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Essential teaching practices – do they exist?

It is often observed that there is no single best way to teach – that what works for some learners under some conditions does not work for all learners under all conditions. For this reason, it is argued, teachers require a broad repertoire of teaching methods that they can call on as appropriate.

Evaluations of specific teaching approaches (such as Bloom's Mastery Learning or Engelmann's Direct Instruction) suggest that almost all teaching methods can be effective for at least some students if implemented by committed and highly competent teachers.

Nevertheless, reviews of research identify some classroom practices as more highly correlated with improved student outcomes than others [1]. Effective practices include: connecting new material to earlier learning; clarifying learning objectives; explicitly teaching and modelling new material; and regularly checking for student understanding. Other practices such as 'formative assessment' and 'feedback' are also sometimes identified as effective, although the meanings of these terms and the ways in which they are implemented tend to vary across research studies.

An interesting question is whether there are general principles of effective teaching, regardless of who is being taught, what they are being taught or the teaching context. I suspect that there are, and that generations of teachers – from master sculptors to piano teachers to sports coaches to parents of very young children – have used these principles naturally in their everyday teaching. But if such principles exist, how well are they reflected in common education policies and practices?

Here are several practices that I would advance as part of the generic 'essence' of effective teaching.

Establishing where learners are in their progress

Effective teaching depends on an understanding of where individuals are in their learning or development. Highly effective teachers, trainers and coaches work to establish and understand the points that individuals have reached – in other words, their current levels of skill, knowledge and understanding. They pay close attention to the errors that individuals are making, the skills they have not yet mastered and the misunderstandings they have developed. This process of establishing and understanding where learners are in their learning also involves connecting with learners as individuals; for example, by developing an appreciation of their personal goals and motivations.

This element of effective teaching has parallels with practice in other professions such as medicine and psychology where, prior to taking action, information is first gathered to establish and understand the presenting situation and to identify the specific needs of individuals. In many professions, data gathering and detailed diagnosis are prerequisites for informed professional practice.

It is not difficult to visualise teaching that does not include such practice. We all experienced teachers who saw their role simply as delivering the relevant course content. Under this form of 'teaching', no effort is made to understand individuals' varying starting points and learning needs. The role of the teacher is merely to deliver the course content; the role of students is to learn that content; and the role of assessment is to establish how much of what has been taught students have successfully learnt. Delivery is to the group, and individuals are assumed to be equally ready for the course content based on their age or stage of education.

Much teaching in schools continues to be of this latter kind, sometimes encouraged by curricula that specify what all students of the same age should be taught and expected to learn, and by assessment and reporting regimes that judge and grade students on how well they have mastered common age/year-level expectations. When teachers see their role as delivering the same curriculum to all students, and the onus for successful learning is placed solely on students themselves, there is little incentive for teachers to go to the trouble of identifying where learners are in their long-term learning progress.

Tailoring teaching to the needs of individual learners

Effective teachers understand instinctively that learning depends on providing individuals with challenges and learning opportunities appropriate to their current levels of attainment. In other words, they know intuitively how to meet learners at their points of need. They know that learning is unlikely when assigned tasks are so easy that they present no challenge or so difficult that they cause learners to give up in despair. Instead they provide carefully designed stretch challenges that are just beyond individuals' comfort zones – in what Vygotsky called the 'zone of proximal development'.

In any given year of school, students' achievement levels vary by the equivalent of five or six years of school, meaning that students of the same age and year level are at very different points in their learning and have very different learning needs. Some students require significant remedial support; others are unlikely to be challenged or extended by year-level curriculum expectations. Effective teachers are sensitive and responsive to this variability in students' levels of educational attainment and progress. They work to ensure that every learner is presented with an appropriate level of challenge, including already high-achieving students.

Again, it is not difficult to visualise the opposite of such practice – undifferentiated teaching that makes no attempt to accommodate the different starting points and learning needs of individuals, delivers the same content to all students, and judges success in terms of the same learning goal (mastery of the body of taught content). Research suggests that differentiation is a challenge for some teachers, especially in secondary schools. It is likely that many less-advanced students in our schools are being given material for which they are not yet ready, and many more-advanced students are being given material that fails to challenge or extend them.

Providing immediate feedback to guide action

Learning of all kinds is facilitated by high quality feedback. Some of the most effective users of feedback are parents of young children who use it to correct, guide and teach. The feedback parents provide is opportunistic, immediate, personalised, action-focused, supportive and ongoing – features that also characterise the feedback of expert sports coaches, trainers and mentors. The feedback that classroom teachers provide is likely to be most helpful to learning when it shares these features.

In contrast to ongoing, opportunistic feedback is feedback that is planned and episodic (for example, provided only in relation to specific assessment events or assignments). There is usually a delay in feedback of this kind, and when it is provided, details capable of guiding learning often receive less student attention than overall judgements of the quality of their work (eg, B+). To the extent that feedback is planned, delayed and primarily judgemental, it is generally less useful for guiding student action. The quality of the feedback students receive often declines through the years of school, with younger children being more likely to receive feedback that is opportunistic, immediate and action-focused, and older students more likely to receive feedback that is planned, delayed and judgemental.

Assisting learners to see and appreciate the progress they are making

Effective teachers also understand the importance of assisting learners to see the progress they are making over time. They know that this is one of the best ways to build individuals' beliefs in their ability to learn and improve, and so is important to motivation and effort. Some progress is easily measured (for example,

improvements in an athlete's times), but in other contexts, effective teachers find ways to help learners see how the quality of their work or performance has improved over time and to recognise how they are now able to perform tasks that once were beyond them.

Schools often do a poor job of helping students see and monitor long-term learning progress. Part of the reason is that schooling is delivered in discrete time periods (school years, semesters, courses, units of work). Each new time period tends to be treated as a fresh start, with students being judged and graded on how well they perform in each period separately. One consequence is that limited information is passed from one learning period to the next. For example, there are few long-term pictures of student progress across multiple years of school. A second consequence is that the grades students receive often disguise the progress they are making. For example, a student who receives a 'D' year after year is unable to see their long-term progress and, worse, may conclude that there is something stable about their ability to learn (that is, they are a 'D-student').

We now know enough about teaching and learning to know that no single, pre-packaged teaching solution works for all learners in all situations. But it does not follow that there are no general principles of effective teaching. A challenge is to continue to identify the essence of effective teaching, wherever it occurs.

[1] References

Recent reviews and summaries of effective teaching practices include:

- Ko J, Sammons P & Bakkum, L (2013). *Effective Teaching: a review of research and evidence*. CfBT Education Trust.
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