

**Colin Foster asks whether preparing the *lesson* has become more important than preparing the *teacher*.**

“Be prepared!” proclaims the boy scout motto. And it’s a cry heard in staffrooms up and down the country today. Now that schools are obliged to give teachers protected preparation time during the working day, we ask how is it best to be used? What determines how ready or unready we feel for a particular lesson? What makes a teacher come across to pupils as well-prepared? It’s certainly more complicated than the amount of time spent writing a lesson plan.

“So how long did that lesson take to prepare?” I am sometimes asked after an observation by a student teacher. I have trouble answering. Do they mean how long did I spend cutting up the pieces of card used in that activity? Do they want to know how long I spent thinking about the content of the lesson and how it might be approached? What about the times I’ve taught the same topic before – am I supposed to include *previous* preparation time?

I want to answer, “It took my whole life up to that point! Who I was in that classroom then was a product of the whole collection of experiences and thoughts that make me who I am today. The mixture of choices made in the moment and ones settled on beforehand are affected by a multitude of factors: how I’m feeling, what I’ve been reading recently, the people I’ve been talking to, my relationships with the pupils, and so on. So much so, that were I to try to teach the ‘same lesson’ next week, it would be impossible, arriving in a different mood, working with a different class (different even if the people happen to be the same individuals), all with a different collection of prior experiences (including those resulting from today’s lesson). A lecture can be the same twice; a lesson can’t be.”

No doubt that isn’t what the student wants to hear. He or she is understandably concerned about the practicalities of getting through a lesson, making good use of the time, not falling out with the pupils, avoiding chaos and confusion. Being well-prepared shows a class you care about them and their learning. But a balance is needed between preparing the lesson and preparing the teacher. A violinist preparing for a concert will of course, one hopes, practice the music being performed, but will also play and listen to all sorts of other music as well, and do other non-musical things. All of that is essential for a fine result! Preparing the course a particular lesson may take is important, but preparing the teacher is a subtle process that we have only limited control over and for that reason we must be careful not to overlook its centrality. To me, working on your own appreciation of your subject counts as preparation. As does taking care of yourself generally, which leads me to conclude that sometimes the best preparation for a lesson is to close your eyes for ten minutes in the staffroom!

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