

NEITA Teaching Awards - Keynote Speech

Professor John Loughran, Acting Dean, Faculty of Education, Monash University

Keynote Title: Expert teachers

There are many skills in teaching that, when combined, form an important base from which initial teaching competence may be derived. Most of these skills require refinement and development over time. However, teaching is complex work and expert teachers perform at levels well beyond the technical. They do not simply develop competence, they strive for excellence in their attempts to better align teaching and learning because they understand both as being in a productive and dynamic relationship. Expert teachers make a conscious effort to pay attention to their practice to ensure that their teaching intentions are in accord with the learning expectations they have for their students. Unfortunately, one of the problems with expert teachers is that they make teaching look easy; yet nothing could be further from the truth.

The casual observer does not necessarily recognize the skill in how a teacher responds to a thoughtful question from a normally quiet student and how that may be very different from the „standard response. to a commonly inquisitive or talkative student. Expert teachers are aware of what they are doing. They monitor and adjust their teaching behaviours to bring out the best in their students.

One of the reasons that teaching is complex business is because it revolves around decision-making. Teachers are constantly making decisions about a range of ideas, issues and events such things as:

- content (breadth and depth);
- student behaviour;
- the appropriate balance between teacher directed and student initiated tasks;
- expectations for student progress;
- homework;
- how to cater for different learning styles;
- personal philosophy of teaching and learning;
- teaching procedures;
- assessment; and so on.

Teachers do not all think the *same* way about the same things. Their individual experiences shape their understanding of the teaching role and how it should be played out in practice. Teachers. personal perspectives on all or any of the issues (noted above) shape not only what they do and how they do it but also the choices they make and why. Because teaching is heavily reliant on decision making,

everything that happens in a classroom demands informed choices and, expert teachers know what they are doing and why because they carefully consider how to structure their teaching in ways that will have a positive influence on their students' learning. For example, it seems obvious that if a teacher asks a question and responds positively only to those answers that are correct, then students who are unsure or have different answers or want to ask a question in return will be less likely to speak up. The expert teacher knows how to ensure that students honestly speak up and say what they think so that the invitation to learning is open to everyone. The way an expert teacher reacts in such a situation may not be immediately noticeable because the subtle aspects that make a difference do not necessarily stand out as being so dramatically different; yet they most certainly are. Perhaps that is one reason as to why expertise in teaching is not so well recognized or understood by those who are not so familiar with the real demands of the role.

A long time ago, Dan Lortie coined the phrase the *Apprenticeship of Observation* to describe how, through years of schooling, students become accomplished observers of teaching. Yet, as Lortie noted, although students have seen lots of teachers teaching, they have really only viewed teaching as a one way process. Students do not usually have access to the thinking and planning that underpin their teachers' practice, and so what they see they tend to generalize as teachers telling or imparting information. Students do not necessarily pay serious attention to what is happening and why, and so as a consequence of their apprenticeship of observation they tend to have somewhat superficial understandings of practice. Then, as adults, when they think about and/or comment on teaching, they tend to think they know a lot about teaching, but their view is that of a perspective borne of observation from only one side of the desk. A perspective that sometimes considers teaching is done in a particular way. Yet expert teachers know that there is not one way of doing teaching.

Because teaching comprises so many competing demands, these choices make teaching itself problematic. However, problematic should not be viewed with negative connotations. Understanding teaching as problematic means that teaching is dilemma based and, because by definition dilemmas are managed (not necessarily solved), it means that teachers are continually making judgments about what they consider to be appropriate in a given situation at a given time. That does not mean that the same action would lead to the same result in a different context or at another time, or that another teacher should do the same thing when confronted by a similar situation. Rather it means that a teacher's personal professional judgment is paramount in responding to students' needs and concerns – and that is why understanding teaching as problematic matters.

As a beginning teacher, it can be quite common to seek “the answers” about what to do and the best way to do it. That is only natural. But as familiarity with the process of teaching develops, as confidence in one's ability to manage grows, as the diversity of learners' needs and approaches to learning becomes increasingly apparent, seeing teaching as problematic rather than rule driven is almost inevitable. In coming to that realization it also becomes increasingly clear that it is

through reflecting on decisions and professional judgements about practice that knowledge of teaching grows.

As the apprenticeship of observation suggests, at first glance, teaching can appear to be an orderly process based on technical proficiency. However, when viewed from an experienced teachers' vantage point the constant undercurrent of choices, decisions, competing concerns, dilemmas and tensions become much more important in shaping what happens, how and why. For some, this can be unsettling because it can mean that despite all of the planning and preparation for teaching, there are still things that can happen that are not able to be anticipated; and that can lead to anxiety and unease in the practice setting.

Because of the apparent "messiness of teaching" and the importance of individuals accepting responsibility for directing their own professional learning, for some, the desire for a much simpler solution is strong because of the need to feel in control rather than be confronted by a sense of uncertainty. However, managing the desire to seek a simple solution matters because it is through being challenged by, and engaged in, mapping the terrain of teaching that professional learning abounds. It is in accepting that teaching is problematic, and working with that conceptualization that teachers learn how to adapt, adjust and construct their practice and build their expertise.

Understanding teaching as problematic means that teaching is rarely the same thing. John Mason described expertise in terms of noticing:

At the heart of all practice lies noticing: noticing an opportunity to act appropriately. To notice an opportunity to act requires three things: being present and sensitive to the moment, having reason to act, and having a different act come to mind. Consequently, one important aspect of being professional is noticing possible acts to try out in the future ... A second important aspect is working on becoming more articulate and more precise about reasons for acting. The mark of an expert is that they are sensitised to notice things which novices overlook. They have finer discernment. They make things look easy, because they have a refined sensitivity to professional situations and a rich collection of responses on which to draw. Among other things, experts are aware of their actions. (Mason, 2002, p. 1)

The "expert makes things look easy" and, because some aspects of teaching look easy, expertise in teaching is often misunderstood. When teaching looks easy, the problematic is not so obvious, the uncertainty of practice is not so apparent and so what others notice and interpret is very different to that which a teacher knows and feels when teaching.

These things are hard to explain to those who are not involved in the demanding work of teaching because much of what teachers know is tacit; they do not always discuss their work in the ways I have outlined here. Because this knowledge of teaching is not so well recognized it tends to be undervalued and that is a shame.

Expertise in teaching involves much more than the simple accumulation of technical skills and tips and tricks about how teaching is done. Although technical competence is an important base from

which expertise in teaching grows, it is important to recognize that teaching is an educative process and it cannot simply be measured against a list of competencies.

Although to some, teaching may look easy, the reality is that it is a complicated and complex process. The how and why of teachers' professional judgements matters and those judgements form the foundations for a teacher's understanding, development and use of knowledge of practice.

Each of the award winners here today has clearly been able to demonstrate their expertise for others in their own particular way. We need that more and more to be the case across the profession as a whole so that the real work of teaching can be better understood and more highly prized.

Expert teachers matter because they make a difference. Congratulations to each of you. Your accomplishment is well deserved. Continue to make a difference.

John Loughran

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