

Michael

*A cautionary tale
for writers in the 21st Century*

Jonny Griffiths, August 2012

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Introduction

As I type, I earn my daily crust by teaching mathematics in a sixth form college. I love my job, but I also find fulfilment in writing. At some time in 2007, I sat down and produced a 500-word article called *Michael*, telling an anecdote concerning an over-anxious student I'd taught some time before. This took me maybe an hour – I knew what I wanted to convey, and I didn't think over-hard about the task. I was at the time contributing (unpaid) a column called *Correlation Street* to *Mathematics Teaching*, the bi-monthly journal of the Association of Teachers of Mathematics.

In the end, *Michael* was never published in *MT*, but it did find its way into the *Correlation Street* ebook, which the ATM published in 2008. This consisted of 24 of my columns, a choice whittled down from a long-list of 40; this task was accomplished by three careful referees. The ebook was published with little fanfare, and as far as I know has not sold much. At no time did anyone indicate to me that *Michael* might be a controversial piece.

A few years later, I began to contribute (paid this time) to the Mathematics Resources section of the *Times Educational Supplement*. I largely wrote new material, but I also used a few pieces from my *Correlation Street* days, ones that I thought possessed a certain timelessness. *Michael* was edited slightly and was published on Friday 10th February 2012.

What follows is the story of the furore this triggered and its ramifications. First, the piece *Michael* as it appeared in the *Correlation Street* ebook.

Michael

It's four o'clock, the end of our day. My weary colleagues and I are slowly unwinding in the Maths Office, when there is a knock on the door.

'Yes, Michael?' says Margaret.

'Could I have a quick word with Jonny, please?' says a bright, nervous voice. I don't sigh, but inwardly I think, 'Is that my quick or yours, Michael?'

I guess most of the aggravation in a teacher's life (not counting hassle from management and the government) arises from students who lack motivation. But there is another student who can be just as draining. I am thinking of the Over-Motivated Student, the Driven, Obsessed Student, the one who is likely to worry themselves into a premature grave in advance of the very exams they are worrying about. Michael is a case in point. Heading towards a maths degree at a prestigious university, he scored a high grade A on both his Maths AS and his Further Maths AS last year. When the results for the first module of the A2 year arrived, he had once more scored an A.

'Pleased with your C3 score, Michael?' I asked.

'No,' he said, his face creased with anxiety. 'I only just got an A.'

Now Michael is staying behind after college to seek my reassurance. 'It's just that I keep making silly mistakes,' he pleads. 'A minus sign missing here, and a wrong factorisation there – I don't want to fail to get an A just through silly mistakes.'

'But Michael, we all make silly mistakes,' I say. 'You watch me making mistakes all the time in class. Some are just careless, but some are actually helpful, in a strange way. Why are you so afraid of making mistakes?'

'It's just that I know I can get an A, I've set my heart on it. I've started to cover the wall of my room with yellow post-its...'

I have a sudden vision of Michael's bedroom looking like an advert for Kraft cheese slices. I can stand no more.

'Apart from you, Michael, who cares what you get in your A level?' I ask firmly.

His bambi eyes look at me in a bewildered way, as if he has just seen me kick a puppy.

'I mean, I care, of course,' I add swiftly, 'But what is better, to go to Cambridge with three As and hate it, or to go to Bangor with three Cs and love it?'

Michael is still too stunned to reply.

‘Look, Michael,’ I say gently. ‘The world is your oyster. University maths departments will be fighting over you. After that, employers will be. You are gold dust. Just enjoy being seventeen.’

The next day, the Further Maths A2 group and I are tackling a piece of maths together.

‘Michael, what did you get for the final answer?’ I ask.

‘Two,’ he says.

‘Shouldn’t that be plus or minus two?’ says Charlotte.

She’s right. I look at Michael. ‘Come on, you can do it...’ I think. I see him jump in a frightened way, but then a smile crosses his face.

‘Just give me the revolver,’ he says calmly. ‘I have brought disgrace on myself and my family. I know what I have to do...’

An Explanation

It might be as well to clarify at this point what this piece was trying to say.

Maybe teachers should not have a soft spot for any of their students, but Michael (not his real name) was one of my favourite learners of all time. He had a fresh appreciation of mathematics that is rare; without any help from me, he could see the beauty in the subject perfectly clearly. He also had an admirable character and a cheerful sense of humour to match. Each year I run a lunch-time group discussing mathematics that links from A Level to University – he was a key member in his time at the college, and extra-curricular work such as this creates lasting bonds between students and teachers.

Michael was not an anxious student in his first year, when he did extremely well. He became so in his second year, needlessly so. His humour evaporated and he became what might be called ‘clingy’; the conversation I describe in my article followed several previous chats where I had tried to explain to Michael in a conventionally kind way how needless his worry was. It was as though Michael wanted to hold my hand into the exam hall itself. When I heard another one of his knocks at the door, I was left feeling, not angry with Michael, or annoyed, but weary – I felt my respect for him slipping away, and I wanted to see his old humour back again. I felt he was working too hard, and that there was a chance that his worry about under-achieving would lead to exactly that.

I know of one student, a brilliant one, who worried so much about her A Levels that she developed anorexia. In the end, she passed away a few weeks before her exams. Anxiety can be a killer. I must say I never quite feared for Michael to such an extreme – I knew him to have a fundamentally secure personality, but I did feel that it was part of my job as a teacher to take on his anxious thoughts.

‘But Michael, we all make silly mistakes,’ I say. ‘You watch me making mistakes all the time in class. Some are just careless, but some are actually helpful, in a strange way. Why are you so afraid of making mistakes?’

This is my philosophy of mistakes. Making errors in mathematics exams is tiresome and to be avoided, but making errors in the run-up to the exam? Surely these are mistakes that the teacher can explain and rectify and which will hopefully therefore be eradicated. I have a rule in my classroom; there are no silly questions. If students are afraid of making mistakes, they don’t ask questions, which means they don’t learn properly. If a student says something erroneous, I believe the teacher should suppose, if they can, that the student is correct. ‘Ah, but then that would mean...’ The student can then see that their suggestion leads to something crazy, and they then happily admit their error.

Student mistakes reveal to a teacher the gap between what they think they have explained, and what the student has understood, and they are thus very valuable to the teacher, a reality check.

‘Apart from you, Michael, who cares what you get in your A level?’

Not something I’ve said to any student before or since. So why did I say this to Michael? I remember once being employed to produce a leaflet for a campaign. I completed it in a frenzy of manic activity, and was immensely proud of it; I sent it off to all the important people in my life, which was a long list at the time. The week afterwards, I experienced the inevitable down that lay on the other side of my mania, and I regretted terribly sending out this leaflet, which now seemed to me to be completely worthless. I bothered those around me repeatedly with my worries, until Jenny, a friend, said wearily, ‘Apart from you, Jonny, who cares about your leaflet?’

Anxious people become self-absorbed. They tend to over-emphasize their concern so that it becomes all-encompassing; they exaggerate its importance in the world, and so, in a way, their own importance in the world. Jenny was right; she asked me a good question, and maybe it was a good one to ask Michael. Taking the question at face value, in Michael's case, what would the answer be? Michael's parents, and grandparents – uncles and aunts less so, if my family is anything to go by. The college would mind a little, but then there are annually 700 sets of student results to worry about, so an A coming out as a B wouldn't be headline news. The maths department would mind - there is a yearly competition over results nationally that we take part in, and every grade matters – but we would get over it. Future employers would mind somewhat. I would mind, because I like Michael and I want him to achieve the best grade that he can; but then, I would say that for all my students. So it would be safe to say that Michael would care more than anyone else.

It would be fair too to say that I was administering to Michael a dose of shock therapy. There was nothing pre-meditated about what I said, but I wanted him to know that there was a limit to the emotional help I could give him. Maybe I was breaking a bond that had become inappropriate somehow. Michael was using me as a crutch, and I was kicking myself away.

'I mean, I care, of course,' I add swiftly, 'But what is better, to go to Cambridge with three As and hate it, or to go to Bangor with three Cs and love it?'

Of all the passages in the piece, this is the most ambiguous. The comments that followed *Michael's* publication read these sentences in a myriad different ways, so perhaps I should clarify.

Firstly, it is completely wrong to suggest that I was advising Michael to settle for three Cs rather than three As. Given the high grades he had already achieved, it would require an underperformance of staggering proportions to get in the end a C in maths and a C in

Further Maths or worse. Of the 2 500 students I have taught in the last 25 years, none has ever underperformed to that extent.

So what was I saying? On one level, I was presenting Michael with two students;

Student A gets top grades, goes to Cambridge and doesn't enjoy it there.

Student B gets medium grades, goes to Bangor and enjoys it there.

By enjoy, I include being intellectually fulfilled. The main point of going to university is to study, and it was my experience that it's very hard to really enjoy the university experience if your studies are going badly.

I realise of course that Student A and Student B do not exhaust the possibilities. Please. I know lots of people who loved life at Cambridge, I'm sure there are some who didn't enjoy Bangor, and there will be a thousand shades of student in between the extremes. No, I was asking, 'Michael, I'm asking you to step back for a moment; if you had to say which outcome you see as being more favourable, Student A's experience, or Student B's experience, what would you say?' I was not implying that this in real life was a choice that faced him.

Nowhere in my article does it say Michael wants to go to Cambridge (he didn't). If you read my words carefully, you will see that neither am I giving him advice on where to go. Where a student wants to go to university is really none of my business, unless they are choosing somewhere incommensurate with their talents, in which case I might have a word. I can and do talk through university maths league tables with a student, but ultimately it is their life and their choice. No, I am simply asking Michael to say which of two educational outcomes he sees as more desirable.

Why did I pick on Bangor? I have no idea. I needed a university that was easier to get into than Cambridge, and as I penned my article at speed, I alighted on Bangor. I know only a couple of people who have gone there, and it has no connotations for me, positive or negative. It never crossed my mind that my choice would be subject to such scrutiny. Researching Bangor after the furore, I discovered that the Maths department there was closed in the summer of 2007, which from my point of view was possibly a blessing.

I was in part offering Michael a choice between ‘status’ and ‘fulfilment’. There might be some people who would choose to be Student A. The benefits of a Cambridge degree over a lifetime might be thought to outweigh some unhappiness over three years. I will be honest and say I myself would much rather be Student B than Student A. In this age where students are being asked to spend large sums on their university education, the idea of being unfulfilled intellectually for three years or more simply to get a piece of paper that could open doors more effectively than another bit of paper is awful to me.

The smart reader might ask what happened in my case. I was indeed a mild example of Student A; I got three As, went to Cambridge and did not much enjoy the maths course there. After two years I completed my Part 1 in maths, and did a two-year Part 2 in Education, which I mostly enjoyed. Why did I go there? Largely because I went to school that specialised in getting students into Oxbridge. If you could achieve this, it was simply never considered that there was anywhere else worth looking at. I followed the crowd. Perhaps the fact that my parents met while studying at Cambridge had something to do with it. There was no external pressure, but maybe something subliminal was going on. I do understand that youngsters don’t listen to advice, but I would nonetheless suggest to them that going to the same university that both your parents both went to betrays a lack of imagination and worse, a certain psychological naivete.

So how common, in my experience, are Student As? I would say they are numerous. I remember speaking with a friend who got a first in the Maths Tripos at Cambridge; he confessed to me that in his final

year, he had been simply moving symbols around while obeying a set of rules that he didn't understand in the least. I could hear his fear. I've taught a number of students who went up to do maths at Cambridge, and the rumours that come back are mixed. Some, of course, thrive at Cambridge in maths; it is these students who go on to be professors. But there are others who drop out or who change course, which is not the end of the world, but which is not ideal either.

But it is not only the academic side that can be difficult at Cambridge. It is a rarified atmosphere. If you climb to the top of the world, then the air is thin. Climbing back down again can cause problems. Those of my friends who opted for 'ordinary life' after Cambridge all experienced difficulties in acclimatising. It is with great sadness that I remember three friends from my college, one from my year, two from the year below, who afterwards went into 'ordinary' teaching jobs, but who could not adjust. They each eventually took their own lives. Maybe Cambridge had nothing to do with this, but the psychology of the place is complex, and it doesn't suit everyone. Perhaps I was also saying to Michael; choose your university very, very, carefully. I hope that at least is uncontroversial.

Let me return to the two-student dilemma I presented him with, but this time in a medical setting. A doctor is faced with a well patient who is a hypochondriac. The doctor knows that his patient is worrying needlessly.

'Apart from you, Michael, who cares if you are ill? I mean, I do, of course, but what is better, to be well and unhappy, or ill and happy?'

Of course, we would all choose to be well and happy wherever possible. But that does not make the doctor's question worthless; in fact, it is a diverting one.

Or... might I have been imagining a single student, who achieves BBB at AS Level?

In Scenario 1, this student sacrifices everything in their A2 year for their grades, has a brilliant month where they are ‘in the zone’ in May-June and gets AAA. They then go to Cambridge, but try as they might, they are not happy there.

In Scenario 2, this student works hard in their A2 year, but runs into difficulties – maybe things at home are problematic, and maybe illness plays a part. They get CCC in the end, and they are disappointed; but then Bangor, a university that would not have been their first choice, turns out to be the perfect place for them, and they thrive.

The moral from this tale? Maybe that life is sometimes unfair. Or once again that we should be very careful which university we choose. Check on the ethos. I have studied at four universities now, and I have always been happier at the more earthy institutions. Being a bigger fish in a smaller pool could suit many people.

But there is a wider moral that I was trying to teach Michael. Let me tell you a story.

Once a man woke up to find that his horse had broken through the fence and disappeared up into the mountains.

His neighbours came round saying, ‘What a piece of bad luck!’ But the man said to them, ‘Good luck, bad luck, who knows?’

The next morning he woke up to find that his horse had returned from the mountains, bringing four wild horses with it.

His neighbours came round saying, ‘What a piece of good luck!’ But the man said to them, ‘Good luck, bad luck, who knows?’

The next day, the man’s son fell off a wild horse as he tried to tame it, and broke his leg.

His neighbours came round saying, 'What a piece of bad luck!' But the man said to them, 'Good luck, bad luck, who knows?'

The next day the army came by, drafting young men into the army. As the man's son had a broken leg, they didn't take him...

So life does not always work out the way we expect. You hoped for an A, you got a B; good luck, bad luck, who knows. Michael is telling me that he is unhappy, and the only cure for his unhappiness is for him to get an A. I am saying that he might get an A and still be unhappy, about something new this time. Getting an A is no guaranteed passport to peace of mind for anyone.

I am a great believer in 'naming your fears'. Anxiety is at its worst when it is a vague background miasma that pursues us wherever we go. If you can say out loud what your fear happens to be, with your own tongue, using words you yourself have chosen, you gain a certain power over your fear, and your anxiety begins to evaporate. I believe that if you are desperate to get an A, saying, 'I might not get an A,' out loud, makes it more likely that you will get one.

Just enjoy being seventeen.

Later comments accuse me of telling students 'to have fun' rather than study or work hard. The word 'fun' appears nowhere in my piece. I choose the word 'enjoy', which I think is altogether more profound. Fun has its time and place, of course, but it is something superficial when compared to enjoyment. Life is to be savoured, cherished, enjoyed, even when it makes demands upon us that are not fun.

Some people see study as a means to an end. 'I will write off this next few months to get my exams.' But then after that, 'I will go to the most sensible university for my career prospects', and beyond that 'I will go for a job that will first and foremost ensure that I am comfortable', and then 'I will marry someone who meets all the criteria on my checklist', and then... And then you wake up at 90

wondering why you have enjoyed so little of life. To be ruled by what is expedient for a lifetime is to throw your life away.

It was my opinion that Michael was working too hard, to the extent that when combined with his anxiety, he was going backwards. For every extra hour he was putting in, his score was going down, and he was becoming ever more tired and drawn. The obvious wisdom was to suggest he had a night off, forgot about his exams for an evening in the company of the friends he might remember if he tried. The danger was never going to be that he did not put in the work hours.

This is not advice I would give to most students towards the end of their second year, who have no problems over enjoying being seventeen. I am a firm believer in hard work. In my ideal society, people will work hard, at a job that fulfils them, without being workaholics. Most students need to become more organised and put in more hours, to stay in for an evening or five and postpone the drinks until after their last exam. They might enjoy the understanding that ensues more than they think.

I was not saying in my piece that all anxious students should be treated the way I treated Michael. Most anxious students need to be treated with great tenderness. Most of the time, anxious students are justified in their anxiety (Michael was not). Maybe they scraped a pass at AS, and they feel they might fail on the A2 papers. With these students I would sit down with their scores, and set sensible targets based on these. Maybe we would discuss topics to concentrate on and others to sideline. Extra time spent outside the lessons together can help dramatically. Once students have practical targets for which to aim, then often their confidence returns, their assignment scores improve, and when encouraged in the light of this, they pass safely.

But that sort of encouragement does not necessarily make for an interesting piece. I believe a writer needs to write *On The Edge of Things*. I do understand that what I said to Michael was ‘Something a Teacher Should Never Say to a Student,’ but that is why I reported it. I was writing first and foremost for classroom teachers, and I trusted

that they could read sympathetically between the lines. I treated Michael in an extreme way, and the story had a happy ending (if it hadn't had a happy ending, you can be sure I wouldn't have told the story).

What then was I saying with *Michael*, in one sentence?

When faced with a student whom you know well who has become needlessly and destructively over-anxious, it could be right for you as a teacher to shock them out of their self-absorption.

In an even shorter sentence,

A teacher sometimes needs to be cruel to be kind.

Or;

Tough love is sometimes necessary in education.

Sentiments that you would have thought the Tory press would agree with...

The Edit

The deal with my submissions to the TES is this; I send through 500 words and the sub-editors prune to 420. The result is usually a vast improvement (I agree with Stephen King when he gives the first rule of writing; **The Editor is Always Right**). The sub-editors are professionals who have been employed for their abilities as wordsmiths. After they have removed redundant sections, pieces usually become leaner, tighter and better.

In this case, however, I think the edit needs a closer look. Does it convey exactly what the original does? Some capitals have been removed. My thoughts on mistakes have been diluted. The final joke has been removed. Does a little confusion enter the piece? Do the titles chosen match my intentions?

Put the brakes on.

Is that what I was saying? I have no problem with bright students working fast if they are enjoying it.

Sometimes ambitious children need to slow down.

I'm not sure that was it either. 'Sometimes ambitious students need to worry less,' would be closer.

But... I recall reading the TES edit in the magazine on the day 'Michael' came out, and I remember thinking, 'That's fine.' Whatever sparked the ensuing hullabaloo, I don't think the edit was fundamentally to blame.

Maths - Put the brakes on

resources | Published in TES magazine on 10 February, 2012 | **By: Jonny Griffiths**

Sometimes ambitious children need to slow down

It is 4pm. My weary colleagues and I are slowly unwinding in the maths office, when there is a knock on the door.

"Could I have a quick word with Jonny, please?" says Michael in a bright, nervous voice. I don't sigh, but inwardly I think, "Is that my 'quick' or yours?"

Most of the aggravation in a teacher's life (not counting hassle from management and the government) arises from students who lack motivation. But there is another student who can be just as draining. I am thinking of the driven, obsessed student, the one who is likely to worry themselves into a premature grave in advance of their exams. Michael is a case in point. Last year, he scored a high grade A on both his maths AS level and his further maths AS level. When the results for the first module of the A2 year arrived, he had once more scored an A.

"Pleased with your C3 score, Michael?" I asked.

"No," he said. "I only just got an A."

Now Michael is staying behind after college to seek my reassurance. "It's just that I keep making silly mistakes," he pleads. "I don't want to fail to get an A just through silly mistakes."

"But, Michael, we all make silly mistakes," I say.

"It's just that I know I can get an A, I've set my heart on it. I've started to cover the wall of my room with yellow Post-its ..."

I have a sudden vision of Michael's bedroom looking like an advert for Kraft cheese slices. I can stand no more.

"Apart from you, Michael, who cares what you get in your A level?" I ask, firmly.

His Bambi eyes look at me in a bewildered way, as if he has just seen me kick a puppy.

"I mean, I care, of course," I add, swiftly. "But what is better: to go to Cambridge with three As and hate it or to go to Bangor with three Cs and love it?"

Michael is too stunned to reply.

"Look, Michael," I say, gently. "The world is your oyster. University maths departments will be fighting over you. After that, employers will be. You are gold dust. Just enjoy being 17."

The next day, the further maths A2 group and I are tackling a piece of maths together.

Michael gives 2 as his answer.

"Shouldn't that be plus or minus 2?" says Charlotte.

She is right. I look at Michael. He jumps in a frightened way, but then a smile crosses his face.

The emails

Dear Jonny

Sunday, 12 February 2012

Could you give me a ring about your TES column. Someone read it and has emailed the deputy editor asking why a teacher apparently appears to be telling a pupil not to worry about getting an A and dissuading him from aspiring to Cambridge. I've been asked to follow it up. If you could ring me asap, I'd really appreciate it.

Thanks

Best wishes

Julie Henry

Education Correspondent

Sunday Telegraph

Hi Julie,

Sunday, 12 February 2012

Thanks for your email. I'm very happy to discuss this, but would prefer via email at least initially – there is less chance for getting these delicate issues wrong.

My column spoke about my relationship with one particular student back in maybe 2004, who I liked a lot, and who had great talent, but who had got the whole process of exams out of perspective, to such an extent that his worry was seriously impairing his performance. It was my professional opinion that if I could give him a jolt somehow, so that he could realise that life would go on whatever happened with his A Levels, then he would have a better chance of realising his potential. In the end, he performed brilliantly, got his A in Maths and Further Maths and went to Warwick to read maths and was (as far as I know) very happy there. Job done.

This student was unusual. Some, maybe most, students don't worry enough about the grade they will get, and don't do as well as they might. This kind of student I would jolt in a different kind of way. I would like these students to worry more about getting an A; believe me, I would really love it if all my students got As or better. As for aspiring to go to Cambridge, if that is where you want to go, then I will do everything I can to help you get there. Two of my current students have been given places at Cambridge to read maths next year, and I am delighted for them. But Cambridge is not right for everyone. Perhaps I should come clean and say that in 1978 I went up to Cambridge to read maths, a subject that I ate, drank and slept. Over the years that followed, my love of maths nearly died. I did okay in the exams, but I found the teaching as dry as dust. It seemed to me that Cambridge cared solely about the top 10%, the few who would go on to be professors, and neglected the rest. I've just completed my MSc at UEA, and the contrast has been incredible – this has been university maths where I have loved every minute.

I'm sure things have changed at Cambridge. Universities were not given grades for teaching in my day. I should say that Clare College were wonderful to me in my time there, and have been since. But I stand by what I said in my article, that it is better to go to Bangor and love it (which includes being suitably challenged academically) than go to Cambridge and hate it – I think that is self-evident. Sometimes a weaker student will work really hard to win a place at a 'less good' university, while a bright student will hardly break sweat to get a place at Cambridge – yet it is the bright student who is paraded before the local papers. I'm not sure that's right.

With best wishes,
Jonny

Sunday, 12 February 2012

*Thanks for that jonny. All seems perfectly reasonable to me.
Sorry to bother you at the weekend.
Best wishes
Julie*

Dear Mr Griffiths,

Monday, February 13, 2012 2:40 PM

Sorry to bother you on half term but I wondered if you were free for a quick chat about the article you wrote in the TES magazine on February 10? It's received a bit of attention online today with some commentators using it to illustrate the perception that the state system places too much focus on low achieving pupils and does not push gifted pupils hard enough.

If you're free I'd really like to have a quick chat to find out exactly what you were trying to say in your article, and to get your reaction to the points above. You can contact me on either of the numbers below.

Best wishes,

*Nick Collins
Daily Telegraph*

Hi Nick,
Thanks for emailing and no problem about it being half term.

The response I've read so far to my article from the right wing has been plain nuts. I've put a statement up at **www.jg-tes.co.uk**

Probably best if you read that first. If you have any questions after that, just email them through and I'll get back as quick as I can.

With best wishes,

Jonny

Hi Jonny, thanks for reply. We have used quotes written under your name in response to a blog by Iain Martin, and said they appeared to be written by you. Are they genuine? They didn't appear to be a hoax.

Nick Collins

Dear Mr Griffiths

Monday, February 13, 2012 3:38 PM

I wondered if you were able to contact me today about an article you wrote for Friday's Times Educational Supplement, headlined 'Put the Brakes on'.

Many thanks,

Laura Clark

Education Correspondent, Daily Mail

Laura,

I wasn't aware that the headline for my piece was 'Put the brakes on'. The subs at the TES do a brilliant job, but I would have not called it that. My original title was just *Michael*.

Jonny

Thanks Jonny. I haven't mentioned the headline. Was Michael his real name by the way or pseudonym, or perhaps a refence to Mr Gove?

Michael was not his real name, no. A reference to Mr Gove? Love it! Yes, put that in,
Jonny

Dear Mr Griffiths,

Tue, 14 Feb 2012 9:39am

We're really interested in talking to you about your view about students applying to Cambridge for our news programmes, in light of your journal piece

Would you be able to call me on 0844 88 168 20?

Many thanks

Megan Boot

Megan Boot | News Journalist | **ITV plc**
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Dear Megan,

Thank you for your email. I am completely amazed that this article, originally published in 2008, should be causing a furore, but there we are. People seem to have taken a largely fictional anecdote about a single student, and extrapolated from there to my supposed general rules for all students, which is nonsense. There some students who should not be pushed – those developing anorexia, for example. I should emphasise the way I chose to speak to ‘Michael’ was a one-off – and it’s a story! But hopefully a truthful one.

If you haven’t visited www.jg-tes.co.uk then please do – it has my reply to Iain Martin’s blog which tells you what my thoughts are currently.

Apologies, I’m not talking about this currently as the issue is so sensitive and the chances for saying something thoughtless are great. But if you have any questions, do please email them though and I’ll do my best to answer them.

With best wishes,

Jonny

Dear Jonny

Thank you ever so much for getting back to me so quickly. I think it’s very interesting what you say in your reply to Iain Martin about knowing what sort of support is in the best interest of the student. It’s this angle that we’d like to talk to you about.

Given the furore surrounding the article at the moment, it would be great if you could talk to us and set the record straight, as it appears that people aren’t interrupting what you’ve written as you intended. I totally understand your concern about the sensitivity of the issue but I think you raise some very important points that we’d like to address and that people do want to know more about.

I’ve cc’d in our Education Correspondent Elodie Harper into this email. Her number is 077 674419 14. If you do change your mind about being interviewed please feel free to call her or me

Very best wishes

Megan Boot

Hi Jonny,

Tuesday, February 14, 2012 11:21 AM

I’ve been following the ‘storm’ surrounding your TES piece with interest.

I’m sure you’re delighted to have made it into the Daily Mail.

If you’re interested in explaining your thoughts to a more measured audience, then do let me know. We’d be up for doing something.

Kind regards,

Ciaran



CIARAN JENKINS
GENERAL REPORTER, CHANNEL 4 NEWS

Hi Ciaran,

Yes, the Daily Mail, hoop de doo.

I appreciate your offer of an ITN spot very much, but sadly the only way I can cope with the current insanity this end is to be in 'email only' mode. The topic is delicate, and the chance of saying something thoughtless over the phone is too great.

My site www.jg-tes.co.uk has my response to Iain Martin's blog – that's where I am at the moment.

Any questions, then do email straight back and I'll do my best to answer them.

All the best,

Jonny

Dear Jonny,

Tue, 14 Feb 2012 10:28am

I saw your response to your article on "Michael" (as I'm sure many others did too). I run the education page for the Huffington Post and think you have some refreshing ideas about Oxbridge students, particularly in the end paragraph:

"Sometimes a weaker student will work really hard to win a place at a 'less good' university, while a bright student will hardly break sweat to get a place at Cambridge – yet it is the bright student who is paraded before the local papers. I'm not sure that's right."

Would you be willing to write a piece for HuffPost? Or if not, would you be interested in an interview?

Best

Lucy

Lucy Sherriff
Universities and Education Reporter
Huffington Post

Hi Lucy,

Thanks for your email. Sadly I'm not doing interviews at the moment, but you can quote this:

Some students don't have a Plan B. They are determined to be a vet, rigidly so. I always say, follow your star, but have a back-up plan if you don't get the grades.

Anxious students can be very able or less able. They can be sometimes self-absorbed, and need to step back to take themselves less seriously. They usually under-perform, which is why a teacher who is ambitious for them must address their anxiety, sometimes in unconventional ways.

Cambridge is brilliant for some people, and it is vital those people are carefully identified (that may be hard). I have two students currently who have been awarded places for maths next year at Cambridge, and I am delighted for them. I think they will both succeed, because they both have more raw mathematical talent than I do.

If you can publicise www.jg-tes.co.uk then I'd be grateful.

Many thanks,

Jonny

Dear Mr Griffiths,

Tue, 14 Feb 2012 10:29 am

I'm writing from the PM programme on Radio 4 to ask if you might be willing and available to talk to Eddie Mair about your story from the TES which was picked up by Iain Martin and now the Daily Mail.

You have probably been inundated with requests from other journalists and I must apologise for adding to that flood but, if you felt willing to do an interview, we could do it live after 5pm today or pre-recorded any time from now.

Our preference would be to do it from a radio studio - I think the closest would be at Radio Norfolk in Norwich - but we can sometimes do reasonably good recordings via skype, using a headset with microphone.

My number is 020 8624 9730

Thank you,

Steven Wright

Dear Steven,

Many thanks for your email. I must confess to being completely amazed that my piece, first published back in 2008, should be causing this furore.

Sadly I must decline your kind offer to speak on PM tonight. I appreciate the chance to set the record straight, but this is a highly sensitive subject, and the chance of saying something thoughtless is high.

With best wishes,

Jonny

Dear Jonny

Tue, 14 Feb 2012 11:31am

I'm one of the producers on the Richard Bacon programme on BBC Radio 5 Live – we're really keen to speak to you today about the article you wrote for a teacher's journal – that's been picked up by many of the papers today. Our programme is broadcast between 2-4pm and we're hoping to have the discussion at the top of the programme just after 2pm.

Be great if you could let me know whether you're available.

Best

Karlene

Karlene Pinnock

Producer

BBC Radio 5 live

Richard Bacon Programme

Dear Karen,

Thank you for your email. I am completely amazed that this article should be causing a furore, but there we are. People seem to have taken a largely fictional anecdote about a single student, and extrapolated from there to my supposed general rules for all students, which is nonsense. There some students who should not be pushed – those developing anorexia, for example. I should emphasised the way I chose to speak to 'Michael' was a one-off – and it's a story! But hopefully a truthful one.

Apologies, I'm not talking about this currently as the issue is so sensitive and the chances for saying something thoughtless are great. But if you have any questions, do please email them though and I'll do my best to answer them.

With best wishes,

Jonny

Hi

Tue, 14 Feb 2012 12:03am

Urgent! BBC Radio Norfolk interview request

Just read the ridiculous backlash against your comments in the Telegraph and was wondering if I can have a chat with you for the drivetime show this afternoon please? I know many teachers who would agree with you!

Kind regards

Karen Buchanan

Hi Karen,

Thanks for your support, but I'm adopting an 'email only' rule at the moment for my own sanity – so I'm very grateful for your offer of a chance to correct some misunderstandings, but I shall have to decline.

Maybe once this madness subsides we can try again – I do like talking to people generally!

With best wishes,

Jonny

Hi Jonny

Boo!!! Please please change your mind as I think you're a complete hero! I have plenty of teacher friends who just think the hype is hilarious. I promise you we'll do a really nice interview – just 3-4 minutes and then lay this to rest and I'll make sure you're not contacted by anyone else at the BBC. Promise!

Warmest wishes

Karen

Hi Jonny

Tue, 14 Feb 2012 12:36am

My name's Victoria and I'm a producer at BBC Breakfast.

We were discussing your article in the TES in this morning's meeting, and it provoked a debate on universities and whether we should all be aiming for the likes of Oxbridge, or whether we would have a better time at a university which is not in the top 5.

There have been many articles written about your viewpoint, but I was wondering if you could possibly give me a call today please to discuss it?

My number here is 020 8624 9700.

Best wishes

Victoria

Hi Victoria,

Many thanks for your getting in touch. Sadly I won't be ringing, since I am adopting an 'email only' rule this end to try to cope with this tsunami of invitations landing in my Inbox.

My viewpoint seems to have been lost a bit along the way. Hardly anybody now seems to have read the original article. Thank you for doing that. My response to the criticism is up at **www.jg-tes.co.uk**

Many thanks for the invitation to discuss this on the phone, but for my sanity's sake (!) I am emailing only.

With best wishes,

Jonny

Hi Jonny

Tue, 14 Feb 2012 16:21pm

I hope you are well!

Sorry to add to what must be a great number of emails coming through to you today but we are running a story tomorrow on 'The Wright Stuff' on Channel 5 as to whether children are better off pushing themselves to achieve at school and it would be really interesting to chat to you about this if possible?

If you could let me know as soon as you can as to whether this is something you would be able to help with I would be very grateful.

Many Thanks,

Diana Liyanage
The Wright Stuff

Hi Diana,

Thanks for your email. You are right, today has been really crazy, but I suppose that means an important debate has been sparked off, which is good.

Many apologies, I'm not really doing interviews currently, not even a few minutes on the phone - these issues are delicate, and the chance of saying something thoughtless is great. I have what is left of my career to think of!

As to whether students should be pushed, some should, but some decidedly should not. Anxiety and overwork is literally a killer at A Level and beyond. Those who disagree over my strategies with Michael must come up with some of their own pretty fast for dealing with this.

You might have visited www.jg-tes.co.uk - my response to the criticism is there.

With best wishes, and thanks again,

Jonny

Hi Jonny

Thank-you so much for taking the time to get back to us!
I'm really glad you opened the debate on this - it is an interesting discussion and one I think a lot of people will want to talk about tomorrow.

Thanks again for your message!

Best Wishes,

Diana

The Newspaper articles

Study at Cambridge? Better to have fun in Bangor, says teacher in controversial article

Daily Mail, Laura Clark, Thursday Feb 16, 2012

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2100772/Maths-teacher-says-better-fun-Bangor-University-study-Cambridge.html>

Maths teacher criticised after suggesting Oxbridge candidate may be happier at Bangor

Telegraph, Nick Collins, 14th Feb 2012.

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/educationnews/9079791/Maths-teacher-criticised-after-suggesting-Oxbridge-candidate-may-be-happier-at-Bangor.html>

Dumbing down of state education has made Britain more unequal than 25 years ago

Telegraph, Toby Young, 14 Feb 2012.

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/9082053/Dumbing-down-of-state-education-has-made-Britain-more-unequal-than-25-years-ago.html>

The Blogs

What Michael Gove is up against,

Mon 13th Feb 2012, Iain Martin

<http://www.ianmartinpolitics.com/2012/02/13/what-michael-gove-is-up-against/>

Maths Teacher Jonny Griffiths Tells Student: Just Enjoy Being 17

Huffington Post, Lucy Sherriff, 14/02/2012 10:45

http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2012/02/14/maths-teacher-jonny-griffiths-tells-student-just-enjoy-being-17_n_1275505.html

What will Vince Cable do about the boy advised to go to Bangor instead of Cambridge? Make matters worse

Telegraph, Martin Stephen Education, Feb 15th 2012.

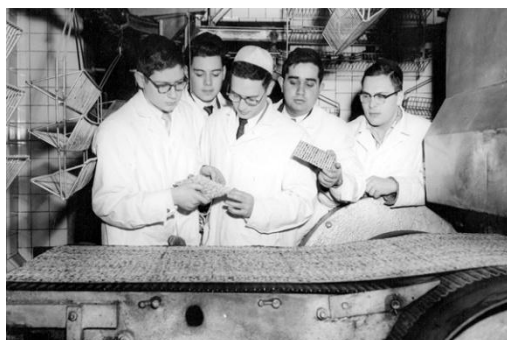
<http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/news/author/drmartinsteph/en/>

Another case of 'Am I definitely going to get an A? Definitely?' syndrome

Nathan Briant, 13th Feb 2012.

<http://nathanbriant.com/2012/02/13/another-case-of-am-i-definitely-going-to-get-an-a-definitely-syndrome/>

When I was at school, which seems like aeons ago now, I could be quite loud at times but because I was fairly bright and did my homework, my teachers didn't really tell me off.



Class 11B on 'work experience', which they quickly, cruelly, realised was more permanent, circa 1951

Thank God it wasn't the 1950s, when 0.00001 per cent of the teenage population took O Levels and 1 per cent of those passed as the rest ploughed fields or set about hitting machinery with a spanner: oh, what halcyon days, I can hear the Tories yawn on. Either

GCSEs were easy, we were taught well or we were fairly intelligent, perhaps all three: it was all ok in the end.

School was fun. I did my work – and if you didn't want to they didn't really pressure you: by 16 it's your choice – and I got a clutch of semi-satisfactory GCSEs. Then I went to sixth form college and spent most of my time pottering about, mostly reading or talking in the library, and got into the LSE.

So my education wasn't too fraught. Whatever happened, happened. My parents might have put occasional pressure on me to do my homework rather than playing on the computer, but that was about it. Doing subjects, at least at A Level, that I was interested in meant that everything was relatively straightforward – and that I didn't need to constantly harass my teachers.

Now, however many years on, everything about the current Government's education policy is driven by elitism. Everything. Free schools require parents to be elitist enough to want to create their own schools because they presumably perceive A Comprehensive School down the road is not good enough for Horace, Maurice and Boris. Education standards are in the process of being cranked up to such an elitist level so that independent schools or (what are perceived the) top grammar schools don't leave the A Level system, even if Eton and other places are using alternative examinations already.

There are a few things that this Government really must start to realise. Of course, it's difficult, since most of the following things highlighted next probably refer to 80, 90, if not more than 90 per cent of the Cabinet, but they can at least try. Firstly, not everyone can fit into a grammar school or an independent school: comprehensive schools are required. Second, not everyone, can fit into Oxbridge or a Russell Group university. Third, some people might not even want to go to Oxbridge or a Russell Group university.

Some do, obviously; some have a vision that Oxbridge is like some educational Utopia. Some don't really mind – I was ready to go elsewhere if I got turned down by LSE. Some obviously don't care too much and have their eyes firmly set on whether their university town has a Hooters or an equivalent. (However distasteful I find that, I don't think that should be a reason to deprive people of a university education – and there are plenty of people like that at the esteemed LSE, I can assure you.)

And so it's with interest that I logged into Twitter today to find out that (a very select sample of) the internet seems to have gone mad [over a piece written by Jonny Griffiths](#), a Maths teacher at Paston College in North Walsham, Norfolk in the TES.

Since my Dad's a teacher, I can recognise how Griffiths feels. My Dad's always happy to help people out – always – but it can get draining for him when he's been asked by the same student eighteen times in one week whether he's definitely going to get an A, when someone's seeking not your expertise but your opinion which you've already given.

Griffiths writes of his encounter with 'Michael' after the learning day has finished. (Presumably Michael's not the pupil's name, otherwise the teacher'll no doubt be up for a disciplinary meeting pretty soon.) He's so driven that it's quickly become tedious for Griffiths to hear his sob stories about how he wrote this and that in the wrong place in January's AS Level exam. 'Michael' talks of how he 'only just got an A' in his exams, how

that's clearly unsatisfactory and how his 'heart' is so 'set on' achieving an A, he's covered his bedroom wall with Post-It notes. This is clearly a student so keen to go to his university of choice – Cambridge – that he will ask anyone at any time about it.

But Iain Martin and others have set about Griffiths, labelling him a lazy teacher for daring to suggest that 'Michael' should enjoy being 17 and stop fretting about his prospects of further education, when clearly there is no real need to worry; they suggest that the teacher is flattening his student's aspirations.

What would they prefer? The student to be totally on edge about his future at Cambridge, something that might not happen if he has a bad exam? Or be like Michael Heseltine, his future written down on a napkin: Cambridge done by 26, Nobel Prize winner by 28... and be distraught when he only ends up going to Durham?

Griffiths writes that he told 'Michael' that it would surely be better to go to Bangor with three Cs at A Level and be happy than go to Cambridge with three As and hate it. Griffiths is charged with damaging his student's prospects in the future again: Bangor is, for some reason, deemed sub-standard, not good enough for the pupils that should, because they have Post-It notes around their room and are fretful, be off to Oxbridge.

There is nothing in the piece that suggests that, as Martin says, Griffiths acts with 'smug shamelessness'. What's shameless about wanting someone to calm down about their future prospects when they seem to be too het up or reassuring them about their forthcoming exams? Nothing.

While Martin is right to say that there is an increased share of privately educated students taking up (what are perceived to be) top positions in Britain like they haven't done since grammar schools were introduced across the country in the 1950s and 1960s, the reason for that isn't poor standards in comprehensive schools. Far from it, it's because quality is seen to be so entrenched in the universities which Martin holds with such regard.

Why, for example, shouldn't the Prime Minister – (forget, temporarily, the fact that he is an Old Etonian, but rather that he went to Oxford) – have gone to Bangor University or have done a BTEC? There's the social mobility problem right there. The more people from independent schools who go to Oxbridge, Russell Group universities and leave others places at what Martin would no doubt class lesser universities, the more unequal British society gets. As a Maths teacher in a sixth form college in Norfolk who no doubt knows this and that there's not much he can do about it save of teaching tens of teenagers a year and is bored of hearing the same rubbish from one student over and over again, that's certainly not Jonny Griffiths' fault.

The TES publishes brilliant send-up of trendy, Left-wing teachers' disdain for academic achievement

**Telegraph, Thursday 16th February 2012,
Toby Young**

<http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/news/tobyyoung/100137028/the-tes-publishes-brilliant-send-up-of-trendy-left-wing-teachers-disdainful-attitude-to-academic-achievement/>

What's wrong with aiming for the top?

Swottyblog, Sian Griffiths, Feb 13th 2012

<http://swottyblog.wordpress.com/2012/02/>

On state schools, aspiration, and a failure of tone.

stephentall.org, Stephen Tall, 14th Feb 2012

<http://stephentall.org/2012/02/14/jonny-griffiths-paston-college-tes/>

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'Sometimes ambitious children need to slow down'. On state schools, aspiration, and a failure of tone

Feb.14, 2012 in [Education](#)

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The TES published an article — [Maths - Put the brakes on](#) — which has attracted a great deal of opprobrium in the last 24 hours for appearing to show a lack of aspiration in the state sector for children to excel.

The author, Jonny Griffiths, is a current maths teacher. Here's an extract which gives you a flavour of the piece:

"Pleased with your C3 score, Michael?" I asked.

"No," he said. "I only just got an A."

Now Michael is staying behind after college to seek my reassurance. "It's just that I keep making silly mistakes," he pleads. "I don't want to fail to get an A just through silly mistakes."

"But, Michael, we all make silly mistakes," I say.

"It's just that I know I can get an A, I've set my heart on it. I've started to cover the wall of my room with yellow Post-its ..."

I have a sudden vision of Michael's bedroom looking like an advert for [Kraft](#) cheese slices. I can stand no more.

"Apart from you, Michael, who cares what you get in your A level?" I ask, firmly.

His Bambi eyes look at me in a bewildered way, as if he has just seen me kick a puppy.

"I mean, I care, of course," I add, swiftly. "But what is better: to go to Cambridge with three As and hate it or to go to Bangor with three Cs and love it?"

Michael is too stunned to reply.

The [Telegraph reported the piece](#) under the headline, ‘Maths teacher criticised after suggesting Oxbridge candidate may be happier at Bangor’. Somewhat inevitably [Toby Young weighed in](#), too, with the self-explanatorily titled ‘The TES publishes brilliant send-up of trendy, Left-wing teachers’ disdain for academic achievement’.

Here’s my view, as posted on the TES website:

I *think* I get what the article was *trying* to say: kids shouldn’t drive themselves so hard to succeed they end up making themselves miserable. That’s fair enough.

Unfortunately the tone of the post completely fails, and appears to celebrate ‘coasting’.

It’s one thing to say, “An A* isn’t everything; you must absolutely do your best; but don’t work yourself into an early grave.”

But it’s wrong to say to an A-grade student, “It doesn’t matter, a C-grade is just fine.” That’s a shocking squandering of potential.

I stand by that. But because I’m not a Torygraph columnist, fairness compels me to note two things.

First, Jonny Griffiths teaches at Paston College in Norfolk, rated ‘Outstanding’ by Ofsted in its recent inspection – so this is clearly not a failing school.

And secondly, at least three of Mr Griffiths’s students have commented on the [Telegraph](#) story ([here](#) and [here](#) and [here](#)) to praise him highly – and I think that must count for something.



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Tom Walker

02/14/2012 12:28 PM

I am actually taught by Johnny and he is a fantastic teacher, couldn’t be more supportive to his pupils. He simply understands that they need to enjoy being young rather than feel an immense amount of pressure which makes them ill.

**Jamie West**

02/14/2012 12:47 PM

I'm also taught by Johnny and he really is an excellent teacher. Personally, I find this article as a poor attempt to completely blow this scenario out of proportion. It is clear that the point he was trying to make is that children who take studying far too seriously, seriously to the extent that they can cause themselves to become obsessed with it could cause more harm than good.

I like to see myself as capable of getting an A if I apply myself, and if anything Johnny is more than supportive in that he always ensures that I - and everybody else in the class - achieve their potential.

This article is putting everything on a much larger scale than what it was, it seems like it is trying to make it seem like Johnny is a poor teacher who doesn't care about his pupils. It's wrong. He isn't and he does. You need only meet Johnny to see that he is a light hearted fellow and absolutely loves what he does. He spoke only from experience, it's his opinion and he's entitled to it without these accusations on his name and the schooling system.

I am sure that there's a lot more, much more appalling problems in the schooling system that could do with being addressed. As for the accusations he made about Cambridge, it isn't like he's the only person in the world who thinks exactly that as well.

**Matthew Schaitel**

02/14/2012 06:21 PM

Like Jamie and Tom I too am a student of Jonny's. It angers me to see a personal teacher put across in such a ludicrous manner. Jonny is a superb teacher and strives to achieve the best out of all his students, he is one of only a few who uses his own free time to offer further support for pupils.

Since when is freedom of speech a bad thing. Jonny having first hand experience of a Oxbridge maths degree is entitled to an opinion, he would be wrong to have lied and said it was a fun experience.

He also would be wrong to witness a student in distress about exams and not offer support and opinions to help them.

Knowing Jonny personally, which obviously Nick Collins does not, to portray a quality teacher with a student's interest in mind in this negative and degrading manner is heartless.

Maths teacher criticised after suggesting Oxbridge candidate may be happier at Bangor

Osiris, Feb 14th 2012

<http://osiriseducational.co.uk/osirisblog/maths-teacher-criticised-after-suggesting-oxbridge-candidate-may-be-happier-at-bangor>

Who cares what you get in your A Levels?

Demos, Matt Grist,

<http://www.demos.co.uk/blog/whocareswhatyougetinyouralevels>



Who cares what you get in your A Levels?

by [Matt Grist](#)

A storm has broken out over a [Times Educational Supplement article](#) in which Jonny Griffiths, a teacher at Paston College Norfolk, recounts telling a bright student called Michael who is ‘obsessed’ with getting an A grade that: “apart from you, Michael, who cares what you get in your A-levels?... What is better: to go to Cambridge with three As and hate it or go to Bangor with three Cs and love it?”

At first, a lot of people thought this was satire. But apparently Jonny Griffiths is real and uttered these words with a straight face, which is quite astonishing and rather depressing. We hear a lot of anecdotes about unambitious teachers settling for second best, but never from the horse’s mouth like this.

Beyond anecdote, how widespread is dreadful mediocrity in the state system? It is hard to quantify such things, but there is indicative evidence that it is pretty widespread.

In 2009 the Sutton Trust undertook [some research](#) looking at application rates to England’s top universities from different upper-secondary institutions. What it found was that such universities showed no bias towards equally qualified candidates from different kinds of

institution (all had similar acceptance rates), but that students at some institutions made far more applications than others (giving them a better chance of being accepted onto a sought-after course).

Not surprisingly, well-qualified students from high-performing independent schools made the most applications, followed by grammar schools and high-performing comprehensives, with middling and poorly performing comprehensives, sixth-form colleges and FE colleges bringing up the rear.

Remember, students from all these institutions were equally qualified in terms of A levels, the Sutton Trust simply measured the number of applications they made. Now, the latter is not a perfect proxy for the ambition of teachers, since there are many influences on the applications process (including the influence of parents and peers). Yet it would seem that the level of disparity in numbers of applications indicates many teachers in the state system are not doing anywhere near enough to encourage bright kids to aim high. For example, high-performing independent schools made twice as many applications to top universities as similarly high-performing comprehensives.

So as well as Jonny Griffiths being real the evidence suggests the problem he exemplifies is equally real. Interestingly, this gives succour to Russell Group vice chancellors who say the causes of less-affluent candidates not getting in to top universities lie further down the supply chain. And it is not a problem [Les Ebdon will be able to do anything about as head of OFFA](#). Nevertheless, it is a problem that urgently needs to be addressed.

Malcolm Rasala

Matt Grist asks " how widespread is dreadful mediocrity in the state system". What about 'dreadful mediocrity in the private school system'?

Take a look at our 'supposed' leaders? Public schoolboys treadmilled through the Oxbridge tutorial system. Do they strike you as inspiring? Do they strike you as wildly knowledgeable? Do they strike you as innovative, open minded ready to embrace the 'new', ready to beat China, America and our other global rivals with really NEW thinking?

Does George Osborne appear to you to use empirical evidence to create economic policy or theoretical bias? Does Lansley appear to be basing NHS 'reforms' on unbiased evidence or political ideology? Does a Prime Minister who calls for 'Judeo-Christian morality appear to be cutting a new path or just following old backward looking bronze age mediocrities?

The trouble with 'closed' thinking like that of Matts here is that it always looks at the micro and never the macro picture. He goes on and on about state schools but never - it seems - questions the dreadful mediocrity of our public school leaders. Yes Matt dreadful mediocrity indeed. Open your eyes. Look about you

Mark Macho

Send Grist back to the mill. What makes you so sure Oxbridge is top?

I suspect the same thing that makes you think Britain is beloved around the world or the queen or Yorkshire. pudding---a large dose of childhood indoctrination topped up with the BBC's tax supported

self compliment machine. Britain's rise and rise was presided over by Oxbridge excellencies but in many cases not created by them and in many cases opposed. And what of today's decline and decline in the national league tables? Not a poster child for national Renaissance.

Oxbridge and the realm have prospered when they were clever and involved with clever people with clever ideas, not when they fancied themselves. 600 million Chinese graduates and Britons worried about the refinements of its educational class system who is out and who's the bee's knees---not very inspiring. The people at the top are not adequate so what's so great? And neither is the idea of increasing the national store of intelligence by limiting educational access. If Britain were flowering we would be expanding our institutions and we would have the money to pay for it!

Are we meddling to confirm our prejudices or to improve our actual condition?

PS

PS We learn that Matt Grist's hero is Kant? Study Kant folks. Learn his hermetic thinking. See where it eventually led. It led ultimately to the destruction of Germany. Then ask yourself is this the kind of 'closed mind' thinking that is going to improve Britains educational, scientific and innovative potential. O Dear Matt. Like Kant you need to get out a bit and see and experience the world.

matt Grist

The first two comments talk about 'Oxbridge' quite a lot, when I don't mention the word once in my post...

Malcolm Rasala

So Matt who are you referring to when you use "England's top universities" in your text. Maybe Essex University. Or the University of Bootle. Perhaps the University of Little Cotswold on the Wold?

Curb your enthusiasm, kids

Coffee House – The Spectator blog

Sebastian Payne, 13th Feb 2012

<http://blogs.spectator.co.uk/coffeehouse/2012/02/curb-your-enthusiasm-kids/>

The Comments

There were, of course, many comments made after blogs and articles by a vast mix of commentators on education and members of the public. I have downloaded 200 pages of such comments, and that scratches the surface. I am not on Twitter (thankfully) but apparently a digital fireball passed through for a couple of days; Lord knows how many tweets that represents. The comments I have collected are a rag-bag; many call for my sacking, while others support me - some are clearly informed by what I actually wrote, while others have equally clearly not bothered with that. I find reading these 'amateur' comments extremely painful, in a way that reading Toby Young or Martin Stephens is not. These men have put their name to what they have written, they have professional reputations to maintain, and I can, in theory at least, reply to them. But those trolls who get some sort of thrill from posting virulent material whilst hiding behind a pen-name are almost unreachable – they have no master, and are off the leash. Comeback with these people is nigh on impossible, so reading their thoughts is a distraction. Maybe when things are less raw, I will return to their responses and filter out the wisdom (of which there is some) from the rant. One supportive commentator in the twittersphere was Rebecca Hanson, who I should reveal in advance is a friend who attended the same Cambridge college that I did.

- [Rebecca Hanson](#) says:

[27/02/12 at 9:54 pm](#)

Hello Toby,

Isn't it wonderful when a teacher gives up their free time to run wonderfully inspiring sessions which stretch the academic abilities of teachers while exemplifying best teaching practice? I attended such a session last year on elliptic curves which totally refreshed me.

<http://www.s253053503.websitehome.co.uk/jg-msc.../intro-elliptic-atm.ppt>

Isn't it wonderful when a teacher gives up their free time to write incredible teaching resources which they then share on the web for free and which I have personally used to great effect with my students.

<http://www.risps.co.uk/>

Isn't it wonderful when a teacher then creates vidoes to explain those tasks and again shares them for free:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PUrYMcxsGNw>

Perhaps you think it's impressive if a teacher spends years regularly contributing great teaching tasks to teachers journals – again for free – and

also writes a column which poignantly describes the realities of teaching.

<http://www.atm.org.uk/journal/>

Ah no – you think -

“The tragic thing about the flight from excellence in our state schools is that teachers like this believe they’re acting in the best interests of their pupils.” and you express your horror that such a person is a teacher.

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/9082053/Dumbing-down-of-state-education-has-made-Britain-more-unequal-than-25-years-ago.html>

Nice one Toby. Carefully researched and well judged as ever.



- [Toby Young](#) says:

[27/02/12 at 11:47 pm](#)

Rebecca, your comment doesn’t invite a response since it merely confirms what I acknowledged in my Telegraph piece, namely, that the teacher in question has good intentions.



- [Rebecca Hanson](#) says:

[29/02/12 at 7:55 am](#)

Ah yes – we do so cherish this culture in journalism.

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/leveson-inquiry/9108612/Charlotte-Church-News-of-the-World-only-sorry-they-got-caught.html>

You don’t give a @@@@ what damage you do just so long as you don’t expose yourself to being sued.

I suppose you feel it is necessary to get rid of columnists who’ve spent 30 years teaching and command the respect of all in their profession. Why should they block up the column inches which cleared to make way for you to impart your wisdom?

The Editorial

The TES were wonderfully supportive over my bumpy ride concerning Michael. In particular, Michael Shaw wrote a far-sighted and balanced editorial that did a lot to make sure I kept my job.

<http://www.tes.co.uk/article.aspx?storycode=6179192>

The Letter

Everybody knows As are all that counts

Can someone please give Jonny Griffiths a slap (“Maths – put the brakes on”, 10 February). Doesn’t he realise that the three Rs (results, results, results) are the most important thing? Who cares if a high-achieving pupil is emotionally damaged? Mr Griffiths’ pay and progression may well depend on pupils like these. However, he will need to find more high achievers if he is to maintain standards and avoid Sir Michael’s search for “value for money”.

Mr Griffiths can be very proud of the pupil who was certain to get an A. His A grade is worth more than the grade C obtained by a pupil who struggles but succeeds against the odds and achieves a grade beyond all expectations.

Missie the Mathematician

Head of maths, Lincolnshire

TES Friday 24th February 2012

From a colleague

From: Matt Phelps

Sent: 20 February 2012 15:21

To: Jonny Griffiths

Subject: RE: in case you missed it

You are honest Jonny and I understand that there has been a brouhaha over it on the news but I cannot see why. Teacher bashing is cheap and easy. Keep on keeping on big fella.

M

Concluding Remarks

My College were understandably upset about the media maelstrom that Michael generated, most of which was, superficially at least, negative concerning the aims of the College. On the advice of my Assistant Principal, I wrote to my Principal and Vice-Principal, not to disown my article, but to apologise for the grief that I had caused them. To their credit, that was the end of it. I offered the College the chance to vet my articles before publication, but they declined; their only request was that I drop any reference to Paston College in my writing. I thankfully kept my job.

Yesterday, the exam results came out for the January exams. I teach maybe 100 different students a week, and almost all have taken at least one exam. Today I've walked around my classes while they tackled a problem, having a quiet word with each, affirming those who scored in line with their Mock, celebrating with those who have exceeded their most hopeful expectations, and suffering alongside those who had a bad day. One student asks, puzzled, 'How do you know all our scores?' The answer is, 'Because I care?' Each score is etched onto my mind next to the hopes I had for that student. There is one student who is really upset; I ask her to stay behind with a friend, and together we allow her to pour out some of her grief. This is what teachers are doing up and down the land; it is emotionally demanding, and it's a part of our job. What kind of monster is it who would not be compassionate in a situation such as this? Where are these teachers who don't care about their students' grades? I have never met any of them.

Look at how Martin Stephens begins his piece.

Commentators condemning the Norfolk maths teacher who appeared to encourage a bright but irritating boy (and how often are they thus?) to get a C grade and go to Bangor rather than work for an A grade and go to Cambridge missed the funniest bit. It was when the teacher wrote: "It is 4pm. My weary colleagues and I are slowly unwinding in the maths office..."

And Toby Young begins like this:

The subject of the article is a troublesome A-level student called "Michael", but instead of complaining that Michael isn't interested in maths, Griffiths complains that he's too interested! Indeed, he's making the teacher's life a misery by trying far too hard to get an A in maths in the hope of getting in to Cambridge. "Sometimes, ambitious children need to slow down," he writes.

Neither writer even hints at the idea that Michael is over-anxious, and that this is the problem I am trying to address. 'Encourage a bright student to get a C grade and go to Bangor' – how shallow a reading of my article is that? Where do I complain that Michael is too interested in maths? And as for 4pm – every teacher knows what I mean. 4pm is the end of the *performance* side of our day; this is where the admin and paperwork start. My usual college day sees me drive through the gates at 8am, and drive out at 5pm (I do have breaks during the day). I may then have 2 or 3 more hours of marking and preparation to do when I get home. 'The funniest bit...' Really? Stephens goes on:

Do our most gifted children need to be told to chill out, slow down and enjoy being 17?

No, but our most anxious students, those driving themselves counter-productively hard, do.

Iain Martin says:

A concerned pupil has plucked up the courage to come and knock on his door. But note that his teacher is annoyed about being interrupted.

I am generally delighted when a student knocks on my door after college to discuss something. I am concerned when the same student knocks on my door for five days running with the same needless worry each time. My piece says

I don't sigh.

I am in fact not annoyed, but weary. I like Michael a lot, but he has worn me down with his anxiety, which is reducing my effectiveness

as a teacher. I have less energy now to teach his colleagues, which is not fair. I take the action needed.

I could go through these critiques line by line and dismantle them. They are an exercise in how writers who depend on being controversial for a living can take an article like *Michael* and choose the most negative possible interpretation for every phrase, regardless of what is actually being said.

[Thinking is] what a great many people think they are doing when they are merely rearranging their prejudices. ~William James

These right-wing commentators already had entrenched views in place before reading my article - for some reason, my piece then resonated with these. I couldn't help thinking, 'You've got the wrong man.' The press is full of statistics like '50% of teachers are looking to leave the profession'; I happen to love my job. A simple Google search would reveal that I am a teacher who freely contributes a large number of much-used resources to the mathematics teaching community, with 20,000 downloads on the TES site alone. Does this indicate a teacher who goes through the motions? But that kind of check does not interest these commentators.

That said, there are moments of insight in the many words that were written about Michael that I need to reflect upon. Toby Young, for example, uses the words 'shock therapy' in his article, and made me realise for the first time what it was that I was doing. There is also a lightheartedness to his piece that redeems it – to ask, 'does Jonny Griffiths really exist?' is a compliment in a way.

There is one thing over which I am left in wonder – the power of a parable. Suppose I'd replaced the Michael article with a précis of my views;

Over-anxious students

Sometimes bright students will worry so much that they jeopardise their grades. In such cases I think it is legitimate for a teacher to

challenge their anxiety, sometimes in ways that appear initially to be unkind. An enquiry as to who else might be concerned about their grade can face a student with the notion that they have become too self-absorbed. Or the student can be presented with two different scenarios; one student goes to a top university, yet is not fulfilled there, while another is initially disappointed to go to a 'lesser' university, yet it turn out to be the perfect choice. The student can thus hopefully come to understand that life does not always work out in the way that we have planned.

Something along these lines would have raised no eyebrows whatsoever, maybe a yawn or two. Tell instead a story, and the whole world goes mad.

The sane response to reading Michael is to say, ‘I don’t have enough information to judge what is happening here.’ It’s a short piece that leaves huge gaps. Yet the result of that lack of detail was to summon up a wild range of responses from a huge gamut of people. The article became whatever folk wanted it to be come, something akin to a kaleidoscope that each reader would shake to see something different. It has struck me since that many writers dream of legally provoking the kind of reaction that I did on the Net; I managed it without even trying.

When I wrote my *Correlation Street* column, the following rider always sat alongside.

Correlation Street is a mixture of what happens,
what I would like to happen,
and what I am glad does not happen
in my classroom (or thereabouts).

The same applies to my TES articles. The conversation with Michael happened a long time ago – I undoubtedly exaggerated it when I wrote it up. Would the real ‘Michael’ even recognise himself in the story? As I type, only I know his real name – it is delicious to be able to withhold this secret from the world. Is he aware of the furore our

conversation caused? Probably not. Maybe one day he will learn, and I hope he then laughs long and hard. I hope too that then he will feel able to share that laughter together with me.

Jonny Griffiths, jonny.griffiths@ntlworld.com, May 2012