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The Teacher - what makes a good one?

Jeremy Harmer Hello, and welcome to anyone who is coming along for this session. I look forward to our discussion.

Georgina Jeremy, nice to see you here... where are you at the moment?

Jeremy Harmer I'm in my office in Cambridge!

Stephanie What's the weather like?

Jeremy Harmer Perfect summer afternoon weather, slightly cloudy, but warm!

Stephanie I'm in New York and it's hot, humid and grey.

Georgina And what have you been doing recently?

Jeremy Harmer Working on the ELT forum site, planning the next few modules etc.

Stephanie I have a couple of questions that have been asked by teachers I was speaking to about the Forum....

Stephanie Should I ask these while waiting for others to come in?

Jeremy Harmer Great, of course

Stephanie Marion wanted to get your views on this. Does a teacher need to be an actor/actress?

Jeremy Harmer Well, I think many students respond to a teacher with bags of personality, but no teacher can be 'up' all the time, so being an actor... doesn't mean doing a huge performance all the time. However, I do think that teachers need to perform for most of the things they ask students to do... it's just that the *kind* of performance changes, from quiet and retiring one minute, to very extrovert and entertaining the next.

Stephanie Is it a pre-requisite to have 'bags of personality'?

Jeremy Harmer I don't think you have to have a 'big' personality, though you may need a big heart, because the most important thing a teacher needs is the ability to listen and respond to students.

Nick Definitely, the money we are paid is not enough to be able to do this without acting!

Jeremy Harmer Well, if it was only the money there wouldn't be many teachers around! Seriously, I think teaching, at its best, is one of the most satisfying professions around.

Stephanie Are you saying that we do it for love?

Jeremy Harmer No, that would be too strong. But I am saying that the satisfaction of a job well done in the classroom is what keeps many professionals going.

Georgina Jeremy, I have another question from professor Gul Celkan in Turkey.

I have been teaching for 22 years now and first time in my life I am having difficulty in keeping my senior year students under control in class. I am a very patient person and students do like me a lot yet they never sit silent in class. I sometimes think it is because they are about to graduate, they have too many things to consider, that is why they are so noisy. I do not like yelling or punishing them. They are in their twenties now. What would you do without spoiling all the good relationship you have formed with your group? If I give them a quiz, they are silent.

Jeremy Harmer Because teaching is a human activity, with people all over the place liable to act any way they please, no one can ever come up with perfect answers to questions about discipline and control but in general I am sure that one of the things teachers can do is 'talk' to students about discipline matters. This doesn't necessarily mean speaking out loud in the charged atmosphere of the class; it can involve sending messages, letters, questionnaires etc. And then again, if the teacher keeps a record of what really works and what doesn't. Then you can soon build up a picture of a particular

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group.

Georgina Good point, Jeremy. How about this next question from jbn.

Jbn How does a teacher get that feedback so they know the job has been "well done"?

Jeremy Harmer In two ways: by keeping a record yourself and by asking them to fill in feedback forms. What does everyone else feel about this? Do you like feedback forms? We've all had to use them.

Barbara Once I started realising I was there for myself and not for anybody else my attitude changed but did this take some time

Stephanie Maybe some negotiation would be useful?

Jeremy Harmer I do think teachers have a right even an obligation to have a 'good' time themselves, provided that this doesn't happen at the expense of students of course.

Stephanie Maybe some negotiation would be useful? I mean, if you feel an activity is not going well and that's why they're talking. Negotiation is fine for students who are prepared to handle it. Brilliant.

Julian Am I still a good teacher if I really dislike some of my students and find it hard to cover this up?

Jeremy Harmer Teachers are human! Of course we like some students more than others but I do think it's part of our professional ability to be able to hide our dislike somehow.

Georgina What techniques do you use?

Jbn I would have thought the rewards of being able to teach someone you don't necessarily like must be crucial?

Jeremy Harmer I suppose the best way to describe it is 'scrupulous politeness', watching what we say and do, and trying to ensure... that the 'disliked student' doesn't take up too much of our time when we over-compensate.

Julian In the future I think that a good teacher will need to be technologically proficient at things like this and other types of e-learning. At the moment many are not. Does this mean they are bad teachers?

Jeremy Harmer Teachers can be absolutely brilliant even though they have knowledge gaps, though it is becoming increasingly important to get to grips with technology but the situation is only temporary. Soon IT will be as everyday as the board used to be and everyone will be more or less competent at using it.

Stephanie What's your view on online learning and its effect on the profession? Are teachers going to become obsolete?

Jeremy Harmer Online learning will never never replace the natural human urge to gather together in groups where they can see, smell, hear each other and learn together but it will greatly add to the learning experience and provide a valued resource for those who can't get together.

Julian But some 'good' teachers are actually proving to be the block between their students and alternative electronic learning methods.

Jeremy Harmer Julian, what do you mean by 'the block' exactly?

Julian They are scared of the technology so they don't want to introduce their students to it.

Jeremy Harmer Oh right. Yes, I think that's a very good point but teachers like that will have to change and are changing rapidly. And if they let the students help them

Georgina How can we help these teachers? Any thoughts?

Jeremy Harmer Yes, think the best way is to provide more and more in-service training opportunities, more and more free computer access, and more and more demonstrations of how good things can be!

Julian A very high percentage of what we do in class doesn't really need a teacher does it? Only the communicative parts and I think that a lot of classroom time is spent on

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things which are essentially self-study. Agree?

I think that it is a case of educating the teachers in new skills. It is quite easy for teachers to allow themselves to not develop any new skills.

Nick Teachers will always be valuable for organising interaction between carbon based life forms

Jeremy Harmer Not entirely, Julian, no. Some students are much better at self-study than others, some on the other hand respond really well to the encouragement and support that teachers can give and some really like to have the teacher give them appropriate feedback.

Georgina Ok, let's change track a little, here's another question from Nick - what are your thoughts?

Nick Are 'acceptable' teachers born or made?

Welsh Boy If we had a definite answer to this question we'd stop asking it. Is it results based? But my general take is that some people are 'better fitted' for teaching than others but that appropriate training can make most (though not all) people capable of being really helpful in the classroom.

Georgina Going back to the previous point on measuring a teachers ability, here's a point from Welsh Boy

Welsh Boy Is it results based?

Nick I feel that acceptable teachers are born and good teachers are made.

Sophie In my experience as a teacher trainer, some people definitely do have a special something that you can't teach.

Julian I think they are made. At the end of the day there are few skills which cannot be taught (by a good teacher!)

Jeremy Harmer The problem with results is that you have to have good students for good result! Genuine interest in people - the individuals; a genuine 'talent'.

Julian Yeah, that's a good point Welsh Boy. A good teacher helps students to achieve good results.

Welsh Boy Doesn't that depend on what a 'good result' is?

Jeremy Harmer I think it's more progress and satisfaction based. Has the human interaction been worth it and valuable in EL terms?

Georgina Does anyone have any feelings about the qualities a teacher needs and how, or if, they can be measured?

Jeremy Harmer The best teachers are the people who are most interested in their students, I think, but the way they manifest that interest, and the ways in which they help students to learn do have some 'technical aspects' too, and these can be learned from watching good teachers at work.

Julian Surely that's defined by the students!

Sophie Whatever, you can certainly train everyone to be a more efficient teacher.

Welsh Boy Is Empathy an important attribute for a good teacher?

Jeremy Harmer Yes, Sophie, I agree, of course. Empathy is absolutely vital. When you go into someone else's classroom the first thing you notice is rapport - or lack of it.

Sophie So you think observation is a crucial part of teacher development?

Jeremy Harmer Yes, Sophie, I'm pretty sure I do. Appropriate observation (not just sitting back and watching) is one of the ways trainee teachers can stand back and see what happens in classrooms. Not for nothing is apprenticeship and mentoring good old models to follow!

Georgina Do you have any tips on good observation techniques, Jeremy?

Jeremy Harmer I think everything depends upon where the observer is coming from the observed person has to know they will get something useful out of it, not just a judgement, except, of course, in exam-type assessments.

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Sophie Observation's particularly useful if the focus is on learners and not just on teacher performance.

Julian Looking at what happens in other classrooms is an interesting point. Is there enough of it?

Sophie Particularly pre-service teachers tend to over-concentrate on what they are doing and not what the students are doing.

Nick Good point Sophie!

Julian Whenever I am observed I put on a special lesson - nothing like the way I normally teach.

Jeremy Harmer I completely agree with Sophie. I remember when I started to realise (as an assessor) that I spent far too much time watching the teacher, not the students! At the beginning novice teachers do tend to concentrate on themselves. Experience teachers an ability to focus on students! Julian, I wish there was more time in school schedules for teachers to work with each other in class, planning together, observing each other etc. That's really useful TD!

Sophie Yes. It would be great if teachers in general could feel less threatened by peer observation it is high risk for many. Even those who are happy to be observed by trainees

Georgina Observations certainly help - and from a teachers point of view, they certainly help but what about the relationship with students, here's a question from jbn.

Jbn Can too much rapport be a bad thing?

Sophie Yes. It would be great if teachers in general could feel less threatened by peer observation, it is high risk for many. Even those who are happy to be observed by trainees

Jeremy Harmer Hi, jbn. Well teachers and students getting too cosy with each other may not be too helpful, and may interfere with some of the 'work' that has to go on but good rapport, for me, is the best relationship for learning to take place in the most enjoyable and productive way. I think that finding a good balance between responsibility and building a good rapport is key to enjoyable teaching!

Julian It is hard to lay down the law if you are too close to your students.

Sophie What do you mean by too much rapport?

Georgina Is it something that we can fake?

Jeremy Harmer I don't think you can fake rapport because in the end it sort of breaks down...

Welsh Boy Ultimately - isn't this all about building trust and honesty ?

Jeremy Harmer Rapport really just means listening, watching, understanding and reacting appropriately, whilst at the same time brining to the students things that will stimulate their intellects and their emotions.

Julian I like that definition of rapport Jeremy.

Jbn I suppose at the end of the day, teachers and students must remember their role in the teaching experience and environment then, and that is truly the bottom line.

Jeremy Harmer Yes, well it's back to our realisation that we're just as human as our students!

Simon From my limited experience of teaching in France, I found their system of removing the role of discipline from the teacher as very beneficial. This left far more time for building a good rapport with students, and being able to 'remove' trouble makers without bearing the responsibility of being seen as the person who lays down the law. Is a similar system employed in many other countries?

Julian Who does lay down the law in French schools?

Simon C There was a small team of Educators who were responsible for all disciplinary matters. If I experienced problems in class, the students would be sent to the

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educators.

Jeremy Harmer I think it's worth acknowledging, in France or anywhere else, that discipline is a major issue, esp in 2ndary schools, and a teacher's ability to deal with problems is a whole-school issue, not just an individual teacher's one.

Sophie Absolutely!

Georgina Let's move on to one to one teaching and a question from Sophie. Sophie wanted to know if one to one teaching is more effective?

Marcella I always found one-to-one harder. So much expectation and nowhere to deflect the attention to.

Sophie Particularly if they have a background in more selective secondary education.

Jeremy Harmer I think those of us who train and write have been a bit careless about one to one teaching and haven't given it due attention. But we will deal with this in the forum in the future.

Sophie Look forward to that.

Georgina How do you all feel about one to one? Do you have much experience?

Jeremy Harmer I think 1-1 can be both more rewarding and (I agree with you Marcella) much more difficult because the relationship is so much more intense.

Bario I only teach one to one and I love it. It is so much more effective.

Sophie A student at 8am in the morning who ate a raw onion every day!

Georgina Yuk!

Sophie Unforgettable!

Sophie Tell us more Bario.

Jeremy Harmer Bario, why is it more effective than a well-matched group of students?

Georgina It's definitely more challenging at times

Bario I enjoy the personal relationship and the chance to really make a difference to the way someone learns.

Jeremy Harmer That sounds really inspiring, Bario. I think it's possible to do that in a group too, of course and I suppose that's where the majority of my own experience lies.

Bario I think you have much more chance to model good learning and good interaction and teaching classes you can only ever talk about it.

Sophie Back to the rapport issue. Not so easy if you don't gel.

Bario Oh I agree Jeremy. But I guess that it just suits me better as a style of teaching.

Jeremy Harmer Yes, Sophie. We all have some classes that don't quite work... or where the atmosphere isn't quite right, and it's often not our fault at all, but something to do with the composition of the group itself. The only thing we can do is watch, listen, learn, change groups within the group, try different activities etc. and see how things pan out. Then talk to students individually... and see how they can help us to divine what's actually going on.

Jbn Then, to go back, a bad teacher one-to-one is worse than a bad teacher to a class?

Sophie It's certainly rewarding in terms of tailor-making your programme to learner needs one to one, I mean.

Bario I did once have a student who hated me but even then I still think that it was a worthwhile experience.

Jeremy Harmer Bario I wish I'd only ever had one student who hated me! But how was it worthwhile?

Marcella But I would say that I was a bad teacher at the start of my career but I had the motivation to improve.

Georgina Good point, Marcella. Is that all we need the motivation to improve?

Jeremy Harmer I don't like anyone thinking of themselves as bad teachers. A good teacher does improve and wants to improve and uses experience for support and encouragement! Agreed, but if the one-to-one is more intense and personal, that lack is

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even more powerful?

Georgina Here are 2 interesting questions.

Sophie What is a good teacher??????

Welsh Boy What is a bad teacher?

Simon I certainly found that it was easier to build a rapport with students who came from a similar background to myself. The hardest experience was teaching in a school which was centred in a run down, and relatively poor estate. Do you think students are conscious of class/or your background, and can use that against you?

Bario I think we both had to learn to get something out of the situation - I did - the realisation that I can't please everyone. I don't know what she got out of it!

Jeremy Harmer Hi Simon, I think students will often use the teacher's difference against them, and I do think the make-up of the class is important. But it doesn't have to be an insurmountable barrier.

When I did some research on this I got some incredible answers, e.g. 'A good teacher is someone who knows our names!'

Simon C A good teacher writes books on how to teach other teachers to be good!

Jeremy Harmer For me a bad teacher (if there is such a thing) is someone who knows nothing about their subject and is even less interested in their students.

Welsh Boy Perhaps a good teacher knows when to stop teaching?

Julian I think that goes back to empathy. We all want to feel like we are getting attention. What is a teacher?

Jeremy Harmer Yes, Julian, but if a teacher really can't stand a student - if it's that serious - then the school should be able to separate them.

Bario This has been very interesting - sorry I have to go now and miss the free chat. Thanks Jeremy. Bye.

Simon C Thanks for your responses, Jeremy. I hope there will be more of these events in the near future. Will more specific teaching subjects be discussed in the future?

Georgina Simon, there certainly will. The next live session is on the 20th June but the next moderated chat with Jeremy is in July, the topic is to be decided from the final votes which will be checked after this session. The date of the next session will be announced on the site and remember, by subscribing, you'll automatically be informed.

Marcella It is nice to have a moderator Georgina. You doing a good job of making everything OK. Bye

Georgina Thank you Jeremy for taking part and everyone else!

Jeremy Harmer And thanks to everyone. See you next time! www.eltforum.com
Thanks!

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