

# What matters in teaching and learning?

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Teaching is incredibly complex. Source: FreeCreativeStuff pixabay

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In this blog post I explore my thinking around what matters in teaching and learning. It is by no means an exhaustive list, but part of a wider conversation.

## **The student matters.**

Students are our common purpose in teaching and learning; our who and our why; the core of our work. Not just ‘students’ plural, but each and every student (with their idiosyncrasies, circumstances, attitudes, abilities and identities).

The decisions we make from the classroom to the board room in schools should all come back to the student. Ultimately in education, we are in their service.

## **The teacher matters.**

The teacher and their classroom practice can make a difference to student learning and achievement. Within schools, [the quality of teachers’ teaching is the most influential school-based variable in terms of improving student learning and achievement](#). (Although more influential than what is within a school’s sphere of influence are students’ attitudes and abilities, socioeconomic context, parents’ education and peers.)

## Knowledge matters.

In Australia, knowledge is central to one of our professional standards: ‘Teachers know content and how to teach it.’ Focusing on preparing students for their future pathways, and on character, skills and capabilities, doesn’t mean ignoring knowledge.

Australian Chief Scientist, Alan Fink, [has spoken about](#) teachers as trained experts who have a “fundamental duty to teach students content: concepts, facts and principles.” He adds that specialist knowledge is needed:

“No-one has ever said to me: ‘gosh, we don’t have enough people who know how to collaborate’. No, what they say to me is: ‘we don’t have enough specialists in software engineering. We can’t find graduates who are fluent in maths. We have meetings where three quarters of the people in the room can’t critique a set of numbers without pulling out a calculator and slowing us down.’”

[Cognitive load](#) theory posits that the human working memory cannot process many new elements at any one time, but the human brain can process very large amounts of stored information. What this tells teachers is that we need to help students to bank knowledge in their long term memory, so that they can use their working memory to learn new things or do higher order thinking. For example, knowing things like times tables or phonics with automaticity and fluency leaves room in the working memory to be able to focus on more sophisticated aspects of problems or language.

Dylan Wiliam, in his book *Creating the schools our children need: Why what we’re doing now won’t help much (and what we can do instead)*, points to long-term memory, arguing that:

“what our students need is more to think *with*. The main purpose of curriculum is to build up the content of long-term memory so that when students are asked to think, they are able to think in more powerful ways.” (2018, p.134)

[Critical thinkers need knowledge on which to build, and creators need to know the foundations on which they are innovating.](#)

## Pedagogy matters

How we teach also matters. In schools we should be asking ourselves:

- How do we decide which teaching strategies to deploy?
- On what evidence do we base our decisions?
- How do we know what is likely to be in the best interests of the student?

In a [previous blog post](#) I outline what research literature indicates about what effective teachers do. They:

- Purposefully design learning opportunities;
- Diagnose student progress to inform both teaching and learning;
- Fight for their students’ learning;
- Personalise learning for students; and
- Provide meaningful and appropriate feedback.

Barak Rosenshine's [principles of instruction](#) give one list of teaching strategies likely to be effective:

- Review previous learning.
- Provide new material in small steps with student practice after each step.
- Limit the amount of material students receive at one time.
- Give clear and detailed instructions and explanations.
- Ask good questions and check the responses of all students.
- Provide models, exemplars and worked examples.
- Guide student practice.
- Check for student understanding.
- Help students obtain a high success rate.
- Provide scaffolds for difficult tasks.
- Require and monitor independent practice.
- Provide timely, systematic feedback.
- Engage students in regular review of their learning and self-assessment.

In my own classroom, I ask myself:

- Who is doing the thinking in our classrooms?
- Who is working harder: teacher or student?

These are questions are anchors that help me to consider my pedagogy in ways that empower and expect students to be doing the cognitive work.

**But knowledge and teaching are not all that matters in teaching and learning. >>>**

**Relationships matter.**

Relationships are also at the heart of learning.

In Australia one of our professional standards states that “Teachers know their students well.” Steve Biddulph says that “boys learn teachers not subjects.” An oft-quoted line, attributed to a number of people such as Carl Buehner and Maya Angelou, resonates with teachers and the student experience of teaching:

“People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.”

When I threw the question ‘What matters in teaching and learning’ out to Twitter last night, I received more than 70 replies in 24 hours. Many of these tweets centred around relationships (student-teacher, but also staff and families). Cameron Paterson pointed me towards this video of [Rita Pierson’s TED talk](#) in which she says “kids don’t learn from people they don’t like” and “seeks first to understand rather than to be understood.” You can read what Twitter had to say in [the thread here](#).

I like to think about the concept, from psychology, of a ‘holding environment’ in which members of the community or organisation feel ‘held’ in a culture of high support and high challenge. How students feel and relate in our school and classroom matters. They need psychological safety.

## **Identity and belonging matter.**

Like relationships, students need a sense of belonging and of being seen for who they are.

We can consider:

- Who are our learners now, and who do they and we want them to *become*?
- To what extent do our students feel and see themselves belonging in our school community?

## **Context matters.**

Research can only tell us what *has worked* in particular situations. It doesn't tell us what to do or what *might work* for our students. [Research can, however, help us to make better decisions](#) about how best to serve our students.

Those teachers within a classroom and leaders within a school know their students and community. Those working with students and families each day are the people best placed to serve them.

## **Culture matters.**

[Cultures of trust](#) and empathy are key to schools that are able to support the learning and wellbeing of their students and staff. Those cultures can be academic, pastoral, professional and community cultures.

We can ask:

- How do we collectively approach teaching, learning and pastoral matters?
- What are our students' work habits and attitudes to school and learning?
- How engaged are our families in student learning?
- How well do we work together as a staff?

And we can work on culture as a foundation stone of the teaching and learning work we do.

## **Engagement matters.**

Knowledge and skills are central to student learning, but we also want students to be lifelong learners who are curious and driven to learn and to solve problems.

- How do we enhance student motivation and excitement about learning?
- How do we facilitate learning that matters to students?

## **Finally, our moral purpose matters.**

I recently heard Michael Fullan saying that it is today's students who will change the world for the better, partly because of their education, and partly because of the anxiety and alarm they feel about the state of the world, that is propelling them towards being agents of positive change.

In 1947 [Martin Luther King Junior wrote](#) that:

“Education must enable one to sift and weigh evidence, to discern the true from the false, the real from the unreal, and the facts from the fiction. The function of education, therefore, is to teach one to think intensively and to think critically. But education which stops with efficiency may prove the greatest menace to society. The most dangerous criminal may be the man gifted with reason, but with no morals.”

Teachers and school leaders have a moral obligation to our students. We can consider our own moral purpose, and how we help students to develop character and their own moral compass and purpose.

- How do we facilitate students as lifelong learners, ethical active citizens and empathetic constructive problem seekers and solvers?
- How can and do we support students to contribute to a world that’s worth living in?

### **Asking ‘What matters?’, matters.**

In our edited book, [\*Flip the System Australia\*](#), my co-editors and I chose the subtitle: *What Matters in Education*. The book looked beyond a ‘what works’ agenda and asked (and in some ways proposed hopeful possible answers to) questions of what matters, what should matter, and how we can focus our education systems on equity, democracy and inclusion.

Teaching is difficult, complex, human, relational work. So much matters, but if we keep the student at the centre of our thinking, we’re off to a good start.