

Element of surprise keeps learning alive



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One of the joys of digital TV is that occasionally you get to see reruns of long-forgotten programmes. Recently, ITV3 reprised *Tales of the Unexpected*, which brought back childhood memories of watching them first time round. But what has changed for the worse is the more obtrusive trailing of episodes beforehand: "Coming up in *Tales of the Unexpected* after the break..."

Isn't there some irony here? I have to hit the mute button to avoid discovering who it is who "may have something to hide" or what situation might have "more to it than meets the eye". Why should I have to fight the system to preserve the surprise when that is the chief aim of the programme?

Increasingly often, at the theatre you see signs warning you to expect gunshots or the like, which almost makes you look out for them. It must be galling for the people who work hard to design such effects to see notices warning people about them.

There is a similar problem in the way lessons are set up, with the push for clear objectives to be laid out in advance. Where is the room for surprise, excitement, drama? Children love the unexpected, and surprises are often memorable and can be moments of real insight where some sudden contrast, connection or contradiction is brought to the fore. No doubt the TV company doesn't deliberately want to spoil what's coming up; it feels it has to say enough to persuade you to hang on until after the advertisements. But the promotion ends up damaging the product.

The same is true in the classroom. If we tell pupils what is going to happen, it fails to have the desired effect. By specifying the direction beforehand, all sorts of other avenues are ruled out and children begin to accept that learning is predictable, mechanical, dull and controlled by somebody else.

How can you take part in a discussion

if you think the teacher knows exactly where they want it to end up? Some lesson plans say: "Have a discussion that leads to making the following points." How is that a discussion? "What do you think about ...?" becomes "What do you think I want you to think about...?" The "right" answer is probably a simple restatement of the "objectives" that are staring down at us from the wall. Parroting the objectives back to the teacher gives a false reassurance to everyone that progress is being made.

Something precious is lost when the element of surprise is removed from education. There is a tedious style of writing you sometimes come across in which the writer says what he is going to say, says it, then says what he's said. Public speaking that follows this model is brain-numbingly boring. The "three-part lesson" can become a pedestrian way of moving through otherwise fascinating material.

Can't we be less predictable and bring life back into learning?