

## As a teacher, what actually matters?

April 19<sup>th</sup> 2018

---

One of the most obvious criticisms of mainstream academic education is that you forget everything as soon as you leave the exam room (except for learning Philosophy, as a comic once joked, where you can remember just enough to screw you up for the rest of your life!) Dates and quotations and formulae are crammed for an exam and then forgotten and never used again for the rest of that person's life. This is surely not true for everyone, but it's a popular jibe nonetheless, and I think there's something to it.

I confess, I am what you'd describe as an 'academic teacher' (boo!) As a teacher, my focus and strength is always and has always been on training students to be academic - in other words, to be like me. But to be clear, this is not where I think education should be, it's just what I am into. If I was a dancer, which I am absolutely not, then as a teacher I would be wanting the whole world to dance. As an academic, I also would like to see the whole world dancing, but that's not going to come about through me. On the other hand, I do have a shot at getting some people in the world to read and think seriously and rationally and write about the fundamental questions of life. So that is what I try to do.

Again, to be clear, that's just me.

In all the debates, whether it's about the importance of exams, systems of assessment or the hierarchy of subjects, I feel that the issue of what a teacher actually should do tends to get lost. What I am talking about specifically is the essence of what should guide a teacher's actions, what should motivate a teacher to act in a certain way, regardless of whether the teacher is preparing the students for a Maths exam, teaching them to juggle, training them in plumbing, teaching personal hygiene or doing finger-painting. I am talking about how a teacher should be judged to have been successful or not. Basing it, as is usually the case, on the achievements of the students seems far too haphazard, not to mention the pressure it puts on the students and the stress it places on the teacher-student relationship. Wouldn't it be nice, don't you think, if there was an alternative?

I think there is and it's actually, I believe, quite simple: a teacher, any teacher, in any circumstance should, in essence, be preparing the students to be able to do what they are currently doing at the next higher level to that at which they are currently doing it. This may sound obvious, but using this and moving away from the student-progress paradigm dramatically changes the game. Now we are talking about what the teacher is doing, or rather what the teacher is preparing the students to be able to do - not what the students can do today that they couldn't do yesterday. Instead, we are talking about what the students *might* be able to do tomorrow.

This definition of good teaching is quite interesting because, if this is accepted, then a good teacher is not necessarily defined by the progress of the students. A good teacher needn't be required to show student progress, but instead a good teacher needs to show clear purpose and design. This purpose and design consists of two things. Firstly, the teacher must show a clear and carefully conceived knowledge of what the next level for the student is. Secondly, the teacher must show knowledge of what the students need to do in order to move to that next level. Provided that the teacher can show clear knowledge of these two things, and is also of course facilitating the students to carry out the action, then proof of progress, in particular short-term progress, is irrelevant. It is irrelevant because it may take a long time to reach the next level and some may never reach it - and that's okay.

School reports would be very different if this were applied. Instead of talking about what the child can do and the progress they have made, the report would focus on the level the student is *not* at and what needs to be done to get there, because that's all that matters - as a teacher, it doesn't matter what the students can do because they can do it; it's what they can't do that matters. Indeed, this is no cop-out. Defining clearly the next level is no easy task. That's why students in school are given meaningless levels such as a grade or a Grade Point Average or a percentage. It's because defining the level the student is at and the next level *in a meaningful way* is difficult to do - much easier just to give a letter or a number. Also, different students may take different routes to competency so even for students at the same level, the next level may not be defined in exactly the same way for each and every one.

It is no doubt a difficult thing to do for a teacher to define the levels clearly in ways that are meaningful, but that adds to the case that it should be a way of judging teachers. Yes, it's hard. Knowing exactly where your student is and where they need to go next takes great skill. In my view, this is the main skill of a good teacher and the only thing that really matters. A teacher who is outstanding at, say, teaching juggling is defined by this ability and this alone, in my view. The teacher-of-juggling who can do this well is a good teacher, but that doesn't mean that he will be able to teach me or anyone else to juggle quickly. The next level for me would be to juggle with four balls, and the path to that may be to practice with three balls for another 100 hours or 1000 hours. It would seem for 1000 hours that no progress was made. He may fail to teach me to juggle altogether, he probably would, but that doesn't prove the approach was wrong. My failure could come from my lack of interest, low aptitude or laziness to practice and would not necessarily be an existential threat to the good-ness of the teacher.

To put it simply, the paradigm whereby a teacher is judged on the progress of the students, whether or not that is defined by formal exams, is inaccurate and makes a lot of people involved miserable. Good teachers have students who don't learn and poor teachers have students who make great strides in their incompetent care. This paradigm of judging the teacher by his students also creates tension between the teacher and his or her students and between the teacher and his or her manager. Not to mention the parents! A good teacher, existentially, is a stand-alone phenomenon independent of results and outcomes. Instead of looking at student progress reports to judge the competence of an employee, education managers should be talking to their staff and asking about individual students. I would ask: 'Tell me about Johnny in Mathematics...How would you meaningfully define the next level coming in his individual line of development and what does he need to do in order to get there?'

And if the teacher could not give me a clear answer, but instead pulled out a piece of Johnny's best work or his latest test result, I would refer him or her to this article.

***Gary John Ilines***