

A Reflection on Good Teaching Practice

By Sulaiman Charles Neave, BA Grad. Dip. Ed.

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As a teacher I have had an incredible variety of experiences. I began teaching in Melbourne, Australia 8 years ago, at an expensive private school. Pupils who went there were well off, from educated families with parents often in important positions of government and business in Australia. From there I moved directly to inner city London, where I taught in a school that was 98 percent Bangladeshi. After that I moved to the outskirts of London where I taught in a truly multi-cultural boys' comprehensive. Now, I teach in an international school in Kuwait.

Using these experiences I have decided to reflect today on what I believe makes a good secondary teacher. I am sure, when I am retiring and I look back on this paper, I will see massive holes and my opinions on certain issues will have changed. However, in all these vastly different schools there have been certain principles that I believe have remained consistent and essential to teaching secondary children. These are the five doctrines, in order of importance, I base my teaching philosophy around:

1. Morality and Religion

In Kuwait at around 5 in the morning, every morning, I hear a clear voice echoing through our neighbourhood. It is 'singing' 'Allahu akhbar'; God is the greatest. Unfortunately, many people in the west now associate this phrase with terrorism. But, after teaching in the Middle East, these are not the thoughts that go through my mind. Sometimes I'll peep through the curtains at this time of the morning and see only dust. The desert of Kuwait has not yet been defeated by the city. At other times I will see a variety of men and women heading towards the mosque around the corner. There are young and old, Asian and Arabic, some with the traditional black and flowing clothing, others in modern, western clothes. When I am feeling strong I will join them. The mosque at that time of the morning is quiet and peaceful. There is a pleasant smell of musk (Arabic perfume generally worn by men), and the carpet is soft and thick. To pray with a group of people who all want the world to be a better place is a wonderful way to start the day.

Religion is still such an important element of Kuwaiti society. Yet in the West, we are frightened of it. It is virtually outlawed in government. The church has lost almost all of its influence in running the country. In countries like Turkey and Egypt it has been directly forbidden by law for religion to become involved in running the state. Often these rules were made in good faith and for good reasons. Historically, in the West (and now in many parts of the world), religion has been used to suppress and control people.

A reaction to this has been to outlaw religion and any discussion of 'bigger picture' issues in the classroom. In multi-cultural schools, like the one I taught in on the outskirts of London, this decision was often taken to be sure not to offend anyone. At my school in inner London it was a little easier simply because Muslims were such a massive majority. And my school in Australia was officially Anglican, although the religious aspect of the school had been watered down markedly.

Unfortunately, this has resulted in children no longer being taught morals. School curricula do not include a section on morals. In the West for many families, religion no longer exists at home (except perhaps the religion of capitalism), and it is outlawed in government schools. No wonder youth today have trouble distinguishing between right and wrong. No wonder there is behavioural concerns in many Western countries, especially in government schools. Of course, there are other contributing factors like poverty, family breakdown etc. but a clear understanding of what is right and acceptable behaviour is not being taught in an organised and clear framework. That framework used to be provided by religion; the church, the mosque, the temple. For many young people they no longer have any contact with religion. How do we expect our young people to know what is right and what is wrong?

The Middle East is different. Every student in Kuwait is 'taught' Islam. Is it effective? It has mixed results. I do not want to paint Kuwait as the bastion of morality, where all young people live perfectly and morally. But what it does do is give young people a reference point. Islam is something they can always come back to, to see if what they are doing is right or wrong. Because everyone is human, they still may decide to take the wrong course. But at least they know.

So as a teacher, especially in the west where there is no formal teaching of morals, I believe the most important aspect of the job is to have a clear, moral compass. Be able to include in teaching, no matter what subject is being taught, a sense of what is right and wrong. A belief in Allah gives this moral compass direction, and the teachings of the Prophet (PBUH) explain the direction we must take. There will always be differing opinions about specific issues, but students will at least be informed that in this world there are 'rights' and 'wrongs'.

2. Be Flexible and Adaptable

Generally, children are amazingly similar. Whether I am teaching the son of judge in Melbourne, Australia; or the son of a grocery store owner in Whitechapel, East London; they will respond in the same ways. No matter what school you go to there will always be the naughty ones and the well behaved ones, the fast learners and the slow learners, the lazy and the motivated.

However, this should not be used as an excuse to be exactly the same, no matter who you are teaching. It is important to be flexible in the curricula you plan and adaptable in the way you deal with young people from different backgrounds and cultures.

In Australia, there is a very loose use of language, even at the highest level. It is not unusual to hear educated people calling each other a 'bastard' as a jocular term of endearment. This word would have been completely inappropriate to use in inner East London with a class full of Muslim Bangladeshis. They would have been mortified and seen it as complete lack of respect. At my school in outer London, with such a racially diverse range of pupils, it was always extremely important never to group students using their races or the colour of their skin. In Kuwait, however, students often ask to be put with the other Egyptians or other Kuwaitis. They are proud of their heritage and they use this as a positive way of reinforcing their identities.

This adaptability while teaching is essential. I have always tried to use the pupils as my educators about their culture. They are generally very happy to talk to me about their way of life, and they will often explain their cultural and religious 'dos and don'ts'. I have found listening to students essential, and then I am always prepared to adapt to what I have learned. Teachers who are stubborn and not willing to change depending on their situation, in my experience, have always had the most difficulty in communicating with pupils. What would have happened if I had gone into my school in Whitechapel and spoke in a broad, Australian accent? In simple terms, the pupils would not have understood what I was saying. This would have led to behavioural problems, deficient learning and a lack of any meaningful connection with the students. It is clear to see how adaptability is necessary in this profession.

Furthermore, being flexible with what you teach is also very important. Teaching in detail the German invasion of Russia to Kuwaiti children is not practical, when they can gain the same skills by learning about the German invasion of Islamic North Africa. This helps to give pupils more ownership of their own curriculum and therefore more motivation to do the work. In Kuwait, this year as part of my English programme, I invited in an English speaking writer, who wrote about the war in Kuwait. The children were fascinated by the writer mainly because she was talking about their home. I doubt I would have had the same reaction had I invited in a British author who wrote about the Second World War. This is the way to teach pupils the same skills while maintaining motivation and interest.

3. Learning Objectives Focused on Skills

What do you remember from school? Do you remember who was assassinated in 1653? Do you remember how to do simultaneous equations? Probably not. So why are we teaching all of our students these things that they will never use?

This is a question that is generally levelled at me by the students themselves. The way to answer this question is by seeing education in a different way. Education is not just a 'means to an end'. Education should be used as a way of developing the minds of our young people. This point is also directly linked to my first reflection on teaching pupils morals. We need to understand our education system as a way of creating good, hard working people for the future. The best way of doing this is by focussing on the process of education, rather than always seeing outcomes as the most important.

To use my previous analogy: Whether you can remember that Charles I was assassinated in 1653, or the way of doing simultaneous equations, is not that important. The student went through the process of learning these facts and methods. We hope that in the future, when a person has to remember a particular, important fact, the original process of learning is recalled; therefore the student becomes a better learner. These 'skills of learning' will stay with people for their whole lives; even if what was originally learned has been forgotten.

Do you remember studying for your final examinations; how pressure affected you, expectations, nervousness, and hopefully in the end; success. This process taught us to deal with anxiety. It taught us how to remember particular facts that at the time were important. We use these 'skills of learning' today. Through our schooling, we all developed individual strategies for remembering and understanding information. We may not all use simultaneous equations today; but we do use the skills we developed for learning about them.

Moreover, teaching must reflect this basic principle of skills based learning objectives. A focus on rote learning is outdated and does not prepare students for their futures. Teaching lessons that focus on developing learning techniques, rather than remembering facts, will develop a pupil's mind. In my experience, pupils will also enjoy this sort of learning far more. When I arrived in Kuwait to lead the English Department of my school, I found a style of English teaching that I would have expected to see in a documentary about education in an English school in the 1950s. Everything was memorising grammar and spelling. The pupils were bored, and this was being shown by their poor behaviour in class. Even though most of my pupils were 'second language' English speakers, I immediately introduced an element of literature into English lessons. This kept pupils interested and motivated them. I made sure the children understood the importance of 'learning how to learn'. For example, I would make sure my learning objectives were skills based, not knowledge based. 'Understand what happened in chapter 6' would be changed to 'Understand how the writer communicates the story'. Suddenly, pupils were learning skills that they would use for the rest of their lives, instead of facts they would forget by next week.

In the Islamic world, because of the way we memorise Qur'an, we often fall into the trap of believing memorisation is actually learning. Learning can include memorisation, but it must also include understanding and skills. An education based around learning objectives focussed on skills, I believe, is a better education that will help pupils prepare for the rest of their lives.

4. Use Assessment as a Tool for Learning

Teaching pupils using Learning objectives based on skills is important, but as teachers we must also have the ways and means of discovering whether students have actually learned these skills and met their learning objectives. I am talking, of course, about assessment.

I believe assessment cannot be the simple matter of a grade. Assessment of pupils must be part of the learning process, not the end of the process. I believe, to be a good teacher, assessment must be used to inform students about how to improve, not just inform them of where they are at the moment. The current system of levelling in the English 'National Curriculum' is an excellent example of how assessment can be formative. At every step in the levelling process the skills the students have obtained are explained. As a teacher, it is then

easy to point out the next step and explain to the students the skills they must demonstrate to move up a level.

Whether you use the official National Curriculum or not, this system of assessment, where pupils are clear about why they have their current grade, and what skills they must demonstrate to go up a grade, is an excellent example of using assessment for learning. I believe a good teacher must use this sort of system of assessment.

5. Have a Sense of Humour

To finish today I would like to discuss this extremely important part of being a teacher. Perhaps I should have put this first as my most important doctrine? In my experience, at every school I have worked at, things will always go wrong. Sometimes, terribly wrong. While teaching drama at my inner London school I had a young, very nice boy decide that it would be fun to hang by his hands out the first floor window. The rest of the class was also highly amused at the stunt, and, to give the lad credit, it was a very dramatic moment.

Without condoning dangerous behaviour in the classroom, I still believe it is extremely important to have the ability to laugh. Laugh at yourself, laugh with your pupils, laugh at yours and their failures. Sometimes a simple smile can diffuse the worst conflicts. Many people see smiling or laughing as weakness. I certainly do not. You will have noticed that I have not included 'strong discipline' or any such thing as part of my 5 doctrines. This is because if you have a moral perspective of the world, if you are flexible and adaptable, if you teach skills using learning objectives and are informative with assessment you generally will not have problems of discipline. But if anything, having a sense of humour is far more important. Who wants to work in a job where they are always stressed and serious? Have the ability to laugh, and you will find that being a teacher is a wonderfully rewarding and special profession.