

So what, MR CHIPS?

Who needs an 'inspiring' teacher? Apart from publishers and conference organisers, pretty much no one, confesses Phil Beadle...

Have you got something inspirational in your pocket for us?" "Well, I do have something inspirational quite near my pocket, but I'd be arrested if I showed you it..."

This is a report of a real conversation that really took place with the organiser of a recent conference that was real. I get asked to speak at fewer and fewer of these kinds of events nowadays, and my face usually falls into an accurate approximation of the disappointed jowls of Les Dawson in a flowery pinafore when I do, and receive the brief, "Could you just be inspirational?"

"About what?"

"Just be inspirational."

"About what? Cod? Flower arranging? Ankles, perhaps?"

"Just be inspirational, please."

The reason I become instantaneously bored with such a request is that conference organisers often don't understand that it is not possible to 'be inspirational', as 'being inspired' is an accidental matter of reception rather than of deliberate intent.

It makes for a lousy lesson objective too. Whilst 'By the end of this lesson students will be able to complete a piece of fine needlepoint work' is an entirely acceptable

goal, 'You will be inspired by needlepoint' makes an unacceptable assumption that it is possible for every individual to be inspired by needlepoint. Whilst in fact, he or she might not like needlepoint. Not everyone does, y'know.

For instance, I am fetishistic about punctuation. I accept that other people have different perversions. I'll happily teach a set of kids how to use the possessive apostrophe; but won't hold my breath waiting for them to be inspired by them.

So you, dear teacher, might teach a lesson or two that may accidentally inspire, but inspirational as a permanent state of being would make you difficult to be around: you'd never get anything done, you'd always be exhausted and it'd annoy your children ("Dad. I don't want to know about the pea as an objective correlative for the human soul. I just want you to pass them to me, so that I can eat some.")

Another problem with 'inspirational' is that it interferes with the functional. There are times in lessons – most of the time, in fact – when we just need to take care of business and get stuff done.

One Donald Clark, whose 'Plan B' blog is consistently well researched and strongly argued, is very good indeed at skewering this media constructed cliché with which the profession sometimes conspires. He argues that the stereotype is counter-productive and that it trivialises a far more important teacher-quality: that of competence. All the while we are in touch with the construction of teachers as 'inspirational' figures we forget to ask them to be competent. And Clark is right here. The label trivialises the nuts and bolts of education to the extent that teachers can become confused about what it is they are employed to do, and it is a term that should perhaps be retired from any sensible discourse about how our children might best profit from their education.

I might reasonably be accused of hypocrisy here in agreeing with the

thoughts of someone who has publicly (perhaps accurately) described me as a "buffoon", but I take his point. I have, partially inadvertently, partially out of avarice, done as much as any individual teacher to propagate this damaging myth by utilising it as a marketing device. It is, initially at least, a seductive award, but 'inspirational' is a mask that eats the face: the moment we start regarding ourselves as being inspirational we are lost to a mindset that regards our own ego as a practitioner as being more important than the functional task of equipping our students with some of the grinding practice through which accretion of knowledge, skill and abilities happens.

Perhaps then, when any teacher finds him or herself being described with the marketable cliché of being 'inspirational' he/she should reject it.

"Could you be inspirational for us?"

"No. I'm afraid I can't. But I will endeavour to be very competent indeed."

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PHIL IS RUNNING THREE INTENSIVE DAY COURSES – 'OUTSTANDING LITERACY ACROSS THE CURRICULUM' – TOWARDS THE END OF 2012 (EXETER, 30TH NOV; LONDON, 11TH DEC; MANCHESTER, 13TH DEC). FIND OUT MORE AT [HTTP://TINYURL.COM/BP6KH2O](http://tinyurl.com/bp6kh2o).

