

“Picked-at displays and scrawled messages on desks ruminating the illicit parentage of peers...”

NO MATTER HOW GRIM THE CLASSROOM, THE PROMISE OF ALCHEMY IT OFFERS WILL ALWAYS BRING OUT TOM STARKEY'S INNER ROMANTIC...



I feel at home in a classroom. You know where you are with them. You can dress them up, try to make them a bit prettier, maybe give them a new name to try to break away from their essential uniformity (go ahead – call them ‘*Learning Nodes*’, you’re fooling no-one there, pal) but beneath it all, in their heart of hearts, they’re much the same up and down the land.

(Apart from the open-plan ones. They’re different because nothing ever gets done in those.)

Staples shotgun-scattered onto walls. Whiteboards holding the invisible trapped ghosts of a thousand drywipe lessons. Déjà vu chairs and tables weighted to the floor with the ballast of flavourless and flattened chewing gum. These are the calling cards of the classroom. The comforting features of the chambers of enrichment that we are lucky enough to find ourselves in and I have a great affection for them all.

Well, perhaps not the chewing gum. That is rank.

Yes, it is true that the spaces where we ply our trade are not always perfect. Or even habitable.


In some of them a west-facing window can magnify the light from the sun into an all-vaporising death ray. In others the shade of yellow paint seems to have been specifically designed to increase teenage depression by a minimum of 46%. The kids might have to fight to be heard over an ancient and monolithic internet server that someone (apparently in a fit of pique about the abundance of effective spoken communication in schools) saw fit to install for no other reason than it was the closest room to networking (yet, notably, not actually *in* networking). They are often too hot, too cold, too small, too large, too smelly, too bright, too dark or too close to the headteacher’s office for comfort. Yet they are ours and they are special places (despite all evidence to the contrary).

Their mundane appearance is a cloak, a subterfuge. Within them there is an electricity

(and not just because Kai accidentally totalled a light switch swinging his bag onto his shoulder two classes ago). Wonderful things happen there. Magic things.

Classrooms are often presented as prisons. As oppressive, industrial factories churning out nothing but similitude and mediocrity. As agencies of entrapment designed to grey the senses and shovel conformity down the throats of those young souls unfortunate enough to be pushed into them. Those that paint this image invariably don’t spend much time in them. If they did they would know better. The space, so everyday, so humble, so utilitarian to the unknowledgeable observer hides a shining truth. If they were to look past appearances and let the veil fall from their eyes they would see them as they are. Places where lives are changed. Places where truths are sought and often found. Places where a window to the world can be opened or a mirror held to reflect on the familiar and

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Tom Starkey is a teacher in an FE college in the north of England. He blogs at stackofmarking.wordpress.com. @tstarkey1212

make it new.

It’s a neat trick. The outward appearance suggests nothing of the special inner reality. Picked-at displays and scrawled messages on desks ruminating the illicit parentage of peers are just dressing. The laminated for posterity yet always-ignored instructions on how to get the interactive whiteboard pen to work are just dressing. The neglected, wizened, once-green pot plant on the window by the teacher’s desk is just dressing – surface iconography that makes the casual observer think that they know what’s going on. But they don’t.

Classrooms are the vessels that hold the minds of the future. They are the ships that our dreams for things to come sail in. They are the most important rooms in the world yet all the while they wear beggar’s robes. Because that’s all that’s needed. Gold leaf and marble would be nice (hell, in some places, clean white walls would be an improvement) – but when all is said and done it is not the walls, or the desks, or the chairs, or the whiteboards or the displays that turn these unremarkable rooms into cathedrals of hope.

It is you. And it is them.

Thanks for reading.