Cryptograms

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Recommended Citation

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CRYPTOGRAMS

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WHITEHALL MIDDLE SCHOOL

RTZQY RTFM ATC QFYA CLF YEMFAKF TG CLTSZLC, ESC CLF
FAR TG CLTSZLC.

KLFMCFHCTA

How do you break a code? Give it to a seventh grader. This code was
broken by two boys who refused to give up when the lunch bell rang because
they had all but one word decoded.

"We have it — all but this word. Is there a word with 'dog' in it — 'dog-
ma'?" Indeed, there is! They were both happy and curious; curious enough
to look in the dictionary, and Brian said, "Then, that means a person who
has his own opinion and won't listen to anybody else. Right?" Right! Not
only had they decoded the message, they had also added a new word to their
vocabulary, deciphered the meaning of the quotation, and earned an apple
as a prize and went happily off to divide it.

With that message decoded, another was placed on the board for the
next class:

XSROWIVM ZIV OVZPB IVXVKXZXOVH RMGL DSRXS GSV
DLIOW KLFIH. EWFOGH ZIV OLXPVW WLLIH ZTZRMHG DSRXS
GSV DLIOW YVZGH. TREVM BLFI XSLRXV, YV Z XSROW.

—QLSM XRZIWR

The class decoded this quote within minutes. Two girls discovered that
the key was the alphabet reversed.

A third code, different from the others, proved more difficult, and we
went about its decoding as a class.

F ZBBW-FJBX QO F SBXOCW IVC VFO EBUZ IVBXB VB IFO FWA
VFOW'Z FXXQYBZ IVBXB VB QO JCQWJ.

First of all, which letter is generally used more than most other letters?
We decided to try the letter "e" because there were twelve "B's" and placed
"e" above each "B". Next we looked at the "F's". What were the
possibilities? We decided that it had to be either "I" or "A" since it was used
alone. If it were the letter "I", what word-class, or part of speech, would
likely follow? A verb; but we couldn't think of a hyphenated verb, so
decided it was likely an "a" and it would be the article that signals a noun.
Since we had two "e's" in the first part and one in the second part of the
hyphenated noun, we decided to look for other clues that might help. There
was an apostrophe. When does one use an apostrophe? The first answer was
the possessive of a noun. That would mean that the "Z" was an "s", but it
didn't seem to work. We looked at the "e's" again. Two words had just two
letters alike. We listed all the words we knew ending in "e": we, me, he, be.

With a two-letter word following it we decided on "he" and guessed that "QO" could be "is". Placing all the letters above each of the corresponding letters we had fragments of several words and six complete words: A, a, he, has, he, is. We saw "has" with the apostrophe and knew it was the contraction "hasn't" thereby adding other letters, so the "teen-ager" was our noun and provided further clues to words.

At this point we had to look not at the words but at the sentence as a whole and see the pattern developing and the logical word for the sentence sense.

So, what kinds of learning skills were we using? What lessons could be learned through decoding?

1. Spelling—to recognize which letter is missing or represents remaining code letters.
2. Word patterns—what are the possibilities of this combination of letters.?
3. Syntax, or the way words are put together to form sentences.
4. Vocabulary—what is the meaning of unfamiliar words?
5. Word class or part of speech—what word class could function in this position?
6. Proofreading (In two instances the wrong code letters were used inadvertently, as in the above code. Thus, "arrived" ended with "Z" which represented "1". As they proofread the code and message, they caught the errors.)
7. Semantics—what meaning does the message contain?

What type of class reaction might decoding evoke? These seventh graders worked with interest and enthusiasm. There were group interaction, working in pairs, sharing, intense individual, personal struggle, controlled voices, and finally relief, as they went through the thinking processes of comparing, classifying, observing, interpreting, and problem solving.

An added incentive was a prize offered for those who broke the code and revealed the message. Further evidence of their intense interest was that one student immediately selected two quotations, one by Lewis Carroll and the other by Lord Chesterfield, prepared a code for each, and the method of decoding. These were used with other classes who exhibited the same interest and consequently, codes of quotations are coming in now for "extra credit".

Codes, cryptograms, can be used effectively to interest young people in the study of their language.