



Five Factors for Effective Teaching

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PHILIP GURNEY

ABSTRACT: *In the course of a teaching career a teacher does not often have the opportunity to consider the very basic principles of his/her craft in the classroom. This article is such an exploration. In searching for the elusive 'Holy Grail' of Good Teaching, the article suggests five key factors that could contribute to an effective and worthwhile learning and teaching environment.*

All teachers do good things some of the time, and all good teachers do bad things some of the time. The differences among teachers lie not only in the proportions of the good and the bad, but also in their awareness of the effects of what they are doing and their readiness to share this awareness with their students.

(Smith, 1995: 590)

INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of this year I set myself a goal and that was to try to establish an understanding of the concept of good teaching. I wanted to see if it were possible to encapsulate the qualities of a **good teacher** and **good teaching** in a **good learning environment** so that one could hold these qualities up as a benchmark for all teachers to see and to aspire towards achieving some kind of excellent standard. In my quest for this educational 'Holy Grail', I have discovered a wide range of very diverse interpretations of teaching theories and philosophies, of very different starting points that will clearly influence the teacher's actions in the classroom and of many different approaches to what actually happens in the classroom and how teachers relate to what they do in the confines of the four walls that they define as their teaching environment. I have also sat in teacher's classrooms for hour-long periods or for short 10 minute visits, I have spoken to 30-year veterans – some jaded, some still passionate, and bright-eyed first year teachers filled with Teachers College enthusiasm and attention to strands and objectives for everything that they do in the classroom. I have reflected on my own 27 years of teaching in different countries and cultures. I have searched high and low for the 'Grail of the good teacher' and in the end I come back to the idea caught in W.B. Yeats poem, 'The Circus Animals Desertion', where all ideas and thoughts begin:

Now that my ladder's gone,
I must lie down where all the ladders start,
In the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart.

(Yeats, 1961: 392)

So what is good or effective teaching? Smith (1995) suggests that learning 'is a consequence of experience' (p.588). He argues that education and therefore teaching, should be focussed on the creation of 'appropriately nourishing experiences so that learning comes about naturally and inevitably' (p.589). He states that schools should focus less on 'talking about learning and teaching' and 'more about *doing*' (p.589). Is this then the answer to the quest? To reflect on what we do in the classroom rather than on all the talk about theory and practice. To develop an effective teacher model by identifying clearly what it is that effective teachers do in their classrooms?

If this were the case then Alton-Lee (2003) has provided ten clearly defined and research-supported characteristics of quality teaching. Although these characteristics were developed for 'diverse students', I would question how many classrooms in New Zealand or anywhere in the world would be made up of anything but diversity in culture, ability and social point of view. Alton-Lee's ten point model covers the following areas:

1. A focus on student achievement.
2. Pedagogical practices that create caring, inclusive and cohesive learning communities.
3. Effective links between school and the cultural context of the school.
4. Quality teaching is responsive to student learning processes.
5. Learning opportunities are effective and sufficient.
6. Multiple tasks and contexts support learning cycles.
7. Curriculum goals are effectively aligned.
8. Pedagogy scaffolds feedback on students' task engagement.
9. Pedagogy promotes learning orientations, student self-regulation, metacognitive strategies and thoughtful student discourse.
10. Teachers and students engage constructively in goal-oriented assessment.

(Alton-Lee, 2003: vi-x)

This then leads to the two extremes of the quest, a simple 'focus on what you do' and a detailed analysis of the best evidence on quality teaching. Does teaching draw on both extremes and should the effective teacher be expected to follow one, or both of these models and in the process perhaps fall short of either goal? In reaching my own conclusions I have endeavoured to find a path that draws these two philosophical approaches together so that I can find a possible map that will provide further direction in the quest for that 'good teacher' epitaph.

With this in mind I will focus on the areas that I believe are the most significant in my teaching and in my efforts to be an effective teacher. In the creation of an effective learning environment, I suggest that it is the interaction of the following five key factors that provide a foundation for a good teaching:

- ✓ Teacher knowledge, enthusiasm and responsibility for learning.
- ✓ Classroom activities that encourage learning.
- ✓ Assessment activities that encourage learning through experience.
- ✓ Effective feedback that establishes the learning processes in the classroom.
- ✓ Effective interaction between the teacher and the students, creating an environment that respects, encourages and stimulates learning through experience.

KEY FACTOR 1: TEACHER KNOWLEDGE, ENTHUSIASM AND RESPONSIBILITY FOR LEARNING

In 1964 John Holt addressed the question: 'How children fail?' and he proceeded to analyse the state of schools and education in the USA. His conclusions were that schools did not recognise the living quality of education. He highlighted the boring nature of repetitive tasks, the dishonesty of teachers with schooling and with themselves, the limiting of knowledge and ultimately the coercive nature of schooling (Holt, 1964: 168-179). Holt's comments are central to the creation of a classroom that reflects the teacher's knowledge, enthusiasm and the responsibility for creating a learning environment that will effectively nurture the student's desire to learn and to accept the challenges of thinking and inquiring into all that is offered by the teacher. To create this environment, the teacher must be prepared to challenge the prejudices of an education system that still reflects much of Holt's view. Teachers need to adjust their thinking about the nature of teaching; the classroom environment should mirror the teacher's reflective practices that would be central to the learning environment. There are many theories about reflective practice and thinkers like Baird (1991), Day (1999a & b), McMahon (1999) and Cole and Knowles (2000) provide specific direction for critical self-reflection. Day (1999a) argues that 'teaching is more than a craft', suggesting it is an 'educational science and a pedagogical art' (p.22). Day (1999b) also suggests a model for reflective professionalism that includes the following key words: 'Learning, Participation, Collaboration, Co-operation, Activism' (p.228). These are ideas that effective teachers should keep as touchstones for their practice.

In taking on the reflective role, teachers can enjoy the process of teaching by sharing their knowledge through the creation of a reflective classroom. In such an environment the knowledge is shared; students and teachers all become learners, discovering the world of the subject. The teacher that is willing to share his knowledge unconditionally will be stepping towards the effective classroom. The passion that a teacher has for his subject will be creating a world that moves beyond the ritual of classroom activities. It is the

example of passion for something that can inspire students to want to learn. Fried (1995) sums this idea up:

The example we set as passionate adults allows us to connect to young people's minds and spirits that can have a lasting positive impact on their lives.

(p.19)

At the same time the teacher is the guardian for learning in the classroom environment. If the teacher goes in unprepared, unwilling to share, unfocussed on the process of developing a context that will encourage and stimulate an interest and a thirst for further knowledge then that teaching is shirking the responsibility of being a teacher. Teaching is far more than simply transferring information, it is the engaging of minds to seek out answers. Strong, Silver and Robinson (1995) put forward the acronym SCORE to suggest a model of student engagement. I would suggest that this model should be applied to teachers first:

- S*: The Success of mastery of the subject that you teach.
- C*: The Curiosity that every teacher should have entrenched in their teaching. A teacher who is not curious has lost a critical portion of the passion for learning.
- O*: Originality – a teacher who is passionate about the teaching process will be creative; will be constantly seeking new ways of engaging and challenging students.
- R*: Relationships are central to the effective classroom and teachers are crucial in the nurturing of opportunities for students to engage with subjects that at senior levels can lead to a life-long interaction with the subject.
- E*: To maintain this process the teacher needs Energy. This is something that schools do not always provide, and teachers in general need the time to reflect; to re-energise and to regenerate their focus on the learning process. It is an essential ingredient in the effective classroom that is too often ignored.

(SCORE acronym adapted from Strong *et al.*, 1995: 9-11)

In essence a teacher who brings a passion for teaching to the subject, and takes responsibility for the creation of an environment that allows for the sharing and enjoyment of that knowledge, will be creating an effective learning climate.

KEY FACTOR 2: CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES THAT ENCOURAGE LEARNING

In many classrooms this is the key factor that supports an effective learning environment. It answers the question posed by Smith earlier in this paper as to what do effective teachers do in the classroom.

Stipek (1996) lists six practices that support the idea that an effective classroom is a classroom of opportunity and experience, where learners can explore and experiment in a climate that recognises the process of learning as the measure of success rather than the right answer approach (p.105). It acknowledges the vital role of intrinsic motivation in creating an environment where students can feel that they are the masters of their own learning (p.102). In a different environment, but following the same basic philosophy, Alton-Lee (2003) suggests, 'quality teaching provides sufficient and effective opportunity to learn' (p.53).

Both of these writers highlight the need for the classroom environment to be a place that allows students to learn. That may be a very obvious statement but in considering the average class of senior students, many factors would in fact mitigate against a good learning environment being created and not through lack of trying or experience on behalf of the teacher. The fact that a teacher may be successful in one year does not necessarily mean that success will be continued in the next year. The teaching environment may be the same but the attitudes that each cohort brings to a classroom will always influence the outcome. A teacher must be able to identify the ebbs and flows of each class and work with the students to create the learning environment. Teachers need to be prepared to test what is going on in the class, for example, through feedback questionnaires on what they doing.

In reflecting on this feedback and on the classroom activity of a year, a teacher could identify specific exercises and techniques that engaged the students. It takes patience and persistence to have the classes work co-operatively, to carry out independent research, and to report back to small groups and to the whole class – the goal is that through the teacher's endeavours, the learning will become the student's own learning. The activities need to be part of their learning regime and not something that is imposed. This is an area that requires planning, reflection and preparation.

This is clearly a central issue in this aspect of the learning environment: it is a very self-conscious action on the part of the teacher. The activities that are used in the class to engage the students must be reviewed, revisited and refocused so that they are constantly drawing the students into an effective interaction with the subject. Effective Teaching is not a passive action.

KEY FACTOR 3: ASSESSMENT ACTIVITIES THAT ENCOURAGE LEARNING THROUGH EXPERIENCE

A central aspect of the NCEA regime is assessment. It is the cry of teachers, students, parents and administrators that NCEA over-assesses. The point that I feel is that the assessment can be very much a part of the creation of an effective learning process. I accept that the nature of a learning environment that is dominated by assessment procedures can detract from the learning environment but I have found that if the students are able to see the value of the learning process, and the assessment is a part of the learning and not an end in itself, then they can buy into the process and actually use it to gain better results while benefiting from the learning environment which they help to generate through their self-monitoring and peer-assessment activities. This is an idea that has been demonstrated by Cameron (2002) in identifying the

processes of peer tutoring, co-operative learning, reciprocal teaching through predicting answers, questioning, clarifying and summarising and collaborative reasoning (p.38-39). All of these processes when used in a classroom will empower the learners as they are the people doing the learning; echoing Smith's question: 'What do you do in the classroom?' If assessment activities are part of the 'doing' then they become a central part of the learning process. In the terms of Brown and Campione (1996, as cited in Cameron, 2002), they become a 'community of learners' (p.40).

Delandshere (2002) argues that there is a gap in the research on assessment practices. She focuses on: the inclusion of the value judgements of the assessments in the learning process, of the 'discourse, actions and transactions of individuals in participation' (p.1478), and questioning the nature of assessment and inquiry. Her questioning emphasises the nature of the debate surrounding assessment and its multi-level of inquiry (p.1481). This is an issue that has concerned me in relation to NCEA where the process of assessment of internal and external standards and formative and summative work seems to blur the lines of assessment and inquiry. At what stage does the teacher have to step back and leave the student to complete the assessment? At what stage does inquiry become assessment?

This is a question that influences the process of learning and the creation of an effective learning environment. The effective teacher has to be aware of the debate surrounding assessment and has to be able to cope with the interplay of summative and formative tasks in the NCEA regime. Regardless of the educational structure, the effective teacher will use assessment as part of the learning environment rather than as a separate entity.

KEY FACTOR 4: EFFECTIVE FEEDBACK THAT ESTABLISHES THE LEARNING PROCESSES IN THE CLASSROOM

Hattie (1999) provides my teaching with a core underpinning value. I have always believed that feedback – focussed, appropriate, timely and learning-related – should be one the cornerstones of the effective teacher. Hattie's extensive research highlighted the value of feedback in raising achievement (p.2). He identifies feedback as 'the most powerful single moderator that enhances achievement' (p.9). With this endorsement I focussed on trying to create a classroom where my feedback to the learners was aimed at encouraging them to become more engaged. I had to develop different methods of feedback that would allow them to engage with the learning. My explanations, my questioning methods, my instructions all had to be linked with the learning environment and all were part of the interplay of feedback and student input. The effective classroom is one where the students actively seek feedback as they will know that their own learning will become part of the feedback process. The nature of interplay of learning and teaching in the activities of the effective classroom adds to the value of the feedback in such an environment. Alton Lee (2003) highlights the value of feedback but warns that too much can be as detrimental as too little. This then provides another key aspect of the effective teacher. Feedback that is appropriate and meaningful to the learner will be a central part of the effective learning environment.

In a further step the feedback that a teacher gets from the students is essential to the creation of a learning environment. The more feedback that a teacher can obtain from students, and the more the teacher can act on that feedback, the better the learning environment will be that is created.

KEY FACTOR 5: EFFECTIVE INTERACTION BETWEEN THE TEACHER AND THE STUDENTS, CREATING AN ENVIRONMENT THAT RESPECTS, ENCOURAGES AND STIMULATES LEARNING THROUGH EXPERIENCE

Eisner (2002), in putting forward a number of concepts that should be essential components of schools, argues:

Good teaching depends on sensibility and imagination. It courts surprise. It profits from caring. In short, good teaching is an artistic affair.

(p.577)

The effective teacher will be one who engages with the students in the class in a way that highlights mutual respect and an acknowledgement of the learning process that is in place. Eisner's suggestion that teaching is a caring exercise is very much part of the effective learning process. Learning is an emotional exercise. Students will engage in something that appeals to them emotionally. The teacher who brings a sense of personal involvement to the classroom, who wants to share the knowledge with the members of the class, who is prepared to show that he/she is also a part of the learning cycle, will be setting up a relationship which will encourage a good learning environment. Wolk (2001) highlights this by emphasising that teachers 'who are passionate about learning ... create an infectious classroom environment' (p.59).

The effective environment will allow students the time to learn. This is something that is mentioned frequently in the literature. Crooks (undated) emphasises that 'good learning needs time and patience'. Wolk (2001) argues that students need time 'to own their learning' (p.59). In the rushed world of Year 13, Level 3 NCEA students have about 125 in-class teaching periods to cover the entire course; it is a difficult decision on the part of the teacher to 'give time' for students to explore at their own pace the work that they are doing.

This last factor is essential in creating an ethos of learning that will allow students to feel comfortable in the classroom. The working environment that is generated by the interaction and the enthusiasm of the teacher will remove the stigma of 'working' and turn the learning process into something that is rewarding and therefore to strive towards. In effect, the creation of an effective learning environment would generate a positive learning atmosphere throughout a school.

CONCLUSION

Nuthall (2001) questions the cultural myths that haunt classrooms, making teachers follow certain rituals that appear to be good practice. His suggestion that 'every generalisation we make, every conclusion we draw, must be true of every individual' (p.24) highlights the very nature of the effective classroom. It is like a finely tuned instrument that needs to be nurtured, not forced into strait-jackets of convention. The effective teacher will be able to orchestrate the music of the classroom, turning Yeats' 'foul rag and bone shop' into an environment of excitement and passion for learning.

Finally, I return to my original quest, having targeted five key areas that if followed might lead towards some answers in the search for that perfect lesson. The point about the process is that it is the journey that is important. As the teacher becomes more involved in the learning process, as the passion for knowledge is shared with the students, so the effective nature of that teaching and learning environment will become evident.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Philip Gurney is Deputy Principal at Trident High School, Whakatane. He has been teaching for 29 years and has held a range of positions, from HOD to Principal. He is an alumnus of Rhodes University – BA Honours, University of Cape Town – B.Ed, and Otago University – M.Teaching (Distinction). He completed the M.Teaching in 2006 where he focussed specifically on reflective practice and engaging students in their own reflective learning.