5.2 David Jenkins
Saved by the bell

A report by DRJ on Mr Bondine teaching 'Exploration Man' to 1C at Hardacre Lane.

This report is written in a spirit of self-doubt. It records what the observer, scarcely neutral, regarded as significant events. An attempt is made throughout to distinguish between evidence and interpretation, and the descriptive parts are written in a broadly referential language. This is not to deny that the interpretation is occasionally, or even frequently, emotive.

It seemed to the observer for a number of reasons that the critical factor in this curriculum environment was the verbal interaction between teacher and class. This was recorded carefully (the quotations are as verbatim as the technique of direct note-taking will allow).

A few preliminary comments

(*a*) The observer had been made aware previously of the isolation felt by this particular teacher, who has not found colleagues willing to work with him in a team situation and is uneasily 'going it alone'. The question is bound to arise: is this still to be regarded usefully as a trial school?

(*b*) A further issue exercising the Keele Integrated Studies Project team at the moment is the need to identify a core (any innovation needs to answer the question: precisely what is it that you are recommending?). Hardacre Lane is open to question on this score as Mr Bondine claims only the most general kind of 'inspiration' from the pack he is using. Theoretical notions of 'flexibility' apart, what does this actually mean in terms of curriculum events? This itself called for a careful analysis.

(*c*) The concern is for the underlying curriculum assumptions of a particular way of teaching, not teacher effectiveness as such. For this reason the observer has concentrated on the verbal tactics displayed in the Humanities lesson in the hope that these tactics would offer some insights into the general problems of teaching integrated studies.

Source: D. R. Jenkins (1969). 'Saved by the bell'. Internal report from the Keele Integrated Studies Project, published here for the first time.

Observations

DRJ arrives at school in the middle of morning assembly, and is shown to the staffroom by the member of staff on duty. The staffroom is full. Conversation continues, by-passing DRJ (meticulously); on the welcome proximity of the end of term; football and babies. Mr Bondine arrives, warm and welcoming. Bondine takes DRJ to 'my place', a large room with grouped desks and curtained library shelves. Maps of Tristan are pinned to the wall, alongside accounts of the imaginary hurricane that felled Hardacre Lane.

The pupils (from 1C) drift in. Bondine is explaining his teaching strategy: *Right off the cuff, boy* (indicating outline scheme for 'Exploration Man' which he taps emphatically with his knuckle). *All I need is the front page. These ideas you see . . . it comes off the top* (presumably indicating that his management of the class is intuitive, inspirational). *Make yourself at home.*

The lesson begins abruptly with a recall of previous work:

What is the Industrial Revolution?

The response is uncertain, so Bondine dramatises . . .

Say this is a TV quiz programme. I am the interviewer and (he selects a child by calling a forceful *you* and pointing a finger) *you are being quizzed* (adopts TV interviewer's pose). *Now tell me what is the Industrial Revolution?* The boy finds the dramatisation unhelpful (*don't look at the camera, boy*) but manages a definition: *A complete circle of industry, sir.*

(A sudden doubt here. Is this definition useful? Or does it arise out of 'dictionary work' and a failure to distinguish between social 'revolutions' and r.p.m.'s?)

Bondine accepts the *complete circle of industry.*

Good. How does it affect us?

Various pupils list industrial artifacts (*potbanks, sir . . . canals, sir*). But the next moves have already been decided.

When we think of the Industrial Revolution what book comes to mind? (a few unhelpful suggestions).

I mean comes especially to mind?

'Oliver Twist' is tentatively suggested.

Right! Oliver Twist!

The books are duly handed out by monitors. The books themselves are tatty, one-between-two. Interest is low.

Bondine offers an option. Would the class like to read the play of 'Oliver Twist' aloud or dramatise the story? There is a chorus in favour of reading aloud, although the alternative is kept attractively open (*wouldn't you prefer . . .*). The result of the vote is greeted with applause.

At this point Bondine passes by your observer. *A quick move into literature,* he explains. This lapse in confrontation causes the class to renew private conversation. Two lads in the far corner (one recently

absent) are talking about the fish floating dead in the green water of one of Bondine's tanks. It was later explained to me that the fish had terminated a project on 'fish' and initiated one on 'death and decomposition'.

You! What are you talking about?

The boy (with genuine feeling), *The fish, sir! The fish. It's dead!* (Chorus: *Didn't you know that!*). Bondine follows 'the flow of interest'.

It's stopped breathing hasn't it? But we don't want to go into the circulation of the blood just now.

(A little puzzling this; but evidently one of those opportunist moments through which it is legitimate to digress in quest of clarity.)

Could a really clever scientist bring that fish back to life? It's dead. (Chorus of doubt. DRJ wonders about the question as put. Just what would count as evidence?)

What is the most important . . . What do we associate with the brain? (Continued puzzled responses.)

What, so we are told, is the state of—the difference—so we are told, between man and, you know that, the animals?

(A confusing question. The double qualification *so we are told* suggested to your observer that Bondine was after the Christian doctrine of the soul.)

It's bigger, sir (ventured one lad).

It's bigger, yes there is that.

(What's bigger? At this point the logic eluded me.)

But what is man's chiefest advantage over an animal?

The pupils were willing to consider this question, judging by their expressions. Bondine finds the pause threatening and jumps in with an answer.

Man can make use of his surroundings!

(It seemed a curious way of distinguishing between man and animal, or did 'chiefest advantage' imply degree rather than kind?)

The next tactical target in the drift of the lesson was the 'soul', or perhaps it was a target before, lost in the previous exchange. As before the method was the dialogue. The idea has to come from the pupils, with Bondine as a kind of mental sheep dog, leading them towards the right pen.

Coming back to this death business. What happens to fish when they die? (a sudden dart; the stabbing finger) *You!*

Girl: *They rot away, sir.*

They rot away! Nothing else? You!

Boy: *They sink to the bottom, sir.*

(Evidently they needed more direct clues.)

Anybody here . . . How many think there is something after death?

(Pupils reconsider briefly their own theological position. Bondine declaring that they are free to decide themselves on this private matter, nevertheless, pulls out *you* and *you* for an instant conversation.)

Right! We're in the TV studios again! (He fingers his chin like the *Panorama* chairmen.) *Why do you believe in God?*

(Incongruously) *You!*

(Inaudible discussion at the TV studio. Boys examine the dead fish, girls read 'Oliver Twist' with flickering disinterest.)

The captive audience are enjoined to listen carefully. The dialogue at the front livens a little. A boy carefully and knowingly summarises a book he has read. A book of goodness, the salvation of souls, and an ordinary family confirmed in their faith by a coincidental happening attributed to the Almighty (probably a Sunday School prize).

As an argument for the existence of God it is unanswerable.

The ideological opponent was at loss for a reply.

Keep on! Keep on! Keep it up! urges Bondine (both glance up at him anxiously). *Not at me! At the camera.* (Bondine glances towards me questioningly.)

(At this point I asked a group of girls near the back of the class what arguments had been put forward. They did not seem to know.)

At this point there was a change in the tack in the actual ad hoc design of the learning unit. This was acknowledged openly. . . .

Just a change in plan before we come on to the 'Oliver Twist' . . .

(Pondering this afterwards, I concluded that Bondine was dissatisfied with the TV studio confrontation and was determined to present the class (or me) with a well-tried example.)

Just before we go on to 'Oliver Twist'; you are a Newcastle United supporter. Are there any Liverpool supporters here?

The lad from Newcastle was introduced by reference to the 'social revolution' that brought his father to work in Liverpool, and encouraged to sing 'Bladon Races' to rapturous applause. Bondine explained that we were to look for local dialect, and that the front of the class had become the terraces of the football stadium. A goal had been scored after an unnoticed foul on Clements.

These are two typical football supporters. The match is in progress. Now argue together!

(They do so, effectively at first. Bondine draws the moral, which has little to do with dialect.)

You know the trouble? (confidentially). *It's gangs. People are not prepared to reason.*

(My thoughts became confused again. How could a demonstration of dialect by two individuals end up as a diatribe on gangs?) A boy in the front row offers a further observation:

Gangs at Manchester. They use knives, sir.

(Alas, gambit declined, or postponed.)

We'll discuss that in five minutes.

(A promise to remain unfulfilled.)

At this point Bondine passes my vantage point and offers an evaluative aside:

We're getting a good lesson from this! Plenty of room for discussion and writing.

Meanwhile the drama at the front has degenerated into mutual abuse (*Get lost, you long-haired git*) and lapel-holding. This did not get in the way of the sought-after 'meaning'.

I, we, everybody, need to think about this. You can see from this how easy it is to be swayed by silly arguments. That is PREJUDICE. How many of you have heard of the word?

(Four hands go up.)

You.

Girl (interestingly) *There is a book called 'Pride and Prejudice'.*

(This suggestion brings no response.)

You!

Boy *Sir, sir, biased referees, sir.*

(Again not the hoped-for response.)

You!

(No answer. Any answer obviously isn't good enough. You must guess what Sir is thinking.)

Bondine decides to move the pen rather than manoeuvre the sheep.

Have any of you heard of the colour bar?

(A difficulty here: we have lost contact with the tentative introduction to prejudice, uneasily rooted in the football playlet, and the children are plainly uncertain about the meaning of the term.) Come to cold, it must be approached within its own terms. One boy ventures that it means *testing colours on the telly.*

Yes. Anything else?

Another boy suggests a *club for coloured people.*

(Bondine did not realise that both these attempts were based on the need to interpret the word 'bar', which was not linked in the pupils' minds with the idea of prejudice.)

We are getting near it now!

(And I hadn't realised!)

What is near to a club for coloured people? A girl suggests a pub for coloured people.

Bondine abandons the dialogue and explains prejudice, choosing the first example rather than the second (the boys are still standing sheepishly at the front of the class grasping each other by the lapel).

So you've got two people there. It's black and white. One supports one team and one the other, so you've got no questions asked, and its PREJUDICE; so lets turn now to a bit of 'Oliver Twist.'

(A round of applause, in which it was possible to detect traces of irony.)

But before we start, what connection did 'Oliver Twist' have with the Industrial Revolution?

(Clearly an integrative thread; and one which excited a thin stir of interest and comment.)

Then comes the naming of parts.

You. Master of the workhouse . . .

(At this point my eye caught the blackboard, on which Bondine had written from time to time the odd key word. It read: 'BRAIN HEAVEN HELL SHEEP INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION FISH'. I wondered whether in any sense it could be cited as a testimony to integration.)

The reading was unexpectedly lively. For the first time Bondine used a pupil's name:

Hepworth! If you don't follow on, I'll . . . have you in the workhouse with Oliver.

(This wit brought forth a slight chuckle, and smiles all round.)

Presently the play became the thing. Although reading from shared books, pupils were enjoined to *make it live.* They were in danger of *losing the atmosphere.*

(I glanced down at a previously-proffered wad of 'creative writing' on 'Birth'. 'I was plucked by rude hands', remonstrated one little lass 'and so much wanted to return to my mother's womb'. The entire batch was based on a number of Freudian ideas originating in discussion, but a genuine personal feeling was coming through.)

At this point Bondine joined me at the back of the class while the reading continued. This was one of the number of indications that my presence was critical in the situation although I tried not to respond to the language of gesture that he was trying to establish (amounting at times to an attempt to implicate me by implied consent in the tactics of the lesson). Odd mixture of pride and defensiveness.

Right off the top! I follow their mood and judge accordingly.

(This interesting summary of the tactics of the lesson did not stand up to analysis. All the changes in direction, with the exception of the dead fish, began as links in the mind of the teacher. It is arguable whether these links at any point added up to an intellectual structure, crossing discipline boundaries or otherwise.)

(Meanwhile the play-reading was running out of steam.)

Right. We'll stop this now. Close your books and do some writing. 'The Christmas Scene'. I'm not stopping you making it rhyme, but avoid it if you can. Paint a word picture so that the reader gets on to the beam of your thoughts.

(When the bell came a few minutes later one girl had written her name, the title and 'snow falls'.)

After the lesson I questioned Bondine on his Humanities interest.

I was pushed into this creative stuff. Mind you, I like it.

Pushed?

Yes, pushed by the headmistress. I'm a geographer really but my geography was too progressive—fieldwork and all that. The headmistress

did not understand my field approach. She wanted me to adopt a ship. I refused, so I didn't get the job. Now I'm English.