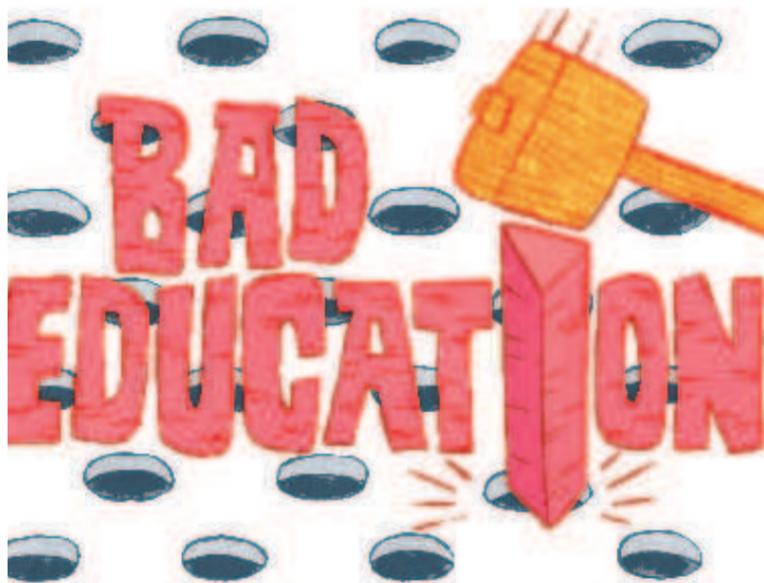


PHIL BEADLE



THE GUARDIAN COLUMNS

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Foreword by Will Woodward, Head of Politics at the *Guardian*



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Preface

In 2004 the then editor of *The Guardian's* education supplement came to see me teach. We chatted briefly after the lesson, and for some reason I decided that it would be amusing to wind him up by pretending that I was married to Marian Bighead, then Deputy Editor of *The Times*. (I have never even been in the same room as her and, to date, have no explanation as to why I enjoy completely unnecessary lying so much.)

He recognised in me a flagrant lack of something, and a few months later asked me to write a public apology for my behaviour at an awards ceremony that he too had attended. This included the phrase 'significantly over-refreshed' and made reference to 'having cleverly slept in my suit'.

It is now 2011. My column entitled 'On Teaching' has run in *The Guardian's* education pages for seven odd years. This book is an anthology of those columns.

Aside from being a husband and a father, it has been the defining honour of my existence having been gifted the permission to write about education for what I regard as the most politically important and vital organ in British life. And I extend my profound thanks to the editors who have guided me delicately through the process of sculpting readable copy: particularly Will Woodward, Claire Phipps and Alice Woolley, who, though I have never met her, is one of my favourite people.

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The Learning Environment

Life in a Glass Dungeon

Whoever designed the school I've just started working at has obviously been properly briefed on the full range of stereotypical judgements it is possible to make on the young people who go there. Anyone's first impression on entering the building is that it bears a startling resemblance to Alcatraz, the key function appears to be the lockdown. And then you enter the classroom.

The wall decoration *du jour* in my new classroom appears to be the unpainted breeze block. Initially, I'd thought, perhaps foolishly, that this was some post-modern nuance of architectural philosophy. 'Ah. Well noted, Mr Beadle. We keep the walls functional as an inverse correlative of the school's approach to learning and, indeed, to teaching – should it exist. The hue of the walls serves to minimise visual noise, and the exquisite sparseness means children can project their thoughts, hopes and aspirations onto the blank, grey canvas of the brick.'

No such cobblers, I'm afraid. The walls aren't painted because, if they were, the building would fall down. Given that it houses 1,200 students and there's quite a lot of glass, this would be considered a bad thing.

Speaking of glass, not since my days as a Penge window cleaner's assistant have I seen quite so much of it. The school is, for a limited period only, at the bottom of the league tables, and this, of course, inevitably affects admissions. Consequently, there are several boys and girls in

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attendance to whom Mr Naughty is not a stranger. Last year, so I am told, this fatal combination of naughty boy and glass palace combined, in startling symbiosis with the presence of small stones in the bits where trees are planted, to produce an array of aural shivering effects and a glazing bill in the region of £13,000 per month.

The building is shaped like a cheese wedge, meaning that classrooms at the front of it have sloping ceilings in the region of over 30 feet high on the right-hand side, 8 feet high on the left. Personally, this leads me to feel I'm teaching in an educational version of the crooked house amusements one might find in a post-communist, Hungarian fairground; though the kids tend not to notice. What they do notice though is that the rooms are unbearably hot in the summer, and that the only windows available for opening are narrow-eyed fellers whose bottoms are some 29 feet up in the air.

Teachers responding to a class's complaints of stuffiness must involve themselves in a ridiculous ballet, in which, with the aid of the school's single 30-foot long pole, they attempt to co-ordinate their hand movements to unhook the window latch at a distance of what must feel to them like several miles. So extreme is this distance, that the merest half-tremor of the little finger can cause the hook to miss the latch by an acutely embarrassing distance. Whole double lessons are wasted as male students collapse into torrents of uncontrollable hysterics while gamine, female teachers attempt vainly to open a window. 'Face it, miss,' the boys chortle joyously and rhythmically, 'You ain't got the control to get the pole in the hole.'

When the window is finally opened, after several lessons marked by much hilarity and little learning, no one notices

THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

the breeze, of course; it's 30 feet up! A whisper across the foothills of heaven. Of no use at all to the earthbound.

The second floor, however, is so well acquainted with the heavens it tempts students to pay an early visit to them. The main corridor is a balcony many miles above the ground, with only the frailest of railings separating students and teachers from a meeting with their maker. I have held informal chats with colleagues on that balcony, our backs glued with vertiginous fear to the wall furthest away from 'touching the void'.

'What do you think of so and so's attainment so far this year?'

'I don't know. I don't care about education. I'm going to fall. Fear the railing! Fear the railing!'

This would be bad enough were it not for the existence of the viewing platform. At one point the balcony sweeps out, in a grand arc, supported by nothing, leaving the foolhardy student or teacher who stands on it feeling exactly as safe and secure as if they were teetering at the edge of a promontory overlooking a Norwegian fjord, supported only by a thin elastic band.

Thankfully, no one has tipped over the edge just yet. The students seem to recognise some of the potential dangers the structure presents and behave appropriately on the top floor. And, in all honesty, this particular glass palace is a far better educational environment than, for instance, the school I worked in where there were so few tiles on the roof that a man (whom the kids had wittily named 'Rufus') had set up home there; or the school in which the toilets resembled the seventh circle of hell so accurately that you were given a special award for risking the hem of your trouser in

The Marshmallow Test

You pick up some odd pieces of knowledge as a freelance educationalist. Fascinating facts I have learnt this week are that hamsters are colour blind, the French for toad is *crapaud* and that the marshmallow has been around, in one form or other, for over two thousand years.

Which leads me to the partial theme of this month's column: the marshmallow test. In his book *Emotional Intelligence*, Daniel Goleman retells the story of a group of American scientists who created a specific torture for 4-year-olds. A scientist places a marshmallow on a table, telling the 4-year-old the scientist is off on an errand, and that if the child can resist the temptation to eat the marshmallow, they may gorge themselves on an extra one on the scientist's return. Some kids manage to resist temptation; some don't. The children are tracked and, 14 years later, their results in the marshmallow test prove to be a more reliable indicator of academic success than an IQ test. On leaving college those who had practised self-restraint and held out for the second marshmallow all became straight A students, whilst those unable to practise such superhuman self-control ended up as poly drug-addicted crazies.

Goleman takes this story as proof of the vast importance of self-regulation, or impulse control, the master aptitude of emotional intelligence. I have a different interpretation. The kids who resisted temptation were idiots! What kind of fool wastes 20 minutes of their life in torture for the sake of a single marshmallow? Eat the bloody thing the moment you are given it, and ask the scientist whether, since he is going on an errand, could he make a brief diversion to pick you up a family pack?

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There are those who suggest we should incorporate teaching of the 'soft skills' of emotional intelligence, of which the marshmallow test is merely a whimsical illustration, into the curriculum, and cheap gags aside, I empathise with them.

This is an area where, for once, the real radicalism seems to be coming from the private sector. Dr Anthony Seldon's introduction last year of a well-being curriculum at Wellington College attracted a barrage of press attention, Ann Widdecombe hilariously describing it as 'the nanny state gone mad'. (Duh. Wellington is not a state institution.) The lessons, written by a Cambridge don, Professor Nick Baylis, and delivered by an absolute pearl of a teacher, Ian Morris, appear to be the start of a movement in British education. This month, over 200 head teachers, journalists and dignitaries attended a conference held at Wellington on the subject.

I travelled to the school earlier this year to sit in one of these happiness lessons, with one chief concern: that the lessons were being used as a sophisticated deflection tactic, permitting the school to pour ever more intense pressure on its pupils. Pop 'em the curricular equivalent of an antidepressant, and you can get the boson to crack the whip all the harder.

However, suspicions that Seldon's intentions are in any way disingenuous are dispelled within seconds in his company. He explains, 'Teachers, like parents, want the children in their care to be mentally and physically healthy and intelligent in the roundest possible sense, and that's what teaching the skills of well-being is all about. Research and practice suggests it should be introduced in every school as a matter of priority.'

ICT

By way of an introduction, here is a series of articles I had laughingly entitled (to myself – no one else knew of this, until the last one) the ‘Wind Up a Spod’ series. They achieved their intent, making a number of people who very much enjoy spending time with their computers a bit grumpy; and as a result, I still get the odd invitation to ICT conferences where I am aware I am being invited simply so they can throw potatoes at me. I’m not much fond of potatoes, so don’t bother turning up.

Wind Up a Spod 1

I am sick, sick, sick to death of PowerPoint, and sick of sitting at INSET days being shown a set of slides with bullet points and having them read to me very ... very ... slowly. ‘Look,’ my inner voice shouts, ‘I am a graduate professional. I can read. Give me the handouts and I’ll have them digested in two minutes. It shouldn’t take the whole school staff two hours in an inferno of boredom for you to make three salient points.’

PowerPoint, as Ian Gilbert memorably puts it, is merely an ‘overhead projector on steroids’. And this is the problem with much of the use of ICT in schools: we are all so busy showing off the fact that we can now button our new waistcoat that nobody has had the guts to point out that it is see-through.

A journalist suggested recently that there are digital natives (who’ve grown up fluent in a world in which ICT is ubiquitous) and digital immigrants (spitting at a much distrusted mobile phone which fails to obey their commands). Well,

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there's a further group of us trapped in some digital hinterland, giving a veneer of competence that's enough to fool your Grandad, but which any 20-year-old would be able to put their finger straight through in an instant.

Brenda Despontin, president of the Girls' Schools Association, has asked: 'Where is the serious debate on the desirability of so much technology?'

The use of ICT in schools is surely worthy of a debate in which teachers actually get a say, and from which those companies selling the equipment are excluded.

ICT has been presented to the education community as a panacea, and if you are not using it to its full capacity you are left feeling the aged inadequate shaking their leg epileptically to a ragga tune.

I am still stuck in that hinterland where I think ICT in schools is a great idea (and all that), but am still rendered shamefaced while caught in stock cupboards sniffing books with lascivious intent. The problem with ICT as a panacea, apart from the fact that the stuff it is replacing – books, human contact and language – was so well designed in the first place, is that it's been thrown at us with neither instruction manual nor time to read one if one existed.

As a result, much of ICT use in schools is piss poor, squared. All of us have witnessed some 'imported for a twilight session' ICT whizz make the interactive whiteboard sing, clap its hands and perform a pelvis-breaking dance. A select few of us, however, will have translated that training into a single trick. A trick we desperately hope will fox OFSTED into believing that we are anything other than pasty incompetents wearing a none-too-convincing ICT-wizard mask.

Religious Studies

I spent the summer holiday in a villa on the Algarve, accompanied by Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens and a staunchly Roman Catholic Mum. Dawkins and Hitchens, of course, came in my bag; Mum could not be convinced to join them.¹⁸

I've always imagined that questioning a pupil's inherited belief system in class was a sackable offence. I imagine this because I've never really had the guts to test it out, what with my own children needing shoes and stuff (though, that is not to say that I haven't been tempted). Kids' justifications of the religious beliefs inflicted upon them by various agencies usually hinge upon what sages describe as the 'Because it does. Right?' argument, and this renders the temptation to just apply the merest, tiniest, most wafer-thin pinpricks to their balloon quite awful.

Thankfully, for the English-teaching atheist, there's literature. You know the stuff ... written by great men ... (or women) ... full of superior insights ... generally satirical or scathing when dealing with what man will do in the name of faith. *The Crucible* has allowed me to allude to the hell that my pupils might experience should they ever attempt to employ their questioning spirits in a theocratic society. It is down to *Of Mice and Men* that I've been able to ask them to imagine the possibility that heaven might be a lie conjured up to keep them in their place, without the fear of a sacking.

¹⁸ This is a joke. My mum is religious(ish), she doesn't buy atheism. I did not attempt to put my mother in a bag. I am pretending.

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So, it was with some delight that I spent my summertime sweating with Christopher Hitchens in a pool of anti-theistic zeal next to a swimming pool in downtown Vilamoura.

Having gathered lots of fantastic facts – did you know, for instance, that the idea of Mary’s assumption into heaven wasn’t defined as holy dogma until 1950? – I resolved that my first column on returning would be to write a piece arguing that, since atheism now has its own version of the good book, perhaps it could now assume its place on the Religious Studies curriculum, and moreover, since religion is a pretty binary choice – you believe: you don’t believe – perhaps it would be even handed to give half the curriculum time spent studying the various versions of idol worship to its more rational, analytical antithesis.

All sounds reasonable enough. Job done. But then I made the mistake of doing some research.

Two years ago Charles Clarke introduced the first ever ‘non-statutory’ framework for the teaching of religious education. In case you didn’t know, kids have a legally protected ‘entitlement’ to Religious Studies, but there is no statutory control over what is taught. It is, for instance, entirely plausible that schools could teach children, without so much as a threat of a chastening governmental finger, that those children alone are God’s elect, that faiths apart from the one they follow are entirely deluded and that it is entirely righteous to wage holy war on those who, by accident, are born on the other side of a wall to them. If I wanted to set up a Satanist school, and it’s a thought I entertain from time to time, I could.

The framework itself, given that it had to accommodate viewpoints as diverse as the Russian Orthodox Church and the British Union Conference of Seventh Day Adventists,

Bad Education is a collection of Phil Beadle's columns from *The Guardian* Education section and is a laugh a minute romp through more or less every aspect of British education over the last decade, which makes the occasional, entirely accidental, serious point.

An anthology ranging across Politics and Policy, Pedagogy, Performance, People and Personalities and Phil's great passion – Literacy and English teaching. With wit and humour and penetrating insight, Beadle provides an original, searching and provocative commentary on educational changes.

**Professor David Woods CBE, Chief Adviser for London Schools
and Principal National Challenge Adviser**

Keep a copy close at hand for the times when the world of education seems to have gone mad (which is rather too often these days): Beadle's book is like a thermos flask of reassurance and unpretentious wisdom. It's one of those texts we all need to sustain us through the tough times – a rare combination of a work that makes us feel better about ourselves whilst also challenging us to raise our game.

Geoff Barton, Headteacher, King Edward VI School

Every teacher needs to read this book. More importantly, every head teacher and governor needs to read it. And, even more importantly still, every administrator and politician needs to read it too. And when they encounter, as some members of all those groups surely will, passages that make them throw the book across the room, let me appeal to them to pick it up and read that bit again, this time with a bit of thought and a lot of humility. Because they'll find that Beadle's great strength lies in the fact that behind the ire and the feisty polemic lies a lot of thought and humility of his own, and plenty of humanity too.

Gerald Haigh, former teacher, head teacher, school governor and author

Phil Beadle always imbues the latest crazy top-down policy with timeless bottom-up good sense and wit. His 1000-word *Guardian* articles provide a dose of medicine that is guaranteed to alleviate the symptoms of teachers who look around them and find only contradictions. The articles are both amusing and deeply serious.

**John Dunford, Chair, Whole Education, Chair, WorldWide Volunteering,
Chair, Chartered Institute of Educational Assessors**

Education Policy



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