

# TEACHING TO THE TEST – A PARABLE

Colin Foster tries to imagine what it might feel like to be taught by a fanatic

Colin would like to thank the secondary-school students whose views he has attempted to represent in this parable

Suppose you are a mathematics teacher who loves your subject and is enthusiastic about helping your pupils develop interest in and excitement about mathematics. This is what really drives you. However, you need to get to school in the mornings, and that means you need to learn to drive a car. So you book your first lesson and meet your instructor and he tells you how passionate he is about driving. Driving is wonderful, cars are amazing, and you are going to love learning to drive. That's nice, but actually all you want to do is pass the test as quickly as possible so that you can cut your daily two-hour train commute to a 25-minute car drive. You would like to do a 'crash course', but he doesn't approve of those. There is a difference of perspective, but the instructor reassures you that that is fine, he is used to this problem, and your love for driving will develop in time, so there is no need to worry.

In the first lesson, you are told that to drive really well it is necessary to have a basic understanding of how a car works. So in the first lesson you will look under the bonnet and learn to identify the main components of the engine and how they all work together. The internal combustion engine is truly a marvel and there are so many fascinating features. You are not really interested in this, it seems to you a complete waste of time, but your instructor tells you that it is essential, so you go along with it. Failure to spend time on this in the beginning always leads to problems later, he says, so it really is for the best. He recommends some books you could read on engines before your next lesson.

In the next few lessons, you feel that you are getting far too much information from this car enthusiast. You are not interested in the make and model of the various cars you see as you drive around, or their different performance features. To you, a car is a car – it gets you from A to B. Your instructor is amused by this but continues to try to engage you in conversation about what an ideal car would be like, the features that you would want it to have. He would like you to sketch out your ideas for an ideal car for homework, but you don't see the point. 'I just want to learn to drive the car that I have, thank you very much.' He smiles and encourages you to be more creative – to think outside the box rather than just accept things as they are.

As the lessons go on you feel increasingly frustrated. You feel like you are doing far more work than is necessary to get a driving licence and it is all taking much longer, and costing much more, than you expected. What right does this instructor have to

impose his views on you and his methods of teaching driving? He is a car enthusiast, living and breathing cars day after day – perhaps that's what you would expect for a driving instructor, but you have no interest in becoming a driving instructor. There is no doubting that he knows his stuff and drives very smoothly. But you would be happy with a much lower standard of driving, so long as you can get safely to where you are going. He insists on complete concentration on driving during lessons, no chatting about other things, because that would be a distraction. He says it is such a shame, because if you would only put in the time necessary he thinks you could become an excellent driver. Apparently he has just won an 'outstanding' award for teaching driving.

Your instructor tells you that he goes to see motor racing at the weekends, but you feel that such competitions are silly, dirty, noisy, dangerous, expensive, bad for the environment and sponsored by dubious multinational corporations. He thinks that if he could just get you along one weekend you would change your mind. He thinks you are ignorant of the joys of racing because you have never been, and wishes you were more open-minded. He blames the fact that your friends and family are not into cars and you missed out when you were young on learning about the joys of motor sports. When it is icy one day and you ring to cancel your lesson he suggests spending the time watching *Top Gear* instead.

What would you do? You would probably quickly change instructor. Non-fanatics don't normally like spending much time with fanatics. But if you are a pupil in a mathematics classroom it is not easy to switch to a different teacher, and they might all be the same! They shake their heads and lament that you are 'not interested'. They feel that you are wasting the opportunity of your daily mathematics lesson. You want to be 'spoon fed' rather than creative. But you are not an uninteresting person generally – you are interested in many things, passionate about some.

Can we all be maximally interested in everything? You see mathematics as a means to an end. Your life is very full with other things, thank you very much. *Why can't people understand?*

---

Colin Foster the School of Education,  
University of Nottingham

---

