

Petrol-pump learning won't fuel thinking skills



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Already a controversial website, it turns out that www.ratemyteachers.co.uk has a further level of controversy, even for those in favour of giving users of schools a forum for comment. Pupils and parents are invited to rate teachers under three categories – clarity, helpfulness and “easiness”. The site says the “easiness” rating is “definitely the most controversial” and that this is why it is not included in the “overall quality” rating. Does a good teacher make learning “easy”? It’s not an easy question to answer.

There is a view that learning anything is simple in principle. It may take time, but there’s no difficulty about what’s going on. You break down the subject into bite-sized pieces and tackle each element. There are facts to remember, connections to make, skills to master, and you do them one by one. You set little targets to tick off and progress is measured by how rapidly you accomplish the goals. Good teachers manage the process smoothly

and efficiently by suitable slicing of the chunks, putting them in a sensible order and motivating the learner to swallow them one after another as effortlessly as possible. If there are two teachers who can fill you to the same level in the same time, the better one is the one who can achieve it with the least effort on your part: petrol-pump learning. Common sense, surely?

No doubt you’ve guessed that I do not hold with this view – because it doesn’t fit with real people learning real things. Learning is complex and messy, and a good teacher makes things difficult: no pain, no gain. The easy way is artificial: circumventing the thinking needed to get to an idea and just taking it on as a free gift is not education. Handing out second-hand notes to cram for an exam may help in the short term, but as a strategy for mastering a subject it sets pupils up to be dependent on cribbing notes from others rather than experiencing the satisfaction of original thinking. Being given the main

points for a topic is not examining those ideas yourself, with all the messiness and difficulty that implies. The best teachers help you to see the difficulties and problems with the new ideas, and the confusions and the contradictions. They let you struggle and come to conclusions rather than dictate the “right ones” to you. They answer your questions with more questions. They push you to go further than may be necessary for an exam. They awaken interest in you so that you become a thinking, questioning, educated person.

The paradox is that the “easy way”, while maybe offering an advantage in the short term, is really much harder in the long run: it disempowers; it makes pupils dependent on others for their thoughts, opinions and answers, and highly vulnerable to deception. It is only by following the “hard” path that students become thinkers, and it is only by thinking for ourselves that people can be free, independent and authentic human beings.