

# The importance of the maverick teacher



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There are currently two gradual movements underway in the teaching profession, which together are either exciting or ominous depending on your perspective. The first one is the move to increasingly harness technology to personalise and deliver content-rich instruction, either through computers, or indeed – in the next ten years perhaps – amiable robots. This innovation should conceivably improve learning through achieving a level of individualised instruction that a human class teacher would struggle to manage, and also through the sheer volume of knowledge and information that such technology will seamlessly draw upon.

The second movement is the concurrent transfer of the human teacher into the role of the ‘Guide on the Side’ – the expert in no particular subject area other than the science of pedagogy and how to coach individuals. This – we are told – will also assist with the personalisation of instruction, as the teacher will no longer get in the way of learners pursuing what they themselves find most pertinent and interesting. And in letting the robot take-over the role

of the ‘Sage’, the teacher will be able to spend more time engaging in those more tricky human endeavours of encouraging and nurturing a growth-mindset and a sense of self-efficacy.

So, what is there not to like?

Put bluntly, I fear we’re going to lose one of the most inspiring and pivotal of our evolved developmental mechanisms...

Yes, it is true that we want our children to develop a love of learning for its own sake – to become ‘independent lifelong learners’ who will continue to grow and develop no matter what their age and circumstances. When we’re drowning in a world of constantly changing information, and where our offspring are likely to shift careers more than once in their lifetimes, we really need to engage the natural learning machines which we are told our children are, and help them to find their ‘bliss’, their ‘element’ or other such unique personal chemistry.

It is also perhaps true that our education system has become overly focused on qualifications which will trigger a life of economic productivity,

and that this process in itself has become skewed towards valuing those things which are most easy to measure – irrespective of whether they will be directly relevant to the kinds of lives and careers that we either need, or we actually aspire to. The old-fashioned didactic teacher can appear to us as a transmitter of what is narrow, limited and imposed from the past.

However, in the midst of this we have a curious phenomenon frequently spoken about by people later in life when reflecting back on their schooling. We particularly hear about it if they are trying to relay a tale about a key turning point in their formation – where they suddenly found themselves on a fast track to destiny. In this we hear the legend of the ‘maverick’ teacher – someone who, perhaps through seeming to break some rules, ended having a distinctly right effect.

World-renowned educationalist Dylan Wiliam is fond of saying: ‘The truth is that, in education, everything works somewhere and nothing works everywhere.’ He means this to imply



that we'll never be able to fully prescribe a single 'best approach' to teaching a particular thing or indeed rule-out any technique as never being of any use.

The reality is that, if you dig deep enough behind the headlines of neuroscience hype, you start to realise that humans are ridiculously complex and unpredictable beings, and that human society and history never fully repeats itself. Our own individual journey through life always remains as a fundamentally unpredictable work-in-progress. Essentially, our attempts to successfully engineer and navigate our futures are a matter of trial and error, and the vast majority of the time, all that the science of learning can really give to teachers and school leaders are rules of thumb for what should likely have a particular effect, across a large group of people, on average.

If schools impose a one-size-fits-all, top-down policy of mechanised 'best practice' teaching techniques – as is increasingly attempted by headteachers determined to withstand Ofsted, or who misguidedly think that they can impose perfection through the use of scripted lessons – then they are going to disillusion as many children as they manage to rescue.

The reality is that children need inspiration, and the truth is that this comes in no stronger form than through the experience and example of other humans. It might be in finding a sense of purpose and meaning, a hook of relevance and direction. It might be in opening-up a possible route that we didn't realise was there, or in revealing a landscape and terrain that we never suspected existed. It might well be in revealing the vibrancy, vitality and compelling essence of an area of study or aspect of life, which we have previously overlooked, ignored, dismissed or misunderstood.

In hoping and searching for such inspirations, we look naturally for a connection with those who teach us; for the subtle signs that they hold a key which we hope is to be found somewhere, and it is when our connections with those teachers hit a unique, bespoke and unexpected moment that these lightning-charged transformative experiences are at their strongest.

In all of this then, there is a fundamental need for teachers who can authentically speak of what they know; who can channel a passion based on personal experience, and communicate an authoritative truth.

This is where we have a need for teachers who take the role of the leader, the figurehead, the guru or sage in unique moments – however low-key, mundane or 'off-piste' the circumstances might be. And in the present circumstances of highly accountable, play-safe education by numbers – where the robots are poised to take-over as the experts, and the humans are going to just be there to reassuringly cheer-on from the sidelines – such teachers are increasingly going to be the ones who might be considered – in their own unassuming way – to be the mavericks. For they are increasingly the ones who in the eyes of the managers, the consultants and the inspectors may not appear to be toeing the line and doing exactly what is considered most efficient, safe and controllable.

It is these teachers – the ones who disrupt the smooth flow of learning with a bit of unexpectedly transformative education – which I fear we are in perilous danger of phasing-out. Please, let's find and value the potential maverick in each teacher – that potential to do the wrong thing, at the right time, and in the process enable the extraordinary to happen.