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If you were to select a person at random on the number 31 bus, and ask them to tell you how they think teaching should be organised in classrooms, the frightening fact is that they might give you an answer. Such an answer would be based on the fact that they were once a pupil in a classroom. It might also reflect some of the public comment about teaching.

These two perspectives share some worrying characteristics: they both over-focus on the teacher, and they both tend to select what they dislike about the teacher's performance. This is a disastrous angle for analysing classrooms as key contexts for important learning, yet it also seems to be the analysis of policy-makers and government agencies.

What is less commonly known about classrooms? And, could it lead to a different direction in policy for improving classrooms? Let me first outline some of the features of classrooms, which are generally unavailable to pupils and casual observers.

Classrooms are measurably the most complex social situation on the face of the planet. Teachers may be involved in a thousand or more interactions per day, many of them personally demanding. In this busy-ness, teachers make decisions fast and they construct routines in order to make classroom life manageable.

I remember hearing of a test pilot, who after a placement in schools decided to train as a teacher: when asked to explain, he said that the flying led to an adrenaline rush on each flight, whereas in classroom life it was there all the time.

Teachers have precious little time to interact with each individual pupil, so they have to make the classroom operate as a system of activities for groups and learning. At the same time they give considerable mental attention to pupils. Seasoned classroom researchers have been known to give up their attempts to categorise teachers' complex considerations about how to respond to individual pupils.

Classrooms and teaching are multi-dimensional. Pupils (and teachers too) bring multiple concerns, interests and life experiences to the classroom, yet they handle this multiplicity and in the midst of it, for example, learn maths. For the teacher the multidimensional nature of classroom life means they are continually involved in balancing acts, dilemmas and trade-offs.

Teachers regularly manage more than one event at the same time. They monitor much more than they can report — the 'eyes in the back of the head' phe-

nomenon. Teaching is full of uncertainties. How will the pupils react? Are they the same as the last lot? What can we do with this new curriculum? Teachers continually handle the ambiguity of knowing that the link between teaching and learning is sometimes uncertain and always partial.

There is no single or simple manual, and a vision is crucial for survival: the vision is to make a difference, rather than to be remembered. Increasingly, effective teachers exercise that key skill of modern times — knowing what to do when you don't know what to do.

Teaching is a highly public activity. In the classroom, teachers and pupils are

How many people really understand what happens in a classroom?

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highly visible to others. Teachers occasionally feel on stage, and may use audience effects to affect others in the classroom. If the public aspects of the job are emphasised and increased, teachers can react by isolating their performance from view.

This both explains and may exacerbate the isolation which characterises their work. Paradoxically, teachers are psychologically 'alone' in densely populated settings.

Where does this analysis lead?

This analysis helps us realise that the nature of classrooms demands that teachers exhibit high level skills, an ability to interpret situations and orchestrate learning. They often can't describe these aspects, and sometimes feel hesitant to

do so lest it divides them from the lay-person. But their professionalism is founded on this complexity.

It also helps us recognise the poverty of those views which portray the classroom as a simple cause-and-effect situation, which offer a simple teacher-centred view, and which seem to imply that there is a prescription for successful teaching in all contexts.

These views are common but are positively dangerous as a basis for improving classrooms. Respectively they lead to teachers feeling de-skilled when simple add-ons don't work, to classrooms not being places where students develop the skills to take responsibility for their learning, and to the creativity of the system being depressed. This can lead to teachers passing on prescriptions, which can in turn depress student performance.

The above analysis has implications for how improvement in classrooms may be promoted, including in the more complex areas of 21st century skills and the crucial but less easily measurable outcomes of schooling. It requires us to build improvement on the following recognitions:

- Teachers are continually improving classrooms in ways which are unrecognised: triggered by their perceptions of students' responses, they problem-solve daily.

- Teachers welcome another eye on their classroom and profit from the expertise of an observer who will not waste the teacher's time, who will not insult the teacher's intelligence, and who will work as hard to understand classroom events as the teachers do to conduct them. When the observer is another teacher, we have mutual observation of classrooms which is regularly a powerful element in teacher learning.

- Teachers welcome in-school and other networks to review and improve their classrooms. The participants who are chosen begin with the close-at-hand — the students in some cases — but also extend to include 'outsiders' with analytic frameworks and methods of knowledge-generation.

- Teachers welcome regular occasions for professional development on areas they have prioritised, and classroom management is high on the list. But professional support is lacking, and in the last ten years INSET has often treated teachers as functionaries.

Teachers are fixing classrooms daily, without taking them to the equivalent of a mechanic. The diagnosis is their own and leads to tuning and tweaking rather than judging one part faulty and extracting it. There's no manual from head

office, and they are sceptical of listening to the blandishments of second-hand dealers, or of trusting the repair outfits who set themselves up with the glossy reception and expensive rates.

And what about policy-makers?

It is of little use to describe the classroom in machine-like terms. In most areas of human endeavour, we have moved from using mechanical or mechanistic metaphors to explain how the world and people work, to biological metaphors — from machines to living systems. Talk to any change agent in industry.

So the first implication is to recognise the danger in pronouncements which seem to imply that there is one prescription for successful teaching in all contexts, and in approaches which reduce and atomise the consideration of teaching. When similar pronouncements emanate from some researchers, usually those who have not been teachers, we need to remember that reductionist lines of research have had little impact on improving quality.

Mature government recognises that it may not be possible or productive to legislate what matters in areas like this, and have learned that externally-initiated

change can easily stay outside the classroom door. So the wish to over-control must be resisted, and attempts at improving teaching quality by remote control won't do.

Some of the counter-productive effects of standardisation are becoming clear, including, paradoxically, divisiveness. The latest Ofsted review on secondary schools shows increased division between succeeding and failing, but it does not, of course, entertain the possibility that Ofsted itself contributes to this trend.

The need now is to move from performance-centred classrooms to learning-centred classrooms, and for this we need the more-than-competent teacher, at least in the way those terms were used by DfEE and TTA. Perhaps we should now call them the non-standard teacher!

Learning-centred teachers understand their own learning: they might also contribute to their colleagues' learning, but that can not be assessed by 'Advanced Teacher standards' which focus solely on them.

There's no way to control and ensure teacher learning but there are ways to promote it. Better in-school, between-school and professional networks for problem-solving, with the chance of ac-

cessing frameworks, evidence and the challenge of change.

Government has a symbolic duty as well as a policy brief: it needs to repair the damage of reduced levels of trust. It is one (but only one) of the sources of those two qualities for development — support and challenge, neither of which are realistic without the other.

Government credibility is at stake with professionals. In 1993 teachers said 'Stop the policy raining down on us': now I see some starting to say 'Let it rain. Put up the umbrella. We can excel without policy'.

In today's target-mania, the best target that government might set for themselves would be to increase the number of people on the number 31 bus who reply, 'I think teachers' work is amazing — I couldn't do it and I respect those who do'. PB

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