

# TELLING TALES OUT OF SCHOOL

Chris Lowe and friends

Number 32

## Making Ends Meet

My first teaching post was at a school in Croydon. In 1961 my starting salary, even with the London weighting, was just £525 per year.... about £40 per month after deductions. In order to pay our rent and then our mortgage I had to supplement our income, and I did this by teaching evening classes a couple of times a week at the local Further Education College. The lessons were to young apprentices, who had to take compulsory '*Uses of Literacy*' courses as part of their professional certification. I am not sure what the presumption was – that plumbers and electricians ought to be literate, which is a reasonable aim, or the course ought to have some academic underpinning, which is outrageously condescending.

Whichever it was, a worthy or unworthy aim, you will not be surprised that the vast majority.... every year... did not want anything to do with it..... On the other hand, they were more than happy to show their displeasure.... in the usual ways – too painful for me to recount now, or even recall!

It was certainly vital for me to grab their interest, even if for only a few minutes of the hour-long sessions. Why? Well, simply because I needed the money and I needed the '*Use of Literacy*' course to continue....and me to be its tutor. My first group turned out to be much the same as the ones that followed.

The immediate task, it seemed to me, was to improve their grammar, spelling and punctuation – not the most attractive of missions for educating plumbers, electricians and bricklayers. They were not taken in by my claim that they would benefit by being able to write a good job application or a polite request for a client to pay an outstanding bill. 'We've got our own ways for those,' they told me. 'We've never had any problem getting people to understand us.'

'Well, you have to attend the course or you won't get your professional certificate, so how about treating it as a challenge, then? Achieving something you have never managed before?' That appealed to them. Much more attractive.

'Right, ' said Lenny the Ladder, an apprentice scaffolder, ' I'll give it a go....but only so long as you don't bore the pants off me, right?' Lenny was fond of adding 'Right' to all his pronouncements. It gave them an earthy gravitas. And he was such a leader that all the others began to emulate him. The class rebounded with 'rights', 'rights'.

'Right, Lenny,' I countered, 'it's a deal.' The rest of the group, nineteen rather well built late teenage blokes and one equally well built female bloke, a trainee woodworker, fell in line.

I strained hard...very, very, hard to make it fun. A joke here, a mystery there, laughter everywhere - anything to disguise the fact that I was on a knife-edge.

We all trod gingerly round the edges of what they on one hand saw as a terribly boring exercise of pure learning, and me, on the other hand, ....well, what I clutched at was an indispensable provider of income!

The technique that appealed to them most – to my surprise – was my invention of '*the cat sat on the mat*' routine..... the learner's easy guide to learning punctuation, and sentence construction.

To illustrate this. Their most common error, stemming from their lack of basic understanding of the vagaries of English grammar, (and this is true of many teenagers today, too) was to sprinkle commas, or no punctuation at all, where full stops should have been applied. I attacked this head on.

I used *'The cat sat on the mat. It lapped its milk.'* to demonstrate the use of a full-stop, which could only be got rid of by a joining word *'and'* or *'but'* or by making one of the sentences into a clause, not a sentence – *'When the cat sat on the mat it lapped its milk.'* or *'Before the cat sat on the mat, it lapped its milk.'* It was a last throw, a bit of an act of desperation.

Unaccountably they cottoned on to this – in their own inimitable way! First, they demanded to know the name of the cat.

Right. Fair enough.

I thought of 'Sam' – since my family had once looked after a friend's Siamese 'Sam', which had ripped my shirt to pieces when I had offered it tinned cat food instead of salmon - a delicacy Sam had grown up on. He was not going to compromise....!

But my lads.... and girl.... rejected that immediately, simply because one of them had a girlfriend, Sam.

Right. Fair enough!

They threw out more – 'Tabby', 'Orlando', 'Moggy' (that got close to acceptance but two carpenters considered that 'our cat' deserved a better name), 'Felix'? No, too corny.... Right.

Right. Fair enough.

We eventually hit.... unanimously.... on *'Figgy'*....And why? Simply because one apprentice plumber, Luigi, announced that he had had a cat called Figaro. His plumber dad was mad keen on Mozart's operas.... after Verdi's and Puccini's. He was especially fond of *'The Marriage of Figaro'*. That did it. The rest of the class consented.... I suspect because they were utterly bewildered by the reason, totally fed-up with coming up with more names.... and Luigi was even bigger than Lenny.

So, for the rest of the ten week term they made up hundreds of versions of *'the cat'* and *'the mat'*, and why it *'sat'*. And they loved it. I did not know why then.... and I do not know why now.

I had to incorporate the two sentences into everything I taught them. If I went on too long at some other exercise, they would demand to know if my cat was ill, or was stuck on the mat!

So, I used this for evermore in my teaching – at the college and at every school in which I taught. I usually ended with a challenge for the longest correctly punctuated sentence, which did not use the same word twice (except for the definite and indefinite articles and words of two letters). Everywhere I went it was a hit.

The most imaginative response to the exercise was by a smart eleven-year old (now, by the way, an eminent professor):

*'When the cat had at last seen fit to sit down, having found a convenient mat on which to perform this deed, and after having discovered milk, which had been placed in a bowl, she, or possibly 'he', decided that it might be delightful to consume the said liquid as quickly as possible, and so the feline practised a lapping movement with its tongue, which turned out to be just right for the task in hand, or paw, so that it very soon finished all the beverage, leaving it with a satisfied look on its face, and a great deal of whiteness around the mouth.'*

I never got any longer ones – that were correct in every respect. I just wish it had been a carpenter or plumber! That would have been a real coup!

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