

Who's Teaching Whom?

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One of my first teaching jobs was teaching English in a Catholic mission school in Zimbabwe. The school was called St Bernard's, and it was in Pumula Township, in Bulawayo. I thought I was going to teach the learners – in fact it was the other way round.

One of the first lessons was to get my facts straight. I'd never visited Pumula Township, so on the first day, I left home bright and early, and, once in the township, slowed to a crawl as I nosed my way through a seething mass of humanity – on foot, on bicycles, in cars, buses, donkey carts and trucks – all making their way into town. I finally arrived at the school – to find I was two days early. I retreated in confusion and repeated the exercise a couple of days later. This time I was gratified to find a classroom full of bright-eyed youngsters, each clutching a bag of books. The most popular bag was made of strong cotton, and bore, in red, the words "Extra Fine – No 1 Rolled Meal."

My second lesson was that one of the joys of teaching people whose home language is not English is the original way they use words. It was generally the more able pupils who were courageous enough to try new expressions. *"With the aid of a file the thief emaciated the iron bars until they were like threads of cotton."* *"The king hated the baby so much that he couldn't even bear to hear it cry. So one night he took his sword, sneaked up and killed the innocent infantry."* A good deal of their writing was drawn from what they knew, and unconsciously they painted a picture of a precarious life in which danger was never too far away. We had a parachute debate, and speakers were allowed to choose their own roles. In ten speakers we had a thief, a murderer, a terrorist, a spy and a gangster. However, their essays were where they could dream of a different life: *"We decided to go to the sea, so off we went in my father's car, which is a beach bugger."* *"I walked down the street, feeling very smart in my belly bottoms."* *"A 'well-groomed' person is one who has married a good husband."*

My third lesson had to do with exercising some discrimination over what the learners were given to read. The books in the library were largely young children's tales, hardly calculated to engage fifteen- and sixteen-year-old readers. In my zeal to get the children to read, I took to lending them some of my husband's pulp fiction, reasoning that reading James Patterson and Jack Higgins was better than reading nothing. Again, it was the more able youngsters who modelled their writing on the thrillers:

"Howzit Jake?",

"Okay thanks, damn you, except this last trip was hell," I said, downing my martini lager in one gulp. I stood up and pushed Lucy out of the window. "That's the quickest way to hell,

baby, and you were going there anyway," I drawled. I did thirty press-ups and turned to appreciate Jenny's beautiful body which adorned my bed."

I also learned that children have a direct and simple way of interpreting what they're told: *"Church is funny. They tell you in Church you mustn't drink. Then they mix wine and gin and give it to you, trying to pretend it's blood." "The priest tells you Jesus answers prayers, but I don't think He does. I once asked Him to make Bulawayo the capital of Zimbabwe because that was what I'd written in my test, but He didn't and I failed the test." "When I first went to church, they passed around a plate and I saw everybody putting money in it, so I also put in two cents. Then they gave out bread and wine, but when it came to my turn, the priest said I was too young, so I was very angry and told him I had also paid my two cents."*

Another lesson was the influence of what the learners heard on their writing style. One pupil spent a good deal of time listening to football commentaries. On Gray's "Elegy" he wrote, *"Gray's thoughts in this poem are so conveyed as to make us feel like not dieing. It could have made sense to Neanderthal men, it did make sense to the Gray generation, and it will make sense to the swinging people of the 21st century. Simply, this poem is based on facts rather than on mere suggestions and imaginations that die away as time goes on. He says: 1) rich or poor, you'll die 2) that poor dead man may have been a Milton had he been discovered. Man! what facts!"*

I also learned that my own instructions to the learners would get the same direct interpretation that the Church's teachings got. In an attempt to teach them the rudiments of research, I set an essay on "A World Figure". "And remember," I said sternly, "I want facts, not a lot of vague waffle." I got them. *"He's a long-haired, peace-loving, Yoko-wifed member of an extinct pop group."* John Lennon would have enjoyed the description.

Finally, I had the very good fortune to be under the guidance of the headmistress of the school, Sister Ignatius, a woman as wise as she was practical. An incident occurred which taught me to be careful about making threats that would be difficult to carry out, and I watched in admiration as Sister Ignatius turned a tricky situation into an educational opportunity.

One of my perennial problems in teaching was the dishonesty of the pupils. They lied, copied, and stole anything that they could get their hands on. In an effort to get them to write, I had set them a task of keeping a daily diary. It was a large task and carried a high proportion of the term's marks. Two boys reported that the diary of a third boy called Godfrey was copied. Godfrey was a bright youngster, with no need to copy, but I'd already found him copying twice before and I had promised the class that anyone found copying would get 0 not only for that section but for the whole piece of work. But now I had a problem. Firstly, I was reluctant to listen to tale-bearers. Secondly, if Godfrey was indeed copying, that would mean 0 for almost all the work he had handed in that term, which in turn would mean failure in English, and that would mean the end of his school career.

I was aware that the whole form would be watching to see what I would do. After everyone had gone home, I checked Godfrey's desk, and sure enough, there was the book he was allegedly copying from. I discussed the matter with Sister Ignatius, and we devised a plan.

The next morning, I marched dramatically to Godfrey's desk, threw it open and took out the book he was copying from. I confronted him with it, told him his marks position, and said, "As far as I'm concerned, that's it. You were told not to copy, you copied and now it's over. Nought for you. Go and see Sister Ignatius." In the Headmistress's office, Godfrey wept and swore he would never again copy anything. Sister Ignatius told him he would indeed lose the marks, but she would take him back the following year conditionally – the first instance of copying would see him out without mercy. As far as I was aware, we never had any problem with Godfrey copying again.

Since that early job, I have done many jobs, all less demanding and much better paid than teaching. However, none has come close to teaching for job satisfaction. In no other job would an eighteen-year-old look earnestly at me and say, "I am what I am largely because of you." What job can match that?