

TEACHER GEEK

BECAUSE LIFE'S TOO
SHORT FOR WORKSHEETS

RACHEL JONES



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IN THIS CHAPTER:

- Rethinking your classroom – swapping old for new.
- Using traditional analogue teaching methods in unusual ways.
- Adopting digital methods.

Chapter 1

OLD FOR NEW

beyond charity shop thinking

Being a geek teacher means taking real pleasure in engaging your learners by using resources in creative ways. You can take a few elements and rework them to produce something different. Not only are you creating something new from long-established classroom materials, like worksheets, but you are also rethinking your students' attitudes to learning and their potential outcomes.



Being a geeky teacher involves doing something different with our primary materials. This allows us to consider how we might have once interpreted those materials, how the students might understand them and, most importantly, it highlights the cultural context of those materials and the learning in our classrooms.

For example, if you have a tub of modelling clay don't just use it for play modelling as that was just its intended purpose. You could, for example, have children sculpt their identity in PSHE or model their learning from the lesson. Similarly you might have balloons that you could redeploy in your classroom for the purpose of learning. Rethink the objects and resources you have access to, and give them an educational purpose. Never do this just for the sake of doing it, but do it because it will make your teaching more effective or enhance the students' learning.

I'm sure it will come as no surprise to teachers that the resources we see as having meaning and value are often not held in the same regard by our students. This gives us the opportunity to think honestly about the materials we bring into the learning environment. Considering them from the students' perspective should be something we do as part of best practice, but this may often fall aside in the bustle of lesson preparation and marking. I am certainly not advocating that your lessons or activities should be resource driven; in fact, anything but. However, resources are part and parcel of teaching so it is essential to take the time to consider what we are using and why.

This is particularly important when considering the cultural context of learning materials. I once taught on a university course on the history of sexuality (never before have I said the word 'vagina' so much). For a class considering the feminist view of sex toys, I had borrowed a Victorian hand-powered vibrator from a local museum. It was certainly phallic, but none of the students realised what it was at first. They passed it around, turning the handle to make it slightly vibrate. One student even sniffed it. At this point I wasn't sure if I should tell them or try to pretend it was something more innocent. But, no, one student then identified it. The object was dropped on the floor and the entire class descended into chaos as the previously

innocuous looking historical object was revealed to be a sex toy. I'm not sure I had considered the full potential impact in advance, but it is certainly one of my more memorable lessons! We then went on to study relevant feminist texts, but the interaction with the resource/object as a hook for learning (rather than just an object in a display case) did go some way to creating some very interesting written work. I have never forgotten this lesson and the power that using objects in the classroom can have.

ANALOGUE TEACHING

With the Victorian vibrator in mind, I am first of all going to ask you to rework some analogue elements of your classroom. For me, analogue teaching is, very simply, everything that isn't digital - that might be your planner, mark-book, hand-outs or task-sheets or even sticky notes.

	<h3>ENCOURAGING A STATIONERY FETISH</h3>
	<p>Let's start with the humble sticky note. I think all teachers have a stationery fetish. We secretly relish the back-to-school shop for stocking up on colourful gel pens and bright new pencil cases. Many teachers have quite a stash of sticky notes. Not only are they useful for leaving notes (in bright pink they are more difficult to ignore than an email!), but they can also be put to work in the classroom during plenaries or even as ways of reporting learning in activities.</p>
	<p>But how about trying out some of these ideas?</p>
	<p>Much of the work I do at the beginning of term is about creating a classroom where each student feels safe and valued, and a class or tutor project to create sticky note art is a great ice-breaker. Each student could have a sticky note</p>

to draw on or write about themselves which you then make into a mural on the wall.¹

Sticky notes can also be used to make a pledge wall. This link shows an example from a school that was produced after the 2007 London bombings.² The pledge here is obviously one of solidarity against terrorism and a show of collectivism. Pledge walls are a lovely visual way of asserting the class or school identity at a time of potential upheaval. The students could also offer to pledge a small sum to a relevant charity – for example, I have seen pledge walls used to champion environmental issues or to support charities like Amnesty International. They make great temporary displays, but they can also be kept for a long time – if you have the patience to make sure the sticky notes don't fall off! I can easily imagine the pledge wall as a focus in a school reception area or hall for an anti-bullying or e-safety campaign that students have worked on collaboratively.

So let's not just think of the humble sticky note as being only for the exit ticket scribbles. Let's put it to more creative use. Just google something like 'sticky note display' and you will find all kinds of inspiration – like this amazing piece of artwork.³

BLACKOUT TEXT/OLD BOOKS

Another way of reusing something old in your classroom is to blackout words in a text. This has been used prolifically in the form of blackout poetry.⁴ Teachers have also begun to use this imaginative approach in the classroom, often using old books bought at car boot sales as a creative writing prompt.⁵

A modification to using blackout work can be seen in the following key words template, that I created for my students, which uses words cut out from newspapers and magazines.

1 For an example see: <http://artjunction.org/art-on-a-post-it-note/>.

2 See <http://media.creativebloq.futurecdn.net/sites/creativebloq.com/files/images/2012/11/peacewall13.jpg>.

3 For an example see: <http://blog.catchmyparty.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/09/post-it-note-art.jpg>.

4 For an example see: <http://library.movlic.com/CheckItOut/12/NowTrending>.

5 For an example see: <http://davidblackmore.blogspot.co.uk/2010/12/development-of-self-help-at-schwartz.html>.

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I have used this technique over several years to improve my students' conclusion-writing abilities. It has really encouraged them to use key words and phrases in their work.

only as a physical subject that he is a worker. (The
engagement of the worker in his object is expressed
according to the laws of political economy
following way: the more the worker produces, the less he
has to consume; the more value he creates, the more
worthless he becomes; the more his product is shaped, the
more misshapen the worker, the more civilized his object,
the more barbarous the worker, the more powerful the work,
the more powerless the worker, the more intelligent the
work, the duller the worker and the more he becomes a
slave of nature.) Political economy conceals the
estrangement in the nature of labor ignoring the direct
relationship between (labor) and production.
is true that labor produces marvels for the rich, but
produces privation for the worker. It produces palaces, but
hovels for the worker. It produces beauty, but deformity
for the worker. It replaces labor by machines, but it casts
some workers back into forms of labor and
turns others into machines. It produces intelligence, but it
produces idiocy and cretinism for the worker. The direct
relationship of labor to its products is the relationship
of the worker to the objects of his production. The
relationship of the rich man to the objects of production
and to production itself is only a consequence of this
first relationship and confirms it. we shall
consider this second aspect.

I have used this technique over several years to improve my students' conclusion-writing abilities. It has really encouraged them to use key words and phrases in their work. The activity also helps them to remember other important knowledge points, such as the names of theorists, as they are unable to complete the task without an understanding of different theorists' ideas and observations. This is a perfect example of an activity that not only develops literacy skills but also improves the retention of factual information.

You could also produce blackout introductions or even sections of a body of text (e.g. an essay) to force learners to slow down and really consider the words the writer is using to express their ideas. In order to reach the top grade boundaries, some exam boards expect students to use evaluative language. This technique can be a creative way to reinforce the habit so by the time they get to the exam it has become second nature.

I think it is important to leave space in your lessons for the students to be creative. Too often we are pressurised into making learning mechanical and teacher centred. It is not the case that a creative activity is a pointless one if it doesn't have an obvious meaningful outcome. Just giving students some space in the day to engage with their learning in a different way can help them to make connections within the work that would not have been possible through a mock-exam or worksheet. Remember, some of the greatest scientific

Remember, some of the greatest scientific discoveries of the last few centuries have come about through individuals or groups working in a creative way, **so allow some space for creativity when you are planning lessons.**

discoveries of the last few centuries have come about through individuals or groups working in a creative way, so allow some space for creativity when you are planning lessons.

COLLAGE

Collaging is a skill much neglected in the classroom. It gives younger children valuable practice at refining their fine motor skills and older ones the opportunity to have some quiet thinking time about a topic before putting pen to paper. I remember happy hours spent chopping up magazines and newspapers when I was little, and I have taken what I found to be a valuable experience for expressing myself into the classroom.

So, how should you go about this? Most schools have a pile of old magazines in the staffroom. Snaffle them away (you might need to ask the librarian if they have control of old magazines) and the next time you start a topic, ask the children to get chopping and make a collage of their initial ideas. Alternatively, ask parents to collect old magazines and weekend supplements for you to use in the classroom.

Watching the students cutting out images and developing ideas to make a pictorial representation of the topic is a joy. By necessity they have to learn to cooperate with each other, and the collaborative work they produce can be an excellent starter for lessons. For example, you could begin by showing them their collage and saying, 'Well, last lesson we thought this. Can you tell me how your thinking has changed in three sentences/ adjectives?' This can provide a starting point for many conversations and, more importantly, reflections on the learning that has taken place. As an added bonus, if you put the work on the wall your classroom will be a celebration of the children's work, as it should be.



RECYCLING

Some objects can be upcycled to make for stimulating and engaging lessons. Many teachers buy their own supplies to take into school, but one way to spend less is to use pound shops or hunt for useful items in charity shops or jumble sales.⁶

I find reusing old books really satisfying because the children use them in some very interesting ways. One technique that is particularly successful is to use a book as a background to an artwork linked to topic or subject work. It is even better if the children are working on a page from a book which is related to the subject they have been studying – for example, drawing a volcano on an old map or geography textbook, or visualising Boo from *To Kill A Mocking Bird* on a page of writing from the novel. Once the children have been artistic with old books, pages can be photocopied and blown up to make into wall displays.

You might also consider using second-hand books in more radical ways. This is not for the book-vandalism-squeamish, but cutting books up to find key paragraphs of interest can work really well for encouraging children to identify writing styles, literary techniques or genres. Use the cut-ups as a

⁶ Thanks to @wallaceisabella for her thoughts on this: Isabella Wallace, Poundstore Pedagogy - Inspiration in the Aisles, *Osiris Educational* (11 March 2013). Available at: <http://osiriseducational.co.uk/osirisblog/blog/poundstore-pedagogy-inspiration-in-the-aisles/>.

* Being a teacher geek is all about celebrating a real love of teaching and learning.

* Being a teacher geek means taking real pleasure in engaging your learners by using resources in creative ways.

* Teacher geeks exploit all potential learning opportunities, take risks and solve problems.

Here, Rachel Jones shows you how to blend edu-geeky analogue and digital teaching techniques and offers suggestions on how to inspire your students, revitalise your practice and gain the rapt attention of your class. You have nothing to lose and everything to gain by trying out a few new ideas in your classroom because, let's face it, there is more to life than worksheets.

A thoroughly enjoyable read that prompts any teacher to trust themselves and challenge their students. ... Practical, informative, enjoyable; what's not to like?

Daniel Edwards, director of digital learning, Stephen Perse Foundation

This is a permission-giving book whose core message is 'recapture your classroom'. It won't be to everyone's taste and nor should it be. But if you've ever discerned the inner desire to draw on desks or wondered wistfully what it would be like to write on windows, this is most definitely the book for you.

Keven Bartle, head teacher, Canons High School

Rachel's advice is to be brave, take risks and tweak and adapt resources (including our environment, images, sound and music) creatively so that they serve as a 'hook for learning'. By being flexible and imaginative we can put a new spin on things, think differently and adopt a new perspective, while still being ourselves.

Jill Berry, education consultant, former head teacher

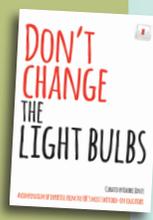
Reading Rachel's book reminded me of the fun of being a student and of the fun that I can have as a teacher. Within a short space of time, my copy will be dog eared and sticky-noted with lots of marginal notes describing the things that have worked for me and the things I want to try next.

Dr James W. Anderson, associate dean, University of Southampton



@RLJ1981

Rachel Jones, who loves sharing ideas, is a Google Certified Teacher interested in creativity and innovation in the classroom. She thrives on trying new things and engaging and empowering students. Her blog - createinnovateexplore.com - was a finalist in the 2013 EduBlog awards and was recommended by the *Guardian* as a must-read for 2014. She is a regular blogger for *The Huffington Post* and is a lively contributor on Twitter.



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