

## What makes an outstanding lesson?

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When discussing what makes a very good lesson with other inspectors the usual response is "Well, you know it when you see it!" or "It hits you between the eyes"

Both statements have an element of truth but are not much help to those hardworking teachers who are aspiring towards a grade one. So what makes an outstanding lesson?

Ofsted defines a grade one lesson as one with many significant strengths and no significant areas for improvement. It is also agreed that an outstanding lesson should provide very clear evidence of highly effective learning for every learner in that class.

In my view the response of the learners is of paramount importance in evaluating a lesson, and thus any observation needs to focus more on what the pupils are doing than what the teacher does. It is therefore inevitable that the observer will need to move around the room and speak with pupils if at all possible.

- Are they highly engaged?
- Do they shift from being merely compliant to positively motivated?
- Do they make progress and learn (it clicks)?
- Are they challenged/have their perceptions changed?
- Do they obviously enjoy the lesson/have fun/are reluctant to leave when the lesson ends and keen to discuss what they have learned and what they might be doing in the next lesson?
- Do they make relevant spontaneous comments, ask pertinent questions, engage in debate, offer novel ideas?
- Are students punctual and do they quickly settle down to work?
- Do they show a keen interest in the tasks planned for them?
- Are they proud of their work, do they understand the concepts of what they have learned and are they eager to explain what they are doing and why?
- Do students interact productively as they are learning?

Teachers who obtain grade ones have such a passion for their subject that they are able to get students 'sitting on the edge of their seats'

I often think of a history lesson on the German U-Boats battle of the Atlantic where the teacher was a history enthusiast with excellent exposition skills. Everything was so vividly and graphically described that I, as well as the students felt as though we were living every moment.

In another outstanding lesson a student debate emerged as to whether restaurants should employ disabled waitresses, where students both defending and opposing the idea were able to produce excellent logical arguments.

From the teaching point of view, lessons should be well planned and organised, and the planning should clearly demonstrate that the lesson will address the needs of individual students. e.g the planning should show the intention to ask more demanding questions and set more difficult tasks for students x, y and z, and this should be seen happening in the lesson. However sticking rigidly to a plan could be disastrous if the students have clearly switched off or unable to access to the content of the lesson. Very good teachers therefore will be unafraid to change what they have planned if it is clearly not meeting the original learning objectives.

There are of course certain standard activities which one would expect in all lessons, that is:

- A recap of the previous lesson at the beginning.
- Clear lesson objectives in the form of expected learning outcomes which are shared with students and revisited as the lesson progresses.
- Clear explanations using language that is accessible to students whilst developing vocabulary appropriately.
- Appropriate assessment (often informal) to test the level of understanding and thus the progress towards meeting the stated objectives.
- Provide clear feedback on students' progress
- Varied teaching and learning activities
- Time at the end of the lesson to evaluate to what extent the objectives have been achieved and some discussion of the proposed content of the next lesson so learners can see where the learning is going.

However the above will in no way guarantee an outstanding lesson. A teacher of an outstanding lesson is also likely to show:

- Subject expertise and flair on the part of the teacher.
- The involvement of each and every student in the learning process.
- Expert use of questioning which probes understanding and teases out misconceptions.
- Students who are encouraged to work things out for themselves (questions that are also sensitively targeted according to ability)
- Challenging and imaginative tasks which will engage students and support the learning process.
- A wide variety of resources to include appropriate use of the internet/videos/powerpoint etc. e.g. in one physics on the universe the teacher used a computer and a data projector to link to a website which enabled students to see a lively animation on the brightness and magnitude of stars. Students were totally engaged by this. Such a change from writing a series of large numbers on a whiteboard.
- A variety of approaches to cater for a range of learning styles, constant checking that everyone is 'on board'.
- A clear desire to facilitate independent learning and include individual/peer evaluation and support.
- A willingness to answer difficult questions and to tackle complex issues with confidence.

Finally a very good teacher will take risks/do the unexpected/introduce humour rather than take the safe approach, whilst keeping the engagement of the class.

In one history lesson, for example, another teacher had been set up to burst in and shout at the tutor for parking obstructively. Afterwards, the students were asked to recount what they had observed, this was an excellent start to a session on historical evidence and its vagaries even when there were eye witnesses. In a Business Studies lesson a teacher working with a group of teenage boys, brought in a range of teddy bears to illustrate the 'unique selling point'. Something which could have been disastrous but ironically worked wonderfully to capture the interest of the students.

In a science lesson (forensic science) students extracted DNA from kiwi fruits and found the whole exercise absorbing.

(In the case of special needs students, those with English as an additional language, the above advice obviously needs to be used selectively.)

At the end of the day, no teacher can guarantee that they are going to produce a grade one lesson on any given occasion because the response of the students is the most significant factor in any evaluation of a lesson. However students who are used to innovative teaching are much more likely to respond enthusiastically when observed by an inspector.