

TALKING POINTS

As Sir Michael Wilshaw warns against insisting on a single teaching style, David Didau would like you to be quiet and pay attention for a while...

It's become a trite and hackneyed truism that if they're not learning, you're just talking. We're all clear that teaching only happens when the little tinkers manage to make some sort of progress – preferably that of the rapid and sustained variety. But this simple truth, like so many others, seems to have been systematically and catastrophically misunderstood by many school leaders and inspectors.

Until recently it was universally accepted that the key to a good lesson observation was showing that pupils are making progress in the 25 minutes available to us, and that the only way we could demonstrate this progress was by shutting the hell up and letting the kids do some work. If a teacher was observed speaking to the whole class they'd be exposed as being a bit rubbish and fast tracked on to the capability process.

But is this right? Surely sometimes we need to stand at the front and indulge our passion for a spot of whole class teaching? I mean, c'mon, we all do it, don't we? We just pretend we don't. When the inspector comes a-calling we fall into line and do the Ofsted monkey dance just to ensure we're not on the SLT hit list.

JOHN HATTIE'S TABLE OF EFFECT SIZES:

+ FEEDBACK **1.13**
+ PRIOR COGNITIVE ABILITY **1.04**
+ INSTRUCTIONAL QUALITY **1.00**
+ DIRECT INSTRUCTION **.82**

Well happily, Ofsted boss Sir Michael Wilshaw recently said in a speech to the RSA that, "Ofsted should be wary of trying to prescribe a particular style of teaching, whether it be a three part lesson; an insistence that there should be a balance between teacher led activities and independent learning, or that the lesson should start with aims and objectives with a plenary at the end." He then went on to describe the methods employed by an outstanding maths teacher at his old stamping ground, Mossbourne Academy who, as far as I could work out, was one of those old fuddy-duddies who believes in actually teaching students rather than in just putting on a show.

Direct action

Clearly, this doesn't mean that we should stand at the front droning on endlessly whilst expecting students to pluck pearls of desiccated wisdom from our parched lips. For anyone feeling confused please note: this is still a crap thing to do. Lecturing is emphatically not the same as direct instruction. It's just that effective whole class teaching requires you, as the most knowledgeable person in the room, to say stuff. Telling kids what's right and wrong is more efficient and less likely to result in confusion than letting them fumble around in complete ignorance for lesson after lesson.

Don't get me wrong; I'm all for a spot of constructivism. I love students working collaboratively in carefully constructed groups on carefully constructed challenges that allow them to deepen their understanding of a topic by getting the hands dirty with the filthy stuff of learning.

But I swear that I will throttle the next person to gleefully and unoriginally pronounce that they would rather be a 'guide on the side than the sage on the stage.'

"A generation of teachers have waltzed through their early careers believing that speaking for more than five minutes is the height of unprofessionalism"

When I began my career direct instruction was all the rage. As a young teacher I was exhorted to share objectives, provide exemplars, model tasks, provide success criteria and then let the students get on with it. At the end of the lesson, said objectives would be reviewed, future planning would be informed and everyone would go home happy, safe in the knowledge that they were able to do something new or better. This was what we used to call the three-part lesson: starter, main course and pudding. I remember my excitement the first time I wrote an objective on the board and students gazed in bewildered wonder at this mysterious collection of words. Boy was I cutting edge! The old lags shook their heads and muttered about this new fangled nonsense never catching on before pulling on their faded corduroy jackets and shuffling into their classrooms.

Education super-boff Professor John Hattie has found that after formative assessment, direct instruction has the greatest effect size of all teacher interventions. So why has it become so unfashionable? At some point over the last ten to fifteen years, its reputation has become so tarnished that it's considered by many to be not just passé, but actively bad for kids.

Find your own way

In 2008 I was observed teaching in the way I had always understood to be outstanding. I did everything I'd been previously been praised for and turned out what I considered to be a first rate lesson. Students took part in a discussion and, down to the way we analysed the mark scheme at the beginning of the lesson, demonstrated a superb ability to build on and challenge the points they heard in a way that developed the issues and supported each other to make a significant contribution to the debate. The inspector wandered out after 20 minutes and wandered back at break time to tell me the lesson was satisfactory due, solely, to the length of time I had spent speaking. To say that this knocked my confidence would be somewhat of an understatement.

I get that things move on. I really do. In my quest to be the best teacher I can be I've embraced progressive teaching methods whole-heartedly and am, largely, a convert to the cause. I'm happy to admit that I'm almost certainly a better teacher for being forced to re-evaluate my practice, but insisting that teaching from the front somehow prevents students from making progress seems to fly in the face of all available evidence.

A generation of teachers have waltzed through their early careers believing that speaking for more than five minutes is the height of unprofessionalism. There's certainly a time and a place for students to experience those joyful eureka moments when they discover new knowledge for themselves, but sometimes it's just more efficient to acknowledge that you're the expert in the room and that it would be in everyone's interest to take on board the stuff you've learned at great taxpayer expense.

And I'm not the only one to think so. Hattie asserts that teachers are "indoctrinated with the mantra 'constructivism good, direct instruction bad'" and suggests the reason for this antipathy might be due to its conflation with didactic teaching. He describes it thus: "The teacher decides the



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learning intentions and success criteria, makes them transparent to the students, demonstrates them by modelling, evaluates if they understand what they have been told by checking for understanding, and re-telling them what they have told by tying it all together with closure." There's surely not much we can find to rail against here is there?

Now, we might not want to teach this way every lesson but this is, perhaps, the most efficient method of transmitting knowledge to youngsters. The bottom line is that teaching like this will considerably increase students' chances of passing those pesky GCSEs. I'm happy to agree that passing exams is not the be all and end all of education and that there are all sorts of other things we should be doing other than getting kids to do so, but it's a relief to hear that Ofsted are no longer telling us that there is only one right way to teach. Maybe eventually that message will filter into schools and teachers will be trusted to teach in the way they judge most effective.

In the meantime, I'd advise stapling a copy of Wilshaw's speech to your lesson plan the next time you're observed by someone you suspect of not knowing his or her backside from a hole in the ground. That should stump 'em.

