

READY for anything

Rather than adopting one form of practice and never shifting, the most capable teachers will bring different approaches to bear on specific teaching challenges – and so can you, says **Colin Foster**...

Have you ever been in a meeting or professional development session, where someone has rejected some teaching suggestion by saying, “*Oh, I don’t do it like that!*”

Someone may, for example, suggest teaching a certain topic in a novel way – only for a teacher to respond that that may be fine for the presenter, but not for *them*, because that isn’t how they do things.

Lying behind responses like these is the assumption that every teacher has a very particular, and often quite narrow range of operating methods. Any proposal gets evaluated relative to that, to see how well it fits – and anything that lies outside those limits is considered beyond the pale. The teacher is locating themselves within a comfort zone which excludes any new ideas that don’t easily mesh with the teacher’s current practice.

Don’t limit yourself

This sort of perspective limits our development as professionals, because it paints us into a corner. If we stop trying new things once

we’ve found one way that seems to work, we end up narrowing our range unnecessarily and imprisoning ourselves in a cell of our own making. While that might make us feel safe, it means that we miss out on a lot of potentially enriching opportunities, for both the teacher and their students.

One great strength of experienced teachers is that they can handle whatever they encounter among the

which is why they don’t panic when the first thing they try doesn’t appear to succeed – *‘That’s okay, it was just Option 1 on the list. Let’s try option 2...’* If that doesn’t succeed either, then down the list they’ll go, as far as necessary before achieving their teaching goal.

You’ll see the opposite with keen ‘amateur’ teachers, such as parents. When parents try to help their children with

homework, even if they possess the subject knowledge and motivation to do so, they’ll still typically

lack the experience of actually teaching it. All they’re likely to have is their own (distant) memories of learning the topic themselves when they were at school, and may therefore try to present it to their child in whatever way they remember it.

“No teacher will ever claim that they’ve found the ‘perfect’ way to teach anything”

full range of young people taught by them. If one way of explaining something doesn’t seem to be getting through to a particular student, an experienced teacher can swiftly pivot to an alternative.

They can call upon a list of strategies as long as their arm,



And if that doesn’t work, they usually won’t have any other methods to fall back on: “*Well, that’s the only way I know to do it...*”

Expand your range

As professionals doing this all day long as our day job, we aspire to do more than that. Being able to master the content ourselves is merely the beginning of a teacher’s journey.

We want to learn as many different ways of doing things as we can – as many different examples, as many different explanations. We’ll then be as prepared as we possibly can be for whatever we encounter in the classroom. Simply knowing something one way is never enough.

In his 1987 book *Impro – Improvisation and the Theatre*, the theatre director Keith Johnstone described how professional actors often specialise in either high-status roles (‘straight actors’) or low-status roles (‘character actors’). He wrote that “*In a bad drama school it’s possible to play your ‘preferred’ status all the time, since they cast you to type, exploiting what you can do, instead of widening your range.*”

In contrast, he observed, “*the very best actors can play both tragedy and comedy.*”

Similarly, in teacher training, irrespective of the route you go through there’s always the danger of capitalising on what you’re naturally good at and ending up only being able to do that.

This approach may seem sensible, especially early on, since it can be hard enough to just ‘survive’ when starting out as a teacher. Any approach that achieves that goal will be seen as desirable.

However, as a teacher gains experience and becomes increasingly comfortable and successful doing things in a certain way, that’s the point at which they should start to

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ask themselves, “*How else might I do this?*”

Be open-minded

That’s not to say that there’s necessarily anything *wrong* with whatever a teacher’s established practice might be. It’s probably very good. Alternative methods may not be ‘better’ in any absolute sense. But under certain circumstances, with certain pupils, they might be *more effective*.

No teacher will ever claim that they’ve found the ‘perfect’ way to teach anything, so it follows

that we should all remain open-minded. Unless we try new things from time to time, how will we ever improve or discover better ways of working?

Sometimes, the teaching methods a teacher uses day to day can be the product of historical accident. They’ll use ideas they picked up during their initial training, or continue doing what they witnessed their mentor doing when they were in

Again, there may not be anything wrong *per se* with a given teacher’s preferred methods – but as professionals, we must be constantly open to being challenged.

Professional autonomy isn’t just the right to do things ‘*my way*’ if I want to; it’s also the autonomy to decide to experiment, and be willing to consider new possibilities. We should be able to reject ideas we don’t like, of course – but we might want to test things out, or at least think them through carefully, before rejecting them.

Mix it up

One way to avoid going stale in teaching is to add in some variety. Mixing things up a bit will keep your lessons varied – which students will appreciate – while keeping us on our toes.

Once you’ve taught addition of fractions to every class, every year, for multiple years, things can get a bit... monotonous. Thinking regularly about new ways of doing things, rather than just repeating whatever it was you did last time, will help to break that cycle of sameness and keep things fresh.

Instead of thinking, “*I have an [X] teaching style, and that’s what works for me*”, take the view that “*I can teach in way [A], [B] or [C].*” Do that, and you’ll quickly find that there’s no such thing as a ‘typical’ teaching day.

Because who knows – your eventual preferred way of teaching something might be one that you haven’t even tried yet...



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