

Just one more thing...

Teaching like Columbo – looking for evidence of learning rather than assuming every child has understood – can make you a better teacher, say **Andy Griffith** and **Mark Burns**...

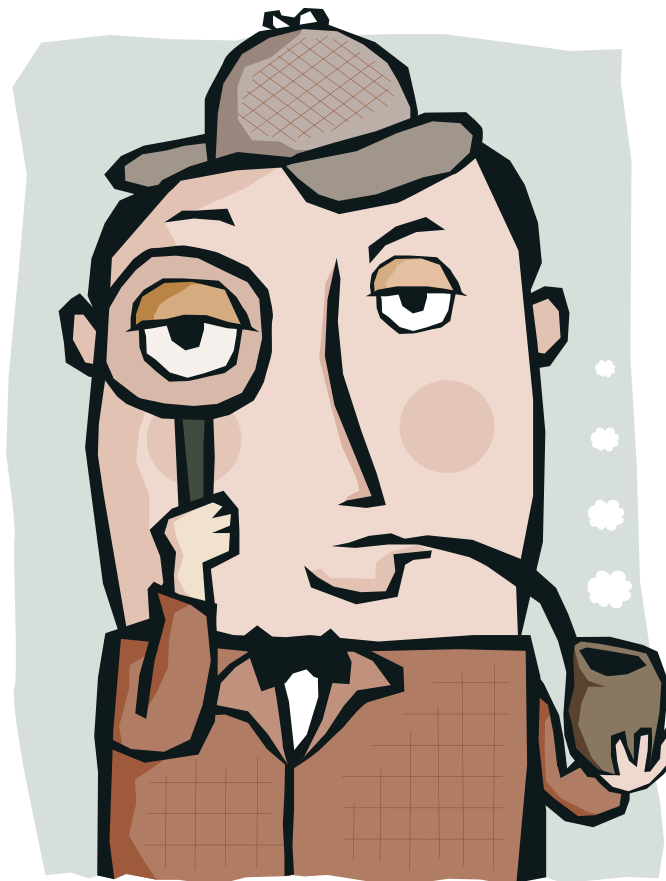
We've probably all got a favourite TV detective.

Ours is Lieutenant Columbo played by actor Peter Falk. Don't worry if you've never seen him in action, you can still find clips on YouTube or watch episodes on Channel 5 or DVD box-set. We've got them all!

In our latest book, *Teaching Backwards*, we have a chapter called 'Looking for proof of learning'. In this part of the book we put a metaphor to work: that of teacher as detective. Detectives, whether fictional or real, need evidence to secure a conviction. However, they come to realise that only certain types of evidence will prove acceptable if their case is going to stand up in the courtroom. In exactly the same way, teachers need to gather strong evidence that learning is taking place.

We've identified four behaviours that help Columbo to be such a great detective. He's hard to fool, has a low ego, devises proof-seeking questions and listens carefully to the answers given. To become more Columbo-esque in the pursuit of proof, we'd do well to imitate some of his characteristics. He never makes assumptions, and he has a healthy mistrust of the evidence in front of him.

For example, in Columbo's world, to see a pupil holding up her thumb or a green card would not be sufficient proof that she understands. He'd seek more evidence through questioning, listening and observing. Also, he wouldn't assume that just because a pupil seems to have grasped something now, that she will still understand it in six weeks' time. He'd plan strategies to help pupils remember this learning.



A detective role in teaching helps us in a number of ways. Firstly, it sharply focuses our planning. The best teachers teach backwards from a clear destination. Each journey will have different steps and stages. By knowing the destination in advance, and the steps required to get there, we can start thinking about how to gather evidence that will definitively let pupils know whether or not they are on the right track.

Secondly, we become more flexible and effective. Even the greats such as Columbo get stuck sometimes or make mistakes. When this happens, he takes it in his stride: his ego never gets in the way of him admitting he got it wrong. The success of the investigation is more important. And perhaps that's one of the key reasons

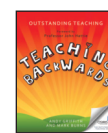
why he's such an excellent detective. He doesn't keep to a pre-set plan. Instead, he adapts the investigation according to what he learns from witnesses, suspects and the clues.

Thirdly, embracing the detective role saves us time and energy. Planning lessons and marking can take up lots of time. When you develop the skills of an excellent teacher-detective you become more efficient in both areas. They take less time when you know what you're looking for, and we can avoid the trap of wasting hours marking incorrect work.

The best teachers don't go into a classroom hoping for proof, they go in with a clear idea of how they are going to get it. In other words, they plan for it before they start teaching. They ask themselves, 'What should learners be able to

say or do at this point of the topic to prove their progress?' When we create multiple opportunities to gather high-quality proofs of progress it enables us to have richer conversations with pupils. As a result, we can offer better feedback to them and articulate confidently to parents, colleagues, and inspectors exactly where pupils have been successful, and how much further they need to, or can, develop.

In our experience, the best teachers share similar qualities with the finest real and fictional detectives. Like Columbo, they use sound strategies for noticing clues and gathering evidence. The strongest teachers plan which proof-discovering strategies they will use before teaching starts. But just as every murder case is different for a detective, every class of children is different too. We have to adjust our teaching based on the feedback that emerges from each class. Without this flexibility, Columbo wouldn't catch the murderer and the teacher won't be able to help every member of the class to make the most progress possible.



Andy and Mark's new book, *Teaching Backwards* (2014), is published by Crown House Publishing.



ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Andy Griffith and Mark Burns are directors of MALIT (malit.org.uk) an organisation that works to develop widespread outstanding teaching practice.

