

# BOTHEREDNESS<sup>®</sup>

— STORIES - STANCE - PEDAGOGY —

HYWEL ROBERTS

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This book is dedicated to Maria and Tom Roberts, my loves.

And to my mum, Dorothy Anne, for whom every day is still an adventure.

And my late dad, who took me to see *Jaws* when I was 5 and my life changed forever.



The past always seems better when you look back on it than it did at the time. And the present never looks as good as it will in the future.

***Jaws*, Peter Benchley (1974, 109)**



# FOREWARNING

Before reading this book:

- 1 Brush up on your Northern dialects. You're about to be immersed in the best blend of Lancastrian and Yorkshire – a peace treaty of an accent. An audio book without the audio.
- 2 Don't drink hot drinks while reading. You'll spit them out.
- 3 Have all those old, nostalgic DVDs, CDs – dare I say it – cassette tapes and vinyl handy. This book is going to make you want to watch and listen to them all again. Which brings me to ...
- 4 Take your time. This is a reverie with many digressions. Wallow in them.
- 5 Have a box of tissues handy. There are stories in this book – ones that make you feel like you have something in your eye.
- 6 Smile. You're about to be reminded of the good things in life. And God knows – we all need that right now.

Most of all, enjoy. I did.

**Debra Kidd**  
**(the one lucky enough to work with this wonderful human being)**

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A SLOW FADE UP:

## CARPE DIEM

CUE MUSIC: Hans Zimmer's *Interstellar* should do it.

CAPTION:

### A reverie

← It's got great  
crescendos and  
plenty of drama.

A CAPTION ABOUT THE CAPTION:

**Reverie: to be pleasantly lost in one's thoughts – a daydream;  
an instrumental piece suggesting a dreamy or musing state**

The year blazes across the screen like it's  
*Lethal Weapon 2* or something:

~~1989~~ 1989

(You can stop all this now, Hywel.  
Thanks – Ed.)

# INTRODUCTION

1989

I went to the cinema with my pal Craig to see the new Robin Williams movie *Dead Poets Society*, which we expected to be a laugh-riot; a hoped-for echo of Williams' previous tour-de-force, *Good Morning Vietnam!* As soon as the director's name flashed up on the screen, and being a bit of a film nerd, I realised we were going to be offered something very different to what we'd expected. Peter Weir, an Aussie movie director, had previously served up such delicious cinematic treats as *Witness*, *The Last Wave* and *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, which I'd devoured courtesy of BBC2 and its late-night Alex Cox-helmed *Moviedrome* series. Look it up.<sup>1</sup>

When I stepped out of the cinema, I turned to Craig and said, 'I know what I want to do with my life' – dramatic pause – 'I want to be a teacher of literature in a 1950s American private school.'<sup>2</sup>

My pal looked at me and grinned, munching the last of the Wheat Crunchies from a crumpled-up bag he'd retrieved from his deep pocket.<sup>3</sup>

'The children are going to carry me on their shoulders as we run through the golden fields to the soundtrack of Beethoven,' I continued, 'and I'm going to laugh and hold my hands up to a sun-drenched Heaven.'

'Captain, my Captain,' sighed Craig, quoting a memorable line from the movie we'd just watched. He then pointed at a rusty-coloured car pulling up. 'Lift's here.'

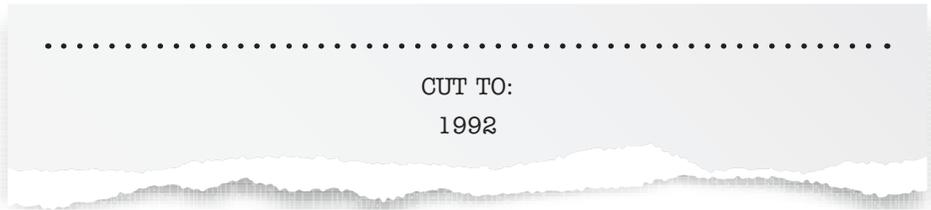
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1 The *Moviedrome* series was on BBC2 in the late 1980s with Alex Cox and, later, the great Mark Cousins. Both experts, they took your hand, Sherpa-like, and guided you through the dark and less-trodden paths of cinema. For each film they did an introduction that would, for me, absolutely suck me in. Cox, a lanky, awkward-looking fella, was brilliant. He introduced me to *The Wicker Man* and *Witchfinder General*, and I never looked back. He's basically the reason this book on teaching is dripping with movies. Cox built my botheredness like no tomorrow. He was inspiring, knowledgeable and loved his subject. Like what all good teachers should do and no mistake, yeah? See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K8IGJjukTzc>.

2 See Ohio State University (2021) for a scientific reflection on the impact of moving and emotional films.

3 Wheat Crunchies are a brilliant food that bridges the texture gap between a Wotsit and a bog-standard crisp.

I looked and there was my dad behind the wheel of the Allegro,<sup>4</sup> pipe in mouth, sucking on St. Bruno Ready Rubbed pipe tobacco. Old school. He tipped a nod, and I couldn't wait to tell him about the film. He was a teacher, after all. Old school. He was buzzing, my dad. Other than Alex Cox, he was the most important man in my life at this point.<sup>5</sup> He, too, was really good at botheredness. Good adults are.



Via a life-changing and wonderful English degree, I found myself staying on a year at Bretton Hall College in Wakefield, West Yorkshire, to do a postgraduate certificate in education (PGCE) so that I could be a secondary English and drama teacher.<sup>6</sup> My roots were down, and I was committed to a classroom career. I also didn't want to go back to Manchester and be a burden on my parents – today I know many teacher trainees and early career teachers don't have this luxury of choice, but I did.

As we went through the training year, I realised that actually it was all *very hard indeed*. I'd put a postcard depicting the film poster for *Dead Poets Society* on the front of my training journal (remember, this is the early 1990s, so no memory sticks, Facebook or email – they were things of the future. A twinkle in someone else's eye). The training journal was a sort of professional diary chronicling the teacher/writer's reflections on all things teaching and learning. The first time I was required to hand the journal in was midway through my first teaching placement. I handed it in to my tutor, hoping he'd see the movie postcard glued to the front and peg me down as a liberal, passionate educator who wanted the best for the children in his care. I wanted

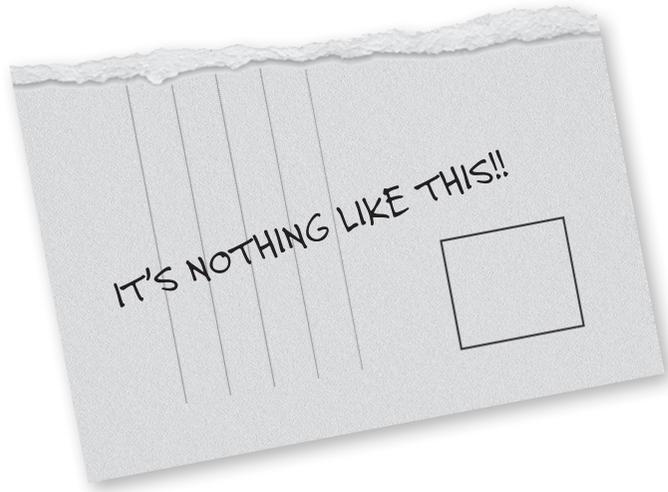
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4 The Austin Allegro. A car for the discerning motorist.

5 He would go on to assert his status as number one fella later.

6 Bretton Hall College: past students include Sir Ken Robinson, *The League of Gentleman*, Kay Mellor, David Rappaport, Gillian Wright, John Godber, Mark Thomas, Colin Welland, Louisa Leaman, amongst many others. The place amalgamated with the University of Leeds whilst I was mid-degree and eventually closed down in 2007. Going there changed the course of my life. There's a good radio documentary here with John Godber about the wonderful place: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zgvmM3YxAZO&t=45s>.

him to know that I was bothered. And also, that I'd be very happy to have kids carry me through orange fields to the stirring soundtrack of Beethoven.<sup>7</sup> When the tutor handed me the journal back, he'd torn the postcard in half, leaving one limp half glue-sticked to the cover. Robin Williams had been vandalised. I found the other half inside my journal. On the back of the abused scrap, the tutor scribbled



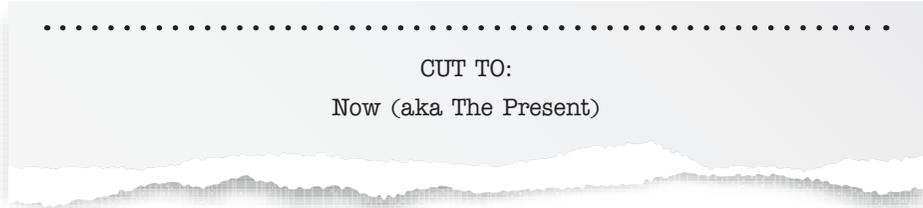
Like I needed telling. I was on teaching practice in Dewsbury,<sup>8</sup> teaching poetry to teenagers who stood on chairs for all the wrong reasons. I realised very quickly that teaching was nothing like it was depicted in *Dead Poets Society*. It wasn't genteel, well photographed or poetic; it was dark mornings, poor planning and, occasionally, cruelly dispiriting. Like space exploration, mistakes came thick and fast, but the journal writing helped. I started to see some themes emerge – things that would help me navigate a lesson, a hard day, a pressured week, a long placement.

I was learning a craft. An art. A profession. And I liked it.

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<sup>7</sup> I'm very keen on this visual from *Dead Poets Society*. Just go with it.

<sup>8</sup> Birthplace of Bartholomew Binns – hangman for the City of London and Middlesex, 1883–1901.



This is an education book, but not one that's going to tell you what to do minute by minute, lesson to lesson. There are no silver bullets. Anyone who tells you there are is lying. You won't even find a scheme of work in here – some planning ideas for sure, even a template or two, but there's no spoon-feeding. There are no curriculum rules to follow or new acronyms to get stressed out about. It's just a book that's inviting you to consider and reflect on where you're up to in your own educational journey, be you a parent, a teacher or a student. Or, indeed, all three. You might be thinking the teaching profession is for you or you might be working with children or young people in a context other than a school. I want to help you texture your understanding of what it is to lead learning and thinking – to develop knowledge acquisition with warmth and optimism. With botheredness.

When I wrote my first book for teachers back in 2012, I didn't realise how much it was going to resonate with the classroom practitioner. And so, years later, here I am writing another. It's not a sequel to *Oops! Helping Children Learn Accidentally* (2012); rather a next step. Some more provocation and optimism for the professional constantly being told they're in crisis.

### Crisis?

Yep, there's a crisis. A crisis of faith in learning, children and curriculum. I think so anyway. Especially when I've a harried Year 7 science teacher sitting in front of me telling me that, as an area of potential study, 'virus' is dull to deliver. It's like COVID-19, *World War Z*, *Resident Evil*, *Night of the Living Dead* and *Plants vs. Zombies* have never happened, right?<sup>9</sup> Something's gone wrong, and whilst it's nobody's fault, we're all to blame. We're all carrying the can for the erosion of the professional imagination.

If the *Oops!* book cleared back the nettles from the path for some, this book is intended to take things further; to offer opportunities to think beyond a path laid out by scripted lessons, downloadable schemes and slavish quick-fix fads, and perhaps

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<sup>9</sup> I just couldn't ignore the pandemic that shook the world in 2020. It seems stupid to pretend it doesn't exist.

move into more uncharted territories (which is, incidentally, the title of the book I wrote with Dr Debra Kidd in 2018). It's a search and examination of the road less travelled, backed up with my own experiences and research down the rabbit hole of contemporary education. And films. There's mention of them as well. They're cultural touchstones, aren't they? Like music.

I do want to get children and young people ready for jobs that haven't been invented yet, but I also need someone to service my car, fix my boiler and give me advice on soft furnishings. I want to be reassured, humoured and supported by people; people who are good.<sup>10</sup>

I hope I'm clear enough when I say that I'm no longer a full-time teacher. I do, however, teach. For a long time, I was a secondary teacher (for ages 11–16) delivering English language, literature, drama, media studies and, for one year, due to an unfixable timetabling error, German. I didn't know what pressure really was until that latter incident. The only German language I knew had been gleaned from *The Eagle Has Landed* and *Kelly's Heroes*, and that, to be fair, was pretty limiting and probably another story for another day. All this unfolded in the flippin' fine town of Barnsley, South Yorkshire.<sup>11</sup>

I resisted the temptation to go into senior leadership but retain much admiration for those that do. I was an untrained middle leader for a number of years. I enjoyed the role but probably didn't realise how important the middle-leader role was going to become in schools today. I thought I just needed to spend the meagre budget on pens, paper and, if we were feeling flush, a new hole punch. My heart belonged to the classroom, however, and, in the spirit of Dweck's (2017) growth mindset (but probably not what she means), I eventually resigned my post and left my school. I think many of my friends and colleagues thought I was having some sort of breakdown, but, in reality, I just had lots of questions and was curious for answers. Sometimes, in order to grow, I suppose we have to take some risks and stick our heads above the parapet. This is what I felt I did. I was brave, took a risk, and my family egged me on.

I now teach in a variety of settings, practising what I preach. I model the approaches outlined in this book. Not *model* in the Vivienne Westwood sense of the word but in

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10 People like The Real David Cameron, from whom I've shamelessly borrowed this sentence.

11 My spiritual home and site of my professional upbringing. Also birthplace of Brian Glover, a great actor, teacher and one-time wrestler (Leon 'Arris, the Man from Paris), famous for roles such as Chess Player in the mint *An American Werewolf in London*, the Armourer in *Jabberwocky*, and, of course, Mr Sugden, the cruel physical education (PE) teacher in *Kes*. I'd suggest the latter is one of the greatest films about childhood and school ever made. More on that later. Shaun Dooley is also from Barnsley and he's really good 'n' all.

the continuing professional development (CPD) sense, where I'll teach a room full of children I've never met before with professional adults watching and participating; CPD on steroids, I call it.

The examples in this book will draw from all settings – primary, special and, of course, secondary, as I'm still a secondary teacher at heart. The only thing you'll have to do, dear reader, is think and reflect. By that, I mean put all of it through your filter. An example of working with children in a behavioural school context should still have resonance to the mainstream teacher, unless, of course, we're totally institutionalised and can't see the wood for the trees. As a secondary teacher, I've found much to learn in the primary and special settings. This will be clear as I take you through some of the strategies that I've discovered to be, well, universally successful across the stages of learning (in my universe, at least) with children in their classrooms.

I mention middle leadership and I don't do it lightly. Middle leadership has become *the* tier that actually makes things happen in any school that act. I say to school leaders, look after the middle leaders and your school will become the place you desire it to be. I ask middle leaders not just to swallow the spoon-fed instructions of their leaders but to offer developing wisdom and insight into classroom practice through a filter that places school values before structures. Middle leaders are the people who make things happen. They quality-control, give permission and set the tone. They're also under enormous pressure from everyone else. If you're a middle leader, I hope this book helps you and reminds you why you took the role on in the first place.<sup>12</sup>

School leaders set the tone of their school. They also give permission to their staff to deliver the most appropriate lessons to their pupils. If you're a school leader, I hope this book helps with continual innovation and improvement in your setting.<sup>13</sup>

If you're a teaching assistant, this book will support you with strategies and ideas to employ appropriately with the children who need the nettles clearing back more than others. I hope it'll also give you the genuine confidence to support the colleagues you're working alongside.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> I see middle leaders as the Keanu Reeves (circa *John Wick*) of the pack. Don't mess with his dog or he'll kick your ass. Try not to see yourself as either Bill or Ted and definitely don't project these latter personas to your pupils.

<sup>13</sup> You're basically Sigourney Weaver in *Aliens*.

<sup>14</sup> Teaching assistants need botheredness and many of them are the real deal, but we know there are those, like in leadership and in the classroom, who just don't get it. If you're a teaching assistant and you're reading this book, you already get it. You're basically Clint and make my chuffin' day.

And then there's the classroom teacher – who may also be a school leader. Or a middle leader. Or the acting special educational needs coordinator. Or in charge of literacy across the curriculum. You're the adult in the room who's constantly developing their repertoire to meet the ever-changing sea of faces in front of them. I hope this book liberates your thinking and returns to you the excitement that you felt when you decided to enter the profession in the first place. I want to help you reclaim your professional imagination.<sup>15</sup>

This book isn't like other education books out there. Don't get me wrong, there are a huge number I admire and won't be without – I'll provide some recommended reading later – it's just that I want this book to capture the essence of the approaches I'm sharing.<sup>16</sup> To this end, I've punctuated the book with a number of stories from my #TravellingTeacher column in the *Times Educational Supplement (TES)*.<sup>17</sup> They're short snapshots of teacher life and reminders to us, I think, of what is important in teacher-to-teacher and teacher-to-pupil dynamics, amongst other things. I've put them in for you to enjoy, but don't interpret that as a direct instruction. The stories bring life to the ideas I'm sharing here.

I'm not trying to be either contentious or polarising with this book – I just want to report back to you and show what I've found out teaching in classrooms of all shapes and sizes all around the world, and the pedagogy that underpins the work.<sup>18</sup> I hope it resonates with you and perhaps reminds you of why you went into the job in the first place.

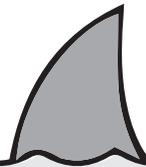


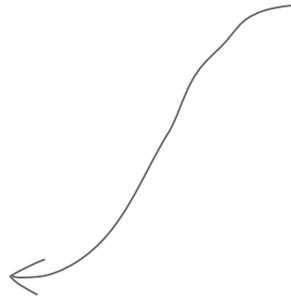
*Dig in.*

- 
- 15 Just like little Billy Casper not wanting to go down no pit, I didn't want to leave the classroom. It's where it's at. Whenever I speak with great leaders, they tell me they miss the classroom. We all do, those of us who bailed. That's how important it is. Folk may be being paid more than you, but you're **doing the teaching**. Everyone else is there to supposedly make it easier for you. I know! I know! To me, you're Morgan Freeman in everything. A sage. Crack on!
- 16 You could do worse than check out what Independent Thinking Press offer if you need a reading list.
- 17 All the stories were originally commissioned for *TES* by the lovely Brian Blessed-like Ed Dorrell (@Ed\_Dorrell). An archive can be found here: <https://www.tes.com/magazine/author/hywel-roberts>.
- 18 Interestingly, and tellingly, a review of this book in an earlier form appeared on Amazon whilst it was still in my head. That is before it was published! The damning sentence accused the unwritten book of being 'boring' and 'dated'; two words that are banned in my house, never mind the schools I work in and with. What the review demonstrated wonderfully was that education is, and always will be, a polarising and contentious world of debate and disagreement, where some prefer to snipe rather than show. It basically attracts nutters.

CHAPTER 1

# CONCERNING BOTHEREDNESS





If you stand for nothing, you'll fall for anything.

**Anonymous proverb<sup>1</sup>**

Okay. *Three words that sum up education for you. Go!* In order to unpick any approach to education – dry, normal, greasy, traditional, progressive, Jedi, old skool – one must settle on some unshakeables, some non-negotiables. Some values we can hang on to. These are the agreements we have with ourselves in our own heads – principles that inform our own practice. When crazy Uncle Pete,<sup>2</sup> who likes Stella Artois and can't hold down a relationship, corners you again at the family event – the wedding, the funeral – and challenges you again on the ins and outs, ups and downs of state education, these are the words you may stutter back at him as he suggests being hit across the arse by a sweaty 50-something male as it never did him any harm.

He's an expert.

Because he went to school.

Uncle Pete's argument is solid in his head and your words back to him might sound like jazz-hands fluff, but don't worry about it. He'll call you a 'snowflake' or 'woke' and then moan that he wasn't allowed to go to university. Uncover them, your three words, and use them to arm yourself against the uninformed, the ignorant and the powerful. Fight on the bridge of educational misinformation for these words. They're yours. They're what make you bothered.

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<sup>1</sup> A number of potential sources have been suggested for this proverb; see O'Toole (2014).

<sup>2</sup> This is a real person in real life and everything. If he were in a movie he'd be played by Steven Berkoff. He's a baddie.

At the heart of great teaching, you will always find a made-up word –

## BOTHEREDNESS®

It's the care teachers have for their children. It's the passion they bring to their lessons. It's their understanding of their children and their communities. It's the warmth, imagination and creativity embedded in their curriculum. It's the inspirational yet down-to-earth approach to teaching and learning that Hywel Roberts shares with teachers around the world. It's what this funny, engaging and unique book is full of. It's botheredness.

If you are looking for an education book that will inspire, not dictate; that will entertain, challenge and fire up your imagination in equal measure; that has more than its fair share of film facts as well as tips and tricks for your classroom practice; then this is the book for you.

In *Botheredness* you will find:

- Clear strategies around imaginative and effective planning.
- Genuine examples of powerful classroom work – from primary, special and secondary settings – that are research-informed and realistic.
- Opportunities to think beyond a path laid out by scripted lessons, downloadable schemes and quick-fix fads.
- A rallying cry to reclaim the professional warmth, imagination and care that are the hallmarks of the very best teaching.

This is an education book like no other, written by a travelling teacher, storyteller and film buff who's on a mission to put botheredness into classrooms everywhere.

Every page fizzes with the same energy and inspiration I got from Hywel as a pupil twenty-five years ago. Top stuff.

**Dan Johnson, BBC Reporter**

Written with heart and wit – it is also an utter joy to read! Absolutely brilliant!

**Lisa Stephenson, Senior Lecturer, Leeds Beckett University, Director, The Story Makers Company**

You won't want to put this down, and you will find yourself being more bothered about teaching than you ever thought possible.

**David Whitaker, Director of Learning, Wellspring Academy Trust, former Executive Principal, author**

This is not a book about individual 'whistles-and-bells' lessons; this is a book about a whole school strategy that gets children invested in their learning and the curriculum.

**Hannah Garvell, Head Teacher, Queens Church of England Academy**

As you read this book, you will be reminded of the power of good teaching.

**Mick Waters, educationalist and author**



**Hywel Roberts** has taught in secondary, primary and special settings for almost thirty years. He contributes to university education programmes and writes regularly for *TES* as 'The Travelling Teacher'. A true Northerner, Hywel deals in botheredness, creative practice, curriculum development and imagineering. He was recently described as 'a world leader in enthusiasm' and his first book, *Oops! Helping children learn accidentally*, is a favourite among teachers. Hywel is an Independent Thinking Associate. @HYWEL\_ROBERTS



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