Towards a pedagogy of 'clown': using archetypes of clown to develop a model of effective primary science teaching

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Abstract

This paper suggests a model of classroom delivery and transformative pedagogy of teaching primary science based on archetypes of 'clown' (Bala, 2010; Gaulier, 2016), 'clown' being an embodiment of dualities of silly and serious, play and work and, in the classroom context, as an agent for transformation through imagination, learning and play.

This study is situated in the context of Initial Teacher Education (ITE) in the UK and focuses on the development of a model of practice devised from studying films of primary science lessons and reflective dialogue from teachers featured in these. There are sixteen teachers featured; eight are from high schools where science has a high curriculum profile and levels of expertise, and their practice is contrasted with eight practitioners working in schools where science has a lower profile.

From an analysis of the films, a model of pedagogy based on the emerging commonalities between all participants has been devised. This paper reports on early, and tentative, findings of the study.

Keywords: Primary science, pedagogy, clown, PCK

Background

What do you think of when I say the word 'clown'? Do you smile and recollect happy childhood experiences of circuses and parties, or do you feel a chill of apprehension at the memory of a particularly gruesome horror film? Do you visualise the cartoonish face of a 'Ronald MacDonald', or the intellectual and physical challenges of a Cirque du Soleil? Either way, I'm sure you will have some mental image of what 'clown' means to you.

We all hold a cultural image of 'clown' (Butler, 2012) and some would go further and argue that we recognise cultural archetypes like that of the jester or clown, in the Jungian sense of re-occurring motifs and themes or patterns that are found in all cultures (Bala, 2010). What about a 'classroom clown'? Now, perhaps, you have another image, one that may strike a note of discord or irritation, or even perhaps admiration of a challenger of authority? And the teacher as clown? What image does that evoke?

This study is part of ongoing doctoral research into outstanding science teaching in primary schools and seeks to develop a transformative pedagogy based on an understanding of historic ideas of 'clown' (Gaulier, 1999, 2007; Wright, 2006; Bala, 2010; Amsden, 2016).

Unleashing your 'inner clown' as a pedagogy is not about being funny, although it can be fun. 'Clown' is used here as an archetype, a recognisable and re-occurring motif, an embodiment of dualities of silly and serious, play and work and, in the classroom context, as an agent for transformation through imagination, learning and play.

The idea of 'serious play', that which is creative, liminal and embraces uncertainty, has been developed recently in many industries as a vehicle for problem-solving and communication in work-related contexts (Schrage, 2000). I seek to deconstruct the more ancient idea of 'clown' as an embodiment of serious play in a classroom context and to identify and exemplify strategies and techniques that can be used to inform effective practice.

This paper reports on work completed to identify models of classroom delivery based on the principles embodied in traditional and modern ideas of 'clown'.

Context

This study is situated in the context of Initial Teacher Education (ITE) in the UK and focuses on the development of a model of practice devised from studying films of primary science lessons and reflective dialogue from teachers featured in these. The study was conducted over a two-year period as part of a larger ongoing study on the idea of 'fun' in primary science teaching and learning, and used a mixed methods approach, where observations of classroom science teaching, digital video records of teaching inside the classroom, semi-structured individual and paired interviews and reflective dialogue from teachers commenting on film of their teaching took place. The data collected were transcribed, compared and contrasted and emerging themes identified. There was a specific focus on not only what the teachers said that their intentions for learners were, but also on what they did. The physicality of teachers and their use of the body became a strong emergent theme and resonated strongly with both the classical and modern ideas of the European practice of 'clown' (Lecoq, 2000).

From an analysis of the films, a model of pedagogy based on the emerging commonalities between all participants has been devised.

Research question

The question central to the research is:

- How do recognised outstanding teachers of science embody the ideas of 'clown' in their practice?

And, subsequent to this:

- Can a model of clown pedagogy support student teachers in understanding what excellent teaching in primary science looks like?

Research design

A realist approach was taken in this study with a pragmatic aim of finding out 'what worked' in the context of primary science teaching (Pawson, 2006, 2013; Oliver, 2012; Edwards *et al,* 2014). Sixteen teachers in eight schools participated in the study, which followed a mixed methods design based around ideas of video-stimulated reflective dialogue (Moyles *et al,* 2003; Powell, 2004; Husu, Toom & Patrikainen, 2006; Muir & Beswick, 2007).

The schools were diverse, ranging from small rural schools to large estate schools, private, state and faith schools. The participating teachers had varying degrees of experience of between three and over twenty-five years, and all but two were female, which reflects the sector as a whole. Teachers were sampled from all year groups, so evidence was gathered of science teaching from Nursery and Reception through to Year 6 (age 11).

The fieldwork took place over two years and in two stages. I felt it important in sampling that recognition of achievements in science teaching came from independent sources and were not determined by my own views on what excellence might look like. In Stage 1, eight teachers were recruited, six of whom had won awards from the Primary Science Teaching Trust (PSTT) for excellent practice in teaching primary science and who were fellows of the Primary Science Teacher College. All eight of the first group of participants were science subject leads in schools that had achieved the highest level of award in the Primary Science Quality Mark (PSQM), which indicated that they were leading science in schools where science has a high profile and a shared understanding of good practice. These teachers formed the 'expert' group. The second phase of the research was exactly the same, with eight teachers involved, but this time they were general classroom practitioners with no specific interest in science. Many had other leadership roles in schools, but not for science, and none had been nominated for science-related awards. These teachers formed the 'general practice' group. It is important to emphasise that the 'general practice' group were all excellent classroom practitioners, but not specialists in science.

Teachers were filmed teaching curriculum lessons for science and these recordings were then played back to them straight after the lesson, or as close in time to the lesson as possible (usually within 48 hours as a maximum), in their classroom surroundings. They were asked to comment on their practice and to give a 'running commentary' on their pedagogical choices. This too was filmed and the researcher guided the responses to focus on these choices, with questions such as *'Can you tell me what you were thinking when you did…?'*, or *'Can you say a bit more about…?'*, etc. Participant responses were transcribed and compared and,

at a later date, some participants were re-interviewed individually and in groups to clarify themes.

A form of thematic analysis (Charmaz, 2006; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011) was employed to discern commonalities and differences between the classroom practices of the participants, which led to the creation of a model of pedagogy based on clown archetypes.

Early findings, interpretations and prototype model

In order to understand ideas of how a model of clown pedagogy could lead to improved practice outcomes of trainee teachers in primary science, it is necessary to have some knowledge of the historic clown archetypes. There are three historic types of clown: the 'Whiteface', the 'Auguste' and the 'Tramp'. The archetypes proved to be a useful 'shorthand' to explain different elements of practice. However, in plausibility testing it was found that the teachers did not like the names of the archetypes, particularly feeling that the idea of 'Tramp', although historically accurate, was derogatory. Therefore, I have changed them to 'Learning', 'Fun' and 'Authentic' for the current model.

The Whiteface clown, a descendent of Harlequin and, later, Pierrot (Ward, 2014; Buckmaster, 2019) is clever and sophisticated, his clothes are stylish and refined, he is in a position of power and control – the straight man to the comic Auguste. The Whiteface is the clown with authority; he is in charge and the person who tells the Auguste what to do. Clear in his objectives, he provides the leadership and the challenge. For me, this traditional clown embodies the 'Learning' aspect of the lesson.

Auguste is the fool, the slapstick, physical comedian and the originator of the jokes, the one who has the water thrown in his face at the circus, falls over, wears exaggerated clothing such as huge shoes or baggy trousers, has exaggerated make-up and a red nose. He (and it was always a he, until the mid-19th century) was an actor and a mime, sometimes a mimic using his whole body and facial expressions to make himself absurd (Simon, 2014; Bouissac, 2015). He is often mischievous, naughty and subversive. This clown embodies the 'Fun' aspect of learning.

Finally, there is a more modern embodiment of clown, which is associated with the idea of an 'everyman' or, in America, a 'tramp' character such as Charlie Chaplin (LeBank & Bridel, 2015). More amiable and in many ways more loveable and compassionate than the other forms, the tramp is the clown who tries and fails, and fails again. He is a naïve truth-seeker, embodies all of the authenticity, bewilderment and awkwardness of modern times and is the most naturalistic of the types. This clown's characteristics signify the relatability of the lesson to children's lives and represents 'Authenticity'.

Table 1. Clown characteristics.

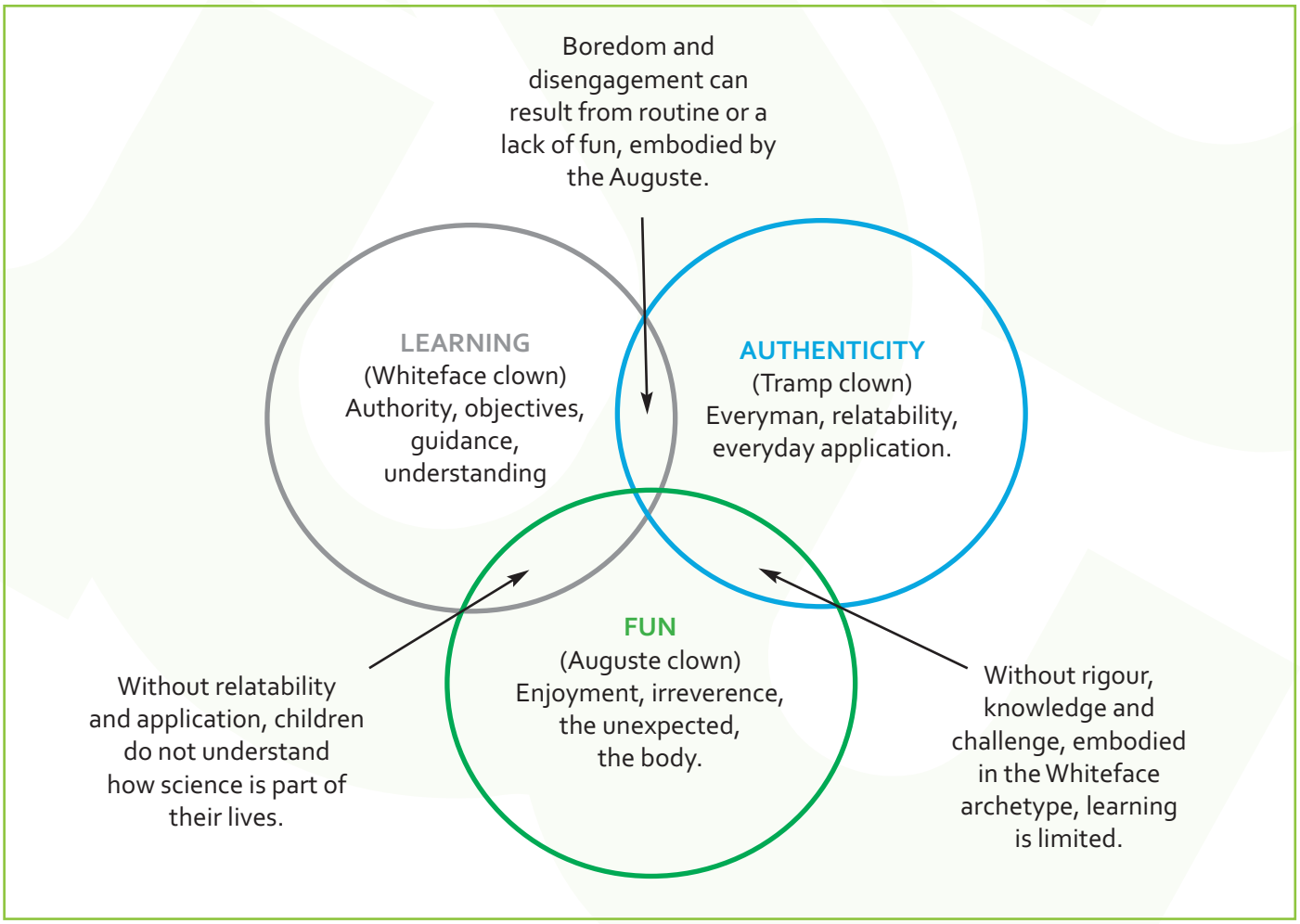
Characteristic	Example from teacher data (letter represents teacher identifier)
Teacher encourages children to move or mimic (Auguste/Fun)	N: Children mimic use of hand lenses and magnifiers and exaggerate the actions of focusing.
Exaggerated use of action/ ethology by teacher (Auguste/Fun)	N: Teacher mimes and exaggerates concept of 'chemical reaction' using body to illustrate 'fizzing' and 'exploding'.
Exaggerated use of voice by teacher (Auguste/Fun)	T: Increase in pitch and repeated exaggerated pronunciation of vocabulary.
Clothing or prop used by teacher or child (Auguste/Fun)	T: Teacher wears oversized white coat and adopts 'professor' persona.
Learning is directly controlled (Whiteface/Learning)	J: Explicit objective written on board and related to curriculum. Success criteria explained. Both recapped at end of lesson.
Learning relatable to children's experiences (Tramp/Relatability)	A: Learning is contextualised in terms of a popular film on release at the time.

The characteristics of 'clown' vary with the type of clown and this became important to recognise as the model developed. I looked at the films of the lessons once more and picked out particular clown behaviours that the teachers displayed. I wanted to identify some commonalities in the teaching of expert teachers and, in using clown characteristics as identifiers, this emerged as a very clear model. Clown characteristics observed are summarised in Table 1, with brief examples from the study.

What became apparent as the study progressed was that the 'expert' group portrayed some very different pedagogical characteristics from the 'general practice' group, most specifically in their physicality. There appeared to be no noticeable differences between experienced or less experienced teachers, and age, gender and locality did not appear to be significant factors either. All of the 'expert' group used their bodies and voices in far more exaggerated ways than did the 'general practice' group; for example, they would hyper-enunciate words, use exaggerated facial expressions, mime and use props and costumes either for themselves or the children to heighten the sense of the dramatic. This was something not observed in the 'general practice' group. There was more attention paid to the affective dimension of the lesson in the 'expert' group also – much more of an emphasis on the children enjoying science and having fun, and the teachers were keen in the reflective interviews to draw attention to that aspect of their practice. For example, one teacher said, *'If you make it more fun for them then you're ahead. You've got a much better chance of them learning something'.*

The 'expert' science teachers showed a clear preference for more active involvement, more novel context and approaches and a more dramatic, theatrical approach to structuring learning in science. The 'general practice' group were not exclusively without these traits, but demonstrated them less often. Practitioners in the 'expert' group all incorporated elements of the three archetypes of clown in their practice. The non-expert teachers did not and concentrated more on the 'Learning' elements and didactic

Figure 1. Pedagogy of clown: A model.



pedagogical approaches, favouring the 'Fun' and the 'Authentic/Relatable' elements less. However, it became clear that it was in the interaction of all the elements in the model that the practice of the 'expert' group was situated and that over-emphasis of any of the three elements, or a lack of any one, could lead to less successful outcomes.

The practice of the 'expert' group suggests that their pedagogy contains aspects of all three archetypes of clown and resides in the central portion of the diagram. The model also highlights some effects of being without the characteristics of one of the triad of archetypes. This was clear in the films, where there were examples of children being too engaged in the fun elements of a science lesson, losing sight of the learning and so not being able to relate any learning that did happen to their own lives, or alternatively, where, although children were compliant and being effectively 'instructed', they found little enjoyment in the lesson. This resonates with the latest findings from Ofsted (2019) on 'Intention and Substance' in primary science, where they found that many schools had engaged only superficially with the objectives of the National Curriculum for Science and that many schools had weaknesses in developing children's scientific knowledge and understanding of scientific concepts.

Concluding thoughts

A useful model to define teacher knowledge stems from Shulman's (1986, 1987) work on pedagogical content knowledge (PCK). He suggests three types of knowledge: knowledge of our subject, the 'content' knowledge; knowledge of instructional methods, our pedagogical knowledge; and the knowledge that Shulman (1986, 1987) suggests is unique to teachers, our pedagogical content knowledge. This is how teachers relate what they know about teaching to what they know about what they teach.

It is my suggestion that we can aid student teachers to develop their pedagogical content knowledge in an imaginative and enjoyable way through unpicking and deconstructing the practice of outstanding teachers in the application of a pedagogical model based around archetypes of clown. This is a work in progress and the study is now in the post-testing plausibility phase. Early results are promising and teachers have recognised the elements of the model as 'making sense'. However, whether it helps students in their practice remains to be tested, but is planned for the coming academic year. The model of the three dimensions of 'clown' deconstructs what is in reality one cohesive act of teaching by each individual involved but, by this explicit deconstruction, it is hoped that beginning teachers can reach a more complete understanding of the individual elements of effective practice in science teaching as demonstrated by the 'expert group' and that this will inspire them to emulate this in their own classrooms.

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