

'Faith in the World' Prize 2011

Winner: Junior Category (ages 13-15)

Lucy Lim

What are school assemblies for?

Bells ring, corridors fill with united thudding feet and incessant shushing. The assembly ritual continues, whether to fall asleep in to musical droning or to gain a keen interest for pressing socio-political issues. It is, to either purpose, a time for the school to join together and demonstrate the collectivism found there: as the seemingly nationally used school prayer dictates, "so many hearts make a school". But do we find deeper reasons for this apparently trivial concept? Let us delve into the thoughts of one student who has found himself deeply asleep in a crowded hall...

As it happens, he is a diligent, independent thinker, but with little time for communal gatherings quite this early in the morning. He is not a team player you see, no patience for the social nonsense spewed out from a blank PowerPoint and a crumpled piece of paper. Assembly for him is evidently a time for sleep. Thus, is school assembly simply for the collectivists among us, or is it possible to encourage independence too? Exhibit A believes assemblies force excessive co-operation and aggregation. Indeed, this certainly seems the case. The foundations of assembly are that students congregate -crushed as one unit. Singing together, applauding their peers, they act for all intents and purposes as a single entity. Monotonous unisons of clapping and single harmony songs characterise the assembly, almost by definition. But can this be altered? Communication with the individual is perfectly possible. In my experience this is achievable when general topics are addressed. Issues that touch on the personal reach the goal of individual consideration, not simply *omnes aequales*. Is this the purpose of assemblies? We cannot feign equality in schools as much as we cannot within society. Thus, mobilising assemblies to encourage individualism seems far more appropriate than loading everyone in one boat.

We return to our daydreaming student, now drifting into something of a nightmare. Across his wandering mind, images of flames and agony taunt his previous optimism, feeding into that small part of his brain he reserves for depression. His subconscious is clearly far more aware than he gives it credit for. That previously blank PowerPoint is now filled with gaunt and contorted figures- illustrations of global suffering, searing into our minds. We call these

Shock tactics; used a) because 'assemblyplanner.com' has frozen, or b) it is genuinely believed pupils will only respond by being hit with reality. The latter is true to an extent. They certainly have a lasting effect. Those images permeate our brains, stubbornly lingering, picking at our consciences until we are almost obliged to react. But is this the best way of awakening students? Instilling horror into lethargic minds might make us sit up but could equally encourage rebellion, widening the gap between teacher and student. The shocking reality of some images and messages might distress pupils who will turn against those who provided them-the teachers. Then again, socially dissociated communities arguably need to learn the hard truths of the world at a young age, to the impressionable, but more importantly accepting and feeling minds of adolescents. Such tactics raise awareness-a feature that is scarce where children grow up so privileged.

So-back to the reveries of Mr Daydream. His expensive iPod is slowly stirring him from sleep, the dulcet tones of Eminem fighting over united chanting of a packed hall. Is music the key? Rewind a generation and this seems evident. Greater spirituality and faith leant towards a prevalence of hymns and increased enjoyment of them seemed apparent. Today's increasingly secular society makes the addition of these difficult. However, come Christmas, we are all-embracing, triumphantly praising the birth of Christ even without belief. If these engage the non-believers among us, surely hymns or even secular songs would benefit the school community? Appreciating a broader range of music would be an excellent function of the assembly; music already a proven international form of communication and gratification.

What are school assemblies for? Community or individualism? Learning or appreciation? Can we include all? I have found the most enjoyable of assemblies are those that reflect on personal experiences. Learning the secrets of a supposedly 2D teacher is especially engaging, motivating students, and in turn making appreciation of the lessons taught easier. Whilst we shuffle out of the routine assembly in utter apathy, such performances as these receive deafening applause. I believe school assemblies are not for teaching. What then are lessons for? But they are for educating. Educating on levels that lessons don't reach, training pupils to appreciate areas outside the curriculum and injecting inspiration. We need not be consigned to the fate of our dreamer with his head in the clouds; there is more to the assembly than sleep. Above the clouds are the heavens and this is where we must reach.