

EARLY CAREERS IN EDUCATION

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EARLY CAREERS IN EDUCATION: PERSPECTIVES FOR STUDENTS AND NQTS

EDITED BY

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

*This book is dedicated to those who are about to or have just entered
a career in education, and to our students and colleagues,
past, present and those we are yet to meet.*

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FOREWORD

Education is one of the most dynamic, professionally demanding and politicised careers one can enter in the UK. This book arose out of the need for a source which provides advice, guidance and information on a range of topics which are of primary concern to those about to enter a career in Education. The chapters are ones which take on the voice of a colleague who wishes to give the reader an insight in to some of the most pertinent and important areas of practice likely to be encountered by an early career practitioner in Education. A career in Education is often automatically thought to be that of a classroom practitioner and indeed many of the chapters are primarily but not exclusively concerned with this. However, the chapters will be of benefit to those entering in to careers which also might include the charity, arts and cultural contexts. Of particular interest (and pride to the editor) is the section provided by Newly Qualified Teachers, some of whom have entered in to careers in mainstream Education provision and others who have taken alternative paths. Their insights in to what to expect during an Initial Teacher Education course are of immense value and should, I hope, provide you with inspiration and reassurance. The book is divided into sections, each of which pertains to an area of educational practice or knowledge. All of the chapters stand on their own and can be read in isolation or as part of the section in which they are situated. The chapters contain discussion and reflection points which should allow you to consider your own experience and opinions on the author's topic.

I and all the Education staff at Northumbria University invite you to critically engage with the book. Challenge the author's position and make the topics your own and we wish you the very best at this, your early steps in a career in Education.

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Section 1

PROFESSIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

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ALIAS THE JESTER – WHAT CAN CLOWNS TELL US ABOUT TEACHING?

Sean McCusker

INTRODUCTION

This chapter discusses the tradition of clowning from the perspective of an educator. The resonant philosophies between the two professions are highlighted and questions are asked ‘Is there something which educators can learn from clowning?’ Should all teachers embody some of the ‘clown spirit’?

There has long been a place for the clown in society. Through the guises of fool or jester, he sat with Kings, priests and peasants, entertaining and questioning each with impunity. The clown as we would recognise him today emerged at the end of the Renaissance, having left behind the name ‘fool’ as a pejorative term but still maintaining his role to question, to parody, to play. In his subversion, he drives the audience to question their beliefs and assumptions. By subverting and inverting convention, the clown opens up the space of what can be thought, expressed and discussed.

Modern day clowning follows an age-old tradition, with a set of principles and beliefs expounded by proponents of the profession. Throughout the philosophies of clowning, themes of subversion, inversion, play and challenge recur ([Billington, 2015](#); [Laanela & Sacks, 2015](#); [Peacock, 2009](#)). These same ideas have a place in the classroom, not as everyday practice but perhaps as a leitmotif.

CLOWNS IN EDUCATION

In the royal court of Medieval and Renaissance periods, the jester had a unique privilege in having the licence, through his foolishness, to question or disagree with the King. This served to keep the king grounded in reality and make him answerable to at least one other. We as teachers need that same grounding to remain answerable to our pupils and to leave ourselves open to doubt and question.

There is a historical precedence for the subversive element of clowning dating back to at least the sixteenth century. At Cambridge University, at that time, examinations were oral rather than written (Stray, 2001) and students submitted themselves to examination by disputation or argument with a former graduate known as the ‘Bachelor of the Stool’ (Stubbings, 1995). There is some evidence that this character engaged in this process as a clown or jester upon a 3-legged stool, hence becoming known as Mr Tripos (Denning, 1995). This approach of challenging academic knowledge through ridicule and satire was not restricted to this isolated case. Equivalents are found in the Tripos of Trinity College, Dublin and the Terrae Filius at Oxford (Rembret & Sears, 1988). These characters would challenge and puncture academic certainty and superciliousness. This tradition appeared to enjoy popularity throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries (Rembret & Sears, 1988), eventually being suppressed in the eighteenth century (Chainey, 1995).

BRING BACK THE CLOWNS

In these contemporary times, when we need to consider the nature of knowledge and what is worth knowing, it may be time to reintroduce the clown into the classroom. ‘Class clown’ is now a pejorative term, which neglects the historical importance of that role. There is potential for revisiting the dynamics of the classroom through the recognition of the important role that the clown can play in society. By looking outside of the teaching profession we can see ideas and techniques from which we can borrow or learn to enhance our own methods and practices which have been shaped to a large degree by a certain uniformity of our own pedagogical training.

Through the practices and philosophies of expert clowns, we can identify many pedagogically useful traits prominently manifested. We can see the effect that these have on their audience and if we want to see those valuable skills clearly demonstrated we should look to the great masters of clowning (LeBank & Bridel, 2015) to understand how they develop and embody

those skills and consider how we might foster them within our own teaching practice.

CLOWNS IN THE CLASSROOM

Nalle Laanela, a modern clown from whom we will hear more later in this chapter, tells us that for him clowning has moved beyond simply making people laugh. Through his work with Clowns Without Borders (Sweden) in areas of catastrophe, such as Rwanda, Syria and Myanmar, he has taken clowning to the level of a humanitarian action and tool for social change demonstrating that the clown still has an important role to play in our society ‘comforting the disturbed and disturbing the comfortable’. This work and philosophy show that there is value in taking ownership of the term ‘clown’ and taking pride in being able to embody the clown spirit, to challenge, to subvert and to question. In practice, clowning offers teachers the opportunity to create environments which engender the clown spirit in others, allowing learners to develop the skills to allow them to become independent, creative and critical thinkers.

The changing nature of the educational environment presents challenges to the role of the teacher within the classroom. The ubiquity of technology, with its accompanying access to information and expertise, brings into question the traditional ideas about the nature of education and the position of the teacher. The established roles as ‘sage on the stage’, deliverer of knowledge or all round ‘know-it-all’ are called into question. In a time of ‘fake news’, distrust of expertise and establishments and information overload, the skills and knowledge which are valued need to be reconsidered. Many of the skills we teach today may well become obsolete or at least less relevant in 20 years. Yet others will always have currency and be valuable to young people as they make their way through life. Critical thinking, problem-solving and information literacy have become valuable commodities in helping young people to navigate the social and professional environment in which they will find themselves. The teacher’s role and identity within this need to adapt to keep up to date with the new learning environment.

CLOWN WISDOM

The *Clown Manifesto* by [Nalle Laneela and Stacey Sacks \(2015\)](#) provides some great insights into the philosophy of clowning. It highlights some of those key principles and techniques for clowns which we would seek to absorb or adapt

to our practice as educators. In this text, reinforced by insights from other prominent clowns, one finds many ideas which one could take into teaching.

They start by laying out ‘The clowns’ ten commandments’:

1. Enjoy the game.
2. Connect with your audience.
3. Comfort the disturbed, disturb the comfortable.
4. Don’t try to be funny, be real.
5. Have a bag of tricks.
6. If it’s funny, do it again, more.
7. If it doesn’t work, try something else.
8. Start under your audience’s energy level and bring them up with you to a climax.
9. Dare to fail.
10. Dare to really succeed.
11. Accept presents from the clown gods.

Each of these commandments can be interpreted in terms of educational practice. However, for the purposes of this chapter we shall focus on just a few points: Commandments 2, 4 and 9 – connecting, being real and daring to fail.

CONNECTING

The principle of Laanela and Sacks’s manifesto is to ‘create tools that all performers can use to enhance their connection to their audiences’ (p. 7). Laneela (p. 6) says that for any performer in front of an audience, their primary art, regardless of their discipline, is ‘to connect with your audience’.

In terms of educational practice, connecting can be seen as feedback. Feedback in its truest sense, which is where the teacher is in tune with the learner in a two-way process where there is a constant adjustment based on an awareness of what it is that the pupil understands and experiences.

There is plenty of evidence on the positive effects of feedback ([Education Endowment Foundation, 2020](#)) and this concept of ‘connecting’ closely resembles informal formative feedback. The best performers maintain a connection with their audience. In the same way as teachers should, they adapt

and modify their delivery, sometimes in very subtle ways, through monitoring their audience reaction and gauging that reaction. Through a close connection with their pupils, a teacher will learn what is being received well and understood and what is not reaching their students and hopefully change their practice in action. Donald [Schon \(1991\)](#) talks of this as ‘reflection in action’, where an action generates an effect and this effect is feedback for the professional. Allowing them to reaffirm or to adapt their approach and continue their ‘conversation with the situation’ in their next action. Laneela echoes this ‘conversation’ where he describes the same process as consistently having an awareness of how the audience is affected and refers to this connection as a ‘dialogue’. This constant and active process of monitoring and adaptation is what Sacks calls ‘a constant pulsation between clown and audience’ (p. v). One of the clowning masters, Peter Shub, goes further to make that case that the performer needs to enjoy themselves, have fun or the audience will sense it. This remains true for teaching, as feedback can take many forms. It can be formal or informal and anywhere in-between. It can be verbal, non-verbal, intentional or non-intentional. If you are not enthused or interested in your own material, your audience will sense it.

BEING REAL

As educators, we need to discover our own professional identities. Not through imitation, but through observation and emulation, take those traits which align with our own teaching philosophies and personality and make them our own and through this develop our own teaching personae.

Where Laneela (and other clowns) talk about developing their identity, they insist that clowns must discover their own clown identity. Laneela talks of how he found his ‘clown calling’ when he trained under a ‘small Italian clown teacher’, but subsequently spent years as a ‘large white male’ trying to be a small ‘Italian, female clown’. In this we have a lesson about developing our own identities, our teacher identities and our clown identities. Whilst we can learn much about the teachers we want to be, through role models and exemplars, we need to leave the space for us to develop and grow our own identities. This might seem a bit obvious in teaching but if we hope to develop our clown spirit as teachers, we will have far fewer role models and we will need to take care that we develop these in line with our own personalities, that we are ‘real’. David Larible, another clown master, reinforces this point. Whilst he enjoins us to learn by observation, he also cautions that this should not lead to copying. Nevertheless, he accepts that when starting out, before

developing a repertoire it is necessary to copy, in the process of developing your own identity and material. So it was with Laneela, who accepts that despite some disasters, many of the ideas copied from a small Italian woman did indeed work for him, a large Swedish man.

Peter Shub makes the claim that there is dormant clown in each of us; that we need to listen to our own clowns, to bring them to the surface. Without his audience, he doesn't exist. David Larible believes that it is not the person who chooses the clown identity, but the clown which inhabits the person, as though possessed by a clown spirit entity.

Although Laanela and Sacks discuss aspects of clowning which involve acting and the inhabiting of other characters, they make the point that acting a role often involves the eradication of the self and this lack of authenticity can have negative outcomes for both clowns and teachers. They remind us that it is our patterns of behaviour, our habits, our ticks which make us interesting and it is in these that our strengths lie. These should be capitalised upon rather than deprecated. We should teach to our characteristics, our strengths and personalities and so avoid imitating or 'acting' as other teachers. Pupils and audiences are sensitive to the performer, they will recognise inauthentic or manufactured 'fake' persona and not react well to them.

DARE TO FAIL

Nalle Laanela tells us 'The essence of clown is not "stupidity"' (Laanela & Sacks, 2015, p. 19) and 'It's not about acting stupid, it's about daring to be perceived as stupid' (Laanela & Sacks, 2015, p. 15). Here he sees stupidity in the form of naivety, an innocence and openness to understanding the world around you. As a young child's misunderstanding is not due to stupidity but naivety, so may make us laugh but also on occasion be insightful.

Many times we hear teachers try to reinforce the idea that 'there are no stupid questions'. How better to engender this environment through the principle of not being afraid to appear stupid, within an environment where such appearances are not frowned upon or judged in a negative light?

By playing the role of the clown, who inverts and subverts, teachers and pupils become practiced in the act of questioning their own beliefs and testing them through other existing knowledge structures. As David Konyot has it, as a clown

You are the one who's allowed to comment. You are the one who is allowed to criticize. You are the little boy who tells the emperor he has no clothes on. (LeBank & Bridel, 2015, p. 111)