Influences on Teaching

Why do we teach the way we do? What lies behind the approaches we use day and daily in the classroom? Finding the answers to these deceptively simple questions has been a consistent preoccupation of educational research and policy and has spawned an increasingly rapacious industry of gurus, seers and snake-oil salesmen.

Of course, the first and most pervasive influence on a teacher may be the fact she or he was once a pupil. Our image of what it means to be a teacher has been conditioned by personal experience over many years and in many different settings. Similarly, parents, politicians and everyone else have also been to school and their expectations of teachers will also be influenced by that experience. That part of the iceberg which is visible to the pupil may well have a disproportionate effect on how teachers are perceived by adults. We should never underestimate the power of past experience in creating stereotypes of what a good teacher should look like. The problem, however, is that times change and the qualities which appeared to serve us well in the past may no longer meet the needs of twenty-first century learning. Mr Chips would struggle to survive in today’s classroom.

Our experience in the early years of teaching will also cement teaching styles and beliefs which may well last an entire career. Advice from university staff and teachers while on placement can, indeed should, have a profound effect. Similarly, our exposure to colleagues who appear to be in command of the classroom will affect how we define success. Finding approaches which work will inevitably dominate our early search for security in front of a class. Throughout a career, the working environment will also dictate much of what we regard as possible let alone desirable. Teachers do not work in a controlled setting and the nature of the school culture, available resources and personal circumstances will all shape what we do.

What then does this mean for professional growth and development throughout a career? If our personal experience as a pupil and the influence of friends and colleagues are givens, then the need for high quality early professional experience becomes more critical. Initial teacher education and induction should take place in the kinds of setting which model professional practice, foster habits of reflection and experiment and which establish from the outset the need to focus relentlessly on the impact of what we do on the learning of the young people in our charge. Passive acceptance of conventional thinking, seeking to replicate the behaviours of others, however exalted, and focusing on process without asking hard questions about impact should have no place in modern professionalism.

The freedom which Curriculum for Excellence gives to the profession brings with it the responsibility to engage with difficult issues and to be personally and collectively reflective. There are real dangers that, without that kind of hard-nosed reflection, teaching can become prey to habit, conventional wisdom, and snake oil. ‘Breakthroughs’ associated with putative developments in neuroscience, for example, can give rise to all sorts of odd ideas.

One such odd idea is the very confused thinking which surrounds learning styles. At its most extreme, this can lead to futile attempts to divine an individual’s most effective means of learning and then to teach to that supposed style. Apart from the flawed science which lies behind such an approach, the notion that we should seek to reinforce an inability to learn flexibly is itself an impoverished view of the purpose of education. However, references to learning styles pepper educational discourse and advice, sometimes coming from apparently authoritative sources. Teachers should be armed with the skills and values to challenge such thinking and not to invest it with an authority which it does not deserve.

Similarly, the pedagogy of Curriculum for Excellence requires careful examination. John Hattie’s work[[1]](#footnote-1) in synthesising the results of over 800 meta-analyses relating to achievement should be an essential point of reference for all teachers. His work suggests that “...active and guided instruction is much more effective than unguided, facilitative instruction”. Direct instruction trumps problem-based learning as an efficient means of maximising learning. Giving quick feedback is more effective than inquiry-based teaching. Many teachers would regard such a conclusion as heretical in terms of their understanding of what Curriculum for Excellence is all about. Of course, Hattie’s conclusions depend on what kind of learning you are seeking to develop and all of this is open to debate. However, the essential point is that research evidence of this kind ought to be critically examined in helping us to develop appropriate teaching and learning approaches. There is no orthodoxy around the kind of teaching which Curriculum for Excellence requires. The key lies in using a range of approaches and constantly reflecting on what works for what purpose.

All of this reinforces the need for teachers who define their identity in terms of constantly developing their and their colleagues’ understanding of why we teach the way we do. Experience and intuition are vital but so is an active engagement with the kind of research which helps us to meet the needs of the young people in our charge. In that way, the day-to-day work of teachers in classrooms across Scotland will itself be part of developing our understanding of the continuing mysteries of the teaching and learning process.

Published in TESS October 2012

1. John Hattie “Visible Learning” Routledge 2009 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)