

**How to be a Brilliant English Teacher** Trevor Wright (2007) London and New York: Routledge (Taylor and Francis Group) ISBN: 0-415-33246-X £15.99 178 pp

*How to be a Brilliant English Teacher* is an invaluable text for all English teachers who wish to hone their practice. It is very accessible, written in a light, at times entertaining, style and does what it claims: it differentiates between good and brilliant teaching. It tackles a range of issues from planning and evaluating to teaching Shakespeare, poetry, drama and longer texts. Wright deals with the big, important issues in English teaching but also covers the little things, providing sensible and practical advice such as who should read which parts of the text and why.

The first section, on teaching Shakespeare, quite rightly focuses on connecting with the pupils. It includes, in order to maximise learning opportunities and pupil enjoyment, teacher editing of the text. The author explains, convincingly, how the tradition of translating the text for pupils has no place in effective teaching and points up the sections in the text that literally sum up what has gone before. What is, perhaps, missing here is the advice that it is also good practice to alleviate pupils' anxieties about this approach by sharing the thinking with them. However, he also convinces us that when dealing with large texts it is good practice to be selective about which parts are read, and to study in more detail those scenes relevant to the chosen focus. This goes against a more traditional approach, which would claim that a text is a literary work that must be treated in its entirety. But Wright convinces us by the argument that the pupil experience is paramount.

On lesson planning, the author reminds us that good planning creates trust, security, good behaviour and progressive learning. He reiterates the need to keep in mind the perspective of the pupil, in order to anticipate possible reactions, associations and confusions. Wright has an insightful way of bringing us closer to a truth that we have always known, when, for example, he states "Good teachers understand knowledge but brilliant teachers understand ignorance". He recommends planning lessons so that teachers and learners move towards the key learning and create the situation where pupils require the language (for example similes) that describes it.

When discussing the management of the learning it is gratifying that Wright destroys the myth of the appeal of charismatic delivery and instead endorses the view that it is good planning that makes the students' work accessible, purposeful and enjoyable. He asserts that brilliant teachers express the key concepts in several different ways and that they highlight the connections between different parts of the lesson, since it is at those points that the best learning often occurs. Through, for example, many practical suggestions for lesson beginnings, Wright explicates the good practice that has become totally intuitive to experienced teachers yet must be spelled out for newcomers to the profession. With humour he sets out the types of questions to avoid, the way to approach topics to ensure pupil engagement and the need to start with the concrete experiences of the pupils.

Chapter 6 is entitled Evaluation although much of the content is likely to be familiar to readers under the heading of formative assessment. Wright advocates that in order to adapt the learning and teaching to suit pupils' needs, the teacher should evaluate throughout the lesson, and gives helpful tips on how to do this. Again, as in other parts of the text, there are suggestions here about

pupils taking joint responsibility with the teacher for evaluating the learning as well as in the final phase.

On working with big texts, the author confronts head-on the main problems facing English teachers, namely the twin dangers of either reducing the text to exam preparation or allowing it to dominate the entire English curriculum for a lengthy period of time. Quite rightly, the author advocates combining the assessment requirements of the course work with the intrinsic and pleasurable learning opportunities it affords. He reminds us also of how powerful prediction is to the enjoyment and understanding of texts and the fact that it engages pupils. If prediction is a reading 'hook', then it is a good to have pupils practise it on a weekly basis while reading a large text. We are also reminded of the importance of sharing with pupils *why* certain activities are being undertaken and how they link to subsequent ones. Class activities such as 'the trial' are perfectly structured to support pupils to move on to discursive writing, but he rightly asserts that the teacher and the pupils need to be aware of this.

The chapter on drama is as interesting and informative as the others. Wright reminds us of the need to keep urging the pupils to visualise the scene on the stage, and where and how characters might be positioned. He confronts the difficult issue of how to maintain good behaviour in lessons that demand freedoms in order to unlock creativity. In recognition of the real need to create opportunities for discovery and uncertainty, there is also a less rigid focus on learning objectives. And interesting and inspiring games are explained and discussed in a way that really makes you want to go and teach them.

The final chapter, on differentiation, presents insights into the anxieties about this issue that most good English teachers experience. It reassures them that they are already doing much in the way of differentiation, and then goes beyond the most common strategies to explore some of Wright's own, such as the teacher rotating her focus. He suggests that teachers spend about three weeks focussing on a particular group in the class, giving a little more detail in the marking, spending a little more time discussing and questioning them and so on. After that time the teacher would move on to another group. Wright reminds us that differentiation takes effect in the language we employ with different pupils and in the variety of approaches we provide as well as offering pupils choices in activities.

This text offers plenty of detailed, practical advice for managing the learning in the classroom while also tackling the more demanding, bigger issues facing English teachers. It is full of good sense, is thoroughly engaging and inspires one to teach.

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