

Hywel Roberts

Ooops!

Helping children learn accidentally

Edited by Ian Gilbert

independent
thinking press 

Published by
Independent Thinking Press, Crown Buildings, Bancyfelin, Carmarthen, Wales,
SA33 5ND, UK
www.independentthinkingpress.com

Independent Thinking Press is an imprint of Crown House Publishing Ltd.

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Cover photograph © Jane Hewitt, 2012
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Illustrations © istockphoto, 4khz

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First published 2012. Reprinted 2012 (twice), 2013, 2014, 2016, 2017, 2019.

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British Library of Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue entry for this book is available from the British Library.

Print ISBN 978-1-78135-009-6
Mobi ISBN 978-1-78135-039-3
ePub ISBN 978-1-78135-040-9

Edited by Ian Gilbert
Designed and typeset by Heidi Baker
Printed and bound in the UK by TJ International, Padstow, Cornwall

For Maria and Tom: everything to me

Foreword

Good teachers are great liars. They create all sorts of untruths, weaving a whole tangled web of deception on a daily basis in order to trick children into learning, despite their best intentions to the contrary. They lie. They cheat. They deceive. They hoodwink. And they have their own language of deceit too. 'Let's imagine...'. 'Let's pretend...'. 'What if...?'.

In order to go through the artificial process of teaching children about things that aren't there (volcanoes, poverty, desert islands, molecules, God...) they have to act as if they were there.

Lies, all lies.

To make the lies work, that is to say to ensure they remain invisible, the duplicitous teacher must also ensure the learners join in the deceit too. 'If you were a poor abandoned dog, how would you be feeling at this moment?' is a question whose structure guarantees that children have to join in the lie in order to respond. 'But I'm not a dog!' won't help. 'But if I were a dog, I'm sure I would be too cute to be abandoned' is better. Just.

This is what good teachers do. They create alternative possibilities, different realities, ones that are enticing to young minds, ones that lure children in. Teacher as Child Catcher.

(Poor quality teachers, on the other hand, think their job is to impart knowledge, dry facts that are as real as that volcano they are studying on the other side of the world and remain just as distant.)

Children may learn real facts about real volcanoes but they will absorb and remember everything there is to know about made-up volcanoes that could erupt at any time in the corner of the classroom. In the science of memory, context memory (real-life learning) trumps content learning ("Fact, fact, fact!" repeated Thomas Gradgrind.) every time. Deceit is what is used to make it real. Want them to know about the truth? Start with lies. Works every time.

Hywel Roberts' pants are usually on fire. He is a master fabulist, a weaver of complete and utter nonsense (flying machines, talking dogs, mad women on supposedly uninhabited islands...). His ability to make lies out of facts knows no bounds. Whenever he sees something real he

likes the look of – a photo, a story, an object, a toy – the question first to his treacherous mind is this one:

Where's the curriculum in that?

In other words, how can I exploit this discovery and turn it into a fantasy to trick children into learning? This is what *Oops!* is all about – the ability to pluck the curriculum from the environment, wrap it up in a tissue of lies for the classroom and trick children into learning about it. Oops!, I just taught you something while we were having fun and making stuff up. Oops!, I just learned something and I came to school today determined to repel all assaults on my ignorance. Damn you, Mr Roberts!!

Drama is a great way of lying to children but, although Hywel draws from his experience of using drama to help children learn well, this is not a book about drama in the classroom. Far from it. This book – best read in a Barnsley accent wherever possible – is full of ideas and activities to bring the learning alive in many, many ways and will seriously challenge the nature of your teaching.

So, read this book, seek out the curriculum that is found all around you, take it, then turn it into a big fat lie with which to trick your children into learning everything there is about it.

And may God have mercy on your soul.

Ian Gilbert

Santiago

Acknowledgements

Thanks to ... Jane Hewitt for taking my picture and for being the teacher we all wish we could be. David Whitaker for being the good guy on the side of vulnerable kids. Luke Abbott for opening so many doors and for being Dorothy Heathcote's outstanding Sherpa. Karen Ardley for helping me to hold my nerve. Mick Waters, Jamie Portman, Alistair Smith, John Turner and others who have given me wonderful opportunities through gainful employment. The National Association for the Teaching of Drama (NATD) for inspiration and for fighting hard for teachers and the teaching of Drama. Matthew Milburn for the permission to be the teacher I could be (and to stop simply making up plays) as well as for the Chilean miners' lesson. Tim Godwin for his 'Northern bloke' impressions. Helen Toft for her passion and for helping people to be brilliant. Liz Gaughan and Dave Matthews at Horbury School back in the day. Melanie Cutler for Hoovering the taxi rank. Iona Towler-Evans, Ondrie Mann, Gemma Handley, Tim Taylor and Richard Kiernan – the Mantle experts. Phil Beadle for telling me I should write a book. Diane and Russell Heritage for helping me let go. Darren and Ronnie at Enquire. Debbie Kidd for unlocking potential in children and teachers. Verity Watts for pushing my thinking. Josie Thirkell, Simon Barber, Phil Davies and Marc Doyle for giving me work at the start. Staff and students at Springwell Community Special School and the Kingstone School, Barnsley, UK.

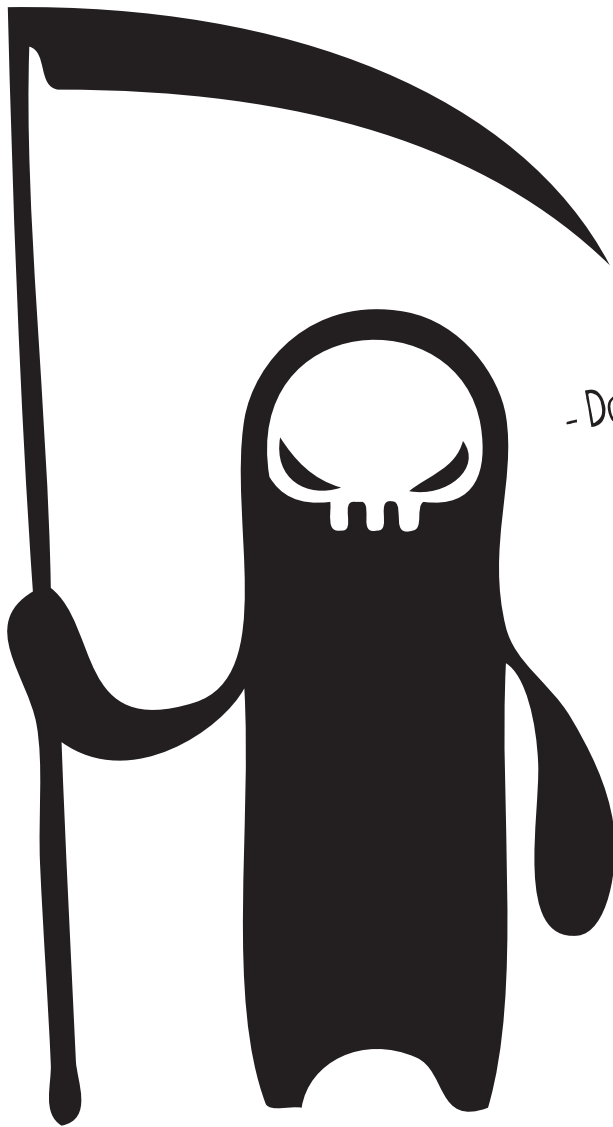
Also a heartfelt thanks to those friends and family who've demonstrated interest mixed with a dash of patience during the writing of this book. Nainy and Jackie Butterfly. Cheers also to my soundtrack of King Creosote, Ron Sexsmith, the Manic Street Preachers and James. Hi to Jason Isaacs!

Big thanks to my editor, the kind Ian Gilbert, who believed I had something to say, and for tirelessly, honestly and supportively helping me to fulfil my ambition of writing a book. And Caroline Lenton and her team at Independent Thinking Press for their advice, support and enthusiasm.

And especially to my Dad, Arfon Roberts, who would have loved this silliness.

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- Don't smile until Christmas

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 thinker. 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

- Teachers working in a school for children with social and emotional difficulties
- Children who are in 'danger' of failing their final examinations
- Drama skills for non-Drama teachers
- A load of timetablers at a timetabler conference (honestly, it was buzzing)
- A conference for PE teachers
- Five-year-olds rescuing a really scary cat from a tree
- A team of artists interested in working more closely with schools
- A secondary school staff. Nothing out of the ordinary there perhaps, except it was a twilight session. And the inspectors were watching

The constant theme throughout this list is *learning*. As professionals we need to keep learning in the same way a shark needs to keep moving, otherwise it'll die. When we stop learning, cynicism can seep in and pretty soon we start hating kids. This book will help to keep us moving forward and my hope is that it will offer you the opportunity to reflect on your own practice.

None of what I offer here requires you to chuck out schemes of work that you feel are tried and tested. It does however suggest that you could look at said schemes from a different perspective. Nor am I attacking the need for lesson objectives, thorough planning or measureable outcomes; what I am offering is a different way to offer *content* to support appropriate *coverage*.

I have drawn my inspiration for this approach from a variety of sources, including the late Dorothy Heathcote's Mantle of the Expert system. This is a fantastic approach to teaching and learning which places the child at the centre of an *enterprise* by being a member of a *responsible team*. It's been a massive influence on me and I encourage you to look at the website www.mantleoftheexpert.com, run by Luke Abbott and Tim Taylor, for more information. The head teacher of my last school invited Dr Heathcote into our school years ago and she had a profound impact on my view of learning, teaching and engagement. She stopped me simply making up plays and enabled me to use Drama properly.

Now, before you stick this book back on the shelf because I've mentioned the D-word, think again; the briefest enquiry into the work of Heathcote, Abbott and others will reveal that the Mantle of the Expert actually encompasses the *entire curriculum*. It's a genuine tool for

teachers, and there are many resources available on the website I've mentioned. This isn't a book about the Mantle of the Expert; rather, it takes some of its inspiration from it. If the ideas in this book float your boat, then I urge you to seek out the system.

The reason I've written this book is to share some ideas with you. As teachers we are constantly in search of resources and it's great when something we discover genuinely works in a real classroom with real children and young people. All of the ideas here are genuine and are designed for you to take away, adapt and make work in your own classroom, whether you teach the youngest or the oldest. The reason I'm confident with this view is because this book not only offers ideas, but also offers ways of thinking, planning and delivering. It offers an approach that is rooted in solid expectations, productive classroom management and inductive teaching.

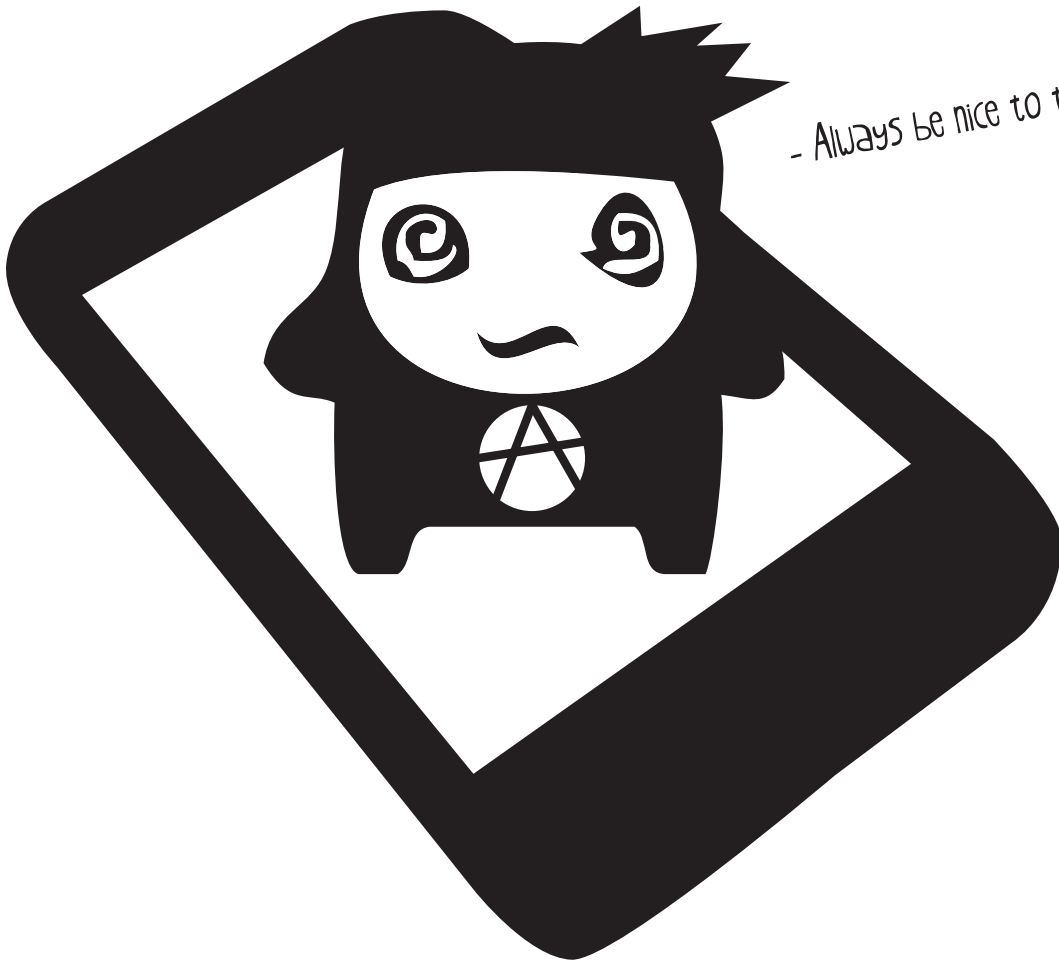
Remember that moment at a theme park when you're strapped into the roller coaster and then launched off at high speed? You're stuck there and for the next three minutes or so you are at the mercy of a predetermined journey. As soon as it's over, you are released and free to go. This, to me, is what many a child's experience of school is like – with the exception that roller coasters can at least be memorable and, for a few quid, you get a picture of yourself screaming. We need to look at the learning journeys we are offering our children and ensure that they don't emulate the roller coaster experience. We can create learning that places the child at the centre of the action where much of what happens can emerge through a supportive classroom climate, clever questioning and irresistible lures. Much of what is on offer here is based around happy *learning accidents*. Objectives and outcomes can be clear but we also need to embrace the unexpected and allow a deeper curriculum to emerge between them. In this book I'll show you how.



Accidental discoveries

- 1 LSD
- 2 Ice lollies
- 3 The microwave oven
- 4 Post-it notes
- 5 Penicillin

- 6** Teflon
- 7** Brandy
- 8** Potato crisps
- 9** Artificial sweetener
- 10** Viagra



- Always be nice to the Emo kid

The Human App

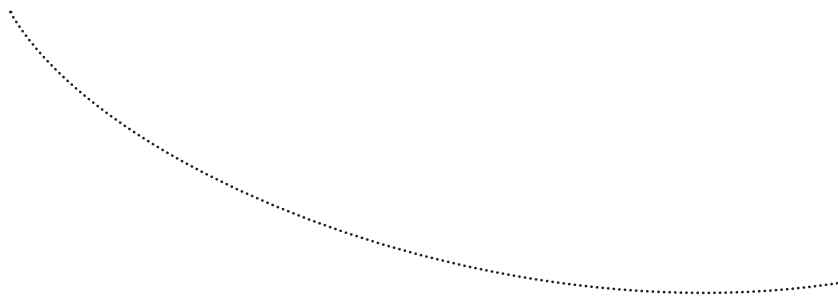
Charity Boxing Night Ends in Brawl

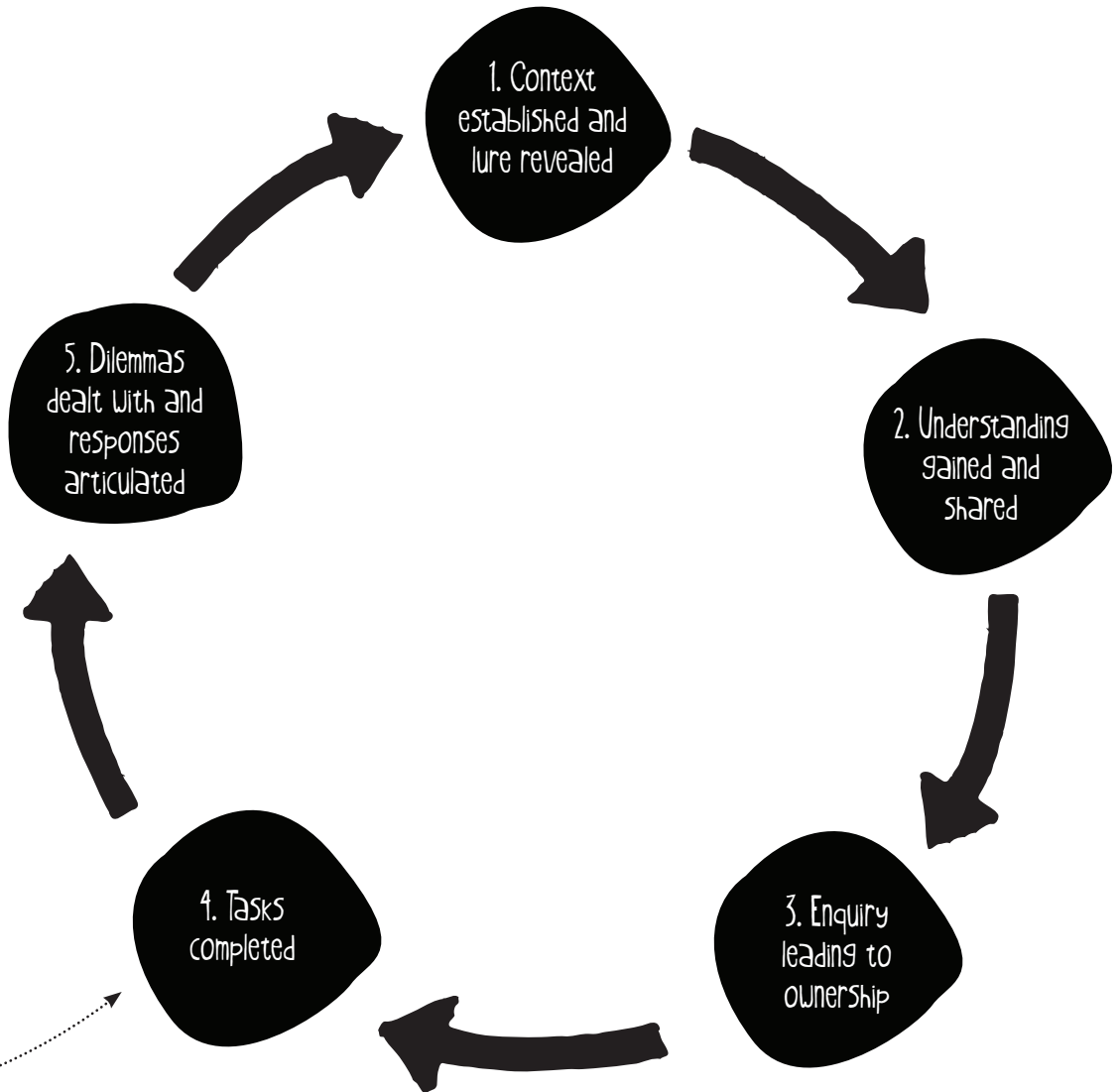
Keighley News

People are great, aren't they? You can probably play out the story behind the headline in your own imagination: can you see the charity fight going on, the bell signalling the end of a round, the people shaking collection buckets for change? Then can you sense the tension? Something clicks and suddenly everything kicks off. The referee jumps out of the ring whilst members of the audience leap in, fists flying, and the two boxers look on bemused. Sense and sensibility are sidelined in favour of aggression and anger.

I, Robot

I recently worked with a class of 10- and 11-year-olds during which I told them I had received a message from the government saying that teachers were going to be replaced by androids. I described the androids as Terminator-esque and really cool. You will be able to see through that but remember these were 10-year-olds. Straight away, the children were hooked in – in particular the hard-to-reach-but-biddable boys. I had thrown a *context* at them using the lure of a government message. This bait grips the children so that learning can take place within that context. The context is the fiction that surrounds the lure itself which the teacher can develop in line with their own aims and objectives. If we were to broaden this out to a process, this is what it might look like:





How better to learn than by accident!

Terry Jones, ex-Python, director, writer

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 Head Teacher, 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 has 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 of 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 Head Teacher, Springswell 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! 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, Head Teacher, Woodrow First School

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

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- Stand out from
the team

ISBN 978-178135009-6



9 781781 350096

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