

What is a good teacher?

By Laura van der Lubbe

Teachers come in all shapes and sizes. As I have had teachers around me for almost 20 years now, I can say this from my own experience. Recently I (part time) joined the teacher side and it even gave me more insights in the weird species they call teachers. Turns out they are humans after all. Different tempers, approaches, motivations, styles etcetera. It made me wonder, what is a good teacher?

The question itself sounds almost unanswerable, just like the question "what is the meaning of life". However, believing Siri, this question can easily be answered with the answer "42". Asking Siri, who should be my personal assistant believing the advertisement, what a good teacher is, was however not so satisfying. It gave me different links to websites discussing this topic, but I simply wanted one clear answer. So I have to do some investigation myself. As I am aware of the sensibility of the question to things like context and personal opinion I will give a literature based answer to the question "what is a good teacher" based on three different sources.

Before we are even ready to start answering the main question of this essay we have to understand the meaning of the question. We are looking for "a good teacher", but how do we define good? What instruments do we have to measure this? Is it solely based on subjective measurements or are there objective means such as the rate of success of a teacher's students? In the article by F.A.J. Korthagen (2004) [1] an attempt has been made to create a framework to define a good teacher. It is important to create a framework around the assessment of a good teacher, for example for the improvement of teacher education programs. Often policy makers are unaware of the complexity of the subject. It is also important to create such a framework so it can be used for reflection.

Attempts to do so have been made, but are often the subject of debate. Creating a list of competencies has been such an attempt, but researchers doubt whether it is possible to describe a teacher based on such a list. A risk with such lists is also that they become long enumerations of necessary skills for teachers. For such things context is important, which is hard to express in a list. Later attempts were directed towards the person of the teacher. It failed to obtain much support but it was a very valuable attempt. It is important to note that both approaches are still used, policy-makers often focus on the competencies, as a way to express the outcomes of a teacher's teaching. Researchers often focus on the personal characteristics of a teacher. However both the approaches are too narrow. [1]

D. Goldhaber (2002) [2] writes about teacher characteristics influencing the performance of students. As it turns out that the education level of the teacher is not as important as earlier has been assumed. He also writes about how it is often hard to find sound research about teacher characteristics and their influence on students behavior. Reasons for this are the different levels in education, each having their own characteristics which might make them incomparable and therefore much data per level is needed to draw sound conclusions. Also it is often hard to take certain characteristics apart and measure them. [2] So long list with an enumeration of skills might look easy to evaluate, it may be harder in practice.

The model of Bateson, often referred to as onion model, supports various levels that are of influence. Each perspective formulates its own answer to what a good teacher

is. The outermost levels are 'environment' and 'behavior', focusing on things such as problems in classes and how to deal with these. Next is the level of 'competencies', influencing the (expressed) 'behavior'. Those three levels are of influence on the so called inner levels, but this also works the other way around. The inner levels consist of: (1) 'beliefs' that the teacher has about certain things related to teaching, these beliefs can already be developed when the teacher still was a student him/herself. (2) 'identity' is the way that the teacher describes him/herself and finally the 'mission' level, this deep and highly personal issue is about what a teacher's "higher goal" is. The 'identity' level turns out to be very important and reflecting on own experiences (with own teachers) plays a role in the development of this. It is however hard to change a teacher's identity. [1]

Now that this framework is sketched it is possible to reflect on the question this essay is all about (what is a good teacher?) in a more informed manner. It is now clear that answering this question is still hard and sometimes there might be a difference between "a good teacher" (somebody that has good competencies, beliefs etcetera) and "good teaching". Sometimes even though the teacher can be described as a good teacher, certain environmental issues will influence the teacher and retain him or her from "good teaching". The optimal situation is hard to define, but keeping all the levels in line is a way to get there. [1]

In a article by P. Miller [3] I found a quote from *The Little Prince* saying "That which is essential cannot be seen with the eye. Only with the heart can one know it rightly." This perfectly applies to teaching, where it is hard to define what a good teacher means and how to become one. Qualities mentioned in the article apply to 4 different topics: affective characteristics, including enthusiasm, encouragement, humor, interest in the student, availability and mental health. The second topic is skills, including creativity and being challenging. Classroom management includes pace and fairness and finally a good teacher needs to have academic knowledge, and needs to be able to be honest about gaps in this knowledge. [3]

Based on the sources it has become clear that being a good teacher is not easy, not (solely) because the skills are hard, but because it is hard to exactly know what a good teacher is. On the one hand being a good teacher is about (objectively) measurable skills, which is vulnerable to bias. [3] On the other hand it is about the person of the teacher itself, which is a more vague and deep notion. [1] Looking at how P. Miller describes a good teacher this distinction is also visible. While affective characteristics is about the persona of the teacher, skills, classroom management and teacher's knowledge are about the teaching skills. [3] Which characteristics are most important to you is dependent on your view on education, policy makers and researchers tend to look at it differently. [1]

Maybe you're wondering by now what all of this has to do with the course 'Serious Gaming', which is the reason why I am writing this essay. For the final project me and my teammates Kim Bosman and Annigje van der Wel have worked on an application called 'test the teacher'. It basically is only a prototype in a very conceptual stage, but this essay is meant as a start to give it some more background. Test the teacher shows different scenarios and asks the teacher its response on the situation, giving the teacher three different options. Each of these possible reactions is linked to a teacher type, ranging from bad to mediocre to good. In order to define these terms (bad, mediocre and good) we used our own experience.

The onion framework sketched earlier in this essay can be used to reflect on a teacher teaching, which is also the purpose of 'test the teacher'. When the application would be further developed it would therefore be important to take all the different levels into account when creating the different scenario sketches. Also the feedback at the end of the test can be further specified including the different levels. With this a more supported means can be created to encourage teachers to reflect more often, and honest, on their own behavior. It might also be interesting for teacher to do the test with their students, to see whether there are discrepancies in the way that the teacher sees its own teaching, influencing the 'identity' level, and the way that students see the teacher's teaching.

An important advantage of using a tool such as 'test the teacher' is that you can incorporate the influence of the environment more easily. When you simply ask "how would you react to this event?" the environment is unclear and it is less easy to judge the quality of a teacher based on its answer. The more visual approach, using XIMPEL, supports the sketching of an environment around the event. You are now no longer asking "what would you do in the case of such an event?", you are now sketching a situation, including a specific event, and ask the reaction in this specific case. Allowing a more supported judgment on the quality of the teacher. Another advantage is that teachers are confronted with different types of teachers during the test. This already gives them the ability to reflect on it during the test. It also helps them to shape their 'identity'. When a teacher sees an example of a mediocre teacher in which he/she recognizes its own teaching style, compared to a good teacher's reaction it might change its view of a good teacher because of this. Which is already an important factor in improving.

Being a good teacher is about more than just mastering knowledge and skills, it is also about who you are as a person/teacher. Hopefully a reflection mean such as 'test the teacher' can help teachers to explore their strengths and weaknesses and further develop themselves.

Resources

[1] In search of the essence of a good teacher: towards a more holistic approach in teacher education – F.A.J. Korthagen - 2004
<http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0742051X03001185>

[2] The mystery of good teaching – D. Goldhaber - 2002
<https://www.stcloudstate.edu/tpi/initiative/documents/preparation/The%20Mystery%20of%20Good%20Teaching.pdf>

[3] Ten characteristics of a good teacher – Patricia Miller - 1987
<http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ971241.pdf>