1 Introduction: Theory, practice and the elements of teaching

Effective, enjoyable teaching is about knowing what to do (or refrain from doing) and being able to do it. It is about beginnings and endings, introductions and conclusions, process and content, absence and presence. It is about being authentically ‘you’ while also being totally engaged with other people: the learners.

Teaching, like other abilities, develops through a combination of thoughtful practice, reflection and stimulation. This guide is intended to provide some of that stimulation, introducing some key concepts and practical issues with a view to prompting critical reflection on your own practice – and perhaps pointing the way to new things to try. In particular, this book tries to explain why top teachers do things the way they do and why some aspects of teaching are not nearly as simple as they initially appear. It also underlines why a full conception of the idea of ‘the teacher’ is immensely valuable.

Getting a grip on learning and teaching in the adult context is arguably even more difficult than it is in the context of the child. In most cases, we at least have a common notion of what a teacher of children ‘looks like’ – but teaching adults means many different things to different people. Indeed, although this book is aimed at the ‘teachers’ of adults, I fully anticipate that readers may be drawn from any professional background. One of the fascinations of this field is that individuals from all walks of life find themselves required to engage in adult teaching and learning, bringing with them a huge variety of perspectives and experience. To meet this challenge effectively, they must nonetheless all become professional in their approach, whatever their job title – and, at heart, being professional begins with an appreciation of the values underlying the practice of teaching and an acquaintance with some of the big ideas. Whoever you are, therefore, this book has something for you.

Where to start? I could begin with a definition, or a summary of published research in the field, or a clever quotation. Yet teaching and learning are social activities – and teaching skill is often largely developed through legitimate peripheral participation in established ‘communities of practice’ (Lave and Wenger 1991), so it may be helpful to introduce the various areas in which I have worked, not least as a model of the very great expansion of opportunity and reorientation that exist for teachers.
2 ADULT TEACHING AND LEARNING

Introduction to the author

I like teaching people to do things. Where there is a practical application to the subject of learning, the teacher gets the benefit of (more or less) immediate feedback as to whether the learning is happening. Even better, learner and teacher enjoy moments of success together, and share failures and frustrations. Both experiences are to be expected, as part of the inevitable ‘messiness’ of all learning. This process is both my passion and my profession.

I initially trained and worked as a comprehensive secondary school teacher, mostly teaching physical activities ranging from dance to dinghy sailing. The young people whom I taught never failed to stimulate, challenge, amuse and amaze me. Nevertheless, after about a decade in practice, the fundamental changes in British state education introduced in the 1980s led me to change career direction. A new political attention to education led to the introduction of the national (e.g. centrally controlled) curriculum, standard assessment tests and directed teacher time in state schools. So I looked for work in a further education (FE) college, teaching drama to young adults. In formal terms, I was entirely untrained for this new role (and certainly inexperienced), even though the students I taught were of a roughly similar age to those I had taught in school. I learned through experience or, in professional terms, as a self-directed (even ‘autodidactic’), autonomous adult learner. Jargon aside, I gained a thorough experience of the value of adult learning in supporting, working round, and creating opportunities for, career change. From work in FE, I went to work for the local educational authority, mediating between educational policy and policy-makers, and professional teaching practice and teachers. Slowly, my focus moved to the professional development of teachers more generally.

As the agenda for change shifted from secondary to higher education, I moved to work at University College London (UCL), widening my field of work to include the provision of adult learning and professional development opportunities across the university. I also extended my engagement with the professional development of teachers, establishing UCL’s Masters in Adult Learning and Professional Development, and then leading its Masters in Education. In this context, I have been privileged to work with a diverse group of people (including doctors, lawyers, clergy, members of the armed forces, social workers, museum curators, art historians, learning technologists, administrators, linguists, nurses, therapists, private sector trainers and developers, and instructional designers) but all engaged in the business of adult learning.

My professional life has thus revolved around learning, teaching and professional development; I have enjoyed opportunities to engage with
these activities in all roles – as teacher, student and even ‘organizer’, ‘policy-maker’, ‘procurer’ or ‘consumer’ – and in the widest range of contexts, crossing disciplines, ages and geographical boundaries. These have included all four principal sectors of adult learning: higher education (HE), adult education, work-based learning, continuing professional development (CPD), and informal and community-based learning. This experience has given me ample opportunity to become expert in the practice of professional teaching.

I am also quite sure about how much I now enjoy teaching grown-ups, and especially working with learners who themselves are responsible for teaching or supporting the learning of others. Contributing to another person’s learning is as rewarding a job as one can find anywhere.

**Bringing practice and theory together**

Theory is fundamental. A sound understanding of theory is essential to the development of a teaching professional. However, in many cases, theory – and the process of theorizing – may seem an ivory tower phenomenon, often apparently divorced from day-to-day practical experience. This book seeks to correct that impression. It provides a first interface between theory and practice, emphasizing the reflexive relationship between the two. (In other words, theorizing will influence practice and the act of bringing understandings from practice into dialogue with theory may, in due course, influence the theory itself.) It will help you to explore the assumptions which underpin current performance and encourage experimentation with new approaches. A consideration of theory without practice frequently leads to abstraction; practice without theory leads to the repetition of error and impeded development.

This book is not a textbook but a primer for further study, thought and professional reflection. In so doing, the book is consciously aligned with the thinking of Stephen Brookfield, who said:

Theorizing should not be seen as a process restricted to the academy and the preserve of the intelligentsia, but rather as an inevitability of sentient existence. A theory is nothing more or less than a set of explanatory understandings that help us to make sense of some aspect of the world . . . Interpreting, predicting, explaining, and making meaning are acts we engage in whether or not we set out deliberately to do so, or whether or not we use these terms to describe what we do.

(Brookfield, 2005: 3)
It must be underlined that there is a lot of theory out there. The study of adult teaching and learning can routinely draw on the fields of sociology, social psychology, psychology, social anthropology, education, philosophy, literature, history, theology, linguistics and so on. Each of these fields offers particular theoretical perspectives, at least some of which may be in competition with one another.

There is a serious question as to which bits of theory have been selected for inclusion in this book. Instinctively, one might assume them to be the ‘basic’ ones – but even the process of identifying core or basic theory is both challenging and contested. Many experts will come to different conclusions about which perspectives are essential. Use of theory is thus a selective task.

Considering the selection of theories, it is important to remember that the process is frequently (indeed, some would say inevitably) influenced by their compatibility with external factors (including policy goals to which the selector subscribes); outside the confines of pure academic study, theories are rarely judged or compared purely on their own merits. This observation is not a criticism: in attempting to select a good or important theory, one is almost always faced with the question ‘is this a good theory for some other purpose or ‘by’ some other standard. Thus, in trying to identify the most ‘important’ theories, or the most ‘helpful’ theories – let alone the ‘right’ theory – we almost always end up having reference to something else.

A classic example of this phenomenon can be drawn from the very notion of theory and practice. To answer whether a particular theory is good, important or right, one frequently asks whether it is right for a particular form of practice. But individual opinion on the nature of teaching practice is in turn potentially influenced by other theoretical perspectives, as well as policy concerns, identity, personal history and so on. For example, even apparently simple questions in this context are hard to answer: is teaching a technical process or an art? There is a temptation for policy-makers, or those with organizational responsibility for the delivery of teaching or training (as opposed to those with operational responsibility, i.e. those at the sharp end), to see it in a purely organizational context: provided appropriate resources are supplied, and the system is properly managed, teachers will deliver a measurable and predictable learning ‘product’. Equally problematic, there is a tendency (although perhaps not so uniform) among those concerned with the practice of teaching to see it as an art, incapable of quantification, and only imperfectly understood by the uninitiated. Neither of these caricatures is entirely true – but neither is entirely false. From personal experience, we can see that both descriptions have strengths and weaknesses, and that the rather stereotyped attitudes I have described are informed by a
variety of factors, some rational and some irrational, some conscious and some unconscious.

For all these reasons, we might have some cause to distrust any person who presents a theory or meta-theory as an answer. As individuals, we will be inclined to find certain perspectives more or less convincing. We can all, however, find great value in theorizing as a process to assist us in understanding and improving our practice. Possession of a theory is not a God-substitute, providing a coherent and conclusive account for the entire ‘universe’ of teaching practice. For the purpose of facilitating effective practice, it may be better to conceptualize theory as an intelligent conversational partner, posing many questions and – only when we are very lucky – offering the occasional convincing answer.

Cullen et al. (2002) have produced one of the fullest overviews of pedagogic research in adult learning in the UK to date. It was written for the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) to help it to determine the future direction for the Teaching and Learning Research Programme, possibly the UK’s largest investment in research into the education of adults. While its density means it is not an easy read, its excellence lies in three attributes: its coverage of the field; its attempt towards rendering manageable and comprehensible a highly complex, contested, dynamic academic field in a neutral fashion; and its presentation of adult learning as an under-researched field which is essentially practice driven rather than theory led:

The key realities are: firstly, there is little established ‘evidence base culture’ in teaching and learning. Secondly, pedagogic understandings are shaped by different – and sometimes conflicting – patrimonies across each sector. Thirdly, however, there has been a significant – and complex – degree of ‘inter-breeding’ between the sectors of post-compulsory education, and it is often difficult to attribute a particular set of pedagogic ‘outcomes’ to particular sources of evidence. Fourthly, practices are either grounded in the day to day minutiae of ‘chalkface’ learning delivery (and hence ungrounded in theory) or, conversely, are tied to a particular ‘grand learning theory’ and are unsubstantiated in practice.

(Cullen et al. 2002: 3)

This book is not a critique of the study, nor a comprehensive overview of the field, nor the development of a meta-theory. Indeed, the study itself underlines that theory is not a panacea. In truth, effective teaching is dependent upon a wide variety of factors, some under the teacher’s control and some not:
we cannot say anything concrete about ‘what works’ over and above the relatively banal . . . In summary, the evidence suggests that what works is dependent on factors like:

- whether the pedagogic approach and learning arrangements adopted are consistent with the socio-cultural context in which learning takes place;
- the motivation of the learners (although motivation, and in particular its relationship to ‘learner-empowerment’ remains a contested issue in the literature);
- the competencies of ‘teachers’ and ‘mentors’ in the new roles required by the ‘new pedagogy’;
- the extent to which the expectations raised by learning can be met outside the immediate learning environment (and particularly in relation to delivering on ‘life chances’ like job opportunities);
- the extent to which the teaching and learning process is geared towards the ‘pace’ of the learner;
- the extent to which learning arrangements address the particular socio-cultural characteristics and ‘life world’ of excluded groups;
- the goodness of fit between learning arrangements (and learning content) and the purposes of learning (for fun; to enhance self-esteem; to enhance the career).

(Cullen et al. 2002: 13–14)

In accord with the thoughts above, this book draws upon, and encourages consideration of, perspectives from a wide variety of contexts and disciplines. In the development of my own practice, key readings from within the field (Dewey, Maslow, Kolb, Knowles, Lave and Wenger, Rowland, Barnett, Cranton, Mezirow, and Brookfield) have ranged alongside those drawn from ‘outside’ disciplines such as theology (Ford), philosophy (Ryle, Ricoeur, Levinas), anthropology (Geertz), psychology (Goffman, Csikszentmihalyi, Jung, Furnham, Maslow), linguistics (Tannen) and critical theory (Bourdieu, Eagleton, Habermas), as well as ideas derived from the arts (visual and creative), popular culture and sport. Some of these influences will be reflected in this text; others may not. It is important to emphasize that adult learning and teaching is not just a matter of cognition, as the heavy emphasis in the literature on this aspect of theory seems to imply. Rather, the twin processes of learning and teaching are situated in a social, cultural, emotional and physical context. Failing to acknowledge this reality is problematic.

It is not necessary for readers of this book to study or master all of the sources which have been helpful to me. Although I will refer to them
along the way, it will frequently be for the purpose of illustration rather than prescription. One might term the writers upon which I draw my theoretical ‘family’. Very few individuals in this world have identical relatives (and, indeed, the diversity is rather refreshing) – but most of us are likely to suffer if we have absolutely no family at all. This guide will be successful if it poses the questions which help the reader to begin to search for their theoretical families.

Finally, it is worth remembering that family members do not necessarily have to agree with each other (although a certain amount of general sympathy may be helpful)! In confronting the rather dazzling array of potential theoretical perspectives, it is important not to let them become paralysing.

**Dualisms in theory and practice – and how to handle them**

At least in the intellectual tradition of western Europe, theoretical development can be helpfully analysed by exploring the idea of ‘duality’. In the modern, binary world, there is even more of a temptation to declare that a thing is one or the other, on or off, 1 or 0. I do not think that is a universally helpful approach.

A common assumption is that theory develops ‘dialectically’: Thinker A proposes a theory and, either in response or independently, Thinker B suggests a competing theory. Sometimes, there is an inclination to say that one approach is ‘right’ and to reject the other: frequently, one might condemn this response as simplistic. In other cases, the clash of theories itself is thought to contain the seeds of a third theory, which might be seen as a ‘compromise’ answering the contradictions inherent to the first two. This core idea can be presented as a simple formula:

\[
\text{Theory A} + \text{Theory B} \rightarrow \text{Theory A/B (Theoretical C)}
\]

However, life is rarely this simple. Very often, Theory A and Theory B both have intellectual strengths and weaknesses, but are based on such fundamentally different approaches that a compromise is impossible. In such circumstances, any attempt to force a compromise does such violence to the underlying concepts that the compromise ceases to be meaningful.

Instead, it is often helpful to leave both Theory A and Theory B intact, and to work with them both. Rather than rejecting one out of hand, or sweeping difficulties under the carpet by creating an artificial ‘third way’, practice is more richly considered when examined stereoscopically, a process which uses two separate (and slightly different) perspectives to obtain a more three-dimensional view of the object of study.
In this context, we come to the idea of dualisms. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines a dualism as ‘a system of thought which recognizes two independent principles’. In philosophy, this has been a traditional approach to the question of existence, often reduced to the problem posed by the apparently fundamental distinction between mind and body. A dualistic approach contends that aspects of the mind may not be fully explained by sole reference to its physical properties while simultaneously acknowledging the common sense reality of the existence of the physical world. Any attempt to reconcile the two principles, or to say that one is ‘right’ and the other ‘wrong’, is largely illusory: instead, for practical purposes, the best solution is to acknowledge that both might be ‘true’ – even if the relationship between them is apparently inexplicable. The very same can be said of competing models of theory and practice. A dualism is ‘complementary but conflictual’ (Porter 2003: 28). One does not have to interpret the idea of a dualism as destructive to the idea of ‘truth’. Plato’s approach to mind/body dualism envisaged two entities in constant strife; yet Aristotle could conceive a more cooperative function (Porter 2003), almost a symbiosis. The *taijitu*, a symbol of the notion of *yin* and *yang* central to certain Eastern philosophies (especially those of China, Japan and Korea), offers a useful visualization of the way apparent opposites are held in balance, joined (rather than divided) by the different directions in which they pull.

Recognizing the difficulty inherent in resolving the conflict between theories thus represents an opportunity – if we are minded to grasp it. We can choose whether to work in an ‘either/or’ way or a ‘both/and’ way. This book is firmly committed to the latter option. It demands that we assume responsibility for making qualitative, subjective judgements on the appropriateness of a particular approach to each new situation. As such, we must be committed to a genuinely reflective practice which weighs actual and potential benefits for teachers and learners against actual and potential costs for teachers and learners. A demanding task – and one which can engender feelings of great isolation – I believe it is the only professionally ethical and intellectually honest choice to make.

In the following pages, I present three common dualisms which pervade the teaching and learning of adults. In many cases, there is strong social or political pressure to consider them as alternate choices; in reality, I suggest that each half of these dualisms is vital to a proper conception of the teaching and learning process.

### Teacher-centredness/learner-centredness

The importance of ‘learner-centredness’ is stressed in much modern discourse. Now applied at various levels, it is perceived as a positive value...
for national policy and classroom activity alike. It is frequently (if implicitly) contrasted with the idea of ‘teacher-centredness’, which is often cast in a negative light. Techniques identified as teacher-centred have come to mean all that is didactic, boring, self-serving and neglectful of the interests of learners, while those identified as learner-centred are presented as engaging, relevant and satisfying.

Genuine benefits have been gained from initiatives based on a perceived tension between the focus on teachers and learners (perhaps particularly in terms of quality assurance; see Chapter 3) but there have also been significant losses. Uncritical application of the idea has led to the deprofessionalization of teaching, which includes deskilling and loss of status, esteem, confidence and purpose. At its worst, it has contributed to a loss of identity coupled with a discordant feeling of generic culpability for many social problems. It is important to separate the political functions of the term from its use as a critique of teaching and learning practice.

On unpacking the idea of any teaching and learning experience which is centred solely on the teacher or the learner, difficulties immediately become apparent. A glance at an off-the-cuff list of teacher-centred and learner-centred experiences provides a good illustration.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>‘Teacher-centred’ experiences</th>
<th>‘Learner-centred’ experiences</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A lecture or sermon</td>
<td>Personally set learning objectives</td>
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<tr>
<td>A speech</td>
<td>Presentations made to peers</td>
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<td>An anecdote</td>
<td>Peer feedback</td>
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<td>A joke</td>
<td>Personal interest-based projects</td>
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<tr>
<td>A demonstration</td>
<td>Portfolio assessment</td>
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<tr>
<td>A facilitated group activity</td>
<td>Unfacilitated group activity</td>
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<tr>
<td>A moderated debate</td>
<td>Games</td>
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<td>A guided tour</td>
<td>Journal writing</td>
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First, in terms of potential impact on learning, it can be said that these experiences are all neutral. Their positive or negative effect depends solely on their judicious selection in the circumstances, and the efficacy with which they are accomplished. A lecture can be gripping, inspiring and informative, or it can be tedious, depressing and impossible to penetrate. An unfacilitated group activity can be liberating, empowering and cause for reflection, or it can be bewildering, frustrating and vacuous. A lecture may be well suited for the transmission of esoteric, technical information but not necessarily for literary appreciation.

Second, identifying any given teaching and learning experience as teacher-centred or learner-centred is a more or less arbitrary judgement.
In reading the previous list, many of the classifications may seem open to dispute. It is easy to say in principle that a lecture is teacher-centred – but good lectures are rarely delivered for the lecturer’s benefit. In the selection of subject matter, pitch and tone (quite apart from considering the possibilities for teacher–learner interaction), the lecturer is thinking of the learner’s needs and interests. The true measure of a successful lecture is defined by the learner. The distinction between teacher-centred and learner-centred activities becomes even more contested when we consider the idea of facilitated group activities. These have plenty of opportunities for learner contribution, and for learner leadership – yet the teacher, facilitating the group, plays (among others) a gatekeeping and time-management function which, although relatively hands-off, may be highly influential. Can we really say that any effective teaching and learning experience is totally dominated by the presence of one party rather than the other? I would suggest that we cannot.

To preserve the meaning of a learner-centred or teacher-centred model, the only possible conclusion is that the terms relate not to the attributes of the specific activities employed but to the focus of the teacher’s attention. A learner-centred teacher attends to the learner’s needs and interests, rather than those of the teacher. At first glance, one could agree with this principle: surely, it is right that the teacher puts the learner first – teaching is an altruistic profession. Yet, on closer examination, some aspects of the idea of competing models become more problematic. Does any teacher put their needs first? Can you be a good teacher if you do so? If one concludes ‘yes’ and ‘no’ to these questions, then the idea that there are two models of teaching with different areas of focus becomes meaningless: instead, we have simply come up with indirect ways to describe ‘good’ (competent) and ‘bad’ (incompetent) teachers. We must assume, therefore, that the distinction is not meaningless, and therefore that the answer to the second question (‘Can a good teacher put their needs first?’) is ‘Yes’. The only other course is to reason that the answer to the first question (‘Does any teacher put their needs first?’) is ‘No’, at which point the entire discussion becomes irrelevant.

We can reason that a ‘good’ teacher can, in some circumstances, put their needs first by recognizing their professional character. The teacher’s entire professional focus is on communicating their field of knowledge with fidelity and accuracy to the learner in such a way that the learner is nurtured and supported, and is able to develop. If we were to describe an individual to whom the needs of the learner were completely abhorrent, such that they refused to make any consideration of them, that figure would quite simply not be a teacher at all. Equally, it is possible to conceive of circumstances when the teacher’s focus upon the learner must be counterbalanced by other considerations relevant
to their professionalism. The teacher must cater to and protect the needs of all their learners, for a start: what suits one learner may not suit another. Similarly, the teacher must protect the integrity of the subject matter too: some fields of study, on some occasions, require the learner to be challenged to work with the rigours of the subject, and not the other way around. The teacher must also have a care for their professional ethics: they must remain ‘centred’ in their own professional character, which includes attention to the learner’s needs but with a degree of protective attachment.

This very brief analysis leads to the conclusion, therefore, that both teacher-centred and learner-centred models of teaching, if they have any meaning at all, are ‘right’. To be learner-centred is to be a teacher. At the same time, learner-centredness is a necessary but not always sufficient condition for being a teacher. We should recognize that the two models are not in competition but represent a theoretical dualism. A good teacher holds the two concepts in creative tension, and their practice is shaped by the interplay of the two.

Given this conclusion, it might be asked why the rhetoric of learner-centredness has come to be such a big idea in teaching. The reasons are not hard to discern (the coincidence of a practical and a conceptual trend in politics and society) and illustrate the significant role that social, political and economic discourses can have in defining (or confusing) basic professional realities for teachers.

Conceptually, the idea of learner-centredness reflects the ‘victory’ of one theoretical perspective (postmodern understandings of epistemology) over its competitors: the challenge to the existence of the ‘grand narrative’ is also a challenge to the teacher in their traditional role as expert in disciplinary knowledge. Knowledge itself, perceived as decentred, situated and relativist, cannot be transmitted because the teacher ‘knows’ little or no more than the learner. The teacher, thus redundant, falls under suspicion as a mere wielder of power. We can in fact contest this perspective in two ways, however. First, it presupposes a total postmodernist victory. This is wrong on both an internal analysis, because its arguments against hegemony – the ‘normalizing’ dominance of a position which necessitates the subordination of another – forbid its validity as one in its own right, and an external one, because it is but one critical perspective, and by no means the last word. Second, it presupposes that the teacher must be redundant even within its own framework. This is wrong because, provided the postmodern teacher is transparent about their own role (or as transparent as humanly possible), they retain a valid opinion, if not the valid opinion in the classroom. Moreover, through the exercise of professional skill, and bound by relevant professional ethics, they can assist in unlocking the various opinions of the learners in the
classroom, and facilitate the comparison and exploration of these differ-
ing perspectives in a safe and supportive space. Postmodernist critiques
may challenge the hegemony of the teacher – but, in turn, the teacher
is no less equal than others. The hegemony of the learner is equally con-
trary to the postmodernist spirit.

Practically, the notion of learner-centredness has been a convenient
banner for a range of interests which arose from the development of
the knowledge economy, and especially the technicization, marketization and
commodification of education systems. In particular, distributed access
across the population (or a town, university, school or classroom) to infor-
mation networks – which is an expensive new form of infrastructure,
entailing investment in physical plant, hardware and software – finds
an easy justification in the idea that it ‘frees’ the learner from the
shackles of the teacher. Although it is not intended to deny that this
new infrastructure is an overall good, the reverse psychology that was
necessary in order to sell it (teachers can sometimes impede learners)
has had an effect.

The popularity of the notion of learner-centredness may thus be largely
attributed to its value as a political tool for the achievement of certain
objectives rather than as an individually sustainable conceptual model.
On the other hand, the teacher-centredness/learner-centredness dualism
is helpful as a reflection of the nature of the teaching and learning experi-
ence, which requires careful tailoring of all its constituent elements to
the interests of all those involved. This theme underlies much of this
book. We shall explore the various elements involved in the teaching
and learning process in the second half of this chapter.

Models of deficit and abundance

We sometimes talk about teachers working to either a ‘deficit’ or an ‘abund-
ance’ model. What exactly does that mean? How does it help us to plan
and provide the best opportunities for learning?

You are likely to be most familiar with a deficit model. It is so
common that it will generally pass unchallenged, appearing to be plain
common sense. The idea is that people take part in classes in order to
be taught something they do not already know. It sounds obvious,
doesn’t it? The reality, however, is that this is only one of many motiva-
tions for adults to engage with teachers. Sometimes called ‘instruction’,
an example of working effectively within a deficit model from my own
practice would be dinghy sailing. Students arrived in my class knowing
nothing about how to rig and sail a boat. Over a number of sessions
I taught them how to do it, and also why it worked that way (physics
becomes more interesting for some learners when it helps them to
understand what is happening to them and how to control it). I had been thoroughly trained to be able to do this efficiently, safely and in a way which was enjoyable for the participants. Used appropriately, deficit models of teaching can be very satisfying for learners and teachers.

A deficit model tends towards:

- An appreciation of knowledge as being constituted of information which can be transmitted
- Diagnostic measurement of aptitude for a programme of instruction
- Predetermined outcomes for the learning
- Recognition of individual achievement
- ‘Constructive alignment’ (Biggs and Tang 2007) of learners, teaching and assessment.

The apparent opposite is an abundance model, which is characterized by a concern with what the learners bring into the classroom themselves. Some deficit model theorists describe learners as ‘empty vessels waiting to be filled’; abundance model theorists speak in metaphors of journey or growth (see Fox 1983); what comes out of the process is, more or less, the same as what went in, although it is changed and developed.

Abundance models of teaching are characterized by a different attitude to the learners, the teaching and the recognition of success. Confidence in the experience, autonomy and capacity for self-direction of learners may lead to a lesser emphasis on the transmission of predetermined content by the teacher. Instead, participants in the class may be expected to share their existing knowledge or ideas on a topic, and to research particular aspects of that topic for subsequent sharing with the group as a whole. The teacher’s expertise may be located in her/his ability to manage a highly participative process. The learners may have a sense of being ‘in control’; the more expert the teacher, the less they may appear to be doing. Excellent performance in this context is often about knowing when to refrain from action as much as how to take it. When they do come, interventions are generally light-touch and focus attention on the learners’ own ability to find out what they want to know, rather than on virtuoso displays of the teacher’s disciplinary knowledge or practical expertise. At its best, an abundance model of teaching does not draw attention to the teacher. Rather it highlights and celebrates the experience of everyone present in the room.

For all these reasons, although preparation for this kind of teaching is equally important, it is done differently (in practical terms, it is much more open-ended and speculative). The success of the new teaching will depend on the way it articulates with the participants’ understanding of themselves and the models of professionalism, career and personal
identity within which they already work. As a result, participants may not always notice expert performance by teachers operating in an abundance model: whereas participants will often be able to comment positively on the knowledge, presentation style, and so on of ‘instructors’, they may simply not notice how well a group has been facilitated.

An example from my own practice of this form of teaching would be a career and professional development course I run for mid-career scientists. Through a process in which they work with a tutor team and each other, they explore the options available to them, develop their ability to evaluate and choose paths to follow, learn ways to access information, discover their own preferences and so on. This particular model of teaching can be very demanding on both teachers and learners (the fineness of the distinctions involved requires a degree of concentration and experience in order to make the experience really work) but can ultimately be very powerful.

An abundance model will tend towards:

- An epistemology of socially situated and personally constructed knowledge
- Relatively open access to a programme of activities
- Learning outcomes which value autonomy and self-direction
- Inclusion of social learning
- Emphasis on facilitative (sometimes known as non-directive) methods
- Assessment which enables personal selection of ways to present material for examination, and is probably categorical (i.e. pass or refer (fail)) rather than being numerical (i.e. capable of discriminating finely between the performance of different participants in order to produce, for example, an order of relative merit).

Knowles (1980) has written, very influentially, on an abundance model of adult learning which he terms ‘andragogy’. In fact, he draws extensively on an older, European tradition of Volkshochschulen (German for people’s high schools, now generally used to mean adult education centres), which originated in the middle of the nineteenth century. This book does not accept the andragogic model without question, but its influence must be recognized and so references to it will occur from time to time throughout the text.

From this introduction, it should again be clear that neither an abundance nor a deficit model is the only ‘right’ answer. Both provide highly effective ways to conceptualize approaches to teaching and analysing the educational learning process but, again, they cannot be regarded as competing with one another. As a technical matter, it might be fair to
say that these models are descriptions of regimes for practice rather than theories. A dualistic approach to them is helpful, however, not least as it underlines that teachers do not have to be confined to one or another. Although some subjects lend themselves strongly to one form (it is hard – and somewhat worrying! – to imagine an abundance model of driving instruction), they may often be used in concert in classroom contexts. An expert teacher may select one approach for one learning activity, and another for others; a combination of both, according to need, may be especially successful. The teacher should thus keep both models in mind in their practice.

**Behaviourism and cognitivism**

Behaviourism and cognitivism represent two grand theories, or ‘super’ theories, with great significance for adult learning and teaching. Between them, they provide a lens through which almost all teaching issues become clearer: they relate both to methods of teaching and perspectives on the nature of material being taught. In understanding the two, it also becomes much easier to recognize and deal with other relevant theoretical perspectives.

Behaviourism is one of the longest lived adult learning theories. Based on scientific experiments with animals (initially Pavlov’s dogs, followed by Skinner’s rats and Thorndike’s pigeons), the theory drew upon observations of an enduring association between stimulus (such as a bell ringing when food is offered) and response (such as salivation at the sound of the bell even when no food is presented), a process which came to be known as ‘conditioning’ (bell rings; animal is ready to eat). Behaviourism concerned itself only with observable behaviour as evidence of learning, a scientific approach which was important in distinguishing psychology (the discipline within which behaviourism was born) from philosophy. This stance does limit the application of behaviourism to a certain extent, but its impact as a theory should not be underestimated. In particular, it offers an understanding of the teacher’s agency (intentionally exercised or otherwise) in the learning process.

Behaviourism highlights the effects of systematic reinforcement on particular behaviours. Systematically rewarding the response you want from learners will increase the chance that they will continue to make that response. Behavioural approaches may be particularly relevant early in a new course while establishing the ground rules of behaviour during sessions. It is not unreasonable to suggest that a little basic ‘training’, even with adults, can be a welcome way of saving time, establishing group cohesion and reducing anxiety. We might consider, for example,
establishing how references are to be cited in written work to conform to appropriate disciplinary conventions. This is not a negotiated practice (though its purposes, origins and effects can be open to debate), it is something which needs to be done. Similarly, conventions about time-keeping, use of mobile phones or laptops might be managed from a behavioural perspective. There are many ways in which conscious use of the technique may be appropriate, although there are also many contexts in which it may not be so. Much of the training in the armed forces, for example, is based on behavioural techniques: they are well suited to the process of ensuring that people will react in certain ways, or follow certain procedures unquestioningly, especially in high-risk circumstances. Behaviourism is not at all well suited, however, to teaching complex disciplinary knowledge or abstract concepts, such as an ethics course. In essence, behaviourism is well suited to procedural knowledge but it may be less well suited to anything but the most basic ‘propositional’ knowledge.

Teachers can also benefit from an understanding of behaviourism as a way of avoiding learner responses which are not desired. An awareness of behaviourist critiques brings with it an awareness of the consequences of one’s own actions. Behaviourist theory applies not only to our intentional, conscious actions, but also to our unconscious ones: many examples of inappropriate behaviour are conditioned responses, either to something we have done or something done by someone else. We consider them ‘inappropriate’ largely because we fail to recognize the context to which they are related. For example, each time a student hands work in late and it gets marked without any loss of credit, the chance that work will be submitted late again is increased.

A number of researchers had their roots in behaviourist theory but developed work within the cognitive domain. Cognitive theories of learning are concerned with the mental processes which are associated with propositional knowledge (‘knowing that . . .’) and the development of what we perceive to be autonomous or self-directed learning by adults. Tusting and Barton (2006) provide a comprehensible introduction to the theories of learning which have their roots in the discipline of psychology. They say that cognitive theories of learning address the perceived weakness of behaviourism in that it does not really help us to understand how conceptual learning occurs, nor enable us to see how adults gain and enjoy autonomy in learning. They comment that:

cognitivist approaches study the roles of individual, internal, information-processing elements of learning. The roots of cognitivist approaches to learning can be traced back to Gestalt psychology, which drew attention to the significance of questions
of perception, insight and meaning. In particular, it identified the
importance of moments when learning reorganizes experience,
so that the learner suddenly ‘sees’ the whole phenomenon
under study in a new way.

(Tusting and Barton 2006: 6)

Cognitive accounts of learning are based around thought, and espe-
cially how thought and behaviour are linked. Until the development
of sophisticated scanning technology, researchers could not learn much by
watching people thinking; instead, cognitive theorists created models and
taxonomies in order to explain and represent the mental processes asso-
ciated with learning. Originally interested in the successful transmission
of existing bodies of knowledge (both procedural and propositional), later
variants of the cognitive model suggest that the learner is not a passive
recipient of the content being organized and encoded for transmission.
Models began to develop around the idea that learners actually construct
new knowledge by working with that which they already have and
adapting it to account for new information or by working with the
new material to make it fit with what the learner already knows. These
approaches belong within an important subset of cognitivist theory,
known as constructivism (see Chapter 2).

Constructivism is an umbrella term for a clutch of theories which stress
the importance of the active engagement of learners in their learning.
In working with propositions, mediated through peers, teachers, tech-
nology, artefacts or environments, we adjust, amend and rebuild our
knowledge and understanding of the world. As we do this we get
better at doing it. We may even reach the point where a previously un-
interesting and/or baffling field of knowledge becomes personally mean-
ingful (see Chapter 6). Constructivists might tend toward abundance
models of learning and teaching as people work together to enable the
new learning to be developed through discourse on the chosen topic.
Such discourse may generate multiple versions of the knowledge being
constructed on a particular topic. Constructivists tend not to value rote
learning or reproduction of teacher-generated material. They generally
prefer to look for the ability of learners to evaluate critically their own,
and each other’s, statements. Evidence must be cited; bias or the pri-
vilegeing of a particular ideology need to be identified. Constructivist
theory leaves room for the subjective and the personal response. As
such, it is more commonly found within the humanities and arts dis-
ciplines than in the sciences, where positivism is still pretty much the
dominant influence on learning and assessment. Constructivist methods
are particularly suited to complex situations in which it is important for
participants to work out for themselves appropriate courses of action.
They may not seem very efficient if you are tasked with training people to perform routine tasks in line with a set of procedures or protocols, nor would they be an ideal way to organize lifeboat drill on a ship.

**Elements of teaching**

The final section of this chapter (before looking at learning environments and the use of technology in Chapter 2) reviews the key elements of the teaching process. My analysis in this regard is not particularly distinctive: Rogers’s (2007) introduction to adult learning provides a similar narrative, although in greater depth and length.

If you teach, you will certainly be familiar with at least some of the tasks which fit into each element. If you are in a ‘learning support’ role you will certainly be involved with at least some elements, if not others. For the sake of clarity in the text, however, I am going to assume that the ‘teacher’ does them all. In reality, in much of adult learning practice, the elements of teaching are distributed between several specialists who contribute to a teaching team. This can make schemes to reward excellent teachers more difficult to design and implement than some education policy-makers, or institutional managers would like them to be. We shall look briefly at this issue in Chapter 3.

The analysis of the teaching process I propose includes six elements. These are:

- Identification of potential learners, estimating their requirements, and breaking the ice
- Creation, selection and preparation of tasks, experiences and activities
- Preparation of resources
- Performance of tasks, roles and responsibilities
- Assessment and feedback on learning
- Evaluation and review of teaching.

**Identification of potential learners, estimating their requirements and breaking the ice**

The old saying that ‘you can choose your friends but you can’t choose your family’ is also apt when thinking about the relationship between most learners and their teachers. Most teachers inherit learners allocated to them by another teacher or administrator. They are often stuck with each other and must negotiate an effective relationship to make the best of the situation. In the worst-case scenario, they may have to deal with
'baggage' acquired from other members of 'the family' and so be in a marginally less propitious situation to develop a positive working routine than mere strangers.

Experience of both postgraduate teaching and continuing professional development leads me to conclude that the most effective teaching acknowledges the integrity of the discipline being taught while recognizing the knowledge, understanding and experience appropriate to the adult status of the learners. So, assuming you have been selected to teach because you are (in at least some sense!) an expert on the topic of the learning, how do you prepare to engage with the people who will be your learners?

The important attributes of potential and new learners can be grouped in several ways, including the following:

- Physical/developmental characteristics such as age, gender, particular attributes relevant to the situation (e.g. size, weight and fitness if the learning involves physical activity)
- Previous experience such as fluency in the language of instruction, academic credentials and other qualifications, occupation
- Ability to pay the costs of the learning
- Need to benefit from the outcomes of the learning
- Understanding of what the learning will require
- Desire to know more or be able to do something better
- Membership of a group which more powerful people have decided needs to be trained.

Examining the factors listed above, it is clear that some imply a deficit or gap to be filled, and others imply an abundance of knowledge, experience and ability upon which to draw. Awareness of these factors can significantly help in planning teaching. Before a course begins, therefore, it is important to gather as much relevant information about participants as possible. This process may be achieved formally, competitively and expensively (for example, the administration of the GMAT (Graduate Management Admission Test) to likely entrants on prestigious MBAs) or it may be minimal (‘Can you afford to pay the fee?’; ‘Are you free on Tuesdays?’; ‘What topic/module do you have to do next to satisfy the requirements of the programme specification?’). Whatever the context in which you work, successful teaching is often based upon good ‘intelligence’ about the learners. It will help you to design your opening activity (‘You don’t get a second chance to make a first impression’) and help in creating an appropriate mix of activities to challenge and reassure or affirm the learners as the sessions progress.

When starting a new course, some learners may be apprehensive, and all concerned will certainly require the opportunity to acclimatize to the
new situation. In such circumstances, it is worth using short, introductory activities (ice-breakers) to facilitate this. (For related reasons, although with the goal of consolidating the learning experience rather than creating its foundations, teachers should also give some thought to closing activities.) It is essential that all learners feel that you want them to be there. There is merit in demonstrating this in practical ways, perhaps by contacting or meeting them beforehand (by email or by sending copies of relevant handbooks with joining instructions), or by phone, or face-to-face interview. If the latter, structure it so that the new learner realizes you are interested in putting them at their ease, rather than simply wanting to judge them.

Although strategies for initiating teaching vary considerably and different teachers will tend to adopt (with equal validity) different approaches, it is worth highlighting one issue which, if it crops up, will often affect the attitude of new learners regardless of the skill of the teacher’s initial actions. ‘Conscripted’ participants, or those who (for whatever reason) are not beginning the course entirely voluntarily, are likely to behave differently from voluntary participants, even if they have the best of intentions. The exercise of power frequently engenders a feeling of resistance, even in individuals who would otherwise be positively disposed to the learning, and this can manifest itself in unexpected ways. The most overt manifestation can be behaviour directly challenging the integrity of the group or the authority of the teacher; more subtly, passive resistance or truculence can quietly poison the atmosphere of a group and inhibit the formation of good relationships. This behaviour will require the intervention of the teacher: learner disengagement of this type is unlikely to go away on its own. You should think carefully about how, and when, to explore any grievance the relevant learner(s) may feel they have. Manifesting a degree of empathy, listening to and understanding the learner’s problem, and assisting them in exercising their own agency within the context of the classroom may go a long way to restoring their commitment. At the very least, it reaffirms your role as ‘teacher’ and forms the basis for future discussions in resolving the conflict in which they find themselves.

This may seem a rather gloomy note upon which to start – but it highlights an important point. Knowles (1984) articulated a conception of the adult learner as self-directed, internally motivated, interested in problem solving, and the guardian of a stock of prior learning which can be a resource for current study. It is unclear, however, if he meant that all adult learners exhibit these characteristics (i.e. these qualities define what it means to be an adult, rather than a child, learner) or that teachers of adults should seek to provide opportunities for adults to become like this at some point in their lives. Experience of my own learning as an adult,
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and experience as a teacher of many others, leads me to believe that, while Knowles was right to articulate these attributes as one model of adult potential (there are others too: Gilligan (1982) proposes that women’s development into maturity might be characterized very differently), it is certainly not the case that all adults exhibit them all or even some of the time. Even the most confident self-directed and autonomous learner may have their ability to work within their normal spectrum of responses disrupted by the unplanned aspects of a situation (see Chapters 4 and 5). Others – including the ‘conscripts’ to learning – may require a great deal of support before they can even identify with his concept, much less manifest it. Teachers may also find that a room containing several learners who are particularly strongly self-directing is hard to manage for the benefit of all the other participants too.

Creation, selection and preparation of tasks, experiences and activities

Teaching should be eventful. Good teaching can be characterized by the fact that it includes remarkable, astonishing, amusing or affecting things. To a certain extent, teaching is showmanship with a serious purpose. The content of teaching matters but, if learners are not paying attention, it is likely to have no impact. Some teachers, particularly inexperienced ones, spend too much of their preparation on rehearsing their own understanding of the content and not enough time preparing for the event. Content matters – but delivery does too.

Active engagement with the content is also important. Despite what we may like to assume as teachers, the greatest influence on learning success is the amount of time learners devote to purposeful engagement with the material to be learned, and the timely and accurate feedback they receive on their performance (Coffield et al. 2004). In other words, no matter how eloquent the delivery, or well argued the point, one of the biggest factors contributing to success is ‘time on task’. As a result, teachers should be alive to the myriad options for stimulating (or requiring) learners to engage actively with the relevant content through the use of appropriately designed activities.

In considering strategies for presentation, as well as potential activities, teachers may benefit from overtly considering the sensory experience that the learners will have of the session. Despite the primary school overtones, successful teaching is vivid teaching: if there is a relevant way to maximize the sensory input, it is worth considering. Providing a varied diet of activities is similarly beneficial. When working at a distance from learners, teachers may need to pay particular attention to the way in which activities are structured, and the form in which instructions
are given, so as to make them meaningful in a more detached context. It may also be beneficial for the teacher to ask themselves whether the activities set can assist the teacher in the exercise of their role. Might they comprise an opportunity for formal or informal assessment, and the giving of feedback? Might they comprise an opportunity to learn about the learners, either to get to know them better or to monitor their state of wellbeing? Might they serve as a stimulus to reflect upon the teacher’s own professional competence?

Preparation of resources

Beyond emphasizing the importance of being well prepared for teaching, there seems little to say about preparing resources. Yet a full conception of the face-to-face teaching experience draws upon a range of resources not normally considered: thinking about what you may need represents another opportunity to think about what you want to do, and what circumstances may intervene.

In preparing for a teaching session, it is thus worth asking at least the following questions. You may come up with more. For those working in the institutional context, an awareness of the answers to these questions may also be of value should auditors inquire.

1. What resources will the teacher require?
2. What resources will the participants require?
3. What purpose do the resources serve?
4. What will they enable the teacher and learner(s) to do in relation to the material or content? (That is, will they enable new material to be introduced? Recorded and reinforced? Will they enable existing knowledge to be remembered and rehearsed?)
5. What resources might assist the teacher in gaining and sustaining attention, stressing importance, rewarding, diverting (not distracting), amusing or entertaining the learner(s)?
6. How will ephemeral resources of time, atmosphere, goodwill be used?
7. What will the teaching environment be like? Is there a deficit to overcome (no windows!) or will it be abundant with possibilities?
8. If the space is abundant (e.g. some high-tech teaching rooms with loads of gear) does it raise the wrong expectations in the learner(s)? Or the teacher? Beware the temptation to use toys and facilities solely because they are there.
9. Are resources available to cover the unexpected? How does the teacher serve the needs of learners who arrive late, leave early
or do not come at all? Must resources be provided to cover what has been missed?

10. What will the resources cost? Who pays?

11. What resources may the learners be expected to bring, and how may they be used? (My favourite recent contribution from a learner is a little yellow rubber duck which squeaks when squeezed. Combined with a box of sweets, the duck was used to give an excellent introduction to behaviourism and its impact on learning.)

This list of questions is by no means exhaustive; before completing their preparations, teachers should know the answers to most of these, and perhaps to others. Reflection upon those answers gives clues to personal theories of teaching: as a rough rule, what someone takes the trouble to prepare and provide they value. Certainly, the provision of resources does send (consciously or otherwise) a tangible message to learners about personal priorities: my favourite educational theory session for MA students began with games and a picnic! My rationale was that the learners need to understand that theory is not necessarily boring, hard, or both. Sometimes a playful approach to serious issues can be rewarding.

**Performance of tasks, events, roles and responsibilities**

Teaching is a performance art. Teachers do many things whose only purpose is to enable other people to learn, whether those people are physically present or otherwise. Teaching is very different from merely covering the syllabus or transmitting information. One illustration comes from my own past, while I was attending a course for the purpose of professional development. I was allocated to Quentin’s class a long time ago, but I remember this particular session very clearly:

Quentin’s class regularly began, after the coffee break, in the middle of a session which ran from 6 p.m. to 9.30 on Tuesday nights for three terms. Most of the students, including myself, were school teachers voluntarily taking additional academic qualifications. Quentin’s lectures always began on time and proceeded in a carefully structured and thoroughly prepared way to cover the topic scheduled for the lecture.

On one occasion, an unfortunate coincidence of circumstances (the over-running of other lectures and insufficient cafeteria facilities to process 100 thirsty learners expeditiously) caused all of Quentin’s class to be late arriving for his lecture. We arrived, only
to discover Quentin in full swing, delivering the lecture to an empty room. We thought (as fellow teachers) that he was making an ironic point; surely, as the room filled quickly, he would stop and begin the lecture again, even if we were admonished for our time-keeping. But, no! Despite the fact that the late arrival was plainly not a result of individual error, and that this was a core course, he carried straight on to the end of his lecture and completed the session precisely on schedule. He duly left. There had been no interaction between Quentin and us, his learners, at all.

Working within an extreme interpretation of a deficit model of teaching, Quentin demonstrated an extraordinary lack of concern for the circumstances in which the learners were trying to learn. There may have been many reasons why Quentin resorted to the behaviour he adopted – but he did not explain them to us. From that point on, many of the students gave up on his class; of those who did continue to attend, many were pretty well disengaged. Teachers are of great value because they are more than mere resources to be accessed by learners: their dynamism is caught up in the professional persona they choose to adopt, and the way in which they present themselves and their subject.

There is no shortage of literature on how to tackle the basic activities likely to be required of teachers (see, e.g. Rogers, A., 2007, Rogers, J., 2001). Nonetheless, it is important – and largely the object of this book – to question why any particular teaching practice (whether recommended by a book, senior colleague, learner, etc.) is useful or beneficial and whether this holds true in the particular circumstances it will be used. This process of reflexivity, which may be understood as the critical awareness of the assumptions that underlie practice (Tennant 2006), is absolutely crucial in turning performance from a mere show to the purposeful, professional activity of the teacher.

Assessment and feedback on learning

Many contributors to the teaching team may undertake the first four elements of the teaching process. It might be argued, however, that the most important professional responsibility for teachers is to be able to make proper judgements on the quality of learners’ work.

Assessment can seem both technical and rather obscure but acquaintance with the basic principles illustrates that it is both a vital component of teaching and learning, and even rather intriguing. Assessment is the crucial precondition for feedback, which helps learners to know what
is going on in the learning process. It motivates them to sustain the learning when it is hard or unrewarding, tells them how far they have progressed (which they may not always be able to recognize for themselves), and helps them know where to go next. Research indicates that timely and accurate feedback on performance ranks as one of the most important factors likely to influence the effectiveness of learning. On first acquaintance, it might be thought that it would be a very straightforward thing to provide this kind of information to learners. It becomes complicated, however, when the purposes of assessment become unclear.

The process of assessment and feedback can, however, encourage dependence on the teacher (inhibiting the development of those often celebrated adult characteristics of autonomy and self-direction); it can mislead and discourage, and it may be used to exclude people from access to resources and activities. Chapter 4 will not only include more detail on how to use assessment to support individual learning, but also contextualize the process within the professional role of the teacher. We are frequently asked to serve several masters when we assess student learning and this can lead to considerable role conflict for teachers.

**Evaluation and review of teaching**

It is important to stand back from the work that we have done, and consider it in perspective. Here is where our abilities to engage as reflective practitioners come to the fore. We may do this after every session and/or at the end of a group of sessions or a ‘module’ or programme. We may be required to do it in certain ways for external audiences and we must do it for ourselves to feed the knowledge into the planning of more teaching. We might use a model like Kolb’s (1984) experiential learning cycle.

Donald Schön’s (1991) work on reflective practice has had a considerable influence on the way we consider the work of teachers who are responsible for the professional development of medical, educational and architectural practitioners for example. He, among others, identified a crisis of confidence in the way professionals in western societies were undertaking their responsibilities. In addressing this deterioration of confidence in professional expertise, he argued that effective practice goes beyond technical competence. Society expects professionals to ground their practice in an appropriate evidence base, and also to display the kind of ‘professional artistry’ which incorporates subtle adjustments in the light of the ongoing experience of the work in hand.

The need for evaluation, for evidence, can have practical implications for teachers. Earlier, we briefly referred to the importance of good closing sessions for teaching, as well as good openings. Good closings provide
an opportunity to be explicit about what has been achieved during the session or activity. They can be carefully designed and precise, or have the energy and immediacy of a ‘hot debrief’. They will motivate learners to continue with relevant activities and encourage them to feel positive about the prospect of returning for the next session or a new module, as well as also providing the teacher with immediate feedback on how the session went. Some teachers routinely ask for brief written feedback at the end of every session (a short structured questionnaire can be good for large groups to hand in as they leave). I often use self-adhesive notes for groups of medium size at the end of a two-day intensive course of professional development, inviting them to leave an anonymous note under the title ‘Dear Tutor . . .’. The limit on space and time means we tend to get one or two ideas from each person; over the years, this has become useful feedback to the course team. It helps us to review how well the course has gone and to match participants’ perceptions of it alongside our own. By using the same approach on many occasions we can also spot some trends emerging and plan amendments to the programme as required.