

What Makes a Good Teacher?

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Introduction

A good teacher is not defined by one personality type, one classroom technique, or the ability to entertain every student. Good teaching is the disciplined practice of helping learners acquire knowledge, skills, judgment, confidence, and increasing independence. It combines subject expertise with careful planning, explanation, assessment, relationships, and reflection. The teacher must also work within real conditions: class size, curriculum, time, staffing, leadership, technology, student needs, and the availability of materials. (Hattie, 2009; Rosenshine, 2012)

The original discussion rightly emphasizes resources, engagement, empathy, patience, and flexibility. These qualities become more useful when connected to specific professional decisions. A teacher's effectiveness depends not merely on being caring or passionate but on translating care into clear instruction, fair expectations, responsive support, and opportunities for students to think. (Hattie, 2009)

Knowing the Subject and the Learning Goal

Strong teaching begins with secure knowledge of what is being taught. Subject knowledge allows a teacher to select accurate examples, identify common misconceptions, answer questions honestly, and decide which details are central. Pedagogical content knowledge goes further: it includes knowing how learners typically understand or misunderstand a topic and how to represent difficult ideas in accessible forms. (Renshine, 2012)

A lesson should have a clear purpose. Students need to know what they are expected to learn, why it matters, and what successful work looks like. A vague intention to "cover" a chapter can lead to activity without learning. A precise goal guides explanation, practice, questioning, and assessment. Good teachers also connect the day's objective with previous learning and future applications, helping students build an organized body of knowledge. (Renshine, 2012)

Clear Explanation and Cognitive Guidance

Clarity is more than speaking slowly. It involves sequencing ideas, defining unfamiliar terms, using examples and non-examples, checking assumptions, and managing the amount of new information introduced at one time. Experts can forget how many steps novices need. An effective teacher makes hidden reasoning visible by modeling how to solve a problem, analyze evidence, revise a paragraph,

interpret a source, or evaluate an argument. (Rosenshine, 2012)

Guidance should change as competence grows. Early instruction may require explicit demonstration and structured practice. Later, students should make more decisions, compare strategies, and solve less familiar problems. Support that is never removed can create dependence, while discovery without sufficient prior knowledge can produce confusion. Good teaching balances explanation and inquiry according to the learner and the task. (Rosenshine, 2012)

Resources as Tools Rather Than Substitutes

Funding and resources matter. Students cannot receive equitable opportunities when classrooms lack safe buildings, suitable texts, laboratory materials, accessibility tools, qualified staff, or reliable connectivity. Teachers often compensate with personal spending and unpaid labor, but individual sacrifice is not a sustainable education policy. (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017)

At the same time, expensive technology does not automatically improve learning. Slides, videos, worksheets, simulations, and artificial-intelligence tools are useful only when they serve an instructional purpose. A worksheet can support retrieval or writing practice; it can also become meaningless busywork. A video can reveal a process; it can also encourage passive viewing. The teacher must decide what students should do with the resource—predict, explain, calculate, discuss, create, or reflect. (Hattie, 2009)

Good teachers design for accessibility. They provide captions, readable documents, multiple ways to participate, and suitable accommodations. Universal design does not mean reducing intellectual challenge. It means removing avoidable barriers so that difficulty comes from the learning goal rather than from an inaccessible format.

Engagement as Intellectual Participation

An engaging tone can invite attention, but engagement should not be confused with constant amusement. Students may be quiet while thinking deeply, and a lively room may still produce little learning. Intellectual engagement occurs when students are required to retrieve knowledge, explain reasoning, ask questions, compare evidence, make choices, and receive feedback. (Rosenshine, 2012; Hattie, 2009)

Teachers can build curiosity by presenting a puzzle, contradiction, case, image, demonstration, or meaningful problem. They should then connect interest to disciplined study. Classroom discussion is strongest when participation is structured, students have enough knowledge to contribute, and the teacher presses for evidence rather than accepting the first answer.

Questions should serve different purposes. Some check factual recall; others reveal misconceptions,

require explanation, or invite evaluation. Waiting after asking a question and giving all students time to think prevents discussion from becoming a conversation with the quickest volunteers. (Rosenshine, 2012)

Assessment for Learning

A good teacher continually gathers evidence about what students understand. This does not require frequent high-stakes tests. Short retrieval questions, exit responses, demonstrations, drafts, observations, and conversations can expose gaps before they become permanent. The teacher then adjusts instruction rather than merely recording failure. (Wiliam, 2011)

Feedback is most useful when it is timely, specific, and actionable. “Good job” may encourage but does not show how to improve. Excessive correction can overwhelm. Effective feedback identifies the goal, the current performance, and a manageable next step. Students also need opportunities to use feedback through revision or further practice. (Wiliam, 2011; Hattie, 2009)

Grades should be transparent and based on relevant evidence. Behavior, neatness, speed, and academic mastery should not be mixed carelessly. Fair assessment considers reliability, accessibility, and the possibility that one task may not fully represent learning. (Wiliam, 2011)

Empathy, Patience, and High Expectations

Empathy allows a teacher to interpret behavior and difficulty without rushing to blame. A student may be affected by disability, language development, hunger, anxiety, family responsibility, trauma, or an earlier gap in knowledge. Understanding context does not mean abandoning standards. It helps the teacher choose a response that makes improvement more likely.

Patience is active rather than passive. It includes explaining differently, allowing practice, teaching routines, and recognizing gradual progress. It also involves setting boundaries consistently. A caring classroom is not one without consequences; it is one in which expectations are taught, applied proportionately, and separated from humiliation.

High expectations should be paired with credible support. Telling students that they can succeed has limited value when work is inaccessible or feedback is absent. A good teacher communicates belief through challenging tasks, structured assistance, and the refusal to define a learner by one mistake. (Hattie, 2009)

Relationships and Classroom Belonging

Students learn more readily when they believe that the teacher knows them, treats them fairly, and

wants them to succeed. Relationships are built through daily actions: learning names, listening, following through, acknowledging effort accurately, protecting students from ridicule, and showing interest without invading privacy. (Hattie, 2009)

Belonging also depends on representation and classroom culture. Examples, texts, and displays should not imply that only one group produces knowledge or possesses authority. A good teacher pronounces names carefully, challenges stereotypes, and creates norms in which disagreement can occur without personal attack.

Trust does not require pretending to know everything. Admitting uncertainty, correcting an error, and showing how to verify information model intellectual honesty. Students learn that expertise includes revision.

Flexibility Without Lowering Coherence

Students differ, but the claim that each has a fixed “learning style” requiring a matching method is not well supported. Flexibility is better understood as responding to prior knowledge, language, disability, motivation, pace, and the demands of the subject. All learners may benefit from combining words, examples, images, practice, and discussion when those modes fit the content. (Hattie, 2009)

Responsive teaching may involve regrouping students, offering additional models, extending a task, changing the pacing, or using a different analogy. It should not produce ten unrelated curricula in one room. Shared goals and coherent sequences remain necessary. (Rosenshine, 2012)

Professional Judgment and Collaboration

Teaching is not an isolated performance. Good teachers collaborate with colleagues, special educators, counselors, librarians, families, and community partners. They examine student work, share resources, coordinate support, and learn from observation. Collaboration is particularly important when a student’s needs cross academic, emotional, health, and safeguarding domains. (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017)

Professional judgment includes knowing when to refer a concern and when confidentiality must yield to child-protection duties. Teachers should not diagnose conditions beyond their competence. They document observations, follow policy, and work with qualified professionals.

Reflection and Continued Learning

Experience alone does not guarantee improvement. A teacher can repeat the same year many times. Reflective practice asks what students actually learned, which evidence supports that conclusion,

whose participation was limited, and what should change next time. (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017)

Professional learning is strongest when it is sustained, connected to curriculum, supported by coaching or collaboration, and applied in classrooms. One-off inspirational sessions rarely transform practice. Teachers need time to study content, rehearse methods, observe examples, receive feedback, and evaluate impact. (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017)

The Conditions That Enable Good Teaching

Discussions of teacher quality can become unfair when they ignore working conditions. Large classes, unstable staffing, inadequate planning time, low compensation, excessive administrative demands, unsafe environments, and constant policy changes constrain even skilled teachers. Responsibility is shared by school leaders and governments. (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017)

Effective systems provide preparation, induction, mentoring, useful materials, manageable workloads, and leadership that protects instructional time. They also evaluate teaching through multiple forms of evidence rather than one test score or one observation. (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017)

Conclusion

A good teacher combines knowledge, clarity, assessment, empathy, patience, high expectations, and the ability to adapt. Resources matter, but the teacher must use them purposefully. Engagement matters, but it should lead to thinking rather than mere activity. Relationships matter, but care must be expressed through fair routines and effective instruction. Most importantly, good teachers remain learners: they examine evidence, collaborate, correct errors, and improve their practice. Their work is personal, intellectual, and institutional, which means societies that want excellent teaching must support the conditions in which it can occur. (Hattie, 2009; Rosenshine, 2012; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017)

References

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