

Originality is OVERRATED

Colin Foster argues that planning a lesson from scratch should be an infrequent last resort...

Imagine sitting at the back of a classroom, watching a lesson being taught by one of your colleagues. It's a great lesson, no doubt about it. To be honest, you're hugely impressed.

Afterwards, you're full of praise and ask them, "Did you come up with that lesson yourself?" And they say, "No, I downloaded it off the internet."

How would you feel? A little disappointed? You'd hoped the lesson was your colleague's original creation, and now you've discovered that it wasn't, it seems to take something away from what they did.

Quality matters, originality doesn't

I think it's a big mistake to feel this way. Originality is overrated. Pressure to plan lessons from scratch burdens teachers with an impossible amount of preparation that burns through what should be their downtime. It's far more important for students to have quality classroom learning experiences, than it is for their teacher to be the sole and original author of everything that happens there.

Samuel Johnson is purported to have once told an aspiring author that "Your book is both good and original. Unfortunately, the parts that are original are not good, and the parts that are good are not

original." Do we really want teachers to sit up late at night planning 'original' lessons that might be less good than something they could find on the internet, in a book, or indeed a magazine like *Teach Secondary*?

Surely, it's far better to spend that precious planning time adapting, improving or thinking through the details of something that someone else has already developed. Trying to come up with content that's original, simply for the sake of being original, is working to the wrong goal. After all, everything seems novel to students who are meeting it for the first time.

Tailoring lessons

But if you take your lesson plans 'off the peg' in this way, are you really being a true professional? Isn't it selling your students short? And in any case, won't these 'lifted' resources clash with your teaching style and fail to meet your students' particular needs?

I've heard teachers sometimes assert that they have to develop their own lessons, because "Following someone else's lesson plan is like trying to wear someone else's clothes!" Let's unpack that simile. I wouldn't have

the first idea how to make my own clothes. But if you could, and opted to make all your clothes yourself, would they always be more comfortable to wear than the garments you could buy from a shop? That seems a touch unlikely.

The process of trying to 'tailor' lessons for our perceived needs as teachers, and the needs we identify among our students, can often be conflated with the 'learning styles' fallacy – the idea that everyone learns differently, and that we should try to make our lessons conform to every individual child's preferences. However, the research is clear that designing lessons to fit preferred learning styles doesn't improve learning.

Conversely, the notion that teachers should plan their own lessons has long been seen as a marker of professionalism. This can almost border on the moralistic, with the implication that you're somehow doing something wrong if you succeed with a lesson you didn't put the hard graft into planning yourself.

Yet this doesn't seem to apply in the same way for other professionals. Do the best doctors make their own medicines? Of course not, and the ones that do are typically considered to be 'quacks'! Real doctors rely on medicines manufactured and tested by the pharmaceutical industry, but that fact doesn't mean that doctors

are reduced in our eyes to technicians, merely 'handing out pills'.

By the same token, teachers who base their lessons on resources and plans produced by fellow professionals are doing nothing wrong. There is no point in reinventing the wheel every time.

Perhaps medicine is a poor comparison, given that the processes of

teaching tend to be seen as more personal than the dispensing of medicine. But when we consider professionals working in other fields, we find much the same thing.

Do the best actors write their own scripts? True, some actors are indeed also writers, but it would be a big mistake to think that when Judi Dench performs Shakespeare, she's being

less creative and less professional than she would be if she only performed her own material. An actor in possession of a great text is likely to have much more scope to express their creativity than they might with a weaker script that they wrote for themselves.

Autonomy and creativity

Of course, teachers aren't actors or doctors, but I'd suggest that a teacher's role is thought about and understood in a way that overstates the individualised aspects of what they do. Possessing a degree of professional autonomy doesn't have to mean doing everything by yourself. Being creative needn't involve building all the resources and materials you use from scratch each time, without any help.

As fellow professionals, we can and do support one another. There may even be a case to be made for incorporating some level of professional specialisation into the role. Perhaps there are individuals out there who are really good at writing lesson plans, but less good at implementing them, and vice versa? (Just as there are outstanding playwrights who can't act for

tuppence.)

Someone else might be much stronger at interpreting, adapting and implementing existing lesson ideas than coming up with their own – and that should be fine too.

The teacher who uses a well-selected, high-quality lesson plan produced by someone else shouldn't be treated as lazy, less skilled or any less professional in their approach to the role. We must prevent an impoverished understanding of autonomy from taking hold – the kind of attitude that calls on teachers to plan all their lessons, by themselves, from scratch.

Self-creation is just one route to the ownership of something. A new jacket becomes our own over time as we wear it and become familiar with it, even though we certainly didn't knit it ourselves.

In the same way, there's nothing inherently de-professionalising about finding, or being given a lesson plan to 'deliver'. Where necessary, the responsible teacher will take time to 'make it their own' and adapt it as needed – but if it ain't 'broke', there's no need to 'fix it'.

Let's therefore agree to respect the skills and efforts of our fellow professionals, and push back against the idea that teachers have to constantly undo and redo their work simply for the sake of it 'being theirs'. Give credit where it's due, and borrow freely from the best you can find.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Colin Foster (@colinfoster77) is a Reader in Mathematics Education in the Department of Mathematics Education at Loughborough University. He has written many books and articles for mathematics teachers. foster77.co.uk