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Chime: A day in the life of an Artis Specialist

The alarm sounds at 7am on a Thursday morning, and I awake, feeling tired. Wednesday night saw my “chamber pop” band headlining at The Slaughtered Lamb in Farringdon. Last night my friends and band-mates called me Stuart, or maybe Stu. But now it’s Thursday morning. Today, at Mayespark Primary School in Redbridge, in my role as an Artis Specialist, I shall be known as “Chime”.



This half-term, Year 2 have been studying the lives of famous people with their class teacher, Mrs Lloyd, and it’s my job to lead a one-hour performing arts session on that topic. I’ve chosen famous sailors. Last week was Sir Walter Raleigh, today it’s Lord Nelson.

When I arrive at school I pass Dave, the caretaker, and we exchange some cheerful banter. He is a musician too, playing the saxophone in a rock ‘n’ roll covers band. We’re also two of only a handful of men working at the school where 90% of the staff is female. In the staff room everybody bids me good morning. Some call me Stu, some Stuart, some Chime – a bit confusing perhaps, but it works.

At 9.20 I greet 2M at the door of the hall, and get their attention by clapping some rhythms for them to copy. Junaid is chatting at the back of the line, so I move a little closer to him to make sure he’s concentrating. He loves performing arts – but he also loves running around and chatting – so he needs a bit more help to get him into the zone. We process into the hall and I lead a mime for them to copy, accompanied by a Tom Waits instrumental which has some accordion in it and I think sounds vaguely sea-faring! I pretend to be on a naval ship going about business, swabbing the deck, looking through the telescope, climbing the rigging... I pull the most animated facial expressions possible and make hugely exaggerated gestures to get the children’s attention. Soon I have 30 six-year-olds smiling up at me and joining in. We’ve formed a circle and when the mime finishes I ask the children to sit down when I click my fingers. I trick them by clapping my hands – a few sit down – a chorus of giggling ensues. After a few more false starts I finally click my fingers and by now the giggling has spread so I lead another quick copying game to re-focus the group.



I give the children five seconds to gather in a group in front of my chair and I ask them how that mime reminds them of the work we did last week. “It was like the man from last time. The man who helped the Queen, and fought in his boat”, says Simran, who is sitting up straight at the front as usual. “It was, Simran”, I say, “can anybody remember his name?”

Eventually we make the link between Raleigh and this week’s subject, Lord Nelson. I turn my back, put on my long dark coat, slip my hand between the buttons and take on the role of Lord Nelson. I assume he had a deep, booming voice, and an incredibly posh accent. The children revel in the impression and I explain to them that “only the finest sailors will be allowed to join my crew!” This leads into a game of “Port – Starboard”, in which I bellow instructions for them to follow as quickly as possible. “Run to the port!”, “Run to the

Starboard!", "Swab the deck!", "Stand to attention!" By the end of this game, the children are hugely excited, and Junaid is on the verge of hurting himself, or somebody else! I crash a cymbal, which the children know is their cue to freeze, sit them down, and click a few more rhythms for them to copy.

Still in character as Nelson, I explain to them how dangerous life on the sea can be, especially on those old wooden boats – which are liable to catch fire. Miraculously, Nelson's hand recovers as I reach for the guitar and teach the children a sea-shanty about fires on board.

A few children shout out playful protestations about the suddenly recovered hand.

I start the song before I'm lynched for being a fraud!



*What's the burning, what's that sound, what's that danger, all around
What's that crackling, what's that ash, I feel frightened, off we dash
Fire Fire Fire down below, fetch a bucket of water, Fire down below!!*

The children learn the song surprisingly quickly, and we create movements to go with the song, pulling faces of mock horror and waving our arms about as the imaginary flames leap higher. Soon the children are moving about the room as sailors, walking in time to the music whilst singing.

I've been working in this school as an Artis Specialist for three years now, and I'm often surprised by how able and confident the children have become through doing this sort of work consistently for that period of time.

After singing I tell the children about the dramatic death of Lord Nelson, on his ship in the midst of a battle. We create a tableau of the scene with me playing Nelson's ship-mate, and Charlie from 2M as Nelson. Charlie sticks his tongue out and collapses on the floor dead to a peal of laughter from his class-mates. We "refine" his performance a little, and I remind the children that a tableau is a still picture - so it'd be better if Charlie was just about to die, rather than face down on the floor already! Soon all the children are finding various dramatic deaths in pairs around the room. Some falling back into the others arms, some keeled over while the other shouts for help.

Soon it is time to bring the lesson to a close. I ask the children about the skills they've needed for today's work – "listening", "copying", "concentrating", "singing", "acting" and so on. "And who was the famous person we were pretending to be?" I ask. "Nelson Mandela", says Jade.

I award some children with "performance points" – special stickers for particularly good work. Kency was walking very well in time with the music, and Charlie used excellent facial expressions in Nelson's death scene. The two children proudly collect their points and stick them on the chart to applause. By then it's time to finish, and I ask the children to "show me how smartly and quietly we can line by the door". Their Teaching Assistant meets the class at the door. "What do we have to say children?" – "THANK-YOU CHIME!" they all shout. And with that they process out of the hall again. Junaid is still singing the sea-shanty he learnt in my lesson – I decide against reprimanding him for making a noise.

Stuart Barter (Chime)
Artis Specialist and musician 2010

