

Model lessons put spontaneity in a straitjacket



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I've lost count of the in-service training sessions at which I've had to contribute to a list of "what makes a good lesson". This task is ubiquitous because that is what it's all about: if we can find the secret of good lessons, we just have to teach lots of them.

But I think this is a mistake. Actually, I don't really care about good lessons in themselves. But I do care about a good overall education, and it seems to me that an excessive focus on individual lessons detracts from the big picture.

Good lessons don't simply translate into good overall education. Many teachers have a few party-piece lessons that are more or less guaranteed to go well, trotted out for demonstrations, interviews or Ofsted. These one-offs are fine, but the problem comes when we adopt the view that those lessons are the ideal and that each lesson must stand on its own as a self-contained unit.

That approach puts unreasonable limits on what the teacher is free to do in the

classroom. Then, a certain kind of lesson format is regarded as optimal, with a fixed list of episodes that must take place, and even the order of them. This leads to a dull uniformity that virtually rules out certain types of activity and impedes teachers' spontaneity and flexibility to respond to the circumstances.

For me, a good sequence of lessons is far more important than an isolated "good lesson". Over an extended period, a teacher knows how pupils are progressing with a piece of work and can respond appropriately: that is real teaching. Dwelling too long on individual lessons is likely to lead to teachers taking less account of pupils' real progress because the teacher is obliged to have a fixed aim for the end of the lesson, which can contribute to a rushed manner – misleadingly called "pace" – whereby the pupils' learning becomes secondary to the teacher's teaching.

If there are "events" that teachers feel they must tick off in every lesson, they

may be too hurried to take time over pupils' real needs. Yet it may be perfectly reasonable to aspire to these things over a sequence of lessons.

Today's lesson may have led to a noisy discussion and nothing written down, but the next lesson may be the opposite. ICT may have played no part today, but next lesson it may be central. Why should we try to do everything in every lesson? Why should every lesson have to feel the same?

Also, the constant switching from one activity to another, which these constraints almost demand, creates problems of its own. Not spending an extended period on one task encourages pupils to flit about without considering anything fully. Far from keeping pupils focused (as is often claimed), it is likely to frustrate them because they are constantly interrupted in their work. If this approach is sustained, it can lead to an acceptance that school is a fragmentary experience in which there is little time to engage deeply with anything.