


TEACH
LIKE  YOU
IMAGINED IT
FINDING THE RIGHT BALANCE

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Next, I need to thank my colleagues, and first I must mention Rob Williams, a colleague and friend who has the most fantastic ability to respond to change that I have ever encountered. Most people have a change cycle where they resist and fight back initially before coming round and making it work, and for some this process takes a very long time. Rob's change cycle is so short that in the space of

a sentence he will go from “that won’t work because ...” to “that’s brilliant, how do we tell everyone else?” The original idea for RAG123 came from an afterschool discussion with Rob, and within a week he had tried it with all his classes and was offering improvements. He has also contributed to all sorts of ideas which I’ve shared via my blog, and he continues to be my go-to chap if I need to bounce a silly idea around with someone.

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INTRODUCTION: UNPICKING THE BIG CONFLICT IN TEACHING



This book is aimed at the teacher or trainee teacher who wants to be great at their job but is struggling to maintain a healthy work–life balance. It is also aimed at the school leader who wants to run a high-achieving organisation but is struggling to manage that while maintaining realistic workloads and staff morale, and against the backdrop of constantly shrinking budgets. If this sounds appealing to you then hopefully you will find something useful in the following pages, but first I need to establish the background behind this book and what I am hoping to achieve here.

Teaching is awesome but difficult

For an amazing number of students, school is the best thing in their lives. Sometimes this is, unfortunately, because their home lives are unhappy. Fortunately, for most, it is because their young minds love learning, they are kept safe, and they are surrounded by their friends and by professionals who are there to help them develop into successful adults.

The children we work with bring with them an energy you simply do not get in other workplaces. They are young, excitable, often energetic and keen to see what the world can offer them. They are – mostly – free from the cynicism that can creep into adult life and adult workplaces. On top of this, we get to live and breathe our favourite subjects – and our love of learning – every day, sharing our passion for it and, hopefully, our enthusiasm.

Spend any time around teachers and you will eventually stumble into a discussion about workload. Unless you have been a teacher it is hard to appreciate how all-consuming it can become. The bottom line is: teaching can be difficult, really difficult. At times it is stressful, time-consuming, emotionally draining and frustrating; it can be all too easy to end up focusing on the negatives. In any class with mostly good results, the teacher will fixate on the student or students who did not quite make the grade more readily than they will celebrate those who overachieved. As this happens – and as stakes get higher through governmental initiatives or societal expectations – the pressure placed upon schools to deliver more and more is often passed on to classroom teachers. It is simply too easy to let our heads drop and forget the positive things that brought us into the profession.

Finding a balance can be challenging

It is also too easy for a fixation on these difficulties to swamp the awesomeness of teaching, and that threatens to make life unbearable.

Too hard and life becomes unbearable ...



Realistically, as with any job, teaching will always have its sources of difficulty. The trick we need to achieve is to see enough of the positives to outweigh the negatives, so that the harder things become more bearable. Conversely, we could see this as reducing the amount or impact of the difficulties, so that the awesomeness can shine through.

We need life to contain enough awesomeness to make the hard things bearable ...

Or reduce the hard things so the awesomeness can shine through



The challenge of doing your best

As teachers, we will constantly search for the next great thing that will help make a difference to our students. A commitment to continuous professional development (CPD) is admirable, and indeed necessary. However, if misdirected, our attempts to be an “even more awesome teacher” may well just add to our workload, and in turn make our lives harder. People talk about going the extra mile, but in doing that you accept the premise that normal effort is not good enough. You either work harder than you would find manageable in the long term, or you feel bad because you see others working harder and think that perhaps you should be too.

Nobody really talks about this conflict. School leaders see stressed staff and are often genuinely concerned about their welfare. But, with this said, they cannot be seen to discourage staff from putting in extra effort, as this might be the key thing

that helps them to secure better outcomes for their students and therefore the school. Often the output of those putting in extra is highlighted as “best practice” across the school, raising the bar for everyone else. Workloads escalate to the level that people will tolerate rather than to a level they will like or enjoy, and everyone always suspects that others are doing a bit more or doing it a bit better, so everyone feels a bit guilty.

It is all too common for a struggling teacher, or more specifically a teacher struggling with a particular class or classes, to be thought of as “not working hard enough” or “not doing their job properly”. In my experience, the teachers who have struggled the most are often working incredibly hard, usually harder than colleagues who are apparently not struggling. Perhaps, counterintuitively, what’s required to improve a teacher’s performance is almost never an issue of working harder; it is almost always about changing practices so that their hard work is more fruitful.

Teaching is a job with an infinite scope for workload.¹ In a factory, when the production line stops, the production line operator’s job stops. For a teacher, there is always another book to mark, display to update, lesson to plan, scheme of work to tweak, resource to create, behavioural issue to follow up, reward to give or letter to write. That is true in non-contact time during the day, in the evenings, at night and throughout the holidays. Work will expand to fill the time that you make available to it and, as such, it will always threaten to take over your life.

At the end of the day we know that there is a child’s future at stake and that we need to do our best for them. Therefore, teachers will routinely work through evenings, at weekends and through chunks of their holidays. It is too easy for this to become too much, to the point where it is detrimental to our wellbeing. We need to do something about it, and I think one way to approach this is to return to how we imagined teaching to be in the first place.

1 I am not suggesting that this is unique to teaching, but it is certainly characteristic.

Why I wrote this book

The idea for this book grew out of a TeachMeet presentation I did at my school in 2016. I had been pondering morale and workload for some time and wanted to say something to reassure the many colleagues who seemed to be under strain. Having been written alongside teaching full-time, it has taken a few years to progress from idea to the finished product. However, despite the delay, it is clear to me that the need is still there, if not more so now than ever.

As I finished writing, the Department for Education in England issued a policy paper on reducing teachers' workload.² Furthermore, the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) issued a report in 2018 highlighting the fact that teachers, on average, work longer hours than nurses and police officers – even once holidays are accounted for – and are typically less satisfied with their leisure time.³ It is good that note is being taken. My intention is to translate these insights into some actions that individual working teachers, and perhaps school leaders, can take as part of managing work–life balance.

There are so many books about how to teach, and ones filled with ideas about teaching practice, but very few about the actual realities of teaching. As a trainee teacher I encountered lots of advice about maintaining a good work–life balance, mostly things like, “Make sure you take one night off per week and one day off at weekends.” Frankly, that is an awful tip as it only gives guidance about achieving something vaguely tolerable for the training period and does nothing to help a working teacher in the long term, and even then it does not actually suggest *how* you might carve out this paltry time off.

Somehow it has become accepted that massive stresses and heavy term-time workloads are a basic requirement of being a teacher, and sometimes this is not restricted to term times either. Once you finish training you are just left to get on

2 Department for Education, Policy paper: Reducing teacher workload (updated 5 November 2018). Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/reducing-teachers-workload/reducing-teachers-workload>.

3 Jack Worth, Sarah Lynch, Jude Hillary, Connie Rennie and Joana Andrade, *Teacher Workforce Dynamics in England: Nurturing, Supporting and Valuing Teachers* (Slough: National Foundation for Educational Research, 2018). Available at: https://www.nfer.ac.uk/media/3111/teacher_workforce_dynamics_in_england_final_report.pdf.

with it; you are expected to find a way to manage it all alongside having a real life outside of school. There is research suggesting that, depending on the school environment, the quality of a teacher's performance can plateau after the first three to five years of experience.⁴ This would fit with the idea that teachers may find a way to survive with their workload and settle into that as a pattern.

My background

Having originally trained as a mechanical engineer, I started my working life with ten years in the car industry as an engineer and engineering project manager for an internationally recognised prestige brand. During this time, I became steeped in the car industry's approaches to maximising efficiency and eliminating waste from processes when managing multimillion-pound projects. I accrued the professional experience required to become an accredited chartered engineer and studied part-time for an MBA in engineering management. Having achieved a lot as an engineer I became restless, and after much thought I took the decision to change career and become a teacher. I believe I have a different perspective on the education sector, given this varied experience, than many who choose to go straight into teaching from university.

In my relatively short time in education I have progressed through classroom teacher and head of department to senior leadership team (SLT) roles. To date, I have been part of six Ofsted inspections, ranging from "requires improvement" to "outstanding", though not in that order. I have gone from an extreme of working basically flat out – working six or seven full days and over 70 hours per week – to cutting back to something hopefully a bit healthier in the long term. During this time, I have gone through phases as a prolific blogger and tweeter, removed myself from that altogether, and made a more measured return.

Over the last several years, I have contributed to international forums, presented at and organised TeachMeets, and organised and delivered training days both for

4 Matthew A. Kraft and John P. Papay, Can professional environments in schools promote teacher development? Explaining heterogeneity in returns to teaching experience, *Education Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 36(4) (2014): 476–500. Available at: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4392767/pdf/nihms634223.pdf>.

my school and for a wider audience. I have been certified as a specialist leader in education (SLE) and deliver leadership training for the National Professional Qualification for Middle Leadership (NPQML) qualification and its senior leadership equivalent (NPQSL). During all of this I have had several crises of confidence, a few bouts of depression, a period of sickness that was at least partly stress related and at least one phase in which I was ready to leave teaching altogether.

Day-to-day I see and hear of too many people struggling to be happy as teachers, and have seen too many good teachers leave the profession, which is not a healthy position to be in.⁵ Teaching should not be a profession of bright lights and burnouts, in which only the toughest or those with the fewest other options remain for the long haul. It should be a profession in which experience is a valued commodity, and in which people can make long, prosperous careers. Even if we are not actively happy in teaching, at least we should reach a state of contentment.

I have thought long and hard about why I am a teacher and why continuing to be part of the education system is the right thing for me. I believe that I have found a way to make teaching a happy and productive career – one that does not consume my life – and with this book I want to help others to achieve that balance too. Given the constraints we work in, I am not sure that it will be easy, but I am hopeful that change is achievable.

The blame game

It is always possible to point the finger of blame at governmental policies or school management practices for the current bright light or bust pattern, but for me that abdicates all responsibility for finding a resolution for ourselves. It is effectively saying, “They did it to us, so we need them to fix it before it can be right again.” Certainly, there are structural and governmental influences; however, I believe that we, as teachers, really need to fix a lot of things from within, by working together to find the best approaches.

5 Michael Savage, Almost a quarter of teachers who have qualified since 2011 have left profession, *The Guardian* (8 July 2017). Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2017/jul/08/almost-a-quarter-of-teachers-who-have-qualified-since-2011-have-left-profession>.

A large part of the ownership of the solution lies with school leadership, but I also believe that every teacher in every classroom can have an impact. In many ways the workload of teachers is left unmanaged; it is down to individuals to find a way to manage their own time. I would like to suggest that there is a route that teachers can take for greater control of their workload and overall work-life balance. While we can and should campaign for better education policies, we must also look into our own schools and classrooms and investigate what we can change.

As a chartered engineer, my approach to a problem was always to try to achieve the most efficient solution given the materials available. Having moved into teaching I still think in this way, and I see inefficiencies everywhere. Many may balk at this point and think that I am conceptualising education as some kind of production line on which we churn out carbon copies of students all trained efficiently to pass exams, but this is not what I mean at all. Students are individuals with their own needs, desires, strengths and weaknesses – as are teachers – and we need to remember that. However, the personalisation thing that many teachers cling on to may not be quite so sacrosanct.

The “I do it my way because that works for me” or “you do not know my students like I do” perspectives have a point to some extent, but they can also overstate their cases massively, and as such limit the search for alternatives. In my experience, the “but it works for me” types of statements are often unsupported by any evidence of a direct benefit to the students, when compared with any other approach. I believe there is often scope to change our habits and become more effective in our roles while reducing stresses and workload. I am not suggesting an approach that is absolutely one-size-fits-all, but familiar processes can be used to serve the diverse needs of students.

Is change realistic?

Perhaps you think I am being naive here. School leaders may frown at the suggestion that their staff should not work quite as hard. You may also doubt that you could do your job in less time, or more efficiently than you do currently. Teachers and leaders may both point to the current situation as the only way to

make schools work, and fear that they will become less effective if things are changed. I suppose there is a risk that they are right.

I also know that there are as many ways of running schools as there are schools, because every head teacher approaches the task differently, and within each school every head of department approaches things differently. Sometimes these differences are at a fundamental level and sometimes they are subtleties in day-to-day practices. Beyond that there are differences in the approaches of individual teachers, even when teaching the same topic. Underlying all of this is the reality of the fundamental differences between the students we are seeking to educate.

Sometimes the differences between students are socio-economic or cultural, others are simply down to personality. These differences are what makes teaching the challenging, fascinating and fulfilling career that it is. Given these differences, we would have to be either very arrogant or very short-sighted to assume that the way that each of us currently does things is the very best. We must also accept that what worked for last year's students may not be the best thing for this year's cohort, or for the lot after.

Against the backdrop of a workforce who are more stressed and tightly stretched than ever before, and with an ever more challenging funding situation, we must choose to do something to save the teaching profession and our education system. To do nothing is to admit defeat and await external improvement. I prefer the more proactive approach, in which we choose to do something to shape the situation from within. The suggestions that follow are mainly about choosing the right – or, rather, the most important – things to do, and making sure we do them in as efficient and effective a way possible.

How did you imagine your teaching career?

When I chose to leave engineering to become a teacher, I had a clear mental image of what I thought it would be like. Regardless of career trajectory to date, we all will have had preconceptions of what teaching would be like before we started training.

My expected view of teaching life, hopefully not too far from yours, looked something like this:

1. Understand your subject and how to function effectively in the school environment.
2. Plan and deliver lessons to teach an aspect of the subject.
3. Use marking and feedback to ensure that students are on track.
4. Assess to see if your lessons have been effective, and use that to inform your teaching, and report back to parents and school leadership.
5. Repeat steps 2, 3 and 4 until the courses are complete.
6. Manage behavioural issues along the way.
7. Have a good work–life balance alongside teaching.

I also imagined that I would be fairly good at teaching, and hopefully you had this view of yourself too. After all, who would go into a profession not expecting to be reasonably competent, at least? I am not suggesting that everyone should start off with the idea that they have to be the best in the world, the country or even in their school or department; however, I am sure that everyone starts off expecting to be reasonably effective and successful, or at least dedicated to becoming that way.

I expected to be happy as a teacher, and again I would hope that you did too. Why would you choose a profession that you expect will make you miserable? Of course, I am not naive enough to believe it must always be laughs and smiles; life, and work, has its ups and downs. However, at least being content with your lot should be an aspiration for us all.

In truth, the only aspect of this imagined teaching life that has ever been absent from my reality is the last one, as the various requirements of tasks 1–6 can become so all-consuming that time gets squeezed and squashed to the point where there is none left for the life part of the balance. A lack of balance can then threaten contentment; if you are not content and have no time for yourself or your family then it places huge barriers in the way of being good at your job.

TEACHING IS AN INCREDIBLE PROFESSION, BUT IT ALSO COMES WITH A POTENTIALLY TOXIC WORKLOAD.

YOU DO NOT HAVE TO PUT UP WITH BURN-OUT – AND ONE WAY TO AVOID IT IS TO RETURN TO HOW YOU IMAGINED TEACHING TO BE IN THE FIRST PLACE.

Before you became a teacher, you pictured yourself as a teacher; in your imagination you almost certainly saw yourself as happy, efficient and able to manage your work–life balance effectively. Yet chances are that the reality of teaching is a little different, and it is this disconnect that can give rise to stress, anxiety and frustration.

BUT WHAT IF YOU COULD USE SIMPLE STRATEGIES TO GET A HANDLE ON YOUR SCHEDULE AND TAKE CONTROL OF YOUR WORKLOAD?

Covering lesson planning, behaviour management, the streamlining of marking and getting the best out of CPD, Kevin Lister has drawn on his background in engineering to fill this book with trusted techniques and savvy suggestions to help you maximise your productivity and teach like you imagined it.

SUITABLE FOR BOTH NEW AND EXPERIENCED TEACHERS LOOKING TO BOOST THEIR DAY-TO-DAY EFFICIENCY AND FIND THE RIGHT BALANCE.



A really enjoyable and accessible read.

Mary Myatt, adviser, speaker and author of *The Curriculum: From Gallimaufry to Coherence*

This excellent book contains a wealth of practical advice.
I wholeheartedly recommend it to teachers and school leaders.

Brian Lightman, former general secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders

Teach Like You Imagined It will challenge and support classroom practitioners and school leaders on their journey to becoming the teachers and leaders they dream of being.

Jill Berry, leadership consultant and former head teacher

An insightful and helpful resource for teachers.

Sir John Rowling, founder of PiXL

This book offers a timely reminder of why you became a teacher and will help you rediscover, nurture and make use of that passion and enthusiasm.

Neil Wallace, Head Teacher, Stratford upon Avon School



After spending the early part of his career in engineering and project management, **Kevin Lister** retrained as a teacher in 2009 and has never looked back – moving rapidly through various posts to his current role as senior assistant head teacher at an academy in Warwickshire. Over the last several years, Kevin has contributed to international forums, presented at and organised TeachMeets and delivered training days both for his own school and for a wider audience.

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