

Easy when you know how

Colleagues who seem to take all aspects of teaching in their stride might not necessarily be the best people to learn from, warns **Colin Foster**...

Let's say there's a teacher who's struggling with their behaviour management and decides to seek help from a more experienced colleague. They'll likely be told something along the lines of, "Oh, you should go and see Mr Smith – his behaviour management is fantastic!" Is this good advice?

In the event, our teacher makes arrangements with Mr Smith to watch him teach his most difficult class – which coincidentally, happens to be the very same class our teacher has been struggling with. Perfect! So she sits at the back of the classroom, ready to watch this 'master teacher' do his thing, pen poised to note down all those novel strategies, clever comebacks and aspects of body language she can later imitate back in her own classroom.

And... nothing happens. The students all behave impeccably. Our observing teacher is impressed with Mr Smith's skill, certainly – but what has she actually learnt? Not much. "He didn't seem to do anything – they just behaved!" she says on her return to the staffroom.

Don't learn from the best

It may sound counterintuitive, but it's actually hard to learn from the very best. If you want to be amazed and impressed by a magic trick, go watch the best magician you can afford tickets for. If you want to

learn how to be a magician yourself, get inside those tricks and understand how they're done, observing the best magician on the circuit will teach you little that will help you imitate them.

In fact, you'll learn far more from seeing a *less* expert performance, even one in which mistakes are made. Catching sight of a playing card disappearing into the magician's pocket, or the tip of a handkerchief poking out from behind

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their hand will instantly clue you in on how you might go about imitating – and ultimately even improving on – the performance you're seeing. If you want to learn the art of magic, it's the second-rate magician who'll be much more useful to you.

I would venture that something similar applies to observations of colleagues within school. To learn good behaviour management you have to see *good behaviour management* – not just good behaviour.

A crack in everything

You need to see things working and things going wrong, and what the colleague does in response.

You need to see problems bubbling up and being cleverly averted, as well as overt instances of bad behaviour being addressed appropriately. You need to see the cracks. As Leonard Cohen once wrote, "There is a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in."

You may well want to see someone who's advanced further along the teaching path than yourself, but it's perhaps best to not seek

it might just be that we're out of sync with their timing.

There's a good chance that Mr Smith experienced struggles of his own with that class during the first few weeks of term, in the process of establishing routines and gaining respect. That would have been interesting to watch, for sure.

But now, with that behind him, perhaps all he has to do is maintain what he's set up via small actions that won't be immediately apparent to an outside observer. The risk of visiting his lessons now is that the observing teacher may end up honing in on tiny, relatively insignificant aspects of Mr Smith's behaviour and try duplicating these in her own practice, when in all likelihood they'll have little effect.

Those behavioural elements aren't what make his lessons successful, but they're the only things she can see in his lessons that she can take away with her. And even then, she may well come away feeling demoralised about how far below the perceived standard she feels she is.

Works in progress

It takes confidence to open up your classroom to colleagues when you know you're far from 'perfecting' your craft – but it's precisely the messy, 'work in progress' phase of classroom

Timing is everything

Of course, those 'superhuman superteachers' who never put a foot wrong are mythical. All teachers struggle from time to time. When someone appears to be light years ahead of us,

teaching that's most helpful for others to see.

By contrast, watching the 'finished product' can be quite uninformative. An observer benefits from seeing something working, but also from seeing it go wrong, and then trying to tell why things went differently each time.

We need to let colleagues see us with all our imperfections, warts and all. In a way, this can take the pressure off those being observed. Rather than desperately hoping that

everything will go 100% smoothly, and that you'll give an 'impressive' performance, you can instead just aspire towards something useful emerging from the lesson. This will allow your focus to be placed firmly on the students you're



teaching – where it should be – and not worry about how you're coming across to observers.

Teachers will sometimes say to a colleague, self-deprecatingly, 'You can come and watch if you want, but it won't be amazing.' That, though, is the point – an observer shouldn't be looking for 'amazing'. There's little value to be had in being 'dazzled' by a star performance.

Learn, don't imitate

Instead, as mutually supportive colleagues, we should want to learn from

both our successes and difficulties. The important thing is for observers to witness something that will allow them to reflect on their own practice, and prompt them to consider aspects of their own methods they might approach differently.

Merely 'copying and pasting' another colleague's techniques, however tried and tested they might be, is unlikely to work. All teachers are different, and we all need to find different ways to succeed in our different contexts.

That doesn't mean we have nothing to share, however – far from it. Seeing what our colleagues down the corridor are doing will give us opportunities to consider different options. While observing, we have the time and space to watch the students and gain a different perspective on the classroom through their eyes. Above all, we have the chance to learn from any mistakes made – whether they be ours or our colleague's.



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