

A Discussion of Some Factors Which Lead to Effective Teaching and Learning

The factors contributing to effective teaching and learning can be split into two main areas. Those things related to how the content is delivered and those related to extraneous issues such as discipline.

Perhaps it would be easy to classify the former as factors affecting teaching and the latter as affecting learning, unfortunately there is much overlap. Good teaching must include suitable control of the non-content factors. Good learning is strongly affected by the delivery of the content. Effective teaching should provide an effective learning environment.

Content delivery is shaped by many variables. On the surface the most important factor is enthusiasm. If a teacher does not convey an interest in the subject then the pupils are unlikely to pay much attention. On the other hand, an overwhelming exposition would trigger pupils to shut-out what was happening – ‘he’s just mad’. This difficult balance is very similar to that of another factor, friendliness and approachability. Too dictatorial an approach will stop a class paying attention and asking important questions. On the other hand, a chummy approach will be regarded with suspicion and may be seen as weakness. Together with a display of competence and confidence these factors shape the relationship between teacher and pupils.^{1,2,4}

Even if the mood is right there is still a lot that needs to be right for the delivery to be effective. The material covered must be relevant, suitably challenging and well structured. Of course, quite how this is interpreted will change from class to class. Some will be able to draw information out of a jumble of sources, and may even benefit from acquiring the skills to do this occasionally, while others will need to be spoon-fed carefully ordered notes. In all cases, important points should be repeated. Ideally they should be said in different ways and written as well as spoken. If the concept is described from as many different angles as possible then at least one way of thinking about it ought to stick with each pupil.^{1,5}

Perhaps the worst obstacle to effective delivery, once all the above criteria are satisfied, is presentation. If the pupils can’t hear or read what is being shown to them they cannot be expected to learn anything from it. Here repetition has another advantage – allowing pupils to catch what they missed second or third time round. Of

course, if the presentation is so bad they can never understand what is said then this doesn't help. Body language ties in with presentation. Overbearing stances can stunt classes' inquisitive nature. If they are not curious how can they be interested, and so how can they learn much?

Questioning is a major aspect of teaching. It can be used simply as a form of repetition, requiring a pupil to say it instead of the teacher. However, it has two other uses that are vastly more important. Asking appropriate open questions can make the pupils think. For those who are able this is the best way of crystallising an idea in their head. Any decent question will also provide feedback to the teacher. This information can allow them to decide whether to go over an area again in a different way, forge ahead, or flesh out the edges.^{1,4} Without the data from such questions the lesson would be delivered into a vacuum with no knowledge of whether the material has been received and understood. The teacher must “monitor patterns of learner use and act on that information to improve teaching” – P Hubbard, 1999.² Many areas can be covered without any extra information being imparted by the teacher – all the facts come from the class and the session helps the pupils form the facts and ideas into a cohesive structure.

Unlike the issues discussed above, the employment of the factors not directly related to the content delivery vary greatly from class to class and teacher to teacher. For instance, different teachers adopt drastically different discipline stances with the same class.

One of the biggest and most controversial issues is pupils talking. During an explanation by the teacher it is universally agreed they should be listening, not talking. The argument comes when they are working. If they discuss what they are doing then it can be beneficial to their learning. However, talking does slow them down and if it is not on-topic is disruptive. Some classes can safely be allowed to chat quietly while they write, others would not get any work done if that was condoned.³

Size of class and arrangement of desks are two other matters which draw a lot of debate. Too large a class can reduce communication both between teacher + pupil and pupil + pupil. It also makes task avoidance easier and adds distractions. Orderly rows cut down distractions caused by facing people. On the other hand, grouping tables allows easy discussion during group work. The layout of the room can change the

mood. Rows could be more intimidating than other set-ups and so lead to some pupils not contributing.⁵

A good lesson combines elements of reproductive and productive activities. An idea cannot be fully understood through passive reproduction of information. Ideally lessons should work towards a point where pupils can take charge of their own learning to some extent. The teacher should “create opportunities for the pupils to exercise real responsibility” – Anthony Luby, 2000.^{1,3} A balance should be struck between “formal instruction” and “freedom to experiment”^{4,6}.

It is easier to cater for classes containing similar ability pupils. This gives the pupils the best opportunity to learn from each other without a few doing all the work for the others. It also allows the delivery to be well focussed. “We need schools which ... abandon any residual dogmatic attachment to mixed ability teaching.” – Sec. Of State for Education and Employment, January 2000.

A factor which straddles both areas is differentiation. This is commonly regarded as being solely to do with varying ability. It often takes the form of a help sheet with extra information, or simply expecting less written work (differentiation by outcome). Sometimes it includes extension work for the more able. While this may be required for some cases it should not be the sole application of differentiation.⁷

Different people learn in different ways. Some may learn by rote. Others may need to find something out for themselves before they remember it. Some need silence and private study. Others manage best discussing things with others, bouncing ideas back and forth.^{4,5} Ideally all these methods should be catered for. Obviously, it would be near impossible to combine silent study and group discussion in the same classroom at the same time. Where possible, compatible methods should be developed simultaneously, with time in other lessons to explore other methods.⁷

Perhaps in time pupils could be setted taking their learning style into account. Although this might make them less likely to pick up other tricks from colleagues, it would make it easier to teach them new methods of learning, as well as the subject material. For instance, a class which has problems with researching can spend a lesson with full focus on doing this and not get bored.

The most drastic change in my opinions caused by the first teaching practice is the level of discipline and guidance required. I had expected that if they were interested in something they would be able to focus on it and not try to mess around. Now I know that they have to be constantly reminded to get on with a task. Self-guided learning has to be taught and channelled – it isn't an automatic reaction to look something up in the textbook before asking.

I had expected to be able to spend more time developing understanding rather than just giving facts or helping pupils to remember things. Perhaps this was to do with the children involved or the topics covered. Most likely it is that the level required to understand some things is A-level and beyond. Most pupils lacked the mathematical and reasoning tools to investigate many areas on their own.

References

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