

OH, CAPTAIN MY CAPTAIN

REFLECTIONS ON A REST DAY



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Having a rest day is something all educators look forward to after an intense period of work. How do educators spend this much-needed downtime? Some may just choose to snooze or chill with a relaxing massage. Others may indulge in a buffet spread or ice-cream fantasy while catching up with family and friends. Yet others will do some retail therapy as nothing beats the sensation of spending some hard-earned money. Sadly, some educators spend a good part of their rest day catching up with work. Let's be honest, the work never ends.

One of my favourite ways to spend a rest day is to sprawl on the sofa and watch a good movie especially one that resonates with the mixture of emotions I feel: fatigue from lecturing and marking, a sense of satisfaction from the good feedback I have received for a workshop or course well delivered, a feeling of despair that a few students just can't understand the concepts or skills I have tried to explain countless times or even just a general feeling of "dryness" or a lack of creative energy to infuse the next session of training to deliver.

So what movie can help educators, to recharge, reboot and rewind?

Dead Poets Society

What? Is this a movie about Keats, Shakespeare or Frost? Poetry is not everyone's cup of tea. Before you judge a movie by its title, continue reading and you may be pleasantly surprised how much this movie has to offer educators. In fact, Dead Poets Society received many accolades including the BAFTA Award for Best Film and an Academy Award for Best Original Screenplay.

Dead Poet's Society is a 1989 movie that starred the late brilliant actor, Robin Williams, who was known more for his comic than serious ones. Williams played the protagonist, John Keating, who is the new English teacher sent to an elite all-boys preparatory school in Vermont, New England. The school is steeped in tradition and conservatism, and high standards are demanded of the students in both grades and behaviour. Keating is an ex-alumnus tasked with teaching the dry bones of English poetry to a senior high school class. However, he is anything but uninspiring although he was educated in the same cheerless and staid conformity long ago. Through his creative and often unorthodox teaching methods, Keating encourages his teenage students to look at life through many perspectives, develop their individual "voice" and to live their lives to the fullest. The movie has many funny and heart-warming moments but it also has its sad ones which reflect the reality of the helplessness we can feel in the face of tradition and differing viewpoints. I won't provide more specific details of the plot because one needs to watch the movie to experience its poignancy and truth.

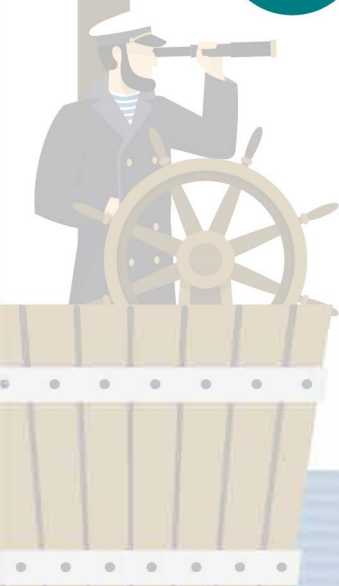
However, I will share four quotes from the movie that encourage me as I continue my daily journey (and toil) as a lecturer with the DAS academy:



Now in this class, you can either call me Mr Keating or if you're slightly more daring, O Captain, my Captain.



There is a certain truth in equating a teacher to that of a captain. A captain is an officer who commands a military unit or ship. It is the captain who leads his men or sailors to victory or defeat. I am the captain of each cohort of participants I teach. I can inspire and encourage them through the words I say and even my own enthusiasm and passion for learning and for teaching excellence. Many of my adult learners are just starting out in their teaching careers. This means I need to share my "growing up" experiences with them so they can see captains were first privates.





Carpe, carpe. Carpe diem. Seize the day, boys. Make your lives extraordinary!



Carpe Diem is a Latin phrase for "Seize the day". In the movie, it was Keating's call to action to his charges to make their lives rich and full. I am in the business of helping ordinary people become extraordinary teachers. Very often my fledging adult learners look at what they can't do now rather than what they will be able to do in the future. When we first begin teaching, we quite naturally tend to doubt ourselves as we struggle to put into practice the concepts and skills we were taught during the teacher training. However, these students have extraordinary hearts that led them to the profession of supporting learners with Special Education Needs. In time with lots of practice, their teaching will become extraordinary too. This must be my belief as I answer their repeated "blur" questions and mark their obtuse assignments. I must also continually seize those unplanned moments in training to inch them along the road to excellence in the classroom.



Just when you think you know something, you have to look at it in another way. Even though it may seem silly or wrong, you must try.



I cannot grow as a lecturer if I just stick to imparting well-trying ways in language and literacy support. I must continually challenge and refine best practices as all best practices must get better to stay the best.



There is a time for daring and there's a time for caution, and a wise man understands which is called for.



I believe that one of the hardest areas to develop in trainee teachers is the ability and confidence to make decisions in lesson planning and delivery. As a lecturer, I must also make the same decisions with regards to what and how. The ability and confidence to make pedagogical decisions are borne out of the experience and are also the product of learning and error. There is no shame in stumbling because I learn where I still lack and how much further I must go to attain the "wisdom" John Keating was referring to.

I hope you will experience for yourself the heart-warming and inspiring influence of Dead Poets Society on a rest day.

To my fellow captains in the DAS fraternity, carpe diem.

References

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