

53 Powerful Ideas All Teachers Should Know About

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There is often a gap between teachers' thinking and their practice

Earlier items have stressed both the importance of teachers' thinking about teaching – particularly their conceptions of teaching - and the need for reflection in developing teaching. It isn't just skills or practices that need to change and develop in order to become a better teacher, it is the teacher's rationales for these practices. This has led to a strong emphasis on reflection and a parallel emphasis on reading and theory, in most 'training' programmes for university teachers.

What is more, when a teacher is assessed, for a qualification or accreditation as a teacher, more emphasis is often placed on their ability to demonstrate reflection, and on the sophistication of their explanations of their teaching, than on their teaching itself. When I started running programmes for new lecturers, in the 1980's, I placed a heavy emphasis on observation of teaching. The teacher would explain to me, in advance, what they were going to do in the classroom, and why, and then I would see what they actually did and whether it seemed to work, and then afterwards we would sit down discuss the teaching I had observed. Traditionally this kind of training process was intended to focus on teaching practice, but I used it to get at a teacher's thinking as well as their practice. Nowadays it is possible to become accredited entirely through submitting some

documentation and many programmes, even those leading to postgraduate qualifications, involve no observation at all. Both qualifications and accreditation may signify little about whether someone can actually teach well. The Diploma in Teaching in Higher Education I taught at the University of Oxford almost certainly gave qualifications to people who were pretty poor teachers, but we never knew because we never saw them teach. But as well as not providing evidence about teachers' actual teaching practice, qualifications and accreditation may not even provide valid evidence about their thinking.

The danger is that teachers might be able to talk the talk, but they cannot walk the walk, or more intriguingly, they talk one talk but walk a completely different one. This phenomenon was recognised early on in the development of understanding of professional competence in any field. Most illuminatingly, Argyris and Schon identified a common gap between professionals' 'theories of action' – their espoused explanations of why they do what they do – and their 'theories in use' – the rather different underlying rationales that must actually be determining what they do, given that what they do is clearly incompatible with their espoused theory. Theories in use are usually tacit, unexamined, and often dominated by conventions. Many people would be largely unaware of their theories in

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use. To give an example, a teacher I am about to observe might tell me that they believe that it is crucial that students are actively engaged, especially in discussing the content of the course. But then I observe them teaching and students have their heads down, bent over their verbatim notes, for much of the class, with only a small minority of students speaking at all in the entire class. A teacher may say that it is important to know what students are thinking and so they intend to ask lots of questions in class. But then I observe that the kind of questions they ask are of the ‘guess what teacher is thinking’ type, with right and wrong answers. In both cases whatever ‘theory in use’ is driving their actual teaching practice, it bears no resemblance to the ‘theory of action’ that they have just confidently explained to me (or that might be articulated in a teaching portfolio submitted for assessment).

This phenomenon has been researched and demonstrated in practice in higher education, with a marked disjunction between teachers’ conceptions of teaching and their teaching practice being quite common.

Asking teachers to write down their reflections on their teaching as part of a portfolio of evidence for assessment purposes allows them to keep both their theories in use, and their actual teaching practices, hidden from the examiner.

The solution is similar to that involved in changing anybody’s ideas about anything. First you have to uncover what these ideas and

beliefs are – for example by watching someone teaching and then asking for an explanation of particular things the teacher can be seen doing. Then the inadequacy of these ideas and beliefs has to be made clear, then alternative ways of thinking, accompanied by alternative actions, need to be offered, and finally some of these new actions need to be practiced and reflections upon them discussed. Using observation or video or transcripts of encounters with students may be essential, otherwise teachers may continue to make claims about their practice which seem justified by their theory of action but which their actual practice does not demonstrate.

The term ‘reflection in action’ has been used to describe being able to reflect on what is going on while it is going on – a kind of mindfulness in the here and now. Reflection in action is rather like the running commentary drivers must give while they are driving in order to pass the Advanced Driving Test. It is rather different from reflection that takes place afterwards, which can take the form of post hoc justification or rationalisation for practices. It is important if teachers are to become aware of their theory in use and to notice inconsistencies and disjunctures. In the second example I gave above, if the teacher had been more able to engage in ‘reflection in action’ they would have noticed that their form of questioning was not actually telling them much about what students were thinking – and so their theory in use was faulty.

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When I used to run training sessions in which I demonstrated teaching methods, I would sometimes stop, stand back a pace, and say “what I have just done is this, and this is why I have done it, and my belief is that it will have this effect” – and then take a pace forwards and continue with the demonstration. I would try and show what ‘reflection in action’ actually looked like and show awareness of process while my teaching was in progress. The intention was that participants would start doing the same, noticing what was going on, and thinking about it, while it was happening and the evidence was there in front of their eyes. In role play situations it is possible to call “time out” and step back from the action and discuss it briefly before announcing “Roll” and continuing the role play. Somehow teachers’

thinking has to be linked up with their action, and their action driven by better thinking.

Suggested reading

An article about Argyris and Schon and their ideas about theories of action and theories in use can be found at

<http://infed.org/mobi/chris-argyris-theories-of-action-double-loop-learning-and-organizational-learning/>

Murray, K. and Macdonald, R. (1997) The disjunction between lecturers’ conceptions of teaching and their claimed educational practice. *Higher Education*, 33, pp.331-349.

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