

My top 11 ideas for what is great teaching here at Ardingly? (And anywhere really). By Anthony Lovat

1. Learning. Obviously kids need to learn. Duh. A good lesson should demonstrate learning to the teacher for assessment and, to instil a sense of achievement, the kids themselves. This doesn't need to be complicated - a few quiz questions or a recap of the objectives as a plenary. It's amazing how many lessons I've seen that ignore this though.

2. Fearlessness. There is a dangerous myth that "strict" teaching, where kids obediently follow instructions from the teacher under threat of sanctions, can be a good thing. A positive learning environment is never built upon fear. Children learn through failure and they should not fear it. Fear of failure can be a particular problem in top sets. This is closely related to the next 2 points...

3. Enjoyment. Every lesson cannot be enjoyable but, if you think of lessons you've taught that you'd classify as "great", they are surely ones that the kids themselves enjoyed. This can manifest itself in various ways – a game, a competition, a practical, a joke or banter, some music etc. Usually you can judge enjoyment by looking at the expression on their faces.

3. Respect. An overused and misinterpreted word – especially when used in an urban context (perhaps not such a problem at Ardingly?). A respectful relationship is built upon trust and trust in any relationship is easy to lose. Respectful student-teacher and student-student relationships are the foundation of a great lesson. To reiterate point 2, this does not mean fearful obedience – it's about wanting to do the right thing for the other person. It's about respect. This is difficult to see in a lesson observation but undeniably is a key component of what makes great teaching.

4. Cross-curricular. Relating the learning objectives to other subjects. Some topics are obviously way easier to do this than others but a great lesson is usually one that students can see the relevance and importance to their own lives and the knock on effects on other subjects. Examples might include how learning about lungs relates to smoking or learning about the carbon cycle relates to climate or integration relates to modelling gravity or Macbeth relates to psychology or Tudor history relates to ethics.

5. Differentiation. This really is not a new-fangled concept. It's been around for a generation but I have observed so many lessons where it's not considered. Perhaps because it has 6 syllables, people are intimidated by the concept. Differentiation by outcome isn't really good enough. Some consideration of differentiation by task / learning style / special needs / language is needed for great teaching. If you have point 3 sorted, by the way, this tends to happen organically.

6. No copying. This is a massive bugbear of mine. All research shows that you don't learn well from copying notes. I know lots of teachers do this. I know many parents expect it (and need educating as to why it's a waste of time). I know many kids derive some comfort from copying neat notes but... it's not great teaching. It's just not. Talk to anyone who's been to university in the last few years and they'll tell you that universities don't even expect the frantic note taking they used to so that excuse isn't valid for teachers any more. There is no excuse. Great thinking requires mental processing and copying notes off a board does not require any brainpower. It's dead time.

7. Engaging starter. When playing jazz, they say that so long as you start and finish well, what happens in the middle doesn't matter so much. There are whole books written with ideas for a good starter to a lesson. Pick one. My personal favourite is pass the parcel with a question in each layer related to the learning in the previous lesson and comedy forfeits for if they get it wrong. It requires a bit of prep so I don't do it that often but if you remember what questions are in each layer you can even differentiate by targeting the questions at particular kids.

8. Great kids. A great chef would struggle to cook a gourmet meal with bad ingredients and, similarly, great teaching is much more difficult with bad kids. We're so lucky to have the amenable kids we have here and we ought not to take them for granted. With ingredients like the ones we have here, we have the opportunity to create a lot of great teaching.

9. Student work on the wall. I stick drawings done by my 2-year-old on the fridge because, although he's unlikely to be the next Picasso, I'm proud of the effort nonetheless. Sticking student work on the wall shows you value it so I'm always a bit suspicious when I go into a classroom and there's naked walls or glossy mass-produced posters up. It's not a vital part of good teaching but, I would argue, it's a good indicator of a positive learning environment and ought to be encouraged.

10. Judge outcomes over a long time period. Ofsted inspectors now will judge teaching based on 20 minutes in a classroom. How ridiculous. Good teaching at Ardingly ought to be assessed over a year and, perhaps, even 5 years as a student matures from shell to UVI (and I say this as someone who has learned how to do quite well over a 20 minute observation). I realise this is a pipe dream. N.B. Although ICT is important, I wouldn't put it on a top 10 list. It's a useful tool and, although it can facilitate great teaching, it can just as easily be used for its own sake and can become a barrier to developing inter-personal skills.

So this is my humble opinion. You can probably tell it hasn't been copied and pasted. If you've read down this far, thanks for persisting and let me know if you agree or disagree with anything. Apologies for overusing the word "kids".