

53 Powerful Ideas All Teachers Should Know About

Graham Gibbs

Introduction

Why do teachers need ideas as well as methods?

Teachers need a repertoire of teaching methods if they are to respond appropriately to different students, different subject matter and different contexts. But to choose which methods to use requires some kind of understanding – personal theory if you like – about what goes on when you teach and when students learn. If a teacher does not choose, then teaching becomes routine. Much teaching is routine and follows traditions and cultural and local conventions, framed by local administrative constraints (such as timetables) financial constraints (such as class sizes) and assessment regulations. The educational rationales underlying many contemporary patterns of teaching either never existed or have been lost in the mists of time. Much teaching is simply taken for granted. Early editions of the most purchased of all books about teaching in higher education – Bill McKeachie’s ‘Teaching Tips’ – even tells the reader how many lectures they will have to prepare for a semester long course. Bill may perhaps have seen the conventions of his own Psychology department as inevitable and assumed rather too much. Asking ‘why do you teach in the way you do?’ can lead to blank stares, and when routine practices are challenged, teachers can get very cross – because they are actually on very thin ice.

But even in what on the surface appears to be a uniformly conventional pattern of teaching

across different courses in a degree programme, teachers still have different ideas about teaching. Teachers are not always aware of their underlying rationales. They are seldom talked about and they can be very difficult to articulate. If you were to ask most teachers what the ‘powerful ideas’ were that informed their teaching you would often have very short conversations.

Some ideas about teaching are simply wrong. They are misconceptions and lead to ineffective practices. For example some lecturing practices appear to be driven by a belief that knowledge can be beamed directly into students’ heads simply by talking out loud in public. This, of course, is nonsense. Recognising when you are utterly mistaken is painful but necessary.

Some teachers’ ideas are unsophisticated. These ideas evolve and develop over time as teachers become more experienced and more aware of what is going on. Teachers’ focus of attention changes as their ideas develop and they pay attention to different things as they try and teach well, for example focussing primarily on their own subject knowledge, on their teaching methods or on what students do in order to learn and on what they have actually learnt. It is teachers’ underlying understanding, their ideas about teaching and

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of learning, that determine their focus of attention.

And some ideas are powerful. The insights they embody enable previously undiagnosed problems to be recognised as problems, to be understood and to lead to very different decisions about how to teach. And the effectiveness of teaching improves as a consequence of these insights. I find it exciting to watch as teachers grasp powerful ideas and their implications. I have seen educational outcomes transformed by teachers acting on new insights about teaching.

Award winning teachers have often been interviewed about their teaching: how they teach and why they teach in the way they do. What stands out in these accounts is not so much their use of extraordinary methods – indeed they often use methods that, at a surface level, resemble everyone else’s - but the level of insight they have. Their thinking about teaching is much better developed than that of ordinary teachers. They are aware of what is going on, can talk about it in subtle ways, have explanations and rationales. They developed these rationales over years of experience and reflection and have thought deeply about how they teach. An intriguing characteristic of these accounts is that they are usually devoid of any reference to the educational literature. These wonderful teachers have worked out many of the key ideas themselves. It is possible for an educationalist such as myself to read these accounts and think – “oh that looks just like the way Kolb theorises about how you learn

from experience” or whatever. But the teacher has never read Kolb – they have worked out what Kolb worked out for themselves, in their own way, and articulated in their own words. A defining characteristic of outstanding teachers is that they have worked out powerful ideas and use them to make effective teaching decisions.

My hope for this collection of ‘powerful ideas’ is that it might be able to short-cut some of the long, and sometimes frustrating, years of experiment and reflection that lead to the insights of wonderful teachers.

The ideas here are informed by the educational literature but this is not an educational textbook. There is no expectation that readers will go on and read the educational literature, though there is suggested reading for the enthusiasts.

Just because someone can talk about teaching in a sophisticated way does not mean that they are inevitably going to be good teachers. I have met some very well read educational researchers who were not at all convincing as speakers, leaders of discussions or supervisors of students. Repertoire, and competence in using that repertoire, is also very important. But ideas drive the choice of methods, ideas inform awareness of what is going on, and ideas frame the reflection that improves teaching.

This collection of powerful ideas is intended as a ‘leg up’ – to accelerate the process of developing a personal way of understanding teaching that is useful in making teaching

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decisions that improve the effectiveness of your own unique teaching. Some of these ideas will resonate with your own experiences. Some will seem completely obvious, even if you had not previously articulated them explicitly for yourself. Others may seem strange or incomprehensible. Take your pick. Use what you will. Good luck.

Teachers and educational developers all have their own ways of understanding teaching and learning and often their own favourite theorists and sources. If you would like to add to my ideas, suggest a different way of seeing things, suggest a useful reading (especially if it is

available on line) or even disagree altogether, please use the links to respond and explain your position. The intention is to enrich others' thinking and you may well have a valuable contribution to that end. It would be ideal if the end product could form a useful primer, in the form of discourse, for beginning teachers.

To comment or contribute your ideas, see SEDA's blog: thesedablog.wordpress.com