

The Lesson Thought and the Lesson Taught

Learning from the Expert who is Yourself



By Ron Piper



Training to be a teacher can be an emotional roller coaster: lesson triumphs can quickly melt away following classroom car crashes and dismal failures can be rapidly followed by the sunny uplands of success. And of course, a persistent flow of well-intentioned advice from seasoned colleagues, each of whom is operating from their own experientially developed model of learning, can sometimes add to a disintegrating sense of self based on thoughts such as “Now why didn’t I do that? Why didn’t I see that?” and “I must be so stupid not to have thought of that!” Advice implies a better way, a way that, in many trainees’ experience, is understandably absent from their practice. So, what is the alternative? Just how do we help a trainee teacher to construct a model of good teaching and learning for themselves? And what, specifically, is the role of the established colleague in the process of helping a trainee in all of this? In short, how should we be thinking about feedback?

NLP assumes that we have all the resources we need. With this thought in mind and after observing trainee teachers, I always invite them to compare, either as a reflection or in discussion, the lesson they taught with the lesson they had in mind. After this, I ask trainees to think about the changes that they would make, in the light of experience, to the lesson just taught. It is always interesting to hear about the changes and then, with the logical levels to hand, locate any issues. For instance, a trainee might identify questioning as a change area but feel that she is not very skilled in asking questions. Alternatively, the trainee might find the role of the questioner an uncomfortable fit with how she sees

Training to be a teacher can be an emotional roller coaster.

herself in the classroom. In both examples, using the logical levels as a template for coaching helps the trainee to critically evolve her own construct of good teaching and learning and what she needs to do to deliver it. My role, as the established colleague, rather than to offer my construct of teaching and learning as the gold standard, is to ask the questions that prompt critically framed thinking. In my experience, trainees are very adept at realising what needs to change for improved student outcomes. Or, put another way, understanding the differences that will make the difference.

Yes, this is a variation of watching oneself in a movie and then thinking about what needs to change. But the central cognitive principle here, and indeed in the movie watching, is contrastive analysis: how is the idealised (planned lesson) different from the reality of the delivered one? Teachers of all stripes are very familiar with AoL (assessment of learning) and AfL (assessment for learning). Now it strikes me that the thinking processes involved in contrastive analysis exactly correlate with AoL and AfL: *this is where I am, and this is what I need to do to change*. And isn’t this, after all, how coaching works? From our earliest years, indeed from the moment we are born, we are continually making comparisons – some conscious but most of them unconscious – with our actions and outcomes and then pondering our actions and how they might change to get us what we want.



Assessment is hardwired into our genes: this is what has possibly made us the most successful species on the planet. We can imagine a desired future and then cognitively engage with how we can achieve it. Sure, a bit of feedback from somebody who has been successful in the past is helpful, but for the experience of learning to be meaningful and uniquely useful, we are better off if we come to realisations and actions because of our own thinking. If we are aware of what works for us, we are then able to generalise outcomes to other situations with a comforting degree of confidence. The ability to assess is already a firmly established part of how we operate. We need, then, to tap into this with our coaching-styled approach with trainee teachers.

The great benefit of a coaching-styled approach to feedback is that trainees identify and have ownership of their future teaching goals: goals that are unique to their own development and which are the outcomes of critically reflective thinking. Yes, I could tell a trainee how they could improve, but the advice would be coming from my own subjectively developed model of learning: my own construct of good teaching and learning. Trainees, like the rest of us, know when a lesson is not going well: they process the somatic information, they engage emotionally. Self-awareness in the classroom is rich currency; without it, trainees will remain oblivious to the need for change. However, using the movie/contrastive analysis approach enables trainees to turn these

The difficulty is getting trainees to limit their self-evaluation to just several key points.

emotionally charged experiences into goals. They are the experts on themselves: they know what needs to change. And it is a given, that the only thing the trainee can change in the classroom is themselves.

In my experience, trainee teachers are quite willing and expert in telling observers what needs to change, and they do it often with complete disregard to their ego. They want to learn and to improve their practice. The difficulty is getting the trainees to limit their self-criticism to just several key points. A coaching-styled approach, however, calls for some hard, focussed thinking and helps to make the process of developing a construct of good teaching and learning manageable and specific: *And thinking about the observations you have made, which of them would you act upon? And if you acted upon just one, what do you think the impact would be? And is it possible to take this action immediately? What would stop you from taking this action?*

We want our students to be critically minded, self-evaluating citizens. It makes a great deal of sense, therefore, to have the same intention for our trainee teachers. They can model the process for students on the back of their experiences. Providing a framework for thinking and critical reflection in a coaching-styled environment affords trainee teachers the opportunity to evolve their own construct of good teaching and learning; moreover, it builds confidence and lays the foundations for producing teachers who have capacity for reflection and self-leadership. And aren't these the very teachers we want in our classrooms? ■



A former English teacher, senior school leader and teacher trainer, Ron is now director of *Ron Piper Coaching and Training*. He regularly works in schools with students, classroom teachers, middle and senior leaders, trainee teachers and their mentors. Additionally, he coaches clients from all walks of life. Ron is an NLP Master Practitioner and NLP Trainer. You can contact Ron through his website <https://ronpipercoachingandtraining.com> or email rcpiper@btinternet.com