

HOW TO TEACH



Here endeth the lesson ...

THE BOOK OF PLENARY

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CONTENTS

Introduction	1
Part 1 An Overview of the Plenary	5
Part 2 Analogue Plenaries	37
1 Don't Share the Objectives Until the End	39
2 Start with a Gag	40
3 A Pyramid of Plenary	42
4 Show Me the Money	44
5 Pick On Two Students	45
6 Extended Abstraction	46
7 What is the Exact Opposite of What You Have Learnt in This Lesson?	50
8 The Frozen Picture	52
9 Mime the Learning	54
10 Key Word Storytelling	55
11 Key Word Definition Matching	57
12 Pelmanism	59
13 Do It Yourself Will Ya?	60
14 Quizzes	61
15 Taboo™	62
16 Drinking Games	63
17 Spot the Deliberate Mistake	65
18 Re-ordering or Re-sequencing a Text	67

19	What's the Question?	69
20	Diagrammatic Representation	71
21	Spaced Repetition	79
22	The Plenary of Plenaries	83
Part 3	Metacognition for Beginners	85
Part 4	Digital Plenaries	107
1	Homework's Holy Grail	113
2	Organising and Transforming	116
3	Self-Consequences and 13. Imagery	118
4	Self-Instruction	124
5	Self-Evaluation	128
6	Help-Seeking	130
7	Keeping Records	132
8	Rehearsing and Memorising	138
9	Goal-Setting/Planning	144
10	Reviewing Records	146
11	Self-Monitoring	147
12	Task Strategies	150
14	Time Management	154
	<i>Potentially Useful Resources for Spods</i>	155
	<i>Bibliography</i>	157
	<i>Index</i>	161

INTRODUCTION

G. K. Chesterton once wrote that he was 'too ready to write books on the feeblest provocation'.¹ It is reasonable to suggest that the existence of the transiently useful artefact you are now holding could be evidence that the same accusation could be levelled at its author.²

This book is an experiment to see if it is possible to make something – a thing that is (perhaps), by nature, intrinsically boring – in some way interesting. (This could reasonably be argued to be the mark of a decent teacher.) So, it is a challenge I have set myself: is it possible to spend a few months immersed in the shallow puddle of the plenary, and come out holding some form of brittle petal that will not only help you, dear colleague, to improve your practice, but will also entertain?

The process of writing this thin volume has been to read everything ever written about the plenary, and try to turn it into a series of workable jokes. And then, having failed to do so, to tell you about the best strategies, and how you might go about implementing them; as well as which ones you should avoid, because they are either stupid (see the anagram and the wordsearch), or because they are merely a marginal, incremental repetition of some non-idea (see both the anagram and, indeed, the wordsearch). But before we go into the useful arena of the practical and specific, let's briefly divert into a more 'big picture' look at the plenary.

1 G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2004), 1.

2 As Alastair Smith brilliantly puts it: 'I like self-deprecating humour ... I'm just not very good at it.'

THE BOOK OF PLENARY

By the end of this chapter (I hope) you will be able to:

- 1 Identify and articulate what your students will get out of a well-conducted plenary.
- 2 Regurgitate what Ofsted have to say about plenaries and, in particular, where they think we are going wrong.
- 3 Clarify what you think about certain aspects of planning a plenary (relating the plenary to the objectives, starting with a plenary, mini plenaries) – good or bad.
- 4 Relate to the problems that your students might have with plenaries, and have strategies to overcome these.
- 5 Use the plenary as an effective part of your already well-developed Assessment for Learning (AfL) strategies.
- 6 Relate your understanding of the plenary to what Professor John Hattie has to say about the end of the lesson.
- 7 Be marginally better read on the subject of domain specificity than your colleagues and, perhaps, have an opinion as to whether domain-general and domain-specific ideas of cognition are mutually exclusive or not. (This may not make any sense to you now. And it may not make any sense to you later on.)

And that's just Part 1.

Organisationally, the book has been constructed (if that is not too baroque a term for such a short tome) with in-built differentiation at its core. The majority of readers will want a brief overview of how one might most profitably conduct a plenary (this is in Part 1: An Overview of the Plenary), and a few decent ideas on easy strategies to use that may have some benefit for their students (this is in Part 2: Analogue Plenaries). If your needs have been

INTRODUCTION

fulfilled by these two sections, I'd advise you not to bother going any further, as the second half of this book is heavy going if you are not of a mind to try and understand some nearly difficult stuff.

For the gifted and talented reader(s) – teaching spods, bloggers, CPD coordinators and assistant and deputy heads in charge of teaching and learning – there is an acknowledgement that writing a book, however short, on a metacognitive activity and not brushing on metacognition would be an act of professional negligence (it is therefore covered, albeit clumsily, in Part 3: Metacognition for Beginners). Where the book begins to fly a little, and where it is, I feel, potentially useful is in Part 4: Digital Plenaries. Many of these ideas will appear, and indeed are, simple. I'd say that this is not necessarily a reason to write them off, as it is rarely simplicity that is the enemy in teaching. It is in this section that I have attempted to translate my reading of the research into strategies that, plausibly, might have a substantial impact on the students' learning in your specific domain.³

3 If you understand that this is a joke (albeit an unfunny one), then you should definitely read Parts 3 and 4.

PART 1

AN OVERVIEW OF THE PLENARY

Firstly, let us acknowledge that the plenary is not in any way sexy; the word itself is unpleasingly under-erotic, seeming to bring to mind some unpalatable infection of the penis: *pleeenary*.

'What's wrong with it, Doctor?'

'Aside from the size? Well, sadly, I must inform you that you have a nasty little dose of non-specific plenary.'

And that, dear colleagues, may well be one of the reasons – go on, be honest – that you (or I) do not always do them. In fact, you can pretty well guarantee that if you get working parties together in schools to examine the assorted parts of our professional practice, and give various groups their pick of what they are going to look at, you'll find, at the end, that the plenary is sat parked, about as popular as a ginger stepson, as the last forlorn car in the garage.

There is also the added weirdness that the word 'plenary', to a teacher in the United Kingdom, signifies something that it doesn't mean to anyone else in sane society or the wider world. To people who inhabit workplaces devoid of staffrooms, a plenary is the compulsory bit of a conference when delegates all come back from the 'break-out' rooms or the workshops into the main hall. It is during a 'plenary' that you will most likely have to sit through a tedious 'keynote' speech from an academic or bore (or both).

THE BOOK OF PLENARY

Alternatively, if you are in (or of) the Church, you might think of it as a form of authority: the power a Church's governing body has to set out exactly what it is going to do. It is only in the British staffroom that we hear this word and think immediately, 'Oh, the ten-minute bit at the end of the lesson that I can never really be bothered to do properly (if at all)!'

The name came about, I think, because plenary is the adjectival version of the Latin noun, *plenum*, which does not even go so far as to exactly correspond to the concept of 'fullness': it merely carries a suggestion of it. The inference here is that in conducting a proper plenary we are giving our students the suggestion of fullness: which is an uncomfortable image, until we remind ourselves that the idea is to set students on the path to being replete with *learning*.

Another of the reasons that the plenary attracts a certain dwarfism of attention is that it's extremely difficult to get intellectually interested, or in any way passionate, about the question, 'So, children, what did you learn today?'

However, if we are to start off with the briefest analysis of what our students might (potentially) get out of a good plenary – and accepting that we all want to be the best teacher we can possibly be – then it becomes a professional dictate (perhaps) that we start taking them seriously and devoting a little imagination and thought to their use, or their implementation, or their management, or their whatever.

WHAT WILL YOUR STUDENTS GET OUT OF A GOOD PLENARY?

'What's the point of all this stopping ten minutes before the end of the lesson and then doing some weirdness, Sir, just when we've understood what you wanted us to do in the main task?' Could Deniz be right here? What's the point? The lesson is going swimmingly. Why stop it, and manage yet another oh-so-bloody-knacker-and-difficult transition, just at the exact part of the lesson at which you are most tired?

Alternatively, what's the point? The lesson has been a disaster from start to finish; the kids have been fractious all along.⁴ Why stop it, and manage yet another oh-so-difficult transition, just at the point when you are most tired?

Look at it through another similarly phrased prism: what's the point? What's the point of going to all that trouble planning an interesting sequence of activities and inputs when they don't remember anything from the lesson? You may just as well have got them to do some lovely colouring-in (!). What's the point of going all the way to 85% and just throwing the last 15% in the waste-bin? What's the point of having thought really hard about the content of the lesson and then copped out just at the bit where they actually cement the information in their heads? What's the point of painting something if you aren't going to varnish it? The colour will all wash off come the first passing shower.

Without the plenary you are arguably just going through the motions and passing time. It was a nice enough experience, but they don't remember it. And the point of lessons is that they are remembered, otherwise they are not lessons learnt.

4 'Sir looks a bit grey today. Let's mess about!'

The existence of the plenary is to help the students remember what they have learnt in the lesson. If you don't, erm, *do one* it is vastly more than likely that they will have substantially less recall of the learning. If we shift the focus to Professor John Hattie, he's quite categorical:

The lesson does not end when the bell goes. It ends when teachers interpret the evidence of their impact on student(s) during the lessons relative to their intended learning outcomes and initial criteria of success – that is when teachers review the learning through the eyes of their students.⁵

There are a few elements to this observation that benefit from a brief unpacking. Firstly, Hattie here gives implicit, yet emphatic, confirmation that some checking of the learning must take place; the end of the lesson seems a quite reasonable place at which to do this. Secondly, he is explicit that we've somehow to reframe the way that we look at the learning experience so that it is the opinion(s) of the students that lead us to review and alter what we are doing in lessons. (There is a pro forma that will be of help if you want to take Hattie's observation as being the gospel here, in the first of the digital plenaries in Part 4: Homework's Holy Grail.)

In performing a task that is specifically related to the learning (and to the objectives), students may come to new realisations and make new connections they hadn't made earlier on in the lesson. Consequently, a decent plenary will extend and broaden their knowledge of the concept or skill being taught.

However, there is also a quite interesting and entirely reasonable argument that the best thing students will get out of a decent plenary is an understanding of what they do not know. As Darren Mead, whose Pedagogical

5 John Hattie, *Visible Learning for Teachers: Maximising Impact on Learning* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), 145.

Purposes blog reveals him to be perhaps the most intellectually engaged of all British teachers, states: 'Becoming less confident in their knowledge is just as valid a response, as they could either be unlearning a misconception, which is a difficult process or be questioning why they believe something rather just accepting something is right.'⁶

Mead is bang on here, and his assertion tallies nicely with Hattie's thoughts (above) about the same: specifically, that what we should be looking for is for the students to be able to identify what they don't understand and to implement (practised) strategies to obtain that knowledge; to fill that gap.

WHAT DOES MR LESSON INSPECTOR SAY?

Here's what those who are employed to take out kitchen scales from shiny briefcases and comment on the weight of a thing had to say about our use of plenaries some considerable time ago.⁷ Ofsted's evaluation of the Key Stage 3 pilot in English and maths commented that teachers are good at standing at the front of classrooms reading lesson objectives to our students from a PowerPoint, and that we're also good at giving the students a point-less activity that takes ten minutes at the beginning of a lesson. They are less happy, however, with the plenary; and pointedly use the language 'lack of well managed' and 'weakness' in a rather unpleasantly pointed manner:

6 Darren Mead, 'Metacognitive Wrappers' (2010). Available at <http://pedagogicalpurposes.blogspot.co.uk/2010/11/metacognitive-wrappers.html> (accessed 22 May 2013).

7 And I mean, ages. There is very little analytical thought that has been published on the plenary, which is why this book is already the seminal text on it: no one else could be bothered to write one.

The plenary is an essential part of the lesson, but its quality has not improved since the strategy began. This is a matter of serious concern. As with independent work, part of the problem lies in a lack of understanding of its purposes; for assessment, feedback, consolidation, evaluation and the linking of the lesson to the next one, or to another area of the curriculum.⁸ The plenary is poorly used if it is simply a bolt-on-extra which provides an opportunity for groups of pupils to present their work daily; it is essential time for making sure that pupils have grasped the objectives and made progress, so that the next lesson can begin on firm foundations.⁹

Broadly, the problem with the plenary session, as it is currently (or was previously) used in British education, is that they are (or were) not performed with enough seriousness of intent: we tend to just go through the motions when we are being observed and, even then, don't devote anything like enough time to it. Ofsted go on:¹⁰

From the outset, plenaries were often the weakest part of the lesson. Good planning was critical to the success of plenaries. Often there was insufficient time for them, typically because teachers underestimated the time required for activities in the main phase of the lesson. Plenaries were often the least active part of lessons. Teachers tended merely to sum up what happened during the main phase and pupils did not have the opportunity to articulate what they had learned. When pupils had such opportunities, they proved an important part of the learning process.¹¹

⁸ See Part 2, Plenary 6 (Extended Abstraction) for why this idea is rubbish.

⁹ Ofsted, *The National Literacy Strategy: The Third Year*. Ref: 332 (London: Ofsted, 2001). Available at: <http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/national-literacy-strategy-third-year> (accessed 22 May 2013), 54.

¹⁰ Don't they?

¹¹ Ofsted, *The Key Stage 3 Strategy: Evaluation of the First Year of the Pilot*. Ref: 349 (London: Ofsted, 2002). Available at: <http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/16531/> (accessed 22 May 2013), 11.

If we reverse the box tickers' conclusions as to why plenaries are poor, we can state fairly conclusively what the fundamentals of a good one would be.

1 It has to be planned

You can't just go into a lesson with any sense that you will just pull something out of the bottomless well of your imagination. With all the will in the world, if you think you can just magic one up from nowhere, you are kidding yourself and in forty minutes' time you will be asking them, 'So what did you learn in this lesson?' You'll go into the lesson intent on finding a little moment in which you can rustle up an idea, but you'll get caught up in something else. Keith will require some tissues for his bottom lip. Everyone will want your attention. You will forget.

2 You have to leave sufficient time for them

Key to this is not to see plenaries as the end of the lesson, but as an intrinsic part of it. What tends to happen is that teachers get caught up in the main lesson activity, as they (not unreasonably) give the 'body' of the lesson due preference. This has its head on the wrong way round. It is the mindset of seeing the plenary as a tacked-on irrelevance that makes the majority of them ineffective; they should be seen not as a tacked-on imposition, but as a vital part of the lesson's function. There's no point whatsoever in teaching good lessons that bring in sparkling and vital new knowledge if the kids have forgotten that information before they have even got as far as the classroom door. So, fundamental to running a decent plenary is to give it a decent fist of time. Ten minutes, not two.¹² This will also ensure that,

12 There is a school of thought, however, that thinks the plenary can be of variable length: two minutes on a Monday, twenty on a Tuesday, thirteen-and-a-half on a Friday. It's not unreasonable. However, the key here is that you plan for it, and that in planning you leave a reasonable amount of time for a planned activity.

If you buy only one book on metacognitive strategies for the last ten minutes of the lesson this year, **make it this one!**

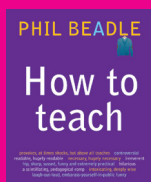
The Book of Plenary is the first in Phil Beadle's 'How to Teach' series, in which he examines – in detail – every aspect of the modern classroom. The first half of this volume gives interested teachers a series of easy-to-set-up activities that make plenaries engaging and worthwhile.

The second half is a detailed and almost serious examination of metacognition in the classroom. It seeks to give teachers the stimulus to prepare and research plenaries fully so that they actively seek to develop the metacognitive experience, knowledge and self regulation of students. Distanced from glib 'learn-to-learn' programmes, this book engages with available research about metacognition and presents its relevance to the classroom in a lively, although sometimes childish, manner.

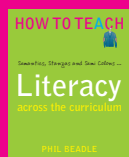


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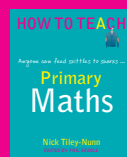
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