Teacher Skills and Strategies

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Teacher Skills and Strategies

For Teachers

In recognition of their 'impossible task'

> Teaching is not to be regarded as a static accomplishment like riding a bicycle or keeping a ledger; it is, like all arts of high ambition, a strategy in the face of an impossible task. (**Lawrence Stenhouse**, 1985, p. 124)

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Introduction: Opportunities to Teach and Learn

This book illustrates a wide range of teacher's craft from some highly successful aspects to less successful. In doing so, it leans towards a certain model of teaching wherein personal qualities are certainly important but have to be seen within the prevailing structure of 'opportunities to teach'. Where opportunities are plentiful, teachers will be freer to address the purer problems of teaching, that is how to promote pupil learning of relevant and worthwhile skills and knowledge. Where they are less plentiful, teachers' energies might be directed toward increasing them, to adjusting means to ends, or even adjusting the ends themselves. Where opportunities are not seen to exist at all, and indeed on occasions when conditions appear to be suppressing and running counter to their appearance, teaching can be said to be in crisis. This, then, represents a continuum. Some teachers may be at a particular point on it for much of the time. Most will experience several aspects of it at different points of their careers or different times of the school year or week. In sum, the quality of teaching cannot be assessed independently of the opportunities to teach. Personal, cognitive and social factors are all important. This can be substantiated by examining some recent reports and research in the area.

An Official View of Teaching Quality

突然涌出 [illegible]

A spate of government reports during the 1980s conveyed what we might term the 'official' view of good teaching and what promotes it (DES, 1983, 1985a and 1985b). A report by HM Inspectorate, *The New Teacher in School* (DES, 1982) set the scene. They reported that 'nearly a quarter of the teachers in the present sample (were) poorly or very poorly equipped for the task they are given to do'. The criteria they used for making this judgment were those they would use for 'assessing any work in schools' and were 'implicit in the evaluation of work seen' (p. 3). Thus, successful lessons would involve good relationships between teachers and pupils, teacher characteristics here showing

> a quiet, calm, relaxed, good-humoured attitude . . . combined with firmness and a sense of purpose; a demonstration of interest in and knowledge of the pupils individually and an appropriate level of expectation of them; and mutual respect . . . the teachers being sensitive to the needs of the pupils and respecting their contributions whatever their limitations. Where these qualities were shown, pupils were confident enough to play a full part in the lessons, to offer their own ideas and ask questions, or seek help when unsure, while the teacher could blend praise and encouragement with an occasional reprimand, the latter without arousing resentment. (pp. 6–7)

Good classroom management is associated with 'a crisp, orderly, punctual start to the lessons . . . a planned and tidy ending, an assured manner, good use of the eye and voice and the giving, where necessary, of clear instructions' (p. 7). In primary classrooms, where pupils may be working in a variety of tasks and subjects, 'the teachers should move purposefully around the classroom anticipating needs, checking and extending the pupils' work' (*ibid*). There should be appropriate aims and objectives, taking account of the age and abilities of the class, their previous experience and the nature of the subject being studied. Where inappropriate, it was often because they were too limited, being based on 'the recording or memorising of facts or the practice of techniques without any attempt to develop a depth of understanding or to maintain a progression' (p. 9). Pupils' work should be 'thoroughly and constructively marked'. Appropriate books, materials and equipment for the range of pupils present should be selected. HMI recognized here possible problems of resource in the school, but were concerned about 'lessons in which teachers had resigned themselves to using the inadequate or unsuitable materials available in their schools and had made no attempt to supplement or adapt them' (p. 10).

Work should be matched to pupils' capabilities and needs. In primary schools, lessons which did this 'called on a number of teaching techniques: assignments at different levels after a class exposition, well-differentiated work-cards, skilfully varied oral questioning which maintained a good pace and individual and group work with well organized intervention by the teacher' (p. 12). Older pupils did not become bored, nor the less able frustrated. Opportunities were provided for pupils to take 'increasing responsibility for organizing some parts of their own work' giving them a 'sense of purpose in their work' increasing motivation, and developing 'self-reliance and cooperation' (p. 13). In secondary schools, such lessons showed 'a good choice of teaching materials which made demands on the pupils, well planned purposeful tasks which allowed for contributions from pupils of different ability, good well paced oral work with differentiated levels of questioning, and a variety of learning styles combining class exposition with group or individual work' (p. 14). Mastery of subject is clearly very important. Without it, teaching approaches 'maintained an often slavish adherence to the textbook reliance on narrow questions often requiring monosyllabic answers, an inability to follow up and extend pupils' answers and an over-prescriptive method whereby the teacher was able to remain within a constricted, safe pattern of work' (pp. 14–15).

Language in the classroom was seen as an important area. There should be opportunities for useful dialogue between teachers and pupils, for pupils to express their own thoughts and ideas and to have their language extended. Teachers should vary their style of questioning to suit the occasions, and 'make good use of the pupils' responses to carry the work forward' (p. 18). In good lessons, questions were carefully balanced between those addressed to the whole class and those to named individuals. Some teachers 'were skilled at breaking down a problem into stages so that, by posing supplementary questions, they could narrow or broaden the scope of the enquiry helpfully for the pupils' (p. 19).

HMI point out that all these factors were 'clearly interdependent and it was rare to find work of high quality in respect of some but not of others. This, perhaps, reinforces their point that 'the personal qualities of the teachers were in many cases the decisive factor in their effectiveness' (p. 80). Some, in their opinion, were clearly unsuited to teaching and the training institutions were taken to task for passing them as fitted for teaching.

It would be difficult to imagine such a conclusion in the 1940s and 1950s when there was a desperate shortage of teachers; or indeed in the early 1990s. Standards of adequacy are almost inevitably affected by social, economic and political climate, which, amongst other things, affects the supply of teachers. As for the 'deficit model' that accounted for the perceived inadequacy within the teachers themselves, the inspectors themselves refer from time to time to 'other factors'. The more these are brought into focus the weaker the deficit model becomes. Much of what the inspectors criticize in lessons, such as too much direction by teachers, failure to distinguish among pupils in mixed-ability classes, boring tasks, the dictating of notes, appears to be fairly common in schools. The scale of the inadequacy is almost certainly too vast to be all put down to teachers' deficiency.

As for 'personal quality' being the decisive factor in effective teaching, McNamara (1986) has pointed out that there is no indication that this arose during the research as a key variable that required definition, close observation and analysis. 'The notion of "personal quality" is merely invoked ex post facto after the research has been completed in order to account for the so called findings' (p. 32). Further, it is not related to the extensive literature on teacher personality, which shows the problems in relating it to effective teaching. For example, we might approve of qualities a teacher possesses, but that teacher may not be able to employ them in such a way as to bring about pupil learning. There are other problems about the question of teachers' personal qualities. Can we all agree whether a particular teacher has good ones or not? Do all teachers require the same kind of qualities? Should not the teaching staff of a school reflect a variety of views, personalities, qualities . . .?

The New Teacher in School put the issue of teaching 'quality' on the agenda, whatever the problems surrounding it, presented an outline model of HMI's conception of it, and evaluated a number of teachers in terms of it. The emphasis on 'quality' and how to secure it has grown with further publications. If the *New Teacher* had its sights on training institutions, *Teaching Quality* (1983) was aimed at LEAs, discussing how they could help 'improve the match between teacher expertise and subject taught' and 'raise professional standards by retaining and encouraging the best and most committed teachers . . . making full use of management tools such as premature retirement, redeployment and if necessary, compulsory redundancy in the interests of achieving a good match between their teachers' qualifications and skills and the need of teachers in the school' (para. 8). *Better Schools* (1985) continued with the related quests to 'expose the heart of good teaching' (para. 135) and to manage the teaching force to ultimate efficiency, better teachers being promoted, those 'encountering professional difficulties' being identified and counselled, and where that did not work, being considered for early retirement or dismissal (para. 180).

These reports have to be seen within the context of growing central control of the educational system. The criteria are centrally determined (as opposed, for example, to being determined by the teachers themselves), rating systems set up against which to measure teachers, and strong suggestions made about how they can be met. This must be done within the prevailing system and with existing resources. Interestingly, *The New Teacher in School* carries a disclaimer inside its front cover to the effect that 'Nothing said in this discussion paper it to be construed as implying Government commitment to the provision of additional resources'. As for the system, DES Circular 3/84 stated 'In assessing the personal qualities of candidates, institutions should look in particular for a sense of responsibility, a robust but balanced outlook, awareness, sensitivity, enthusiasm and facility in communication' (para. 14). As McNamara (1986) points out, an educational argument could easily be advanced for replacing what might be seen as the conservative 'robust but balanced' with the radical 'critical and reformist' (p. 36).

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As for an explanation of teacher effectiveness, Broadhead feels that not enough consideration has been given to factors that impinge on 'all teachers' work which lie outside their control' (DES 1985b, para. 3). Broadhead points particularly to the enormous disparity between different age-groups of children, their different needs and consequently different demands from teachers. Yet even though HMI draw a distinction between primary and secondary teaching occasionally, the assumption seems to be that one model, by and large, fits all of them. They have missed, too, Broadhead argues, the complexities of relationships within the classroom. 'Real life' has been reduced to a 'plethora of prescriptive descriptions' (1987, p. 68). What we have, then, is not a theory of successful teaching, but a check list of points that might be useful in a teacher appraisal process where that is conducted by somebody else observing the teacher. It does not contain guidance on how a teacher might improve his/her personal effectiveness beyond the implication that 'weeding-out' and behaviour modification will enhance effectiveness. There is no consideration of what lies behind teacher behaviour. If the latter is 'inadequate', it is considered to be redeemable at source, and if not, to be dispensed with. This reflects, perhaps, the new managerial ethos that pervades the environment in which teacher quality is being discussed.

There is also a problem in placing teachers in categories. It might be a useful 'sorting' device, but in terms of professional development it might prove counter-productive. A lesson might be drawn here from the literature pointing to the dangers of labelling pupils. We may shape our behaviour towards them in accordance with the label, and they may come to respond in line with that; that is they come to act out, and hence confirm, the behaviour expected of them. Broadhead concludes that 'perhaps the issues to which those concerned with developing a theory of educational effectiveness should be addressing themselves are not "What is the ideal state and how many have made it?" but "What is happening along the way?"' (p. 70). I turn to this next.

Opportunities to Learn

Prominent among social scientists' attempts to identify effective teacher behaviour have been the 'teaching styles' and 'classroom tasks' researches associated with Maurice Galton (1980a and 1980b), Neville Bennett (1976 and 1987) and their colleagues. The 'teaching styles' research developed from the debate over 'traditional' and 'progressive' styles of teaching, brought to the fore by the Plowden Report of 1967. The research yielded a mass of useful information about teaching in primary schools and about teacher–pupil interactions. Yet, though initially the quest might have been to identify the effectiveness of various styles, the research showed, in the end, the problems of conceptualizing teaching in terms such as 'traditional' and 'progressive', and relating these to the realities of classroom life. Most teachers use both to varying degrees (Bell, 1981); and though a wider range of styles was identified it was always difficult isolating what parts of teachers' behaviour were responsible for which learning outcomes. Further, as far as successful teaching was concerned, there appeared to be more important factors running across the styles.

As far as implementing the terms of the Plowden Report are concerned, the research illustrated the considerable difficulties primary school teachers face. Further, it showed the need to probe deeper on more specific behaviours if 'successful teaching' was to be identified sufficiently to be of use to teachers and to teacher-trainers, or to advance our understanding of teacher-learning processes. One of the most prominent attempts to get to grips with this kind of detail was that by Bennett and his colleagues in their work on 'classroom tasks' published in *The Quality of Pupil Learning Experiences* (1984).

For Bennett, the key to the new line of research lay in the observational data of the 'Teacher Styles' project – a good illustration of research development when one line of enquiry has become exhausted. It was noticed that the more successful 'formal' teachers gave a greater proportion of their curriculum time to mathematics and language activities, and that within these classrooms the pupils spent much more time involved in their work. These findings appeared in line with Carroll's (1963) model of school learning, which held that, all else being equal, mastery of a task was determined by the opportunities provided by the teacher for a pupil to study a given content, and the use made of that opportunity by the pupil. This 'opportunity to learn' model yielded a number of interesting studies relating to (i) the amount of schooling made available to pupils (length of school day, for example, can vary as much as six hours per week in Britain); (ii) the allocation of time to various curriculum activities (which can vary considerably both between and within schools, though the National Curriculum in the 1988 Education Reform Act is designed to reduce this); (iii) the use pupils made of opportunities provided i.e. the amount of time they spend on tasks (in Bennett's 1980 study of Open Plan schools, it was found that involvement varied from nearly 90 per cent in some classes to less than 50 per cent in others).

However, the provision of time is an organizational, rather than pedagogical matter. It counts for little if the children do not understand what they are required to do, or if the pacing or sequence is faulty, or the work too hard or too easy. It is necessary, therefore, also to consider the nature and quality of tasks. This in fact was the focus of the Bennett project reported in 1984. Central to it was the notion of 'match' or appropriateness, a concern that had run through HMI reports from 1978 to several of those mentioned earlier. For example, in the 8–12 Middle School survey, they found that 'overall, the content, level of demand and pace of work were most often directed toward children of average ability in the class. In many classes there was insufficient differentiation to cater for the full range of children's capabilities' (HMI, 1983 and 1985). In other words, there was inadequate matching of tasks to children's abilities.

As well as a theory of learning, to help them characterize tasks Bennett *et al.* also needed a wider view of the teaching-learning process of which tasks are a part. Bennett (1987, p. 59) saw this as a circular process. The teacher decides on the choice of tasks. This is then presented to pupils. They do it, the teacher assesses the results, diagnoses any problems, and this informs the next intention or purpose. Much teaching proceeds in this circular way. Mismatches can occur at any stage of this process. The teacher may choose an inappropriate task for the pupil concerned (ability of pupil, stage of development etc); it may be presented in ways that are not clear to the pupil, or in a situation or with resources that make it difficult to do; the teacher may make a faulty diagnosis, and so on. We should also note that, like most models of educational processes, things are not as neat and tidy as they may appear in this model. As the author points out, these are processes, not discrete events, there is a large measure of overlap between them, and not all of the processes appear in every task.

The authors found some interesting differences in the nature of tasks teachers set pupils, reflecting, they thought, important differences in the quality of learning. Thus 60 per cent were practice tasks, and only 25 per cent 'incremental' (accumulating and consolidating new knowledge and/or skills), and 7 per cent 'restructuring' (discovery and invention) and 'enrichment' (problem solving). Surprising here, perhaps, in the continuing aftermath of Plowden, was the low incidence of discovery or invention demands.

As for mismatching, there was a significant discrepancy between the tasks teachers intended and the actual ones that children faced. Thirty per cent of number tasks and 20 per cent of language tasks did not carry the teachers' intended demand. This was mainly due to diagnostic errors and to problems in designing tasks. The central question was the degree of match between a task and a child who performed it, or, in other words, the contribution the task made to the child's learning. Taking into account the results of the child's work, the observation of the child's strategy and the interview with the child afterwards, it was found that in language, only 40 per cent (43 per cent in maths) of all tasks matched in this respect, with 29 per cent (28 per cent) being too difficult, and 26 per cent (26 per cent) too easy. In both areas, high attainers were underestimated on 41 per cent of tasks assigned to them and low attainers overestimated on 44 per cent of tasks. While the teachers sometimes recognized that a child was in difficulty, the problem of underestimation did not arise with them.

This high level of mismatching came about, in Bennett *et al's.* opinion, through teachers' emphasis on procedures (layout, neatness etc), quantity, and judging pupils by their own standards ('It's good for Steven'). Teachers recognized some of the signs of overestimation (though less often underestimation) but they rarely planned to go back to diagnose children's problems. In nearly all cases, the response to the perceived overestimation was to plan more practice on difficulties in procedure using similar examples, or to go on to the next task in the scheme. This, then, was a mismatch between the child's task performance and the teacher's diagnosis of it.

For achieving better matching, Bennett *et al.* recommend things like rationalization of the queuing system at the teacher's desk; deciding whether they want error-free work, or imaginative, expressive writing; exploring further possibilities in teaching to groups; employing more teachers' aides, such as parents or suitable unemployed school leavers (pp. 219–21). These remedies might help to create more time for teachers, but, the authors argue, teachers also need to develop their skills in diagnosis and time should be allocated on training courses for this. During in-service work, provision for teachers from different schools to share their knowledge and experiences might help break down their sense of isolation, which itself helps perpetuate existing practices. The creation of specialist posts to promote work in this area would give it a boost. The authors recognize, however, that there are no easy solutions. Desforges (1985) concludes: 'Indeed, it might be that the classroom as presently conceived has reached levels of productivity, in terms of learning outcomes and happy relationships, consistent with its design limitations. Improvements might require radical reconceptions of teaching and learning situations' (p. 102).

As for questions about the research, it might be asked if, despite the polish of its design, it has done justice to the complexities of classroom activity, to teachers' decision-making and to pupils' learning. In the first place, it might be argued that a wider conception of 'matching' is needed to embrace the social and the affective as well as the cognitive. It is well known, for example, that background cultures, such as those of social class, gender and 'race' have considerable influence not only on children's disposition toward school and learning, but also upon thought processes themselves (Schostak and Logan, 1984). Learning is a process, which takes place within a context and a history. To achieve cognitive matching we would need knowledge of pupils' interests, values, concerns, and the influences operating on them. The match might be more dependent on the treatment of the influences than repair of tasks. For example, a girl's difficulties with a scientific task may be due more to the influence of gender codes upon her and her teachers than to her 'natural' abilities (Kelly, 1981; Whyte *et al.*, 1985). Simply to repair the task in such a situation to match her *apparent* abilities would be to minister to a state of affairs which forecloses on educational opportunities for large numbers of children.

Teachers subjectivities also need to be taken into account. One of the major problems in the Bennett *et al.* research is whether their approach keeps faith with the teacher's approach. Teachers were consulted in the research, but only within the framework and theories of the researchers. In other words, very little is known about these teachers, *their* theories of teaching and learning (though some are inferred — again within the framework of the research), or the general pedagogical context within which the tasks occurred. There is no 'longitudinal' dimension, that is to say, teachers were not observed over a period of time. The tasks are extracted from the complex reality of classroom life and held up for analysis as fairly discrete items, despite the researchers' recognition of them as processes operating within a wider context. Teachers' and pupils' work is ongoing and, arguably, has to be studied in the round to do it justice. For example, tasks can be, and most probably are, multi-functional. A teacher's approach, typically, would be to ensure a fair range of tasks over a given period of time with any particular child according to the child's perceived needs and the teacher's own theory of learning. To examine one or two tasks given to a child in that period, therefore, possibly misrepresents the teacher. A practical solution to this would have been to include one or two in-depth, longitudinal studies of teachers.

Teachers might also query some of the assumptions behind the diagnoses of mismatching. For example, judgments of 'overestimation' and 'underestimation' are based on *observers'* perceptions of discrepancies between task performance and pupils' abilities. There are clear indications in the study that teachers considered there to be less discrepancy. Where there was some, it could be within what we might call the 'margin of error' given the difficult circumstances in which teachers have to work; or it might not necessarily be a mismatch, since difficult and easy tasks can be functional for learning. A difficult task can inspire or challenge, push to the limits, or restore an appropriate sense of one's own abilities. An easy task can boost confidence. You have to ask, therefore, too difficult or too easy for what? Again, if the answer is the pupil's cognitive abilities, the teacher may reply that there are other considerations, such as personal and social development, and motivation. A significant feature here is that the pupils were generally happy and content and industrious. Rather than interpreting this as a factor blinding the teachers to mismatching, they might argue that it makes a splendid climate for learning among 6- to 7-year-olds and that it was produced in large part by a judicious selection of tasks.

Teachers might disagree also with some of the distinctions made: for example, those between 'procedural' aspects of tasks and their product. To the teachers, some of these procedural aspects may well be part, and a very important part, of the product. For example, neatness, layout, punctuation, 'good writing' are, arguably, crucially important matters, especially at this particular age when, possibly, the work habits of a whole school career or even a lifetime are being formed. Procedural aspects may also be deemed important by teachers when some of the basic skills that hold the key to later learning opportunities and accomplishments are being fashioned. If we accept, however, that there was a certain amount of mismatching and that it retarded pupil progress, it is important to identify the reasons. Even though the teachers were experienced and generally recognized as able, Bennett *et al.* felt the problems lay with them and various kinds of misjudgment that they made. This was not, however, a matter of lack of 'personal qualities' as in the DES reports. These teachers were rated highly in this respect by the researchers. This is more a matter of research and teaching combining to pinpoint problem areas. Attention can then be given to those areas to yield an even more advanced professionalism, and thus to increase the pupil's opportunities to learn.

The Oracle project, the 'quality of pupil learning' research, and the DES reports all reveal much useful information about classroom teaching. They are all, too, aware of the problems of dealing with classes of thirty or more children and other pressures on teachers. The question is whether awareness is enough; whether, in other words, we can single out aspects of the teacher's work and study them in isolation, or whether they relate together in some way. As it is, these studies tend to take for granted what teaching means, and what it means to teachers. Also, teaching has been considered as if teachers are free to decide which style they wish to adopt, how they will monitor tasks, whether they will choose to diagnose instances of mismatching and so on. In other words, it has been studied as a technical process employed by teachers for effective learning. Thus, improving teaching is a rational business of, either identifying people with the appropriate personal qualities and selecting accordingly or attempting to train people up to them, discarding those who do not reach the mark; or teachers improving their skills of matching tasks to children. Both site the point of improvement within the teacher. As the DES document *Teaching Quality* put it, 'The teaching force, some 440,000 strong, is the major single determinant of the quality of education' (1983, paragraph 1). This, however, neglects two related influences upon teaching which have a critical and integral bearing upon the product, one internal, and one external to the teacher. Together, they amount to

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