

# 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 said. "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 was still too stunned to reply.

“Look, Michael,” I said 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 is 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...”

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