

What to Do When You Feel Out of Your League



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Introduction

A week ago I gave my first ever talk at a WomenEd conference. I've written before about not particularly enjoying doing things "as a woman". So the talk was less focused on gender, and more on the unifying fact that we all feel out of our depth sometimes – especially in work situations.

Feeling out of my league has been fairly common as I moved from being a classroom teacher, to being taken to court by the government, to editing a newspaper. I've also watched carefully as other people have gone on journeys which pushed them out of their comfort zone. After all, the education landscape changes quickly – politicians are parachuted in and out; union secretaries rise and fall; successful superheads are praised one second and mutinied the next. Watching that happen gives you a good sense of who pushes ahead, and how they did it.

From all that watching, the main thing I learned is this:

**Everyone is out of their league.
Some people just let it stop
them, while others don't.**

No matter how big or hardy the edu-celebrity, every single one I've interviewed admitted things they worried about. Michael Wilshaw, the former chief inspector of Ofsted, did a stint in a 'middle-class' school and was flummoxed by the level of intervention by parents. He left and went back to working class communities where parents didn't question what he said. Dan Moynihan, the chief executive of Harris schools, famously paid over 400k a year, is pretty short in height – and that mattered to him at school. He was a scrapper until his teens. His stature meant he couldn't prove himself by physically fighting anymore. He was outclassed by taller, stronger kids. Instead, he figured he could be clever – hence, he traded fists for textbooks and went on to university. Dylan Wiliam, the demi-god of education research, was so surprised when he heard that he was being



promoted to an academic position he dropped all the files he was carrying when he found out.

Everyone feels out of their league sometimes. But opportunity comes, they are pushed from the top of the building and, as the adage goes, they build their wings on the way down.

So what can you do when you feel yourself shying away from the big leagues?

It is normal to be afraid in situations where you feel out of your depth. I suffer as much as anyone on this.

Three years ago I returned from a period of study in the US and was invited to a roundtable at the Department for Education to be held by David Laws, who was schools minister at the time. I was reasonably well-known as an education blogger by then, but I still hadn't met most of the big education names face-to-face.

At the meeting were journalists, CEOs, union leaders and so on. Of the 16 people around the table that day – I was one of only two women. That rarely bothers me, but that day I let it get at me. I felt smaller. I felt my voice would be squeakier. I felt... different.

And I let it freak me out.

The discussion was about the pupil premium: why it wasn't closing the achievement gap despite its vast sums.

I had an answer. But after forty minutes I still didn't have the guts to speak up. This wasn't like me. I'm renowned for being gobby. And yet... I just felt completely outclassed. As if my idea wasn't going to be impressive enough for a debate which was, so far, pretty theoretical and involved a lot of highfalutin words.



After about fifty minutes, I worked up the courage to speak and said something along the lines of ...

“Well, see, isn’t the reason that the pupil premium doesn’t work is because we don’t know what to do with the money? I mean, we give schools 700 pounds... but what are they supposed to do with it? It’s not as if you can feed the money to a child and the problem goes away. It’s not as if there’s a supermarket with 700 pound products where you can go in and say – ‘hi, my poor kid has x need, which solution can i buy for them?’ – and then you buy it and you know it will work. It seems obvious to me the reason the pupil premium doesn’t solve inequality is because we don’t actually know how to solve inequality.”

It’s not the most sophisticated answer. It doesn’t mention evidence, or data, or collaboration, or all the other dreadfully polite and on-trend words that people in education like to use.

I still don’t think it’s wrong though.

The room fell silence for a beat. Then a senior educationalist said, “Well, I think that’s a bit simplistic...” and everyone went back to their discussions of long abstract phrases.

It wasn’t mean in tone. But it was certainly dismissive. My stomach flipped. My cheeks flamed red. I couldn’t hear much for a few minutes. It had taken me fifty minutes to get the guts to speak up and I felt totally shot down.

Even worse, I’d left it so late to speak the first time that by the time I gave myself enough of a talking-to that I felt confident enough to re-enter the conversation, the meeting was wrapping up.

I promised myself afterwards that I would never allow myself to feel so totally helpless in a meeting again.

But how? How do you make yourself speak up when you feel so outclassed? And how do you avoid the dreaded fear that something will go wrong?



Three things to tell yourself when you feel out of your league:

1. Be 10% Braver

I first heard this saying from Jill Berry although I know it's widely used across the WomenEd sector. It's a little lifesaver. I use this one whenever I am just about to complete an action and then find myself self-sabotaging with negative thoughts.

Back in April last year, for example, I really wanted to do a profile interview of Toby Young, the journalist who set up one of the first free schools. Having battled with him for years, and given that our newspaper is often quite scathing towards free schools, I didn't imagine it was a proposition he would leap to take. Nevertheless, I wrote an email to send on the basis the worse that could happen was that he would say no.

As I was about to send it, the doubt demons visited. My fingers hovered over the send button. Was I being an idiot? Why would he do the profile? Were readers really interested? What was the point?

And then Berry's words floated in: **would you send the email if you were being just 10% braver?** My brain immediately answered: **Yes**. So I sent the email, and secured one of the most successful profile interviews Schools Week ever published.

The nice thing about 10% braver is that it gives your brain a question to overrule the doubt demons. I find that if I ask it of my brain the answer always comes back quickly. Most of the time it is a yes, sometimes it's a no – which usually points up to me that my reluctance isn't irrational fear, but a genuine concern. Had I asked myself in the David Laws meeting to be 10% braver, I have no doubt my brain would have said – **We can do this** – and I would have spoken sooner.



2. The 4Ws: Some Will, Some Won't, So What?, Someone's Waiting

I use this phrase when making decisions I will have to live with for some time. The 10% braver statement is good when you need to do something quickly. The 4Ws is for those moments when you've got a good idea that you want to implement but you know you will have to live with the consequences – for example, publishing a blog post or announcing a change in departmental policy.

The fact is: some people will like what you do, and some won't. The question is whether or not you can cope with that.

And if you're not sure ask: So What? So what if everyone hates it? So what if everyone likes it? Will you lose your job? Will you feel uncomfortable for 24 hours? Will absolutely nothing at all happen and the world will go on spinning? (This is the most likely).

Finally, remind yourself that you are unlikely to be unique. Out there in the vast universe there is probably another human being, just like you, who is hoping someone might say or do the very thing that you want to say or do. The world will never move forward if we are all politely waiting for someone else to articulate our thoughts. So you articulate them. Chop, chop. Someone's waiting.

3. Is this your _____ moment?

Six years ago, when I was still teaching, I was asked to attend a TeachFirst 'strategy' meeting. I didn't really know what it was but the invite listed lots of big names – Michael Barber and Andrew Adonis among them – and I was very excited to go.

When I got there I realised it was an afternoon to plan TeachFirst's strategy and I was the only teacher in the room. I felt totally out of place. I observed the enormously influential education people, who all knew each other and



seemed so normal with each other, in the wide-eyed way that children watch animals at the zoo. At one point someone was texting Michael Gove's special advisors **and getting an instant response**. I was bowled over. **"Who are these people?"** I remember thinking.

The seat next to me was empty at first but half-way through the first session a young woman appeared, apologising for her boss's absence. He was sick. She had been sent in his place.

As the session continued she leant over to me, introduced herself and said, "I really have no idea why I'm here. Have you seen these people? They are all amazing." I leaned back towards her and empathised entirely.

Over the day we warmed up but we spent the whole day shaking our heads as to what we could possibly be contributing and questioning if we should be there.

That woman, it turned out, was Dr Becky Allen, now chief executive of Education Datalab and this year listed on DeBretts as one of the most influential and powerful people in education.

Which goes back to the point that everyone is out of their league. Everyone had a first meeting where they sat around a table and wondered **what the hell am i doing here?** Today you might feel uncomfortable but it is entirely possible this could be your Becky Allen moment and, in a few short years, you'll be the one at the head of the table getting calls answered and having apologetic newbies rush in the door.

But what if it all goes wrong?

This is the thing that can put us off the most. If we screw up by being 10% braver or saying 'so what? someone's waiting...' then won't we pay for it?

In all honestly, the answer is probably no.



Three things to remember about why being wrong doesn't mean the end of the world

1. The Trump Pussy Principle

Last year, Donald Trump made a ridiculously crass comment ... and he still became the President.

That's a terrible indictment on many things. But it highlights two truths:

1. No one is that interested in other people, they are more interested in their own lives, and
2. You can really screw up and still get to the top.

Please don't take this as me saying you should therefore abandon all morals and not give a stuff about anyone else. I'm not.

What I *am* saying is that if you are well-intentioned in your actions, and you mess up, the chances are that you will be able to recover the situation. And the reason I say that is because even when people are not well-intentioned, and they don't do anything that proactive to try and make the situation, they often still recover given enough time. Ultimately, your mistakes are not other people's priorities hence, they are not likely to damage you too greatly.

2. You Have More Resources Than You Think

Secondly, if things *do* go wrong, you have more resources than you imagine with which to cope.



I realised this a few years ago when I noticed I had a really weird, quite embarrassing habit. When I first moved to London, every time I visited a decent public toilet in the city I would mentally log it in case I became homeless. I would note how easy it would be for me to get to it without being seen by a security guard. Or how easy it would be to wash in the basins.

One day, I mused out loud about this on Facebook.

My friend Pia responded almost immediately: “Laura, if you were homeless you could just use our toilet. Also, you wouldn’t be homeless, because you could come and stay with us.”

She was right. Yet it was only then that I realised my mind had kept catastrophising what might happen if I lost my job to the point that I had decided that by losing my income I would also, apparently, lose every friend I had ever made, plus their kindness. Plus any ability to get another job too.

When the chips are down you will not be able to count on everyone. But the likelihood that your action at work – your asking for a raise, or saying no to a new responsibility – will lead to a catastrophic outcome is pretty darn low. Don’t let irrational fears of loss stop you from gaining.

3. Flip The Script

I owe this one to my dad. The master of ‘flipping the script’ – he is able to turn almost anything negative into a positive.

If I call him to complain about people writing horrible things about me on Twitter. He will point out how great it is that people are engaging with me. If someone is mad at a story in our newspaper, he will point out how great it is the paper is influential enough for people to be so worried.

And he’s great at perspective – including the game of 5s:

Will it matter in 5 hours? 5 days? 5 weeks? 5 months? 5 years?



Frankly, in work, almost nothing will still matter five years later. So don't let a dip in fortune, or a mistake get you down. After all, it probably just means people will notice you – and, to Dad McInerney's optimistic mind, that can always be turned to your advantage.

So, in conclusion: Everyone is out of their league...

In the end, none of this adds up to magic beans. You will find yourself paralysed sometimes, unable to act, feeling outclassed and beating yourself up for being such a wuss.

But, I hope it is helpful to know that you are not alone. That almost everyone has felt that way at some point and that, when it comes down to it, you can either let it stop you or you can carry on anyway. And if you want to carry on anyway then ask yourself: Can I be 10% braver? So What? and Is this my Becky Allen moment?

Remember, someone's waiting for you to speak up. Hop to it.





About Laura McInerney

I'm an **education journalist, former teacher and co-founder of the amazing research tool Teacher Tapp** ('the app teachers tapp to make schools smarter').

For six years I taught in challenging east London schools for six years before becoming Editor of the investigative newspaper Schools Week.

Since 2013, I have been a **columnist for The Guardian** and have written for other publications including **The Observer, the New Statesman, The TES, and Prospect**.

I regularly use my schools expertise to appear on broadcasts including Radio 4's Today, Radio 5 Live, BBC London, LBC, Talk Radio, and Sky News. (If you want to get in touch for broadcast purposes, contact me).

My main specialism is looking carefully at government policies, clearing away all the faff and pomp, and explaining exactly what will happen to teachers, pupils, parents and the wider school community.

I've a geeky interest in **free schools & academies**. In 2011 I published the book *The Six Predictable Failures of Free Schools...And How To Avoid Them* before receiving a prestigious Fulbright Scholarship enabling me to spend two years in the US studying their global equivalents.

In 2014 **I was taken to court by the Department for Education for asking a question**. After initially losing, I later won the answer. I represented myself in court throughout the proceedings.

I'm super interested in **the influence of politics on education**. I have a database called 'greatness' based on my reading of all available biographies of past UK's Education Secretaries. I once ran a website about the process, documented at www.greatedusecs.com. And I now give talks on what we can learn from past education secretaries and am wheeled out whenever one changes – which is, on average, every 801 days.

My teacher training was done through TeachFirst and I received the 2008 Award for Outstanding Teaching.

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