Teaching and learning
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National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH)
Opinion piece
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There is no better place to start a discussion of the leadership of teaching than with your own favourite teachers. They are the role models who help shape the deepest, most unacknowledged levels of our personal motivation iceberg. They are the reason most commonly cited by interview candidates for entering teaching themselves: that they were inspired with a love of their subject, or in some way rescued by Mr Batman or Ms Superwoman, and how they want to do the same for others.

So it is ironic that I would certainly not employ now the man who inspired my love of English and, through his general studies course, opera. He was called Derek Lucas, and we called him Bill although I have no idea why. He would march into the classroom with a pile of books under his arm – Macbeth, for example – throw them out, allot parts and off we would read for the next umpteen lessons. Whichever play we read, he was always the king.

His love for the books was palpable, his enthusiasm infectious and his passion for engaging us in the study of literature difficult to resist. Although of course some did, and that is where the limitations of Bill and his ilk just up like an insurmountable cliff. They were teachers as entertainers, hugely enjoying playing to the captive audience, and in that respect self-indulgent. It was great fun for those who wanted to engage, and the rest doodled away their time at the back of the class, or chatted, or truanted. I was at the front of the class for English, and one of the disengaged at the back for maths. It was mentioned on my end of year report, but otherwise no one worried. As a person, I was inspired by old Bill; as a leader, I recognise that we need far more in a modern vision of teaching.

It is a truism that leadership has to start with a vision, but it is no less true for that. So the first element of leading teaching is to decide your aspirational outcome. We decided that ours was '180': this was shorthand for 100 per cent of students achieving 5 grades A*-C at GCSE, and 80 per cent of those including English and maths. Most vision statements are too verbose. They are unwieldy, multi-legged tables designed by committees and seeking to include everyone's pet hobby-horse. We chose 180 because it was simple, memorable and achievable. Moreover, a vision lives when you weave around it a credible story, and ours was about the kind of teaching we wanted in our classrooms.

From our starting point, these were challenging targets so the main plot in our story was about high attainment. Any style or theory of teaching is self-indulgent if it does not result in high exam results. Talk of teaching methods that develop independent learning or resilience or any other potpourri of 21st-century learning skills are a load of guff if they do not at the same time give students the exam grades to take them to the next level of qualification or employment.

But there was an important sub-plot in the figure of 100 per cent. The story we told here was about inclusion. The more successful a school in driving up the percentage of those who succeed by gaining a C grade or above, the more acute the feeling of failure for those in the decreasing minority left behind. So we were very clear that these targets were not just about league table glory, but also to ensure that every child reached the age of 16 feeling a part of our success and with a progression route beyond.

The starting point for implementing our vision was curriculum structure. Children cannot succeed unless they are on appropriate courses, and a school cannot put on a sufficiently large range of such courses unless it has a well-managed budget, excellent partnerships with other schools and FE colleges, and a timetabler with the brain of Garry Kasparov. It also needs to avoid the Ken and Ray factor.

Ken and Ray taught the low-ability kids in the first school I worked in. Ray's definition of literacy was that they should be able to read The Sun. Those kids spent a lot of time sweeping the paths around the school. "Put them in a boiler suit, give 'em a task they can do well, builds their pride and self-esteem," said Ken. The kids responded well to the low demands put on them. The staff loved having the potentially most difficult kids so well occupied. You will understand why.
So any vision has to be implemented with a strong sense of moral purpose. There is no doubt that many schools have directed students towards unchallenging courses, which nevertheless bring league table success, and both the English Baccalaureate (EBacc) and the Wolf report on high-quality vocational education (2011) are necessary correctives. Assuming a school has designed the right curriculum model, the next stage of implementing high achievement and inclusion becomes a matter of teaching.

According to Ofsted our school’s teaching is outstanding. In my view, they made the right judgement. And yet, as I tour around 20 or so classrooms (which I do every day), I sometimes arrive back at my office feeling slightly disappointed. I will have seen calm classrooms and groups engaged in their learning and teachers on top of the situation in every class. Will I have seen dramatic, whizz-bang lessons that I would smack straight on to Teachers’ TV as exemplifying every line of the Ofsted outstanding criteria and several theories of learning to boot? Occasionally.

The same is true of other outstanding schools I have visited. As part of our development, each year I take the whole leadership team to spend a day crawling over an outstanding school to see what we can learn. We always come back with lots of ideas, but invariably our view of the teaching is that it is... well, a little ordinary. What is this telling us?

First, that truly outstanding teaching is a fantastically complex business. Ofsted has done us a huge service in codifying this in the inspection framework descriptors. Reading the criteria for outstanding teaching reminds us just how difficult it is for teachers to reach that benchmark, and especially when we want them to do it in every lesson. It is only remotely possible with a level of detailed planning before, and intense energy during it, which is beyond most teachers who have a sensible work–life balance.

So, second, the way in which we implement our vision of teaching has to be correspondingly subtle. In our school the trajectory of doing this has mirrored the national move from central direction to empowerment of individual schools and teachers, from the national literacy, numeracy and Key Stage 3 strategy to the current phase of school-led improvement.

We started with blunt, centrally imposed diktats. You will put your lesson objective on the board at the start of every lesson. You will have a seating-plan that mixes up boys and girls. You will set home-learning according to the published timetable. Weak leaders do this and then never bother to monitor whether it is actually happening, so that in time people lose interest and default to their normal practice. We persisted until we had moved everyone to a common baseline of practice, and the impact was being seen in results. Then comes the tricky bit of going to the next level.

You do this by creating turbulence. You reconfigure the position of the rocks on the riverbed so that teachers can no longer follow their normal course. How you do this depends on your context and your own personal style of leadership. Some do it by reconfiguring the curriculum, for example forcing English, geography and history teachers to re-plan their lessons as part of integrated humanities. Others do it by introducing an IT strategy or by introducing a new model of teaching such as accelerated learning or opening minds.

We chose a model of co-operative learning, evolved by an American Dr Spencer Kagan. It appealed to us because it emphasises learning as a social not a solitary activity, and because it offers teachers a toolkit of strategies that they can use to structure their teaching in a way that engages all students all of the time in lessons. In a traditional question and answer lesson in a class of 30 students, one student is actively engaged while the rest are in various states of passive disengagement. Kagan suggests ways in which that session can be restructured to involve all the students simultaneously.

Has it had an impact? Yes. Would you see such techniques in use at all times in every lesson? No. That is partly because of my style of leadership. I am absolute in demanding high aspirations and standards, but not in seeking convergence with a particular style of teaching. I do not see that as consonant with respecting a teacher’s judgement as a professional, and neither do I think it releases the creativity needed to perform at the highest levels.
So our insistence is that all students are engaged and that teaching is planned and differentiated to make that happen. Our suggestion is that co-operative learning offers a suitable methodology, and we support this with training. We send staff to the Kagan institute in Florida; they later lead sessions back here. We model our desired style, so all our staff meetings and development are structured co-operatively rather than as lectures. Our lesson observation forms are tailored to identify our preferred styles. We train staff in coaching techniques for use with students in tutorial conversations, because coaching locates the responsibility for solving problems with the student not the teacher, so that our pedagogical and pastoral approaches reinforce one another. We repeat this approach of training our own experts, who then train others, across other areas such as IT. The result is a loose, pluralistic approach within a framework of tight expectations of outcomes.

As you contemplate your first headship, your reflection on how you will lead teaching and learning therefore needs to be multi-dimensional. It starts with an honest look at your own experiences as a learner and the teachers who have had – and perhaps still continue to have – the biggest influences on you, whether positively or negatively. Identify your heroes and demons, for you need to recognise the forces that are surely shaping your thinking and motivation at some deep level.

Only then start to build your own model and vision of what teaching will look like in the school that you lead. What for you is not up for grabs? What is your bottom line? What would you go to the wall for, and on what would you compromise if the context of your school and staffing demanded? What is your time-scale for change? How impatient will you be in moving towards the reality that you want to see?

Years after I left school, I met old Bill Lucas again. I had taken a group of students to see an opera, and he was sitting several rows behind. I introduced myself and pointed to the group. “If it was not for you, they would not be here,” I said.

There can be no greater tribute to any teacher. Our job as leaders is to make sure such inspiration ignites not just a few, but all students in all areas of school life. A veritable conflagration. Not asking much, then.

References

Available at www.britishcouncil.org/session_1_the_wolf_report.pdf [accessed 5 April 2012]
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