

BOOK REVIEWS

Outstanding Teaching in Lifelong Learning, by Harriet Harper

Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2013, 123pp., £19.99 (pbk), ISBN 0-335-26262-7

Harriet Harper's book is, as she says in the first sentence, about teaching and teachers. This is a deliberate rebalancing of the emphasis in education that had swung strongly towards learners and learning. I would agree that the book is relevant to different institutions and to trainees, teachers, and teacher educators, although I would go further and suggest it is essential reading. It can be tricky to bring together education theory, the demands of quality assurance, teaching practice, and learner experience in a coherent way but Harper's varied roles as a teacher in further and higher education, as one of Her Majesty's (Ofsted) Inspectors, and as a teacher educator provide the knowledge and authority to do so. The result is a practical, informed, thought-provoking, and digestible account of teaching that is defined as outstanding. The book is enhanced by the sub-themes indicated in the contents, by the list of lessons analysed, and by the glossary of some of the terms that are in common parlance in teaching and teacher education.

The book is structured clearly around five themes that were evident in the 20 outstanding lessons offered as examples. These themes are planning, passion and enthusiasm, expert questioning, high expectations, and inclusive practice. Four lessons per theme are briefly described and analysed. At the end of the analysis, a summary of strengths is provided. A particular strength of the book is the range of lessons selected, such as numeracy, ESOL, hospitality, bricklaying, teacher education, and classical civilization.

Another strength is the critical approach that is taken. For example, the author is aware of the difficulties of defining what is 'outstanding', which is part of the cultural context in which teachers inevitably develop, refine, and adapt the way they teach. Although such matters cannot be resolved, there is at least mention of them. To go further into these issues would detract from the purpose of the book, which is a focus on what teachers do and what makes their work outstanding.

Following the themed chapters, Harper turns to the characteristics of outstanding lessons, thereby addressing some who might be sceptical about the examples chosen. There was nothing typical about the subjects, resources, or teachers. Claims that certain traits in teachers are advantageous are not supported by the examples in this book. What they had in common was skill in the five themes identified. For those who value reflective practice, the continua on page 104 might be useful. These include the extent to which a lesson is didactic-participatory, encourages surface-deep learning, or uses assessment *of/for* learning.

Notably refreshing were the ten myths of teaching. At a recent teacher development day there was surprise, to say the least, that the requirement to read out learning outcomes at the start of a lesson is a myth. One of the difficulties in quality assurance is encouraging teachers to demonstrate good (or hopefully outstanding) practice without devising rules for lessons. The result, I believe, can be standardization rather than standards, almost certainly through fear of failure when Ofsted comes to call. It was refreshing to see in print support for the approach taken by teacher educators, one which can conflict with the practice encouraged or imposed by placements.

Inevitably, there are some unanswered questions. I would be interested to know something about the context of the outstanding teachers. What ethos, I wondered, might be discernible where these teachers can be found? Are these teachers 'doing their own thing' or are they encouraged to teach in that way? Do their workplaces provide opportunities to maintain passion and enthusiasm for their subject and, if so, how? Another question I had was about the success of the students because of the central role that success plays in quality measures. I would assume the students did well but it would be interesting to know. Did these teachers instil good learning habits that contributed to progression for learners? I also wondered how inspectors' judgements of lessons as outstanding compare with the judgement of teachers, teacher educators, and those involved in monitoring quality. A comparison of observations would be most interesting. These are beyond the scope of the book but perhaps the basis of another.

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As a trainee teacher in further education, I found Harriet Harper's book to be an extremely useful and refreshing 'easy read' on the subject. The author makes it clear from the beginning that there is no simple definition of outstanding teaching and she demystifies the whole term by telling us that there is no strict recipe for how to achieve it. Rather than laying out a prescriptive agenda, she examines good working methods in a variety of observed lessons and, through exploring the practice of highly skilled teachers (3), and presents us with an array of examples, ideas, and tips that could be used to plan and deliver our own outstanding lesson.

I particularly enjoyed the part dedicated to the theme of passion and enthusiasm which, although crucial to the profession, rarely seem to feature in academic texts about teaching and learning. The final chapter on the ten myths of good teaching practice is very refreshing as it encourages the use of what is appropriate – what makes sense to you and your learners – rather than worrying about ticking what you think (or are told) are the right boxes.

There is a good balance throughout between the real lessons and related educational theories that enables understanding of how and why each particular theory was applied. The information provided is sufficient to encourage and facilitate further research. I also found the highlighted vocabulary and related brief glossary to be a useful reminder. My only reserve is the format of each chapter which, while very clear, also quickly becomes a little repetitive. However this repetitiveness clearly highlights how crucial and intertwined the common features of outstanding teaching are.

As a trainee teacher I will definitely use this book again when planning lessons, especially to consult the diverse and successful assessment methods used and the dos and don'ts of expert questioning.

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As a newly qualified teacher (NQT) in further education, I found Harriet Harper's book very enlightening. The book provides unique access to a range of outstanding lesson examples in an

easily readable format. The format is very simple, based around 20 case studies which are then used to highlight a particular theme of outstanding teaching.

The author analyses what experienced teachers from a variety of educational establishments do in their classrooms, and then examines what made those lessons successful. Related pedagogical theories are integrated into the chapters providing commentary into what each teacher did or did not do to achieve their success. Lesson summaries are included at the end of the chapters and these provide a useful reminder of the strengths of the individual lessons.

As a newly qualified teacher, chapter ten was especially significant and had the most influence on me. It dispels the myths surrounding the Ofsted inspection and observation process: myths such as displaying your learning outcomes throughout the lesson, the mandatory use of group or pair work, and the constant changing of activities. This is in direct contrast with everything that I have been encouraged, and in some cases, instructed to do over the past two years. Perhaps I should be using my professional judgement more to engage and enhance my learners' experience in the classroom and focus less on ticking the boxes on the outstanding-lesson checklist.

Having read numerous books during my initial teacher training, I would suggest that this volume is essential reading for teachers embarking on their training or career. It provides a no-nonsense overview as to what the observed lessons have in common for them to be deemed outstanding; that they:

- are well planned
- are run by passionate and enthusiastic teachers
- feature expert questioning techniques
- are a result of an expectation of high standards from teaching staff
- display professional and respectful relationships between staff and students.

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