

PHIL BEADLE



How to teach

provokes, at times shocks, but above all teaches controversial
readable, hugely readable necessary, hugely necessary irreverent
hip, sharp, sussed, funny and extremely practical hilarious
a scintillating, pedagogical romp intoxicating, deeply wise
laugh-out-loud, embarrass-yourself-in-public funny

HOW TO TEACH



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INTRODUCTION

Make no mistake. Your first year as a teacher is tough; nothing like the permanently uplifting stroll you may have been sold by glossy government adverts and brochures. Your days can be confusing, spirit crushing, depressing; frightening even, but you will also have moments of profound joy, in which you see why some regard it as being the best job in the world; moments where you feel 'part of the solution'. (These will last exactly until the next lesson when you are immediately and summarily turned over by year 4/6/8, and spat out shuddering.)

Over the next two hundred or so pages I aim to give practical solutions to help you be the best classroom teacher you can be as quickly as possible. This is decidedly not a survival guide. There is no advice contained in this book as to how you should deal with a difficult boss, or how you get the bloke who does the photocopying to respect you. There is no trouble-shooting session, nor any cod psychological cack about how to deal with stress. It is written assuming that, as an intelligent, graduate professional, you can work most of that stuff out for yourself, and that you are aware of your nearest licensed premises.

This book is a guide to doing infinitely better than just surviving. You will not revolutionise the life chances of the children you are to teach, or make a vast and seditious contribution to overturning the class system, one child a time, by merely surviving. It's a guidebook, the intent of which is to help you to fly; to be phenomenal. And it is a guidebook written by someone whose, admittedly over-hyped, reputation comes from being identified as being outstanding where it counts: in the classroom. Unlike many *experts* in education I am still a serving schoolteacher. As such, these insights are not something I once thought fifteen years ago that no longer apply; I am using the techniques in this book, in a school towards the bottom of the league tables, on the day you are reading this.

Organisationally, it is divided into five chapters: management of students, knowledge and understanding, methods and organisation, lesson planning and, finally, assessment. These subject headings are taken from the lesson observation sheet that I use

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when I am sitting in the back of other people's lessons tutting. The lesson observation sheet came from my time at Eastlea Community School, and is, I think, the creation of Linda Powell, my former head teacher, who was the first person ever to recognise that a haircut was not outside the realms of my abilities.

CHAPTER 1

MANAGEMENT OF STUDENTS

AaaaaaaAarGhhH!

How on earth are you ever going to manage thirty knife-wielding psychos on your own? What happens if they don't do what you say? What if they go completely hat-stand? Carrot? Even? Completely mental? My God, you're under-prepared. You're über-under-prepared. They'll kill you. You're not cut out for this. You're not in the right job. You're not in the right profession. Best you resign before it all gets too bloody.

The beginner teacher's fear of the unruly class is similar to the turkey's fear of Christmas, in that, not only is it entirely warranted, but also neither teacher nor turkey are anywhere near properly prepared for the full horror of what it is they are to face. PGCEs rarely give much more than a day's training on how to manage behaviour, and that generally consists of sitting mute, watching Antipodean behavioural guru, Bill Rogers, effortlessly controlling a class of miniature, compliant Aussies, as a room full of adults think, as one, "Well that's got to be a piece of cake, hasn't it? The kids in the Bill Rogers video are all well fed, clearly middle class and obviously easy to manage. I don't think there's going to be too many of those in the school that I've just signed on for."

This proved to be true in my first year of teaching. I thought I'd manage them purely on the basis of having nice(ish) hair for a thirty-two-year-old and being able to read books aloud in the stentorian, actorly manner of an amateur Kenneth Bran-argh. Wrong.

In my first year of teaching I was shuffled into a classroom far away from the rest of the English department and left to get on with it.

In no way did my PGCE prepare me for Rod freaking out and sobbing; for Lee threatening to chuck a chair at me; for the whole of 8M point-blank refusing to do anything I asked, nay begged, them to do, ever; for Mick pushing me; for 8S winding me up

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something chronic; for Mick pushing me again; for JK punching Cookey in the mouth in the first five seconds of my first Ofsted observed lesson; for Tammy and her mate to write me really scary love letters; for the whole sorry mess that was my desire to be a good teacher to teeter and threaten to topple into the abyss on a near daily basis.

It would have been much easier if I'd had some of the pieces of information, of which you will be in possession within a couple of minutes. Managing behaviour is actually fairly easy provided you observe a few rules (also provided that you haven't been gifted the most difficult class in the borough on your first day in the profession). You must observe them religiously though. Fail to do any of the following and you'll find that you are not in control of the class. And this is key: it's your classroom. You are the teacher. If you are not in control it'll all go to cock, the kids will learn nothing and, what is more, they'll have a deeply unpleasant experience, as they won't feel at all safe.

RULE 1 – TURN UP

One of the most difficult classes I've ever taught was in my first year as a teacher: En10a2. The worst you would think on seeing this seemingly innocuous set of letters and numbers is that they are slightly oddly capitalised. To me, in 1997, the merest flash of this set of signifiers would be enough to reduce me to shuddering, silent screams of, "Please. Don't make me go in that room with them. They are savages." It was in En10a2 that Mick, a bulky fifteen-year-old, pushed me, with substantial force, full in the chest, in front of the rest of the class. (He was taken to internal inclusion and told off. I was left to teach the rest of the class, hands shaking and pale as a sheet as I held grimly to the piece of paper I was reading to them in a quivering voice). And it was in En10a2 that the same kid performed the same feat two weeks later. It was in En10a2 that Tammy and her mate wrote the love letters, that JK punched Cookey when Ofsted were in, that Christelle informed me in front of a senior manager that she, "Didn't give a fuck" about my lesson, that the whole class came in sobbing after a funeral they'd attended that no one thought I should be told about and called me an, "Insensitive tosser" for trying to teach them afterwards. And it was in En10a2 that I was given the gift of being Coops's teacher, (which, if you'd met Coops, you'd

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understand is the kind of gift that would make you believe a brain tumour to be a birthday present).

In my first year as a teacher, every lesson with En10a2 was fretted about before, dismal and depressing during and, afterwards, often left me as a shell-shocked wreck, strung together with string and masking tape, barely suppressing the tears lining my lower eyelids, which were threatening to make me even more of a laughing stock in the staffroom than I already thought I was.

By the end of year 10 they were my favourite class. I adored them. And it was, they were fairly fond of telling me, one of the rare moments in my life where such affection was, at least partially, reciprocated. The next year, when HMI were in, En11a2 organised their own séance in class when my lesson was being observed, Coops taking his group and leading them brilliantly. My head of department witnessed a conversation between an inspector and the Principal, in which she pointed out Coops to be about the most challenging young man in the school, and that I had him, "Wrapped around my little finger." En10a2 were eventually the first step to me getting recognised as being alright in the classroom, as opposed to the borderline pass I'd been regarded as in my NQT year. But it was not always thus ...

In year 11, the class and I spoke about the early days. Oh, how we all laughed at how difficult it had been the year before. They remembered how horrific they had been in those first few half terms. They were sorry they'd been horrible but, as Danksy pointed out, I was about their fifteenth English teacher in the space of a year. They'd actually quite liked me (sort-of-ish-a-bit-but-not-really) from the first moment, but no English teacher had ever stayed around long enough to see their good side before and, quite reasonably, they saw no reason to think I'd be any different, and consequently, no cause for getting that good side off the mantelpiece and giving it a shine. They didn't want to get too fond, because that'd result in them being all the more disappointed when I left them, as I was inevitably bound to do, particularly as they'd behaved so awfully!

It is a sad truth that you will teach many young people in your career who are all too used to adults letting them down. Sadder still, many are used to the adults they care for the very most leaving them. Put yourself in their shoes. Would your response to experiencing such loss at such an early age be sane? In behaving appallingly in the

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first few half terms, En10a2 could at least draw some power from their teacher's inevitable chucking in of the towel. They had caused it. They were the hardest, the toughest and the meanest. Adults leaving them was entirely in their control. They were not helpless, or vulnerable, or any of the other things they feared they might be in their darker moments. They were captains of their own fate.

You may think you're a crap teacher doing a crap job when you are in front of the class, but you're worse when you're not there. Turn up. Take the punches. Smile back. Within six months you'll have achieved what some teachers refer to as the 'bowling ball effect'. You pick them off one by one. You'll notice a couple of kids initially (in the case of En10a2 it was Kelly and Sam) who are less resistant to learning, and to you, than the others. After a while a couple more might join them. Then you pick them off like pins at a bowling alley, until such point as you have a critical mass in favour of both you and your lesson. Eventually, even the hardest nut cracks and you have that profound moment of epiphanic teaching joy: the first good lesson with the truly hard class, in which you begin to see it *is* possible. You *can* do this.

The reason this is in the section regarding behaviour management is that kids like teachers who are there every day. One of my most weirdly proud moments came when, halfway through the spring term, Big Isaac (a charming and vastly proportioned naughty boy, who couldn't write that well, but was a very promising boxer) cried out to me, giving vent to an exasperation that had obviously troubled him for a while, "Christ! Beadleman," he exhaled, "Don't you ever take any time off? When are we going to get a break from you?" This, I think, was Isaac's backhanded way of saying that he appreciated my attendance record. (From my perspective I was very grateful he didn't punch me even once during our years together). If you get a reputation with the children as a good attender, it will pay dividends in terms of behaviour. You will always be on top of what happened yesterday, and the children will respect the commitment you show to them by always being there.

RULE 2 – SORT YOUR SEATING

A teacher without a seating plan is a dunce and is asking for it. Other than your own ability to charm, cajole and sometimes even confront, the seating plan is the single most important piece of behavioural modification equipment you have in your toolbox.

There are different schools of thought on this. I have a particular methodology, which I'll explain later, but first, a bit on why classroom organisation is the most important philosophical decision you will make in your career and why you should turn your face away from the darkness and towards the light.

Here's a shock. You are not necessarily the cleverest person in your classroom. You may not even be in the top ten. Yes, you are the one with a degree. You are the big-shot, for now. But, let's face it, you have no idea what the children in front of you may one day become. Something altogether more impressive than a piffling, cardigan-clad, Cornish-pasty-shoe-wearing schoolteacher, perhaps?

Any survey of students that asks them the important question, "How do you learn best?" finds the same answer at the top of the list. "Groups," their replies will scream, with one impassioned voice. "We learn best in groups. WHY WON'T ANYONE LISTEN TO US?" Having your desks set out in groups is the right way to organise your classroom. Period. No discussion. No arguing. Having the tables in groups allows you to set them the grouped speaking and listening activities that are the way in which they learn most effectively. Having your tables in groups lets them learn from each other. And having your tables in groups is a spatially symbolic move away from the Dickensian notion of the teacher standing at the front talking cobblers about really hard sums all day, every day.

Having your tables in five groups of six is the optimum classroom layout, in that it allows you to mix up the activities. You can do a paired activity, then one in threes, then one in groups without so much as a single moved chair. Not only is it convenient, but it is good use of the classroom space. If you ensure that each group of tables is positioned as near to the boundaries of the classroom as is possible, whilst still allowing the kids at the edge to be able to breathe, you are left with a space in the middle of the classroom in which kids can do exciting kinaesthetic activities, or you

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