

OUTSTANDING TEACHING

TEACHING  
BACKWARDS



THE OUTSTANDING  
TEACHING SERIES

ANDY GRIFFITH  
AND MARK BURNS



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# A FOREWORD TO BACKWARDS

BY PROFESSOR JOHN HATTIE

So many lessons start with an engaging activity, move to the explanation, and then provide practice and 'doing'. There are many variants of this 'tell and use' or 'chug and plug' form of lesson, but they are the norm. Students are expected to work along with the teacher; in time all will be revealed and knowledge will be gained. Many students are quite happy with this approach: it is predictable – just wait and the teacher will tell you what to do next. Is it not the case, after all, that students come to school to watch the teachers teach! Certainly, by the time they get to tertiary study, the die is cast – just tell me what to do, I will do it, and then you can tell me how well I did. Indeed, many students rate lessons poorly if there are unstructured problems, if there is an expectation of creativity and initiative, and if the number of words in the assignment does not appear in bold up front.

Andy Griffith and Mark Burns ask us to turn this thinking backwards – to start by revealing the destination ('What does success in this lesson look like?') and then work backwards to where the students are now. They ask us to have high expectations, to plan, to watch for where students might go off route and where they may misunderstand, and to provide multiple opportunities for feedback, autonomy, challenge, and engagement. Based on Grant Wiggins and Jay McTigue's *Understanding by Design*,<sup>1</sup> this book provides the methods, the meat and vegetables, for the journey and lots of practical advice about how to understand success, work backwards from success to where the students are now, and then plan how to navigate (with all the usual twists and occasional wrong turns) the route to this success.

When we were developing our assessment and reporting engine for New Zealand schools, we developed a report based on target setting. We allowed the teacher to see a

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1 Grant Wiggins and Jay McTigue, *Understanding by Design* (Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2005).

progression from the students' past assessments, which used a polynomial regression to predict into the future (the tool followed students from Year 4 to 12), and then said to teachers, 'If you keep teaching as you are, and the student keeps learning as he or she is, then this is where they are likely to end up in three, six, or twelve months' time.' The tool then allowed teachers to adjust the target (hopefully up) and pointed to lesson plans and assessment items for this new target. What was fascinating is what happened next. Teachers said, 'Aha, so this is where the student is now and this where I need to go, and I can work out how to make this link.' They then resolved this developmental progression and helped the student along this trajectory. But the students said, 'Aha, so this is where you want me to be, and these are items and lessons that indicate what I need to do. Let me try these items and lessons now – oh, I cannot do them. Will you, teacher, help me?' The students' thinking was so much more successful than the teachers' thinking.

This understanding of what success looks like highlights four factors. First, helping students to set high expectations of what they can achieve is a powerful incentive to action if they know what success looks like. Second, allowing students to see what they do not know and cannot do up front is a powerful motivator, if they also realise that there is expertise available to help them attain success. Third, teachers' models of development may need to be adjusted as learning rarely progress smoothly along trajectories, but is up and down – there are many wrong turns and misconceptions. But as long as the participants do not lose sight of success then we may still get there. Fourth, we need to allow teachers rather than students to set the expectations, as young people often have major difficulties in calibrating success appropriately and need professional help in setting suitably challenging targets.<sup>2</sup>

Andy Griffith and Mark Burns have a detailed section on setting high expectations for teachers *and* students, and they show how the various dangers on the way to success can be turned into exciting opportunities for learning (e.g. the pit of exploration, teaching resilience, stuckness routines, celebrating mistakes, deliberate practice). They note the importance of pre-assessment to discover the students' starting points. This may seem obvious, until we recall Graham Nuthall's finding that students already know 60% of most lessons – which is rather too much scaffolding and certainly not very challenging!<sup>3</sup>

Chapter 3 (Defining and Demystifying the Destination) is the critical chapter of this book, as it highlights such factors as clarity, exemplars and models, 'what a good one looks like', and emphasises that it is the teacher's responsibility to determine what does and does not constitute high quality work. The key is to get learners to wrestle with different notions of quality in different ways, both before and during the learning process. This requires the teacher to be a teaching and learning detective to help track progress, but

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2 See Graham Nuthall, *The Hidden Lives of Learners* (Wellington: NZCER Press, 2007).

3 Nuthall, *The Hidden Lives of Learners*, p. 35.

with the goal so clear, this is much easier to get back on track than the alternative – starting everyone off on the journey without really knowing where they are going and what the destination is.

Finally, the importance of challenge. Experts differ from experienced teachers, particularly in the degree of challenge that they present to learners and, most critically, in the depth to which learners learn to process information. Without challenge, feedback becomes less important as there are then no gaps to close!

Many computer games understand how to get young people to learn. There is no secret to what the target is – often the next level. Games designers know the Goldilocks principle of challenge – not too high and not too low. These criteria of success are known to the user and they do not change (none of this, ‘Dear, dear, you are not smart enough so I will make it easier for you; you only have to get half correct before you move on’). The game knows your prior achievement (your last level or score). Then it provides inordinate amounts of deliberate practice – that is, practice with feedback, with hints and cues, and sometimes with skill tips and lessons. Young people will spend hours (as will many of us adults) engaged in these games. When we succeed in progressing to the next success criteria, the game merely raises the level of challenge – and off we go again into the learning process. This is backwards learning in action.

*John Hattie*



# INTRODUCTION

This is a book about planning and teaching outstanding lessons. Not just once in a while but consistently. We know it's possible because some teachers manage to achieve outstanding results year after year. These teachers are successful because they do something which we call *teaching backwards*.

The context in which teachers work today is unbelievably demanding; in particular, they face more scrutiny than ever before. When we both started teaching in the 1990s, the only people who came into our classrooms just wanted to borrow a bit of chalk. Now it's common for teachers to be observed on a regular basis. In principle, of course, this is no bad thing. The problem, however, is that the observers' judgements are sometimes deeply flawed, often reflecting nothing more than their prejudice or their interpretation of the latest Ofsted framework. Rather than creating opportunities for teachers to grow and develop their skills, the extra scrutiny has, more often than not, created unwelcome pressure and it has left many teachers confused, demoralised, and dreading the next observation.

This book is our humble attempt to relieve some of that pressure. We recognise that teachers don't have much spare time on their hands so we've worked hard to make this book clear, concise, and practical. It's packed with case studies from teachers we've worked with, and it's punctuated with reflective questions that invite teachers to slow down and do some thinking about how they currently teach, so that their teaching can have an even more powerful impact on learners.

We introduced the concept of teaching backwards towards the end of our previous book, *Engaging Learners*.<sup>1</sup> It was an idea that we first came across in the work of American professors Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe.<sup>2</sup> Over the last seven years, our own take on this concept has deepened and taken shape as we've worked with thousands of teachers in our Outstanding Teaching Interventions.<sup>3</sup> As a result of these interventions, and our

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1 Andy Griffith and Mark Burns, *Engaging Learners* (Carmarthen: Crown House Publishing, 2012).

2 Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe, *Understanding by Design* (Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2005).

3 We've worked with more than 3,500 teachers (as of September 2014) in a series of Outstanding Teaching Interventions.

introduction of the teaching backwards concept to the teachers we've worked with, we've seen a remarkable transformation in the quality of teaching and learning in numerous classrooms up and down the country as teachers switch from teaching forwards to teaching backwards.

This book contains two overriding themes: first, that different learners need to be *catered for* in different ways and, second, that some teachers, in our experience, make far too many assumptions when planning their lessons. Let's explain what we mean with a couple of stories.

Imagine a family Sunday lunch. But it's not any old Sunday lunch: it's Aunt Ethel's ninetieth birthday. She's the oldest member of the family and someone has the bright idea of inviting the extended family to celebrate the occasion. It's a far-flung family with relatives living as far away as Australia, India, and the United States. Ethel must be some woman because quite a few agree to attend. The local family decide to have a British theme – after all, that's where the family's roots are. And what could be more British than good old roast beef?

When the great day comes everyone's happy to see each other, but the meal is a disaster. Nephew Brian's wife is Hindu for whom the cow is sacred; cousin Amelia's American husband has read in a newspaper back in Idaho about mad cow disease; grandson Richard, who lives in Australia, believes his body is a temple and doesn't eat red meat; great granddaughter Julie is just back from university and she's become a vegan; second cousins Rob and Josh are heavily into their rugby training and are on a carbs-only day.

If only someone hadn't made assumptions! They could have sent out an email to find out exactly what people did and didn't eat and what their preferences were. That way they could have catered for everyone. It would have been a little more work, but what a difference it would have made to a very special occasion.

It was great granddaughter Julie who had a bright idea and suggested they all go down to the local Chinese dim sum restaurant the next day instead. As the trolleys came round everyone chose exactly what suited them and a great time was had by all.

When teachers teach forwards, the educational equivalent of this scenario can happen all too easily. Assumptions are made and the real needs of the learners, and their starting points, are not sufficiently taken into consideration. Some years ago, we were observing a music teacher working with her class in the north of England. The bell rang to signal the end of the lesson and the learners filed out. We'd just finished videoing her lesson and from her perspective it had gone well. There was a smile on her face. She thought her learners had made good progress in developing their musical skills.

One boy lagged behind as we chatted to her. 'Please, Miss, I use violin, OK?' 'This is Adnan,' she explained to us. 'He's recently arrived from Albania with his parents.' Keen to nurture a

love of music in one of her learners, she took a violin from the cupboard and handed it over to him.

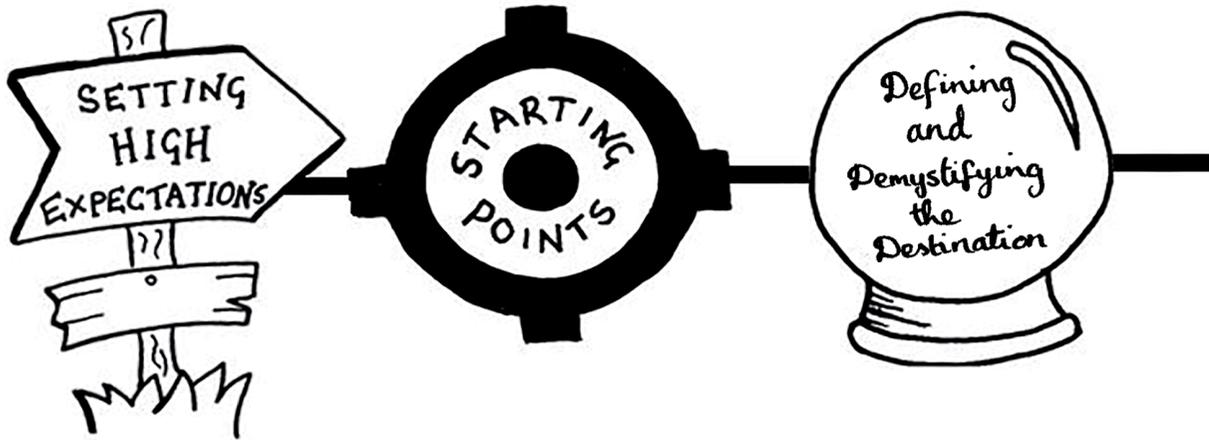
What happened next challenged the teacher to completely revise her assessment of how well her lesson had gone. Adnan started to play. He launched into a virtuoso performance of the theme from *The Godfather*, with all the panache of Joshua Bell and the cheeky passion of Nigel Kennedy. It earned a round of applause from all of us when he finished.

The teacher was stunned. 'I had no idea he could play like that. Had I known I'd have given him a lot more challenge in the lesson.' She paused a moment to reflect and then her eyes opened wide. 'I wonder if any of the others have got musical skills I don't know about?' At least she had a good sense of humour. She chuckled and, quoting from the movie while doing a pretty good impression of Marlon Brando, said, 'Dat lesson of mine just now; I guess you could say it's sleeping with da fishes.'

What do these two stories illustrate? In each case, it wasn't the lack of time, effort, or commitment to planning that caused the problems. It was simply *poor* planning. It was planning based on insufficient information, unchallenged assumptions, and a one-size-fits-all mindset. In both situations, the family and the music teacher were asking themselves the wrong questions. They were planning forwards. They'd have been far better off if they'd planned backwards.

This book offers teachers a multitude of ways to become more rigorous, disciplined, and investigative in their planning and delivery of outstanding teaching and learning ... by teaching backwards.

## WHAT IS TEACHING BACKWARDS?



The most effective teachers teach backwards. At the heart of teaching backwards is a thinking process that enables teachers to plan and teach backwards from a clear and well-defined destination. This destination could be a model of a high quality piece of work that shows learners exactly what standard they are expected to have achieved by the end of a learning module or it could be a clear and compelling description of the attitudes, skills, and habits that the class are expected to be demonstrating by the end of the school year.

Teaching backwards is a journey that starts with the end very clearly in mind. It is the destination that gives the teaching backwards process its shape, direction, and structure. The journey is supported at all times by the high expectations in which the teacher holds the learners, and his or her ability to engender and encourage the same high expectations in the learners themselves. From the destination and the high expectations everything else follows.

First, the teacher needs to establish the learners' true starting points and then to demystify and clearly explain to them how each destination will be achieved. The next step requires the teacher to plan in advance how he or she will regularly elicit proof that learning is taking place, not generally but for each student, so that the whole class can move forward together. The planning and teaching must then take account of the appropriate levels of challenge that are required to motivate learners to address and overcome the obstacles



they will undoubtedly face, and develop a real and felt sense of satisfaction from achieving results they might have previously thought difficult or impossible. Finally, the teacher needs to employ strategies that give the students quality, real-time feedback that develops their **K**nowledge, **A**ttitudes, **S**kills, and **H**abits (KASH), while also training them to give quality feedback to themselves and each other.

At the heart of teaching backwards is our philosophy that great teaching and learning rely on four key ingredients. We call them the Big Four: feedback, autonomy, challenge, and engagement (for more information see the Appendix).

The structure of this book follows the sequence of the teaching backwards steps and we strongly recommend that you read it in that order. Each step is crucially important in ensuring that learners achieve their full potential, topic by topic, as well as over time. Miss out a step and we guarantee that your learning journey will end in a cul-de-sac. We've seen many a teacher experience a 'Hindenburg moment' after missing out a step. They learned the hard way as they watched their lesson crash and burn – or worse, their classes underperform over time. They realised to their cost that teaching backwards isn't a pick-and-mix approach. It's one that needs to be embraced wholeheartedly.

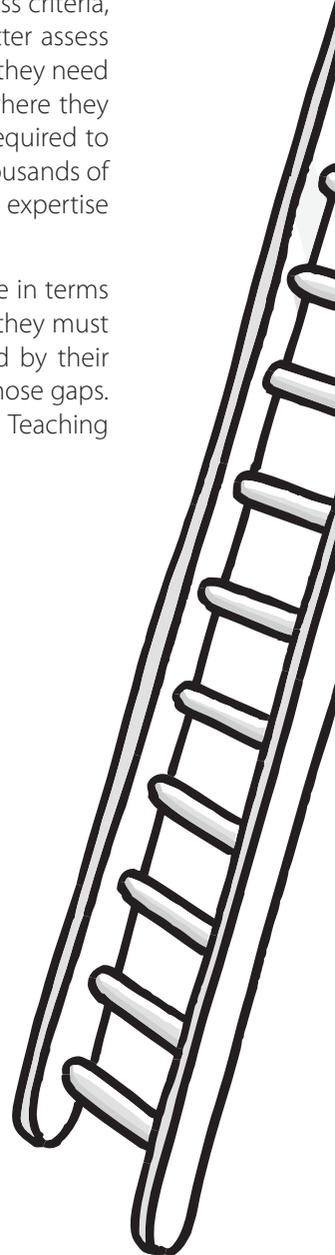
## WHY WE USE LEVELS

The levels we use in this book provide clarity for busy teachers. We've lost count of the times that teachers have told us how helpful they find clear, well-defined success criteria, both for themselves and for their learners. These levels enable teachers to better assess their current stage of expertise and practice, helping them to understand what they need to do to get to the next level. Only when teachers realise the gap between where they currently are and where they need to be can they implement the strategies required to close those gaps. Our own experience over the last 10 years of working with thousands of teachers is that using levels really helps them to rapidly improve the quality and expertise of their teaching.

The same is true for learners. As they understand their current level of expertise in terms of the knowledge, attitudes, skills, and habits required, they begin to see what they must do to 'level up'. Once they are aware of the gaps in their learning, supported by their teacher, they can begin to work with strategies that will enable them to close those gaps. Feedback from countless teachers we've worked with on our Outstanding Teaching Interventions (OTI) programmes tells us this process works.

The levels we use are:

- Level 1a = Outstanding Secure
- Level 1b = Outstanding Unsecure
- Level 2a = Good Secure
- Level 2b = Good Unsecure





### LEVEL 1A

All learners have clarity on their current position and the quality of KASH they need to develop further in order to achieve their goal. Teachers and learners are highly skilled in giving and receiving feedback on how to improve. All learners routinely reflect and act on feedback. Teachers use feedback to adapt learning within lessons and in planning for future lessons. Both teacher and learners demonstrate excellent questioning of themselves and others. Collaboration adds greatly to learning and to learners' ability to overcome challenges. The teacher and learners demonstrate high expectations in relation to quality of work and progress.

### LEVEL 1B

Feedback is used to ensure that planning, both within and between lessons, accurately meets the needs of all learners. High levels of challenge predominate due to skilful questioning from both learners and teachers. All learners have clarity on their own gaps and are motivated to close them. As a consequence learners make rapid progress. The teacher uses effective strategies to develop the KASH of learners. Well-developed routines ensure learners have time to read and act on the high quality feedback given. Peer and self-assessment are developing. Learners can now identify specific ways in which to improve, and target-setting is becoming owned by them. The teacher and nearly all learners have high expectations of progress and quality.

### LEVEL 2A

Feedback from and about learners enables the teacher to adapt learning, both within and between lessons. This ensures that learning is challenging for all. Support is given for learners who are struggling to progress or who require higher levels of challenge. A feature of the level of challenge is the quality of teacher and learner questions. Effective written and verbal feedback from the teacher ensures all learners are clear on their next steps to improvement. The teacher is training learners to identify these steps themselves. The teacher demonstrates high expectations of learners in terms of progress and quality of work, and this is beginning to be adopted by the class. Learners make good progress.

### LEVEL 2B

The teacher plans and provides learning using evidence from some aspects of the available assessment data and other feedback. Within the lesson, the teacher reshapes tasks based on feedback in order to improve learning. Most learners understand how well they are doing and the next steps they need to take in order to make progress using the teacher's feedback. Teacher questioning helps to both extend learners and get feedback on their progress. The teacher is working to develop the KASH of learners so they can work at higher levels. The teacher has high expectations for the class.

## ICONS USED THROUGHOUT THE BOOK



**CATER:** Throughout this book, we will be asking you to reflect on how you plan for and teach different learners with different learning needs. The CATER (community, assistance, tasks, extension, and resources) framework supports you to differentiate across a number of factors that aid in the development of all the learners in the class. Like Aunt Ethel's meal, we'll ask you to consider how you are CATERing for their different needs. We use this acronym to encourage you to think about how better to meet your learners' differing requirements.

- **Community.** The essence of a strong community is togetherness. It's a place where people support each other when they need help. A strong classroom is no different. We ask how you are building a community where learners are collaborating and supporting each other in order to overcome challenges. For example, one teacher we know has instilled in his class the importance of being as one using the mantra, 'we leave no one behind'.
- **Assistance.** How will teachers and other adults, such as teaching assistants, vary their approach to support the needs of different groups of learners? For example, a teacher who asked his teaching assistant to provide detailed feedback to a group of learners who were all struggling with the same maths problem.
- **Tasks.** Teachers need to ensure that the tasks they set provide their learners with appropriate levels of challenge. If learning lacks challenge then learners make little progress, and the same will be true if the challenge level is too high. Given that learners are likely to have different starting points, this could mean that some learners are working on different tasks.
- **Extension (stretch).** Extension refers to the raft of strategies a teacher might use to stretch learners further after they have completed a classroom challenge. Creating opportunities for learners to go beyond their current level will extend them even more. For example, a primary teacher who created a 'Mission

*Impossible corner*. When learners finish their classwork early, they go here to find tasks that will stretch them to another level. The learners see this as a challenge to rise to. In a secondary class, a teacher might invite her GCSE learners to work at an AS level task.

- **Resources** (support). Some learners will need additional tools or resources to help them to overcome the challenge they are currently working on. Without these additional resources the level of difficulty will simply be too high for them. For example, a teacher who produced a literacy mat (or writing frame) to help his learners.



**Reflection points:** Here we suggest you reflect on your current practice and think about how you might challenge or change it. When you see this icon, take a little time to ask yourself whether these suggestions could improve or enhance your performance as a teacher.



**Eureka moments:** Here we offer inspirational ideas and case studies from other teachers' experiences. These practitioners have achieved eureka moments by trying out new ideas. Why not consider trying them too?



**Level up:** Here we suggest ways to 'level up' your teaching. When you see this icon, consider how you might use the idea to level up the teaching and the learning in your classroom.

To encourage you to go beyond thinking about change and actually take action, we've also included a checklist and an action plan section at the end of each chapter. It's useful to consider what you might need to stop or start doing in order to move your class up the levels. But a word of warning: we strongly advise that you don't pack the start section with too many new ideas at the expense of considering what you are going to stop doing. Our own experience, and that of the many committed, passionate teachers we've worked with over the years, confirms the wisdom of this. Teaching is a hugely demanding job and often there is little spare capacity to do much more on top of the existing workload. Consequently, we would encourage you to identify just as many things that you are going to stop doing as you are planning to start doing. As we like to remind ourselves, the road to hell is paved with good intentions. So, choose quality over quantity and settle for a small number of important changes you know you can deliver rather than overstretching yourself.

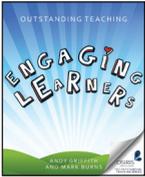
We're confident that whether you're new to the profession or a teacher with years of experience, you'll find ideas and inspiration in this book to make your own teaching even more effective and compelling, so that you can make even more of a difference to the learners that you teach.

We hope you enjoy the journey.

# THIS BOOK IS ALL ABOUT HOW TO BE AN OUTSTANDING TEACHER AND HOW TO TEACH BACKWARDS

It is a book about planning and teaching outstanding lessons. Not just once in a while but consistently. We know it's possible because some teachers manage to achieve outstanding results year after year. These teachers are successful because they do something which we call teaching backwards.

Teachers don't have much spare time on their hands so this book is clear, concise, and practical. It's packed with hints, tips and success stories and punctuated with reflective questions that invite teachers to slow down and do some thinking about how they currently teach, creating fantastic learning opportunities for both teacher and learners.



This is the follow-up to the best-selling *Outstanding Teaching: Engaging Learners*. It is based on the analysis of thousands of hours of primary and secondary lessons, part of Osiris Educational's Outstanding Teaching Intervention (OTI) programme.

"Vintage Griffith and Burns: an impressive melding of anecdote and outstanding classroom practice, which provides countless strategies for ensuring that busy teachers see learning through their pupils' eyes. Simultaneously compellingly readable and rigorously research-informed, this book is the unlikely but deeply attractive love-child of Wilbur Smith and Hilary Mantel!"

**Barry J Hymer, Professor of Psychology in Education, University of Cumbria**

"The accessible, real-life nature of *Teaching Backwards* will undoubtedly encourage many practitioners to experiment with its techniques and produce better crafted and more stimulating lessons."

**Graham Aldridge, Head Teacher, Range High School**

"All teachers want to improve their practice and this book is essential reading. It is Practical! Practical! Practical! And packed with ideas you can immediately implement in the classroom alongside little pearls of wisdom in the form of memorable stories. Based in evidence, *Teaching Backwards* will make a difference to school leaders and teachers alike. A must read."

**Carel Buxton, Executive Head Teacher, Redbridge Primary School and Snaresbrook Primary School**



**Andy Griffith** is the creator of the Outstanding Teaching Intervention (OTI) and is a director of MALIT Ltd. He has helped teachers and whole schools, both primary and secondary, move up to Ofsted's Outstanding grade by offering practical advice and getting teachers to try new ways of working with their students. Andy has won a national training award and has written and consulted for a number of organisations including Comic Relief. [@oteaching](#) [www.malit.org.uk](#)



**Mark Burns** is a leading trainer with Osiris Educational and a director of MALIT Ltd and has a wealth of experience from his twelve years of teaching. He contributed significantly to the development of the Outstanding Teaching Intervention (OTI) and his work with both individual teachers and schools has helped them move up Ofsted levels. This work has been recognised by Ofsted as well as being shortlisted for the *TES* Awards. [@oteaching](#) [www.malit.org.uk](#)