

# TEACHERS AT WORK WITH IMAGINATIVE EDUCATION

## Philosopher Pirates: Teaching Over Their Heads

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Pirates! Of Penzance? Of Queen Elizabeth's England where the Irish female pirate, Gráinne Ni Mháille (Grace O'Malley), was a formidable force? Of the present-day Strait of Malacca where well-armed pirates arrive by zodiac, terrorize the crew, commandeer the ship, take it into international waters, rename and repaint it? Of the Caribbean with crazy but gorgeous pirates who resemble Johnny Depp? Or, perhaps, quietly in dens and bedrooms all across the "plugged in" world pirating music, movies, and software?

Pirates capture the imagination, span centuries of history, have great clothes, conform to surprising codes of conduct (apparently there is honor and democracy among thieves), and invite a wide variety of themes and subjects for teaching.

Ask an average fourteen year old what they know about pirates, and they will recite a mix of fact and fancy from movies, cartoons, and the occasional book. Some may even mention their own piracy.

Piracy can be a seductive topic for all ages. Consider the 2003 movie, *Pirates of the Caribbean*, and its 2006 sequel—the adult asides, the kid-pleasing action, lots of explosions for my husband, plenty of bad boys for me. In spite of the imaginative appeal of the topic, piracy is insufficient as a starting point for a well-connected social studies, science, math, and English unit until we ask challenging questions, like what are the deepest meanings of this theme? How is the topic useful emotionally, spiritually, and academically?

To draw out some of the more profound and pertinent meanings, one might use questioning strategies, conjure up images, ask what is important and why, speak with others, do research. What is piracy? How is it different from stealing, thievery, looting, pillaging? (Surely, it isn't just the clothes?) Stealing can happen at any mall; piracy happens outside the jurisdiction of any territory—at sea, or on the Internet. Do fourteen year olds operate outside the jurisdiction of any authority? If so, in what ways? How do they manage to do so without being caught? What knowledge and personal attributes do they need? Are there any similarities between them and pirates? When they operate outside the control of any legal authority, are they "stealing" anything?

While I am responsible for asking challenging questions, I need not have all the answers. Like Postman and Weingartner (Gross & Gross, 1969), I believe that questions should push the learner to make further inquiries and "allow for alternative answers" (p. 166). Most importantly, the questions and their answers should "help the learner to sense and understand the universals in the human condition" (p.167).

During an exploration of piracy at an alternate school for thirteen to sixteen year-olds, the students asked, "Should all stuff be common stuff without personal ownership?" They wondered

aloud if the murder of the captain on a recently boarded container ship in the Strait of Malacca was a crime. What about grabbing a boatload of poorly guarded containers? Was that acceptable given the "snooze-you-lose" rule under which, many of the students agreed, they operated? They also wondered how someone thinks up a device like a sextant.

In response to the apparent unscrupulousness of the students, I chose a picture book on the theme of piracy, *The Pirate Queen*, so that we could discuss some of the rewards and costs of living opportunistically. The book led to lessons about Britain's coastal geography, Elizabethan England, and how to get away with burning someone's property right before their eyes. The question of the sextant took me on a fascinating journey of learning that I estimate took me thirty hours of study in order to produce a four-hour project.

A sextant is the means by which seafarers of old (and modern seafarers without batteries) discover where they are on the globe. In its simplest form, it is used to sight the sun at noon in order to calculate latitude. I have never seen a group of teens so interested in learning how to use sine, cosine, and tangent calculations as our class prepared for the equinox. They busied themselves putting a hole in the end of a meter stick with my grandfather's auger drill, a task that provided some ADHD energy focus. When the less channeled energy of some warriors was redirected from swinging heavy metal washers at each other's heads to the task of attaching them as plumb lines to the meter sticks, we synchronized our watches and checked the weather.

I have taught geometry in the past and usually required students to memorize the formulas for angles. Now, students were applying what they knew to mapping. They breezed through a variety of math problems involving trees and shadows, which inspired one creative individual to figure out the angle of a stream of urine coming from the dog he drew beside the tree. Is there such thing as too much imagination?

As 11:55 a.m. approached on September 23rd, we gathered our equipment, I uttered a teacher's prayer of thanks to the sun goddess, and we headed outside. As the students (none of whom knew we lived on the 49th parallel) had done their calculations and compared their results, they concluded that we were located at 48.4° north. "Not bad," I said, whipping from my pocket a handheld GPS device. Not one of my heavy-smoking, "I'm hungry" teenagers even noticed it was lunch break. They were too busy finding the best place to locate satellites. Their calculations were confirmed by GPS—we were standing at 49.12° north.

In addition to using the sextant we studied a graphic novel of *Mutiny on the Bounty*, read *Treasure Island* aloud, and interacted with several picture books and poems—Susan Musgrave's poetry

was a special favorite. Students were particularly impressed that her husband is Canada's most notorious bank robber and that he only ended up in jail when his heroin addiction got the better of him. At that point, I made an executive decision not to learn about successful bank robbery and turned quickly to the subject of geography.

Seafaring pirates have sailed all over the globe, and this introduced us to the study of the geography and trade (what were those pirates stealing, anyway?) with China, Indonesia, the Caribbean, Spain, England, and even the west coast of Canada. The students cracked jokes about smelling them coming. They sang "Aargh, Métis" (maties)—a joke taken from the Arrogant Worm's song, "The Last Saskatchewan Pirate." This led to a discussion on the history of the Métis nation.<sup>1</sup> One of the girls in the class who identified herself as Métis was able to speak to some of the issues of not fitting in with the urban Native community at first, and, yet, being seen as Native by the dominant culture.

The theme of piracy lent itself to many imaginative projects before we reached the end when *Pirates of the Caribbean* was released on video in December 2003. The class enjoyed the pirate slapstick, and I sighed loudly over Captain Jack Sparrow, a.k.a. Johnny Depp (my infatuation being a running gag throughout the two months duration of the unit).

Because of the enormous personal investment in learning how to find latitude without modern technology, I found that mapping was the most rewarding part of the piracy unit. It integrated the study of science and math in a meaningful way. Students learned how the world revolves around the sun and why we have seasons. They learned how to calculate angles and latitude. Although writing report cards was a nightmare, I was able to tease apart what percentage of the curriculum could be allotted to each subject area. I knew these students had learned more about the world than they had for years.

What is important to understand about piracy? What narratives lead us to that understanding? And, what cognitive tools were we using as I brought my own sense of fun and passion to the serious job of educating alienated and rebellious young people?

Lesson planning and preparation often focus exclusively on what will happen in the classroom. Like the Scouts, we follow the motto, "Be prepared." But the problem with this style of planning is a loss of what is important. We have ways of accounting for transitions from activity to activity, formative evaluation, intricate methods of leading students to conclusions, even a little creative work and hands on production, but we are largely engaged in transmitting the formulas that we learned for essay writing, mathematics, laboratory work, and perspective drawing. Jagla (1994), however, suggests that it is important to imagine, as we plan, the sequence of events and individual student reactions. To find out, we must find the narrative about what we teach.

Piracy is not simply a matter of making a neat connection to a popular movie, or even a route to the study of *Treasure Island* or the gross national products of seafaring countries. Piracy is a topic with great opportunities for emotional engagement—one that we think we know something about, until we ask questions such as the difference between piracy and stealing. I was delighted to discover that pirating on the Internet has parallels to piracy on the open seas. It helped me to see that I could escape the rigid requirements of governmental expectations, parental concerns, administrative requirements, and educational mediocrity and risk a little piracy of my own by setting off with my students on a multi-disciplinary voyage.

What did I learn? First, it's important to ask real questions while planning. Even when you are good at this, it takes time. Not only is this time "worth it" for the students, it will engage you in learning at a more profound level. Enlist the help of someone who is a good questioner (children in the "Why?" stage, or a colleague) to keep you from superficiality. You will not need to answer all the questions you are able to generate, but you will find that some are irresistible and some of these answers will become the central narrative for your unit.

I know that a question is worth pursuing by checking my own level of emotional engagement. In what ways am I a pirate? Are alternate school students the pirates of our educational system? What are the emotional realities of piracy? Adventure, hope, curiosity, discovery, fierceness, persistence, survival, greed, hopelessness, sharing, teamwork? I was able to bring out each of these realities in different parts of the unit—some like survival, adventure, and greed were integral; others showed up as by-products. I was most surprised when "teamwork" came up as a theme. I had not considered the camaraderie and loyalty required of pirates, but I see how it fits my group of outsiders. Angry, alienated youth fall into very different cliques in a regular high school: Goth, gangster, party girl, loner, teacher's pet, and stoner. Like pirates of yore they had to find ways to work together.

Teenagers, especially those labeled "at risk," need a metaphor to help them explore the idea of living outside the rules. The glorification of the gangster is powerful in youth culture, but no adult is allowed to say anything that might sound critical. In some ways, these gangsters are the same hard drinking, partying, flash-the-gold rebels that Johnny Depp portrays. Piracy embodies the intensity of opposites that many teens face: loyalty and betrayal, family versus individualism, planning for the future or living for today, survival by any means versus living by a moral code, following the rules or suffering the consequences of rebellion, greed and generosity, right and wrong.

Throughout history there have always been people operating outside the rules. Their lives have been difficult, dangerous, and sometimes, rewarding. Some had to accept survival by any means, as "more right" than living by society's moral code. Grace O'Malley is an example of such a person. As a child in the 1500's, she knew she wanted to be a sailor, but in those days girls did not get to be sailors. She never gave up her ambition. She cut her hair

<sup>1</sup> The Métis people constitute a distinct Aboriginal nation largely based in western Canada. They emerged out of the relations of Indian women and European men. While the initial offspring of these Indian and European unions were individuals who possessed mixed ancestry, the gradual establishment of distinct Métis communities, outside of Indian and European cultures and settlements, as well as, the subsequent intermarriages between Métis women and Métis men, resulted in the genesis of a new Aboriginal people - the Métis. See [www.metisnation.ca/who/faq.html](http://www.metisnation.ca/who/faq.html).

and dressed as a boy and convinced her father, who owned a fleet of ships, to take her sailing. She agreed that if ever there was any trouble she would go below decks. But that arrangement did not sit well with Grace and, one day, when pirates boarded the ship, she climbed the rigging to watch the fight. She saw a pirate sneaking up on her father and dropped from above, shrieking, and knocked the pirate out of the way. The distraction allowed her father and the crew to gain the upper hand and save the ship. From then on, she lived most of her life aboard ship.

Later, when she was about thirty years old, her husband was killed and his family refused to give her the estate. She could have lived with them and been fed and housed, but she declined and left for sea. Employing her legendary shrewdness, she soon owned her own fleet of ships and five castles in Ireland, and had the loyalty of a good crew. Grace was known as a fearless leader and fierce fighter.

Around this time, she married a man with his own castle thereby strategically improving her ability to ward off the English who were appropriating Irish holdings. The marriage was a success, but when her husband died seventeen years later she was, again, denied her inheritance. So, with four children and a few castles to support, she decided on piracy and resisting the English as a way of life. This proved an adequate arrangement until Grace was captured and sentenced to hang for treason.

Her son-in-law offered himself in her place. Queen Elizabeth approved of this arrangement, as long as Grace agreed to stop her piracy and submit her lands, cattle, and homes to England. Grace was released from jail, but her years of piracy were not over. Tragically, the English later captured her brother and son. As much as she loathed the thought of cooperating with the English, Grace pleaded with Queen Elizabeth for their release and promised allegiance to England in return. Queen Elizabeth agreed, and Grace, who had been blowing pirates away when she was fifty-six years old, continued to defend England until she died at the age of seventy. Grace's commitment to Ireland, her family, and her crew led her to do things that many of us would condemn. At the same time we can admire her loyalty, bravery, and persistence.

Although, there are more dead pirates than heroic ones, the resourcefulness of those who thrived is astonishing. This is the narrative I used, hooked to a central theme that survival and loyalty by any means may sometimes be "more right" than living by the moral code of established society. In working with my students I would turn the theme to a discussion of moral themes. However, with a high percentage of students whose parents teach them to shoplift and fail to question the arrival of a new \$200 jacket in the closet, I hoped to explore times when others have had to place survival above moral considerations.

Following a narrative is a complex intellectual task of fitting things together, identifying what is important, constructing emotional meaning, and synthesizing the parts into a reasonable whole. Some of us do this well, and even easily, but others struggle to identify important themes, or fail to connect emotionally with the subject. For this reason, I think we might benefit from occasionally

acting like philosopher pirates when we teach our children. At our best, we can be fierce, loyal, persistent, and shrewd. At worst, we can simply whine for someone to give us the prepackaged lesson plan.

There are many reasons why those in our profession sometimes finds themselves unwilling, or unable, to plan one more lesson. But, I think, if we were to add philosopher to the vision of ourselves, we might simplify our planning and students would learn more. Joseph Conrad wrote in *Lord Jim* that "there is nothing more enticing, disenchanting, and enslaving than the life at sea." School-teachers often labor with the same contradictions. How beguiling to think that we might impart wisdom, better students' lives, spread joy, and practice new skills! How soul-destroying to think that if we do not teach to the test, our charges will be left behind!

Unfortunately, academic programs for "at risk" youth frequently assume knowledge that they rarely possess. Children who miss school for long periods have a difficult re-entry when they decide to show up again. As a result, many alternate programs focus on preparing students for work. They use sequential learning booklets and forgo strenuous academics. The realities of teaching youth who may be involved in crime, drugs, and street life highlights the challenges in simultaneous efforts to socialize, self-actualize, and intellectualize students.

As I contemplate the success of my pirate unit, I look for significant events and consider my project as it relates to imaginative teaching and learning. I oppose the practice of giving the least capable teenagers collections of worksheets in the hope that this will raise the level of their basic skills. I see that, although teachers must operate within the jurisdiction of "the system," there is a sense, for some of us, of setting out to sea when we close the door of the classroom. We imagine new possibilities for developing understanding beyond the already known and socially useful. We are the pirate teachers, trying to operate outside the jurisdiction of traditional practice. We want to engage all our students and to do this we need to fire up their imaginations as well as our own.

## REFERENCES

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