

TEACH



LIKE
NOBODY'S
WATCHING



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INTRODUCTION

THREE BELIEFS: THE SIMPLE, THE COMPLEX AND THE COMPLICATIONS

This book is based on three things that I believe to be true. Firstly, that teaching is, at its heart, simple. If you want to teach someone something - whether it is how to drive, bake a cake or understand the evidence for plate tectonics - you start by reminding them of what they already know (recap), you then tell or show them something new (input), you direct them to apply and practise with the new concept (application) and then you give feedback on how they are doing. Simple.

The second thing I hold to be true is that doing these simple things well is complex. There are many ways to remind pupils of what they know and even more ways to introduce them to something new. It is this complexity that makes the job of teaching so endlessly fascinating. It is also why it is a profession that requires a high level of training and continuous reflection and development of its members.

My third belief is that teaching has become overcomplicated. Teachers have endured decades of competing and conflicting advice about how they should teach, and spent an inordinate amount of time trying to please outside observers. In my career to date, I have been instructed to do all of the following:

- Test pupils to determine their learning style and plan different activities so pupils could choose one that matched their style.
- Start the lesson with Brain Gym activities. Stop the lesson frequently to do more Brain Gym activities.
- Plan every hour-long lesson as a three-part composition of starter, activity and plenary.

- Not talk for more than 10% of the lesson in total.
- Let pupils discover knowledge for themselves.
- Mark work every two weeks. Use one particular colour pen. Have pupils respond in a second colour. Respond to their response in a third colour.
- Base all learning objectives on Bloom's taxonomy and aim for the higher-order thinking skills in each lesson. Have pupils write every objective in their books.
- Don't teach subject knowledge, as pupils will always be able to look that up. Instead, focus on teaching transferable skills - like evaluation or creativity.

These complications have moved us a long way from the simplicity of recap, input, application and feedback, and have made teaching less effective. They have also added to our workload by making teaching less efficient.

FADS: WHERE GOOD IDEAS GO TO DIE

Many of these complications arise when good ideas about how to approach the simplicity of teaching well (i.e. the complexities) are turned into strategies and then passed on to teachers as policies. As I mentioned, there are many ways of delivering the input of new information. One way that became popular (certainly when I started teaching in 2003 and still frequently recommended to teachers on discussion forums today) was a carousel task in which pupils would take turns to visit a table to read the sources of information on it before moving on to the next. This was seen as preferable to simply giving them the information where they sat.

It is entirely possible that somewhere within this strategy there was a kernel of a good idea: a rationale that helped to explain why it was being done and how it was meant to improve learning. If there ever was, it was quickly lost. It became something that teachers were told they should be doing in their classrooms. It was imposed on them, divorced of its underlying explanation. It became a fad.

Sadly, we can see too many good ideas rapidly turn into fads:

- **Knowledge organisers** could be a powerful tool for departmental planning and for self-quizzing, or they could be a task given to already overburdened teachers for them to create and forget about.
- **Retrieval quizzes** could be a useful way to start the lesson and help pupils to make links between different parts of the subject, or they could be a random selection of questions chosen because someone has been told that lessons should begin with a quiz.
- **Growth mindset** sounds like a sensible principle. We want pupils to believe that they can achieve. This could involve carefully scaffolding tasks so that they taste success and know what they are aiming for, or it could be communicated via an assembly and a poster.
- **A knowledge-rich curriculum** could involve a deep understanding of what our subjects entail, with a thoughtful approach to the substantive and disciplinary thinking behind it, or it could involve making a list of what you think pupils should know for the exam.
- **Chalk and talk** could once again be seen as the bedrock of the lesson, whereby an expert carefully unpicks the subject with the use of analogies, diagrams, modelling and questioning, or it could involve someone talking incoherently for 20 minutes and then saying, "Now answer the question."

All of these ideas, amongst many others, will appear in this book. What I hope to do, though, is to explore the *why* (the theory underpinning the practice) as well as the *what* (the practice itself). In this way, we can act as professionals and choose how to apply the principles of effective teaching in our own classrooms. This enables us to have the confidence to teach like nobody's watching.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO “TEACH LIKE NOBODY’S WATCHING”?

When I talk about teaching like nobody's watching, I mean teaching the way you would naturally if left alone to get on with it. Teaching in this way demands confidence, and this confidence comes from having a good understanding of what works. Whilst this develops with exposure and practice, we also have to remember that our own experience can sometimes be a poor guide to what is most effective.¹ This is where a knowledge of educational research can prove invaluable. It acts as a guide and as a check to what we believe to be true.

This body of research (covering everything from how pupils learn to how teachers can develop themselves) also helps us to untangle the web of misinformation and contradictory advice that many of us have been given since we first started teaching. It can show us that it isn't the case that pupils remember only 10% of what they are told but 90% of what they teach others; that group work isn't necessarily better than individual work; and that differentiating objectives is unlikely to be effective.

These discussions always raise the knotty question of whether there is a “best” way to teach. I'd suggest that there is, but only if we keep the terms very loose. If we accept that:

- “teach” means to ensure that pupils know, understand and can do what we think they should know, understand and be able to do
- “way” means an approach, and
- “best”, in this context, means most effective and efficient

then we have the question, “Is there a most effective and efficient approach to making sure pupils know, understand and can do?”

This book has the twin pillars of *effective* and *efficient* at its heart and these two terms need some unpicking. “Effective” is perhaps less controversial. When we talk about something being effective, we simply mean that it works. Hitting a nail in with the butt of screwdriver might be just as effective as using a hammer. Both get the

¹ See David Didau, *What If Everything You Knew About Education Was Wrong?* (Carmarthen: Crown House Publishing, 2015).

job done. Likewise, there are many effective ways to teach. We can, as we will discuss, make almost anything work.

Bringing the term “efficient” into education tends to raise more eyebrows. Efficiency tends to mean doing something with the fewest possible resources. At a time when school budgets have been slashed in real terms and everyone is trying to do more with less, it is understandable that the word efficiency causes some alarm. It gets used to justify everything from larger class sizes to firing teaching assistants (TAs).² In this context though, I mean something slightly different. I mean efficiency in terms of our own personal resources: our time and energy as teachers.

This book will seek to answer the question of how to teach like nobody’s watching by looking at how we can modify our practice in a way that is not only efficient in reducing workload but also effective at creating cultures of excellence from the classroom up.

We ignore this point about efficiency at our peril. Teaching can be an immersive job and it will fill any time you allot to it; the job is never really finished. This creates two significant problems:

- 1 **Burnout.** There is a serious UK-wide issue with both teacher recruitment and teacher retention, with an increasing number of teachers leaving the profession each year.³ In many cases this is driven by an unsustainable workload. If we want to keep teachers in the job, we need to make the job efficient.
- 2 **Opportunity cost.** There are many things we could do that might make a difference to our pupils. However, time is finite. If we spend time doing one thing because we believe it is important, we have less left over to do something else that might be even more important.

2 See for example the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) Teaching and Learning Toolkit, which shows the cost and impact of any given type of intervention. TAs are listed at a high cost with only one additional month of progress and reducing class size is also expensive for only a three-month lift in progress. The toolkit is available at: <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/evidence-summaries/teaching-learning-toolkit>.

3 Will Hazel, Reasons to worry: 5 new facts about teacher retention, *TES* (27 September 2018). Available at: <https://www.tes.com/news/reasons-worry-5-new-facts-about-teacher-retention>.

I would argue that one of the biggest problems in schools up and down the country isn't a lack of effectiveness (we are good at making things work), but a lack of efficiency. We are often instructed to do things in a way that takes more time to get the same result. This wouldn't happen if we taught like nobody was watching. Then we would find the most efficient way.

Professor Daniel Muijs, head of research at Ofsted, likens this to being instructed to eat soup with a fork.⁴ If someone asked teachers to do this, we would try. Not only would we try, we would find a way to make it work. The soup would get eaten but at what cost? There would be a lot of mess, a lot of frustration and a lot of time wasted. This book suggests that teachers should instead bring along their own spoon.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

I believe that an excellent education starts with excellent individual teachers and that in recent years there has been too much of a focus on school structures as a way of driving improvement. The layout of this book reflects that approach and puts the emphasis very much on what each teacher can do to make a difference in their own classroom.

Part I will consider the individual lesson and discuss how we can build lessons around four simple elements:

- 1 recap
- 2 input
- 3 application
- 4 feedback

Each chapter will consider one aspect of the lesson in turn and discuss its importance - with a particular focus on how educational research can be applied to it in

⁴ Daniel Muijs, Keynote address at the researchEd Durrington conference, Durrington High School (28 April 2018).

the classroom, how it might look in different subjects, and the potential pitfalls to avoid.

Part II recognises that lessons don't happen in isolation but as part of a wider curriculum. This section will discuss:

- The creation of a programme of study that takes pupils on a journey through your subject.
- The super-curriculum of what happens outside the classroom.
- The principles of assessment design.
- How time in departments can be used to reduce workload and support a culture of excellence.

In Part III we will look at the role of the wider school in supporting teachers to teach like nobody's watching and how leaders can help to set them free from some of the more burdensome pressures.

I hope that this book will be a practical, and essential, guide to effective and efficient teaching and will give you the confidence to relax into your role and teach like nobody's watching.



PART I

THE LESSON

INTRODUCTION TO PART I

In most schools, it is in the lesson where the individual teacher has the most control, or at least it should be. Unfortunately, many schools have weighed teachers down with long lists of non-negotiables that they are expected to demonstrate in their classrooms. These demands are loaded with various myths about learning that have lingered from teacher training or from years of poor continuing professional development (CPD). The problem has also been driven by fear and a culture of high-stakes accountability. This has led to pedagogy in the classroom being shaped around an idea of what Ofsted are looking for.¹ This, as we shall discuss throughout this book, distorts our practice by asking us to teach for outside observers and not for our pupils.

Part I takes a look at the lesson and asks, “What would the lesson look like if teachers took back control of their own classrooms?” To answer this question, we will have to take a good hard look at a number of sacred cows in teaching – for example:

- Testing is neutral and doesn’t lead to learning.
- Pupils benefit from written comments on their work.
- We should plan engaging activities.

1 See, for example, Daisy Christodoulou, *Seven Myths About Education* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014).

- Noisy classrooms are a sign of learning.
- Teachers should limit how much they talk.
- Pupils need to discover knowledge for themselves.

There is one point that we need to discuss before we get started:

- Teachers need to plan lessons.

As with many myths in education, this seems too self-evident to be challenged, but challenge it we must. For as long as I can remember, the hour-long lesson has been king. When we train to teach, we are required to complete plans for each of the hour-long lessons we will deliver, with clearly defined objectives that will be met at the end of this unit of time. In many schools, the requirement to create lesson plans for each hour is still there, especially for observed lessons. This hour-long lesson should invariably involve some sort of starter, then a task or series of tasks, and then a plenary to demonstrate what has been learnt. Even if we aren't writing out individual lesson plans, this way of thinking about a lesson is still engrained from our training. But it is wrong.

Whatever made us think that every objective can be met in exactly one hour? Or, magically, in 50 minutes if that is how long the lesson is? Some things must take more time to learn than others and yet we still think of learning as having to fit into neat blocks of time that begin when pupils enter the classroom and end when they leave.

Before we can do anything else, we need to stop planning lessons as hour-long blocks of time and start thinking about planning learning. When I talk about a lesson comprising of four elements – recap, input, application and feedback – I don't mean to suggest that these should be worked through in the hour. Rather, whilst meeting an objective, over however long, all four elements should be present. This might involve recap at various points, a mix of input and application, and time for feedback throughout. It might take ten minutes to meet an objective or five hours.

At a time when schools are crying out for more autonomy and trust, teacher and bestselling author Mark Enser asks educators the critical question

“HOW WOULD YOU TEACH IF NOBODY WERE WATCHING?”

and empowers them with the tools and confidence to do just that.

Mark argues that a quality education is rooted in simplicity. In this book he convincingly strips away the layers of contradictory pedagogical advice that teachers have received over the years and lends weight to the three key pillars that underpin effective, efficient teaching: the lesson, the curriculum and the school's support structure.

Teach Like Nobody's Watching explores these three core elements in detail, and presents teachers with a range of practical, time-efficient approaches to help them reclaim their professional agency and ensure that their pupils get the excellent education they deserve.

Suitable for all teachers in both primary and secondary schools.

A fabulous book. Practical, principled and inspiring, it exudes an authenticity that is all too rare. It's the voice of someone who actually walks the talk in the classroom every day – a popular and successful teacher with plenty of front-line wisdom to share.

Tom Sherrington, education consultant and author of *The Learning Rainforest* and *Rosenshine's Principles in Action*

Teach Like Nobody's Watching cuts through the unnecessary, and frankly overcomplicated, nonsense that has impeded the progress of our wonderful profession in recent times and gets to the heart of everyday practice that reduces workload and creates a culture of excellence in your classroom.

Chris Moyse, Head of Staff Development, Bridgwater and Taunton College Trust,
Managing Director, TLC Education Services Ltd

A refreshing read that provides beautiful clarity on educational debate. I am going to have all my staff read it!

Katharine Birbalsingh, Headmistress, Michaela Community School

This book is about integrity. It's about teaching day in, day out in a manner that you believe is best for the children and young people in your care. Teachers must take responsibility for ensuring that this “best” gets a little bit better every day, and reading *Teach Like Nobody's Watching* will undoubtedly help.

Stephen Tierney, CEO, Blessed Edward Bamber Catholic Multi Academy Trust,
blogger and author of *Liminal Leadership*



Mark Enser has been teaching geography for over a decade and is a head of department at Heathfield Community College. He contributes articles to *TES* and to the *Guardian* Teacher Network and often speaks at education conferences. Mark also writes a blog called *Teaching It Real* and tweets [@EnserMark](#). He spends the rest of his time reading, drinking coffee and running in the hills.



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