

Teaching Tip

Teaching English via empathy

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Teacher: Please work on your summary for scene ii...

Pupil (holding phone): I'm just waiting for Shmoop...

Teacher: (reluctant to be a Facebook phenomenon, gnashes teeth) I'd prefer YOURS...

For much of what we do in the classroom, there is a shortcut. The Internet has resulted in short summaries, cartoons, memes, YouTube clips, study guides, mini-movies.....

While I salute the desire for speed and I commend the innovators who regularly make aspects of English accessible, I have to convey my frustration with the all-to-frequent quest for the short-cut. I worry that the need for speed and instant gratification is costing our pupils valuable insight – and empathy.

Here then, is a suggestion for the introduction to “Dover Beach” – not using a study guide!

1. Close your eyes and imagine you are at the beach. (Not a bustling Plett or Clifton!) Just you, the sand, the sea. In your mind's eye, see the shades of blue and imagine you can hear the waves – they sound a little like the rise and fall of your breath/ the sound when you hold a sea shell to your ear. Focus on your emotions, as you visualise the waves, the steady rhythm, the ebb and flow of the tide. (You may need to use Soundcloud for some sea sounds!)
2. List your emotions (probably – calm, relaxing, restful....).
3. Now consider recent news headlines: Quickly list what's happening. (probably Trump, #fees must fall, Syria, crime, corruption, etc).
4. And isn't that just what Matthew Arnold was experiencing: A moment of tranquillity; a quiet 'time out' followed by the despair that comes with contemplating a world in turmoil.
5. Even today, 'ignorant armies' are clashing!

I love using short cuts. I respect study guides. Thug Notes and John Green certainly bring fun into the classroom. But every now and then, let's remember that our common humanity exists in literature. Our learners' shared experiences certainly have a place there!