

CHAPTER 8 FAILING, TO LEARN



'It's fine to make mistakes – that is one of the best ways of learning'. How many of you have sat through, or indeed delivered, assemblies where we endeavour to inspire young people to pursue their goals by highlighting the struggles of figures such as James Dyson, Thomas Edison or the go-to figure of the last 20 years when it comes to overcoming setbacks as they journey onto deserved fame and recognition – JK Rowling? Do we, as teachers, practise what we preach? Maybe the more pertinent question is, are we actually allowed that luxury? Imagine responding to a complaint about our standard of teaching, classroom conduct or general professionalism by quoting the opening line of this section with a playful smile on your face and a few innocent shrugs of your shoulders, with a *'Never mind, I'll get better in time'* thrown in.

I am of course not referring to significant safeguarding issues that draw our level of care into question – there are some ‘mistakes’ that are rightly never acceptable. As trainees, we should be encouraged to try different methods, be creative in our approach and just give things a go, knowing that the real teacher will pick up the pieces when we are gone. However, all of a sudden when we qualify, the stakes seem too high and the consequences of bad teaching play on our mind as we seek consistency, reliability and safety in our methods. For such a rewarding but complicated and challenging profession, is one training year really sufficient to get all our gaffes out of the way? Maybe this is why we put so much pressure on ourselves and do not broadcast the (ultimately helpful) mistakes that we make in the classroom, choosing instead to keep the door firmly shut so that others cannot witness the bedlam that all teachers will experience at times. The general approach is to gain enough skills and confidence so that you are ready to try out new ideas, while still being able to maintain control if things take an unexpected turn. However, that can leave new teachers out in the cold, looking in with envy and yearning for their training days when exploration was possible.

I would argue we need to have greater acceptance that things do go wrong in the classroom, not always but sometimes as a result of our decisions. The best teachers never stop learning as they strive to hone their skills by walking along the try-reflect-refine-retry circle.

Hopefully, I have now given sufficient justification on the need to experiment in the classroom so that when you read some of my teacher fails and you ask yourself *‘Why would he try that? Surely he could see that would be a recipe for disaster’*, you might be more forgiving. Remember that necessity is the mother of invention and sometimes we are at our most creative when we have to be, but being creative does not always result in good ideas, even though our brains convince us of the logic behind these strategies and gives us the confidence to put them into practice. I am opening a vault into some stories that have not been shared with anyone, other than those very close to me. I certainly can look back and see the funny side now. Welcome to my blooper reel.

The shut up circle

I really struggled with a few classes during my first years of teaching and my bad luck usually resulted in them being timetabled on the last period of the day, by which time my energy and patience gauges were dangerously close to empty, with no reserves in sight. Even though behaviour issues remained for at least a few terms, I grew fond of the students (who I could not control) within a few weeks. After all, we go into the profession to make a difference to young people, especially those who have not found positivity in education yet. Having classes that did exactly what we asked, when we asked, would lack the perverse thrill that we sought, right?

One particular Year 10 class pushed me to try one of my first teacher fails that I have never revisited – I hopped off the try-reflect ... circle pretty quickly. Even though I am going back nearly 25 years, I still vividly remember teaching that group on a Thursday afternoon. It was directly after their lunchtime, an hour's break which would sometimes result in fallings out, tears, hormonal swings and the occasional fight, leaving me to pick up the pieces and attempt to distract them with some percentages or algebra – a near impossible task. Whatever happened over lunchtime seemed to result in several students in the class needing to tell each other to '*shut up*' at the start of (or, being honest, all the way through) the lesson. My requests for them to be quiet, so that we could attempt to do some learning, were drowned out by their insults to each other. A combination of my frustration with this situation and self-confidence when it came to problem solving resulted in an idea that I convinced myself was a sure-fire winner.

The logic behind the shut up circle was linked to getting something out of your system by paying short, intense attention to it, like a scream to let out irritation. I had seen students with hyperactivity disorders managed well by being made to go for a run around the field when they presented the teacher with issues in a lesson and they would return much calmer and settle relatively peacefully into their learning. For me, the shut up circle would be the verbal equivalent of this effective method.

The next time they entered my classroom following their lunch break and started with the insults to each other, I made the students sit in a circle and told them that for the next five minutes they would turn to the person to their right and tell them to 'shut up'. That person would not reply but instead turn to the person to their right and do the same – this would keep going around the circle until our time was up. I visualised that, at the end of the 'activity', they would return to their desks and be able to refocus on the learning, as their desire to throw out insults would be washed away and they would realise how silly their previous actions had been. This is how it would have played out in an inspirational film about teaching against the odds. I was very wrong!

Indeed, the licence that I had given them to do something they had previously done, but without my approval, only increased this behaviour but now it had become more of a joke rather than a follow on from a previous disagreement. I had to endure 'You shut up', 'No, you shut up', 'No, you shut up ...' for the remainder of the lesson. I learnt that I should not accept behaviours that fall under my expectations but how I challenge them was to be carefully considered. At the same time, I should not turn them into a game to be exploited and misinterpreted. How could I now give any sanctions out for the behaviour that I had legitimised in my classroom?

In the end, I took a better approach of discussing my thoughts on the way they treated each other, calmly, later in the lesson once the lunchtime excitement had died. This did not resolve the issue entirely but did reduce the level of the disruption and made me feel more in control.

Dictation – the relationship killer

At the start of my story, I reflected on my experiences as a student in the classroom and how, over 30 years on, I still remember those excellent teachers who inspired me and others who closed the door on a subject that otherwise could have been presented in a far more engaging way, maybe changing the direction of my life. Those memories of teachers at each end of the scale will never leave me, even if I cannot remember their names. For me, history was brought to life with the vast knowledge and confidence of my teachers. Their vivid

storytelling enabled the skill of empathy to be developed, so I could understand why serfs were so unhappy in Russia in the lead up to the revolution or, despite having little interest in politics at the time, I still grasped the origins of the Chartist movement in the 1840s. In contrast, geography was delivered through dictation, lesson after lesson with very little teacher–student interaction. What an absolute waste for such an interesting and relevant subject. Therefore, when I went into teaching, I would learn from the good and never repeat the actions of the bad – or so I hoped.

It is easy to fall into bad habits, especially when they represent the path of least resistance. I am embarrassed to say that, when I felt a class had defeated me, my lessons had no real teaching but instead I often noted four points on the board; for example:

1. Copy p135
2. Do exercise 4.5
3. Copy p136
4. Do exercise 4.6.

I resigned myself to not being able to get them quiet enough to teach and therefore they would copy out (which they barely did, but at least I was not having such a public losing battle wearing me down on a regular basis). No real learning took place, as I took off my maths teacher cap and replaced it with a cover teacher one.

From that point, I killed off any chance I had with them as I demonstrated that I had no real interest in their learning or progress. I painted over the richly colourful and beautiful picture that is maths without realising (until writing this book) that I had become my old geography teacher. One of the harsh truths in teaching is that, when you start or move schools, things will be very difficult and you will have one, or a few, classes that can defeat you if you throw in the towel. However, you will come through much stronger if you battle on, showing them that you are not ready to give up on them and therefore pass the endurance test that they have obviously designed for you. My approach to this class took me a few years to recover from, as I left the school at the end of my first year there, but I never gave up on a group of students again. That was my key learning.