

ALEX QUIGLEY SMILE. PLEASE.

TRAINEE TEACHERS CAN BE GIVEN SOME DODGY ADVICE AT TIMES, SAYS ALEX QUIGLEY, SO TAKE A DEEP BREATH, TURN THAT FROWN UPSIDE DOWN, AND SEE WHAT HAPPENS...

Have you ever heard the age-old teaching aphorism “don’t smile until Christmas?” If you have had the privilege of working in educating for any amount of time you are likely to have come across this supposedly sage classroom advice at some point or other.

I first heard it as a trainee teacher in my murky past, when, afear’d by my attempts to master a hoard of truculent teens, I’d go along with pretty much anything I was told. Now, however – a decade on – I’m busy unlearning some of the so-called truths about pedagogy that I thought were undisputed. And with only a little research into behavioural psychology, it is clear that a well-timed grin can be a key tool in the teacher armoury. Smiling is ‘priming’; that is to say, when we smile at our students we influence their emotions positively, and condition them to respond in kind. Studies tell us that people who smile are seen as more believable and trustworthy and – in possibly my favourite scientific study – get more free drinks at the bar.

What simple, pain-free tool, then, could be more useful to the teacher looking to marshal his or her students into having the right frame of mind for learning, than a friendly and genuine smile?

Yes, we need firm boundaries. Sure, sometimes it would be inappropriate to smile (beaming incessantly is likely to result in questions being asked about your mental wellbeing – and quite rightly, too), but the fact is, the advice to remain relentlessly stern while a new cohort of students gets to know you is simply wrong. We must reject such hand-me-down adages and instead grapple with the complexities, and sometime chaos, of the real classroom. We should search out the evidence for received wisdom where we can. Then we can break it down into something useful and practical for every teacher.

We have all been given duff advice at one time or another. I remember being told during my PGCE to develop a ‘presence’. No clear definition. No strategies and goals along the path to this hallowed state. Just, “develop your presence”.

What *was* this ghoulish apparition? Could you hold it, bottle it, or smell the thing? At the time, I would have happily paid any amount for a handful of the stuff – but no one seemed able to tell me what this cryptic bit of advice actually, practically, meant.

A few years on, I think I got to the bottom of it myself with a bit of reflection on my practice and some worthwhile research. ‘Presence’ had something to do with physicality, gesture, tone of voice and movement – and, dare I say, a well-timed smile. *How* we say something can be as important as *what* we say in the classroom.



ALEX IS AN AHT AND SUBJECT LEADER OF ENGLISH AT HUNTINGTON SCHOOL, YORK. HE WRITES REGULAR BLOGS AT HUNTINGENGLISH.COM. HE IS DUE TO RELEASE ‘TEACH NOW! ENGLISH: BECOMING A GREAT ENGLISH TEACHER’ IN 2014.

Our teacher training should develop these subtle strategies, making the implicit explicit (to borrow a phrase from David Didau). We should do away with simplistic sayings, and break down concepts like ‘teacher presence’ using some behavioural psychology research and our craft knowledge:

Gesture: There is a huge amount of research to prove that we learn and even think with our bodies – labelled embodied cognition by the scientists. For example, researchers have proven that parental use of gestures can accelerate vocabulary development in young children. They have found that students understand and remember explanations better that are accompanied by precise gestures. Simply pointing can make a difference to learning and remembering. We should therefore be acutely conscious of our gestures and use them for learning.

Body language: Again, in the blink of an eye, we learn and make judgments with our bodies. As students enter the room, a confident posture, upright and expressive, with clear and decisive arm gestures, can convey an assured ownership of the classroom. Mirroring the body language of our students can disarm any negative intent and convey that we care and empathise with our young brethren. Decisive movement around the classroom, with lots of micro-managing of behaviour, such as a timely tap on the desk, can prove telling and convey that much vaunted ‘presence’.

Hone the tone: We are sensitive to pretty much every nuance of human relationships – right down to the tone of our voice in conversation. Most children will unwittingly imitate your tone, be it quiet or ear-piercingly loud, so having a range in your teacher voice is crucial. Shouting can betray a lack of control in behavioural terms, whereas a deep, sonorous tone can convey authority.

By engaging with the research evidence available to us, we can learn far more than a stunted saying could ever tell us. Learning to pay attention to the

minute details of classroom interactions should start in teacher training and become part of our daily practice, no matter how battle-hardened by experience we become. And now, this article is at an end.

So go on, smile. You know you want to!

