

Jim's Views on Teaching and Learning

Foreword

My initial intention was to write a book about my 38 years in teaching. I then realised teachers would not have time to read it so I decided a few pages of my views on teaching and learning may be more appropriate.

The following views have seen me through 38 years 'at the chalk face' of the teaching profession quite successfully so I should like to 'pass them on' for the benefit of teachers, students and parents.

Firstly a bit about myself: my 'Pen Portrait' is below.

Pen Portrait

My name is Jim Baker. I retired from full-time teaching in August 2008 after 38 years at Lincoln Christ's Hospital School, Lincoln (formerly Lincoln School).

I was Head of Chemistry and Deputy Head of Science in charge of behaviour management within Science when I retired.

During the 1990s our School was at the forefront of student-teacher training in schools and I was our school's chief mentor and liaison officer with Sheffield Hallam University. During my time in that role our school was highly regarded by Sheffield Hallam University, so much so that they asked us to take part in one of their OFSTED inspections.

After coaching other staff to take on that role, I became involved with mentoring NQT's in Science. I devised proformas to use when mentoring and these were adopted by other areas of our school.

In my final year at Lincoln Christ's Hospital School, I was asked to mentor a colleague during her HLTA accreditation: she passed with flying colours. I again created a proforma to use when assessing her lessons and a co-ordinator for her course asked if she could have the proforma.

Many of my former mentees still contact me to ask about things as I always told my mentees "A mentor is for life, not just for Christmas" and I am pleased they still hold me to that.

In 1997, I got to the final 13 in the Salter's "Chemistry Teacher of the Year" award and in my penultimate year of teaching, I was awarded a 'Lifetime Achievement Award'.

I created my website www.jimbakersonlinelearning.co.uk initially to promote independent learning amongst my Chemists but my site quickly grew to cover links to many subjects and areas including Teacher Training. It is rated 5* by Schoolzone and recommended by Revision World.

It is now used worldwide by students, teachers and parents as can be seen from the comments in my guest book.

In addition to mentoring/advising less experienced colleagues, areas of expertise are knowledge of Chemistry, maximising potential and advising students and teachers on 'what really works'. I have been at the "chalk-face" of the teaching profession for 38 years with just 3 weeks' absence in all that time.

I have a passion for education that continues during my semi-retirement.

I am now a 'Freelance Educational Consultant' and an associate with LSN on their 'Starting Out' project.

Views

All the modern technology was created to 'make our lives easier'. In fact, it has made our lives more stressful. This is not the fault of the technology but how some use it. Targets now dominate everyone's life. In the teaching profession, schools and teachers have to comply with, and are judged by, standards created by 'others'. More and more is expected of them to the detriment of what really matters: the learning experience of the students. These standards create stress amongst teachers. Students are very perceptive. As everyone, students learn best in a relaxed atmosphere with a relaxed teacher.

Years ago, the sign of a good teacher was one who could 'change tack' during a lesson. Nowadays a teacher is expected to have a lesson plan that can be checked by his/her performance manager. A key factor in today's lessons is pace. One has to 'get through' a prescriptive syllabus in a decreasingly shorter time. In many areas more topics are covered but in lesser depth. This decrease in depth is often a hindrance to understanding. What really matters is the learning done by the students as measured by what they know/understand when they leave the classroom minus what they knew/understood on entering the classroom. People have drawn up 'the criteria' on what makes a lesson outstanding, good, satisfactory etc. but, as already said, the outstanding lesson is the one where much learning has taken place irrespective of whether the criteria have been met. Teachers and students are different thus, what works with one teacher/class may not work with another. One teacher may have a poor lesson based on 'the criteria' when in fact it is outstanding from the learning of the students.

Teaching is a profession that everyone has an opinion on and a topic many claim to be experts in. Repairing a leak in a pipe can be done successfully almost all of the time after reading the manual or attending the course on 'pipe repairs'. Teaching is not like that: it has so many variables and involves children (thankfully not animals too) so is much more complex.

There are many 'experts' who give talks on discipline and classroom management at INSET days. Were it that easy, staff would come away from these talks, apply what is said and have no further problems in the classroom. But (apologies for starting a sentence with but) we all know there are further problems despite applying the 'rules' learnt at the expensive INSET. Teaching is dynamic: what works for one teacher may not work for another, what works

with one class may not work with another. A teacher is learning his/her profession every day and this learning process continues throughout his/her career.

It is often said that it is no good 'knowing your subject knowledge' if you cannot 'get it across'. I go one stage further. It is no good being able to 'get it across' if the audience is not receptive. When mentoring student teachers I told them that **relationships underpin effective teaching and learning**. Without a good relationship with the people being educated - note I used educated rather than taught - all else e.g. background reading and lesson preparation cannot be utilised fully, if at all.

How does one achieve a good relationship with the people being educated? To answer this one just has to look at one's everyday experiences: what are the characteristics of people with whom one has a good relationship? They must be pleasant, smile and not lose their temper. Many teachers lose their temper when they feel threatened by students because they are losing control of the situation. A smile will put one back in control, a shout will not: it is surprising how disarming a smile is, particularly when a shout is expected.

From my 38 years' experience at the chalk-face a pre-requisite of being in control is good subject knowledge. Without it students soon sense inadequacies.

I have always given my sixth form students my email so they could contact me in 'out of school hours', as it is often in these 'out of school hours' that they need help. The benefits of being able to reply to a student's query, say at a weekend, are threefold:

- 1) The student can continue with their work and not have to wait until Monday.
- 2) I should rather give up 5/10 minutes on a weekend to email back with the solution than be hassled on a Monday when I am teaching all day.
- 3) The 'goodwill' this builds with the students is immeasurable.

I know there are issues these days with 'giving students emails' but none of my students has ever abused that privilege.

Following on from that point, the students view access to help 'outside school hours' as important. The sites now available for creating forums on which students can ask/answer questions and share problems/solutions with each other and with the teacher are in place. In schools where these are used, feedback from the students is very positive.

Students should be told (or if not told, they should ask) what their **next** lesson is about. The students can then read about the topic **before** the lesson and have questions ready to ask. They will learn far more from that lesson than 'going in cold'. (One understands a film far more having read the book first or having seen the film once before). In addition, they will ask their questions in

the lesson on that topic. When students have a lesson they have not prepared for (because the topic of the lesson was not known), they do not learn as much during the lesson. In addition, they cannot consolidate and come up with questions until **after the lesson.** They then ask their questions next lesson (if they remember). The next lesson may be days ahead and on a different topic.

Most students I asked did not know what they would be doing in their next lesson. I told them always to ask so they could prepare for it **beforehand.** They started to do this and all said they 'got far more out of the lesson' having read about it first.

My views on homework are simple: students should choose their own homework whenever possible. Setting the same homework to a class is not very productive. Students who achieve full marks are wasting their time spending it on work they can do. After a lesson the students' needs will differ. Student A may have understood the first part of the lesson but not the second part. Student B may have understood the second part but not the first part. So, student A needs to spend his/her homework time 'getting to grips' with the second part of the lesson whilst student B needs to spend his/her time 'getting to grips' with the first part of the lesson. By doing this each student is maximising his/her time. In addition, a student is more likely to do homework they choose and see the need for.

I am a great believer in independent learning and I put the above 'homework theory' into practice in 1998 with my 14 A'Level Chemistry students.

The A'level grades obtained by these 14 Chemistry students in 2000 were:

8 Grade A's
3 Grade B's
3 grade C's

I think the results prove the theory works (the same students' results in 'less demanding' subjects were not so good). Parents need educating on homework. They must not assume 'more homework means more learning'.

I shall finish my views by giving a few thoughts on examinations.

Preparing for the Exam

- 1) Start revising at the start of the course, not a week before the exam.
- 2) Revise in small 'chunks': a little bit and often. Revising for periods of over 1 hour is inefficient, as your brain is not 'taking things in' after that time.
- 3) Condense a chapter into a one-page mind map. Whilst creating the mind map you are learning as your brain is processing in deciding the key ideas from the chapter you want on your mind map. Only one word

in every ten is relevant to remembering so revising from a mind map takes 1/10 of the time of revising from a chapter in a book. Simply copying down key phrases does not involve processing so is not as effective. Also, if you have 15 minutes to spare you think it not worthwhile to open your book and start to read. However, you can learn a lot in 15 minutes from a mind map with pictures. Think of the scenario below.

There are two equivalent students. Student 1 sees a person for 5 seconds. Student 2 does not see the person but is given an A4 sheet of paper describing that person. It takes 10 minutes to read the description. Two weeks later, both students have to describe the person. Who will do the better job? Answer: student 1 who **saw** the person even though for only 5 seconds – point made.

- 4) Relax the night before the exam. The extra few hours' revision you gain by sitting up until the early hours are negligible compared to the total number of hours spent on the course. In addition, the problem in an exam is not seeing questions that are unfamiliar but **remembering the answers**. An aid to remembering is being relaxed after a good night's sleep.
- 5) Have everything you need for the exam ready the night before and arrive for the exam in good time. Have spare pens etc.

In the Exam

- 1) Note the length of the exam and plan your time to allow for checking.
- 2) Read the whole paper through first (unbeknown to you your brain is working on all the questions in the background).
- 3) Start on your 'best' question first and answer them in order of difficulty. Having answered the first question well gives you the 'feel great' factor: your frame of mind is so important.
- 4) Remember, the examiner will not know you. All he/she has to go on is your paper. If it impresses (no silly spelling mistakes) then he/she is more likely to give you the benefit of the doubt on something that may not be clear.
- 5) If you get an answer that you know is clearly wrong (e.g. a bond length of 1cm) but have not time to re-do the calculation, just put a note saying you realise the answer is incorrect but have not time to re-do the calculation. If you know the order of magnitude for bond lengths put it in. The examiner will then know you have an appreciation for what bond lengths should be.

- 6) Read each question through carefully so you are sure you are answering what is asked, not what you **think** is asked.
- 7) Do not repeat yourself: it is quality, not quantity that matters.
- 8) If there are 3 marks for a question then give 3 separate points, not repeat the same point twice more.
- 9) Check through **every** page. In most exams there are always candidates who did not see the question on the back page.

If you heed the advice above you will not need 'luck' in your exams.

As I alluded to earlier, one is more likely to read six pages than 106.

I hope you may have found something useful on these six pages, if not, I apologise for wasting your time.

Remember

Smile, Live Longer and Make Someone's Day

Best Wishes

Jim

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