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**Wigs, disguises and child's play:
de Certeau and the primary curriculum**

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La Perruque

In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, de Certeau develops the French idiomatic expression *la perruque*, used to refer to activities or tasks undertaken for personal reasons, under the pretence of legitimate, paid work. *La perruque* literally means *wig* and according to de Certeau its origins lie in an ancient tradition of 'duping the master'.

La perruque may be as simple a matter as a secretary's writing a love letter on "company time" or as complex as a cabinetmaker's "borrowing" a lathe to make a piece of furniture for his living room (de Certeau, 1984, p. 25).

The significant factor about engaging in *la perruque* for my current argument is not the material diversion of employer's resources to the employees own ends, but the carving out in the working day of personal time. Time borrowing, or time stealing is relevant for all kinds of employees, even though so-called 'professionals' have more control over their time than workers in non-professional occupations.

Engaging in *la perruque*

differs from pilfering in that nothing of material value is stolen. It differs from absenteeism in that the worker is officially on the job... The worker who indulges in *la perruque* actually diverts time (not goods, since he uses only scraps) (ibid.).

La perruque is more related to the realm of play, with its connotations of creativity and leisure, than to the domain of morality. One engages in *la perruque* 'for work that is free, creative, and precisely not directed toward profit'. De Certeau rightly asserts that successful exercise of the practice relies on the worker's wit and ingenuity, and as such represents autonomous acting and experiencing, within the confines of what might otherwise be monotonous work - work undertaken merely for the wage it represents and not for any intrinsic value to the worker. He is at pains to point out that nothing material is stolen and there is no implication that engagement in *la perruque* entails incompetence or inefficiency.

De Certeau's discussion is situated within the specific context of contemporary consumer society. In this context *la perruque* should be valued as a strategy to support survival and flourishing in any institution designed for ends not related to human flourishing. The worker who engages in *la perruque* exercises desirable qualities in a situation of constraint, and at times, servitude.

In the very place where the machine he must serve reigns supreme, he cunningly takes pleasure in finding a way to create gratuitous products whose sole purpose is to signify his own capabilities through his *work*.

Consumer products in a market economy rely on the profit motive and the good of individual consumers and producers. De Certeau situates his interpretation of *la perruque* within the discourse of communal shared values. For de Certeau the worker engaging in *la perruque* asserts a different ethic to the dominant ethic of the market.

With the complicity of other workers (who thus defeat the competition the factory tries to instil among them), he succeeds in "putting one over" on the established order on its home ground. (ibid. p. 25-6).

Moreover the worker 'confirms his solidarity with other workers or his family through *spending* his time in this way' (ibid, p. 25).

The term 'wiggery' seems to me an acceptable English equivalent to the term *la perruque* to use in the following discussion.ⁱ

Wiggery and school

When an infant becomes a school pupil she takes up the statutorily imposed role of a participant in a social institution. In England this takes place at the age of five, or in the school year in which she becomes five. A number of reasons and stories about going to school might be offered to her. From the perspective of the state, the child is enrolled in a social institution in which she will begin her education as a future citizen of that state, so the entry into school is in some sense a call up for compulsory school service. Once in school she begins her work on the first Key Stage (KS) of the National Curriculum. At the end of the KS her educational achievements will be audited and will count against the schools targets and achievements, in a market model of league tables and competitive comparisons. The arguments about how these factors tend towards test-led curricular have been substantially articulated (Davis 1999 and 2008, Stobart 2007).

In state schools, the day is necessarily structured in order to fit in the various demands of National Curriculum and recommended strategies (DCFS 2008). There is little time for other curriculum objectives. Both junior and infant pupils routinely undergo the kind of educational experience that was once common to 16-18 year olds, when school examinations took place predominantly and only at this age. 'Cramming' for examinations, was a feature of the education of this age group and the institutions engaging it were often referred to as 'sausage machines'. This kind of learning experience equates to de Certeau's account to being a factory worker, 'on the boss's time'. It is far cry from a pedagogy based on inquiry and explorationⁱⁱ.

It is not disputed that play is of foundational importance to the psychological, emotional and cognitive development of children (Isenberg and Quisenberry 1988; Fromberg 1998 and 2002; McCune and Zanes 2001; Jenkinson 2001). At one time children's play was a foundational aspect of curriculum design in the primary school. Following the 1967 Plowden Report play and experiential learning became central to the primary curriculum, a curriculum that was changed after the 1988 Education Reform Act established a statutory National Curriculum and testing regime from ages 5-16 (DFE 1988). (Plowden had stated specifically that we should 'not assume that only what is measurable is valuable' [1967]).

Wiggery should be encouraged in the sense outlined in this paper as it allows children to create a space for play, in a non-confrontational manner. It is important that children can survive in school without getting into head on clashes with authority. Children who are unable to dissimulate and disguise non-compliance often get into difficulties that may lead to exclusion from school and other adverse circumstances. These can lead to a career of disadvantage and confrontation. Children who are good natural 'wiggery players' have some survival and developmental advantages in the school system. With an ability to sometimes 'do their own thing', they may develop a number of dispositions that are important to leading a good life, such as tactfulness and diplomacy, attentiveness, situational alertness, creativity, independence, solidarity. Children have to respond with tact to teachers if they are to avoid confrontation. They need to notice what is going on around them, otherwise they may be caught out. They need to be aware of their class mates and know how to draw on friendships: their wiggery needs to fit in with interests beyond their own, otherwise it would soon be revealed. De Certeau thinks of *la perruque* as the tactics of the weak. In the current school situation children are virtually powerless. In celebrating *la perruque* de Certeau expresses how the practice might benefit us within an institution led by managerial, rather than humanistic aims. He tells us that

we can divert the time owed to the institution; we can make textual objects that signify an art and solidarities; we can play the game of free exchange, even if it is penalized by bosses and colleagues when they are not willing to "turn a blind eye" on it; we can create networks of connivances and sleights of hand; we can exchange gifts; and in these ways we can subvert the law that, in the scientific factory, put work at the service of the machine, and, by a similar logic, progressively destroys the requirement of creation and the "obligation to give".

Until and unless the school culture becomes less like a factory and more like a place of free association and inquiry, let us encourage wiggery at school, in the belief that this practice may enable children to create some space for their playfulness, within the restrictions of their school working lives.

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ⁱ Using the French term when entering into the substantive discussion became clumsy. *Wiggery* is not entirely satisfactory as a translation. When referring to the person who engages in *wiggery* I have thought *wigger* unwise. It has an unfortunate rhyme and is also too close to the slang use of 'to wig', as in 'to wig out', meaning 'to freak out', to over-react. I have used 'wiggery-player' to emphasis my taking the concept of *la perruque* into education, from de Certeau's critique of consumerism, that fits the territory of cultural studies. The association with playfulness in the concept is important and here linked to creativity. So 'wiggery player' remains, but is under review.

ⁱⁱ As advocated by educationalists such as Rousseau, Dewey, Bruner, Piaget, Vygotsky, Froebel, Montessori, who while differing in theoretical detail, all based their pedagogy on the primacy of experience in the child's development of knowledge and understanding.