

Assessing Quality of Teaching (and Teachers)

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In response to one of my face book postings in my exchanges on education with Subir Shukla, Arjuna Venkatesh asks “Is there a way (or a 'method') to verify if someone is a good teacher or if someone is teaching well?”

To answer Arjuna’s question, we have to define ‘teaching’, ‘excellent teaching’, and “excellent teacher.”

TEACHING, LEARNING, AND EXCELLENT TEACHING/TEACHER

Suppose we define **teaching** as

*an activity that aims at helping someone to **learn** something.*

Given this definition, if X has helped Y to learn how to ride a bicycle, how to make money, how to crack exams and tests, how to make money, how to win friends and influence people, or has helped Y to understand what ancient Egyptians believed about life after death, then X’s activity is teaching, and X is a teacher. If X sets a group assignment that requires students to engage with the question “What is democracy?” or “Why should we believe that air is a mixture, not an element?” and the students learn by engaging with that question, that intervention by X constitutes teaching. In contrast, if X delivers a learned lecture on philosophy of science in a teacher education program or in a research course, and the students do not learn anything from that lecture, that activity does not qualify as teaching.

If you accept this definition, I would like to invite you to consider the following definition of high quality teaching:

High quality teaching (a) **aims at** high quality learning, and (b) is successful in achieving those aims most **effectively and efficiently**

Part (a) is about the goals of the activity of teaching, while part (b) is about the pedagogical means. [Note: Terms such as ‘Inquiry Oriented Learning, Higher Order Cognition, Critical Thinking, and so on point to what we aim at (see http://www.thinq.education/inquiry_and_integration_oriented_education) In contrast, terms such as active learning, interactive learning, activity based learning, experiential learning, peer learning, cooperative learning, collaborative learning, inquiry based learning, project based learning, etc. point to the means, the pedagogy.]

If you resonate to this definition, you might also resonate to the following definition of an excellent teacher.

An excellent teacher is one who (a) **aims at** high quality learning, and (b) is successful in achieving those aims most **effectively and efficiently**.

If you resonate to this definition, you would most likely resonate to what we say in the article “Outstanding vs. Popular Teachers” (<http://www.thinq.education/articles/54>)

ASSESSING LEARNING AND TEACHING

If you resonate to all of the above, I would invite you to reflect on the question how we can tell whether learners have learnt what we expect them to learn. In the case of teaching learners how to do well in exams, or how to play chess, the answer is simple: if the learner gets high marks (in the case of exam cracking) or wins in chess tournaments (in the case of chess) then the learner has learnt and the teacher who helps them learn how to crack exams and how to play chess is an excellent teacher.

But what if we wish to aim at is higher order cognition? For that goal, all that a teacher can do is to sensitise the learners to the value of what needs to be learnt, help them take the first few steps, and hope that the learning triggered by the teacher will continue after the educational program (e.g., a bachelor’s program). In that situation, no form of continuous and final assessment is reliable, because what is learnt during a course can be quickly forgotten soon after the program is over. (What percentage of engineers who have high GPAs in their engineering programs can do a calculus problem ten years after their engineering degrees?)

If you resonate to what I have said, you might also resonate to unreliability of using *student performance* or *student feedback* during or at the end of a course or program to assess the quality of a teacher. I believe that I am a good teacher, but that conclusion is based on the emails I tend to get ten years after the students have completed their programs. When they write to me about the value of what they have learnt from me years after they have graduated, I see partial evidence to support the claim that I am a good teacher.

That does not mean that is impossible to make an assessment of the quality of a teacher. This can be done by

- A) asking the teacher what (s)he **aims at** in his/her teaching (to make an assessment of the value of his/her educational goals,
- B) examining the **appropriateness** of the pedagogical means (s)he employs to achieve what (s)he aims at (e.g., by observing the teacher’s classroom activities, by looking at the worksheets and readings, ...) , and
- C) finding out if the teacher **continues to be a learner**. (Most teachers disqualify if we use this criterion.)

This is not a fool proof method, but I think this is the best we can do.

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