

7. What is a good teacher?

People are often shocked to find that there is no agreement about 'good' teaching. One view stresses that a good teacher is in the business of making themselves redundant. The American educator, John Holt, put it like this:

"a good teacher teaches you how to teach yourself better."

So the task of the teacher is to make themselves unnecessary as soon as possible.

Another view stresses the teacher as instructor, taking decisive action by using crowd control skills to organise learners. Then, using crowd instruction methods, the teacher tries to get the learners to memorise a particular piece of information or achieve a required understanding. This tends to be the officially approved view of 'good' teaching, that underpins the whole imposed apparatus of the National Curriculum, the Testing System and the OFSTED inspection ideology.

The third view sees the good teacher as supporting the growth of learning groups who direct and manage their own learning:

"Of a good teacher, they say, when the task is done, we did this ourselves!"

Actually, Lao-tse was talking about the characteristics of good **leaders**, but I suggest it applies to this particular view of teaching too.

There is a further definition of a good teacher - one who stimulates another person's researches. Most of the 'my best teacher' articles that I have read use the second model of 'teacher instructing me'. I must confess that I find these kind of articles rather repetitive and tedious. In contrast to this constant admiration for the instructor-teacher, my 'best' teacher hardly spoke to me directly, apart from the usual pleasantries of 'hello', 'good-bye', and 'how are you?'. He was the Co-operative Society Insurance Agent. He made our house his last call on a Saturday, since he knew that he would be certain to get a cup of coffee and a lively discussion with my father. I learned to make it my business to be in the room, reading or working, to listen in on these conversations, because new and exciting ideas were constantly being introduced. Charlie would mention a book, *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropist* by somebody called Robert Tressell. I would go to the library and investigate. Next time, he might mention a radical theologian named Peter Abelard, which meant another trip to the library. On another occasion he would quote a guy called Bertrand Russell, so that meant another search along the bookshelves. A person named Tom Paine apparently wrote an interesting book called *The Rights of Man*, so that needed checking out. On the subject of ghosts, he talked about the research activity of the ghost-busting British Psychic Research Association. I needed the assistance of the librarian to track this one down.

Charlie was a self-educated man, an evening classes attender I would guess, and had no formal qualifications to my knowledge, but I think he was the best educated person I ever met. He exemplified the character in Wesker's *Roots* who declared that 'education is asking questions all the time'. Yet he seemed entirely content with his work in the Co-operative Movement. None of the topics he stimulated me to look into, ever seemed to be on the agenda at school, and I had no reason to believe that any of the teachers would even welcome their introduction.

Another version of 'good' teaching is one who waits to be asked. Holt proposed the dictum of 'no question, no teaching'. Unless someone has asked a question, there is no mandate for teaching. One school, Sudbury Valley in USA, takes this seriously, so there is no timetable unless the learners organise or request some systematic learning activity. That this idea alarms or perplexes people tells us how our assumptions about good teaching have been absorbed from a very narrow range of ideas. I saw it in action when studying the learning activity of some home-schoolers.

When Robert Owen, who was another person Charlie used to mention, established the first infants school at New Lanark, he was criticised for his appointment of a particular teacher. He passed over somebody with good literacy skills for a person less proficient. Owen explained the prime requirement for a good teacher, was that "*they were fit company for children.*" The more highly qualified person failed his prime requirement.

If we applied this exacting requirement to present-day teachers, the current estimates of 10% failing teachers might well be considerably inflated. If I think of all the teachers I worked with, this would certainly be true, though discretion prevents me from trying to quantify it. Perhaps it is as well that the present Chief Inspector of Schools applies different standards of judgement.

The next generation of teachers that are needed for the next learning system, however, may well be judged by the Robert Owen requirement. In his book, *In Place of Schools*, John Adcock predicts that teachers in the next century will be quite different to those in the present. They will need to be learning coaches, learning advisers, and learning agents. They will need good interpersonal skills, consultancy skills, and computer research skills, in order to help the members of the families on their case-load 'plan, do, and review', their personal learning programmes. They will need to be 'fit company for learners.' The skills of crowd control, and crowd instruction that dominate the behaviour of present day teachers, will not be much in evidence.

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