'll see it everywhere – maybe in your own classroom. If the last incarnation of the national curriculum (remember that?) showed us anything, it is that all knowledge, all subject content is contingent.

To many, the worst of the history strand of the national curriculum was its attempt to establish an unquestioning, partial, "pub quiz" national narrative. In itself, it represented a compelling invitation to the prairie-wide curricular freedoms of academisation.

And yet, those schools who adopted those freedoms all seem to have been suckered into the same functional approach. We know we need to do things that are academically challenging in key stage 3 but we don't trust ourselves or our students enough to engage with real thinking, with real intellect.

And so we are left with the bizarre spectre of students studying the industrial revolution in year 8 by producing a series of posters. Or, in RE, exploring spirituality through drawing a labelled picture (Tick. Smiley face stamp. Target. Flick). Or reading the play of *Frankenstein* in English so that we can somehow claim to have "done *Frankenstein*". *Frankenstein's* a novel exploring issues that have profound and lasting relevance beyond its mere plot. If we think it's worth doing, we should do it properly – exploring those themes through honest, intellectual graft – or not at all.

The ubiquity in key stage 3 of activities and practices such as these reflect the cowardice and the intellectual compromise which is so characteristic of school life for the average 12-year-old.

We were all children once and many of us are parents. I remember wishing away the sluggish days of being 13 so that I could get to the pastures of 18 and beyond. But I never felt that being 13 was a preparation for being 16. And as a parent, I want my 11-year-old's school to see that child for what they are, not for what they will one day be when they actually count on the figures. Being 13 is not a preparation for being 16: it's about being 13.

Start over

Ask those fundamental questions. Not "what should we do with year 7 in the spring term?" but "beyond mere 'facts', what do we want students to understand by the end of the spring term and how will we decide what to teach to deepen that understanding?"

The predominance of "doing" rather than "understanding" is key. Start with yourself. You are expert. You know why your subject is important. You also know how 12-year-olds work: you know what fires them and you will sure as anything know what turns them off.

Your best lessons will have seen them respond to challenges that are real and in which they have some-



Image: Adobe Stock

thing invested. I have never met a child who doesn't want to be clever or do clever things. Kids respond best to issues that are richly intricate and challenging. Their boredom in lessons is more a reflection of the ease of what they are doing than its complexity.

If stuff is easy, why don't we just photocopy it and have done? If we're doing it, it should be because it is hard, because we're going to have to struggle for it and because, even after that crucial, productive struggle, we may not reach a neat end point that can be easily assessed. If yawning Beth in the third row was your own child studying this subject that you love, what would you want her to understand about this topic? If this topic were studied at A level, how would it be different? Now, try teaching the A level understanding.

Celebrate being both clever and ignorant

I used to start my form time (average ability school) once a week by exploring topics chosen by the students. I asked them what they wanted to know or got them to identify a topic they were doing in any one of their lessons, then led a 15-minute presentation on that topic where we discussed issues.

We got three such sessions out of "Why do England fans at the World Cup wear Crusader costumes?" We covered Richard the Lionheart (and busted the myth of him as a great English hero), the identity of Saint George, Edward III and the birth of Chivalry, Arthurian legend and national identity.

The school was 30-plus per cent British, Asian which led to further, fascinating discussion of the whole etymology of the term "Crusades" and its (ab) use in the English language.

"This is my favourite part of the week," said one year 10 boy (an exhibitor of classic boredom-induced off-task behaviour around school). The questions they ask, the rabbits they set running, will reignite your love for learning and help you reflect on your own lessons. They will ask you stuff you don't know. Go find out or wait for that magical moment when the quiet kid provides an answer or, memorably, offers to start off the discussion next week with a PowerPoint they'd done themselves.

Rebel

Key stage 3 is where we most indoctrinate students with the canon of unquestioned stuff – Battle of Hastings, Population Growth, Baroque Music – and where we hand to them the baton of precisely the

Bottomed out? Reducing down complex topics – such as *A Midsummer Night's Dream* – in order to 'do' them in key stage 3 could be cheating our students

“We are left with the bizarre spectre of students studying the industrial revolution in year 8 by producing a series of posters”

kind of assumed narrative that the key stage 3 national curriculum for history represented.

Stop!

Ask your head of department if you can try something else. If Klimt is worthy of study it can't be just because the department has always done it and have pre-ordered the gold paint. Be a student again and ask questions of what you teach. Identify the urgent, intellectual weight of whatever you are doing and devise a way of teaching that.

Save the world

Real learning is hard. It will frustrate. But it will also prove that simple "truths" ("Britain won the Second World War") usually mask crucial nuances and that easy answers are the used car salesmen of the classroom. In a world bent on populist, easy read solutions, exploring the complexity of almost everything with students may be the most important thing you ever do for them.

SecEd

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“Ask your key stage 3 students why they're doing whatever they're doing. Ballads in year 8. The Elizabethan Age in year 7. Buddhism in year 9. It could be anything, the answer will be the same: 'Don't know'”