

## TEACHING & LEARNING JOURNAL - EDITION 45

### MMXX: The differently dressed servants

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During the past four months, this global pandemic has, on countless occasions, been compared – by those who should, (and, of course, do), know better – to the two monstrous and unimaginably barbaric pan-continental conflicts of 20th century Europe. During those two vile periods of history, however, there was, at least, a degree of 'all being in this together'. Brooke, Owen, even bloody Blackadder – (whether by choice or, perhaps, through lack of it) - stood and, ultimately, fell alongside their hierarchically-inferior trench-dwelling brothers in arms: captain with corporal; doctor with docker; barrister with barista; major (hmmm... perhaps not) with miner. Yet, in the midst of the current 'conflict', the Prime Minister and his dishonourable ilk – strangers, demonstrably, to the very concept of such integrity – casually and continually cry, "Forward!" from the rear of our classrooms. Meanwhile, untrammelled by the dubious demands of educational legislation, their pampered progeny carelessly canter, astride their polo ponies, through the golden, early-summer sun-streaked meadows of Grantchester, where there is [of course] honey, still, for tea. I don't even think it's them I despise; it's us - and our compliantly quiet desperation: present circumstance has, fittingly, provided each of us with a serviceably untrimmed forelock; they bark, "Jump!" and we continue to simper, "How high?" A plague on both our houses.

During these same 16 weeks, we've endeavoured, in everything we've done, to minimise risks to the health and well-being of both ourselves and those around us. We've been alert since long before we were instructed to be; we've stayed informed and educated, so that we might, at all times, act in a socially responsible manner; and, we've carefully considered our participation in any situation involving human interaction in order to promote and maximise the safety of all concerned.

My careful adherence to the dutiful disciplines of simple social distancing has, by and large, been a fairly straightforward, (if somewhat zig-zagging), undertaking. Despite the furtive frequency of its casual lockdown restriction flouting, the lawn-mowing, dog-walking, prosecco-popping population of this south Ipswich Thursday-night-clapping cul-de-sac is, generally – with a surreptitious side step – successfully swerved during my daily constitutionals: (smile; wave; "Morning!"; jog on.) My occasional but vital ventures into a wider, (and wilder), world, however, have proved to present more of a challenge: while the free-for-all, elbow-roomed, toilet-tissue'n'packet-of-pasta feeding-frenzy of post-zombie-apocalyptic Tesco was, of course, to be expected, the alarmingly arrogant laissez-faire example of our – elected 'misspeaking' and unelected Barnard Castling – leaders came, (naively, I suppose), as more of a shock.

How, then, in the midst of this viral mismanagement, is one to maintain professional, moral and ethical integrity, while simultaneously silencing the imminent pre-dawn whistle and evading the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle? For myself – similarly, I suspect, to English teachers across the nation – the answer to my hastily pattered orisons came in the divine forms of Doddle, Oak National Academy and the messianic Mr Bruff.

Ultimately, if fickle fortune favours my fate, the seemingly ceaseless stream of Doddle's high quality, self-assessing language and literature lessons, the flawless flow of Oak National Academy's perfectly prepared PowerPointed presentations, and the deadpan drawl of Mr Bruff's occasionally cynical, cautiously critical, deep-analytical, borderline miracle, investigations of things metaphysical – in close combination with my newly-found knowledge of Show My Homework's previously unplumbed potential – may finally fire-up the phosphorous flare to light the way back to Blighty.

Brothers, be aware! Sisters, save yourselves! Your country needs you... to turn your backs on blustering buffoons, to close your ears to the belligerent bellowing of the blatant old Lie, to keep your heads down, don your masks and follow me in following Bruff. We'll be home by Christmas.

#### A host of differences

At university, I took a class about the foundations on which education was built. It was here that we were informed of the systemic racism that is involved in the space. Pure and simple: education was created for white people, with middle to upper class backgrounds, to succeed. Although this is what education once was, it is not like that anymore; or at least, it should not be like that anymore. The UK is a multicultural place. Ipswich is a multicultural place. Westbourne is a multicultural place. We need to adapt our teaching practices to ensure that all of our students can succeed. Hooks believes that dialogue is the best way to build a teaching community that does this. She writes, 'to engage in dialogue is one of the simplest ways we can begin as teachers, scholars, and critical thinkers to cross boundaries, the barriers that may or may not be erected by race, gender, class, professional standing, and a host of other differences' (pg. 130).

#### Teaching to transgress

Hooks wrote this book after having taught for twenty years. She has questioned her love for it, but come to the conclusion that it is the best place for her. I believe the same. The front of a classroom is the place I feel I can make a difference in the world.

'...I have sought teachers in all areas of my life who would challenge me beyond what I might select for myself, and in and through that challenge allow me a space of radical openness where I am truly free to choose- able to learn and grow without limits... this is education as the practice of freedom.'

Bell Hooks, 1994, p. 207.