

## training teachers

Geoff Barton

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So how do you tell a good teacher from a mediocre one?

In his provocative and inspiring book *Blink*, Malcolm Gladwell tells us what we already guessed - that students can judge the quality of a teacher within (wait for it) ten seconds of seeing them. And - like so many of the other snap-judgements he describes in the book - these judgements tend to be unerringly right. Apparently our pupils can tell the good teachers from the rest of the pack with the instinctive accuracy of a leopard hunting its supper.

So if it's so easy to tell the good teachers from the rest, why isn't our recruitment better? Why is so much of our training still so amateurish? Why are 20 years of teaching still, for too many teachers, the equivalent of one year repeated twenty times? And why, as Dylan Wiliam argues, are so many teacher attitudes and methods formed at the age of eighteen - before they even start to train?

The training of teachers remains one of schools' weakest and most contradictory features. For too many staff, training consists of meetings which contradict much of what we know about effective pedagogy, contain no differentiation, and rarely address practical issues of classroom practice. Training days too often sap our will to live, with an undifferentiated, mixed ability diet that would fail an Ofsted test. Death by PowerPoint or an overpacked agenda are hardly likely to aid reflection. Or we sit through lectures about learning styles, a leaden herd of bodies, all eager to be gone, all irritated by the lack of evidence of impact, sceptical of the grand claims.

Teacher teach thyself, but please do it to reflect different learning styles.

Michael Marland's seminal work on being a teacher - *The Craft of the Classroom* - remains spot-on in recognising that teaching is essentially a craft: a learnable set of skills that can make the difference between the good and mediocre teacher. That is not to say it isn't a rewarding and intellectually challenging job; it isn't to decry the skills and talent, the passion and creativity of colleagues. But it does recognise that just as a surgeon needs certain essential physical skills - a steady hand, strength, sharp eyesight - so teachers have certain skills without which they will never be great. It's not just about subject knowledge.

Watch a mediocre teacher in a lesson. The problem isn't usually what he knows or doesn't. It's how he enters the room, where he stands, how he doesn't engage the pupils, the insecure gestures, the poor classroom positioning, the failure to smile, the ammoniac tang of victim.

Whilst teacher training has undoubtedly improved from the days when many of us attended sporadic seminars led by long-fled refugees from the classrooms, anecdotal evidence suggests that there is still a failure to engage with the day-to-day realities of what good teachers do.

I would suggest that the answer is even more in-school training, more observation, more focus on the micro-skills of teaching. Let's use technology better to coach and analyse what goes on within and beyond the classroom. Let's film, freeze-frame and analyse the body language, the verbal mannerisms, the proxemics of trainee and established teachers. Let's borrow from sports coaching the microphone and earpiece technology that enables the coach to give trainees instant advice and feedback, rather than waiting till the end of the lesson for retrospective, stale advice. Let's be much more explicit in spelling out what good teachers do.

Most of all, let's stop trotting out the argument that reflection about practice can only be done in universities. We want our teachers in every school to reflect, day in, day out. Good schools encourage and even insist on it. Reflection is what good teachers do in schools: it isn't the province of university departments of education.

So what should good teacher training consist of?

- More school-based learning, shifting resources and staffing to effective schools.
- More observation by trainees of lots of teachers - and not just those who teach our own subjects.
- More focus on the micro-skills of teaching, such as where we stand, how we use gesture and intonation and eye-contact.
- More use of technology, for example using a wireless microphone and earphone kit that allows the coach to give instant guidance to the trainee.
- More video analysis of the teacher's performance in a lesson.
- An interventionist cradle-to-grave approach to staff development that expects career progression from all staff from their earliest years.
- Encouragement for all staff to visit their 'adjoining' phases, and in particular to challenge the notion that compartmentalisation of subjects is any longer appropriate. Teachers are foremost teachers of children, not of subjects.
- More rigorous performance management which focuses on the skills teachers need to make them better teachers, rather than on the hoops they need to jump through to get more pay.
- A cradle-to-grave approach to staff development which recognises the essential skills and experiences of older staff, using them as mentors and staff tutors to the rookies.

There are, no doubt, many other ingredients too. These are just starting-points.

The main message though is that real educational improvement is not realised through centralised initiatives and strategies, nor through the big stick of inspection. At the heart of a good education system is good teachers. I would suggest that our training could afford to take a much harder look - as well as a "blink" - at what we might mean by that.

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Geoff Barton is of the National Education Trust's Leading Thinkers.

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