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Introduction

When the first edition of Raising Grades Through Study Skills was published in 1998 the annual debate on whether the public examinations taken at school were getting easier by the year had only just begun.

Now, 14 years later, as we publish this new edition of Raising Grades, the commentary has become so repetitive and so regular that one can write the headlines the popular press will utilise before a single exam paper has been marked.

The theme is always the same: standards are declining, papers are getting easier, qualifications are worthless.

And yet there is, and has always been, another explanation as to why pass rates rise, year by year. It is an explanation that has much merit, and yet because it is one that does not reflect the hysteria of the political and media debate about education and exams, it is an explanation that is rarely heard.

This explanation is simple and is based on the fact that the ability of a student to get a particular grade in an exam is due to two factors:

- a) how much the student knows
- b) how good the student is at reproducing that knowledge in an exam or via coursework.

Thus, if the student can know more and can become better at reproducing this knowledge in a meaningful way when required, then the grades will go up.

And this is what has happened. Teachers have in fact been using four methods of improving the results that students get each year. They are...

- a) Using teaching techniques that help the student learn and remember more rapidly
- b) Helping the students understand that learning is an active process in which they must participate throughout the school year
- c) Helping students understand various methods of learning which they can adopt
- d) Giving the students an understanding and experience of memory techniques that can help them remember more, more quickly.

As I say, such a method is not as exciting as the “exams are getting easier” shock horror scandal headlines that are used, and so the argument is not heard. But the fact that the media don’t want to know does not make the argument untrue.

I wrote the original “Raising Grades” 14 years ago and yet, as soon as I was asked to prepare a new introduction for this edition, I recalled the fact that within the book there is a piece I wrote about how varying the location in which the learning takes place can enhance that learning. (This piece is to be found in this edition as section 4.3.)

Indeed I can still recall how, when I was studying the psychology of education many, many year ago, I went to a particular scenic location and studied a particular volume in the build up to my finals.

An awareness of my own advancing years prohibits me from now saying just how many years ago that was, but the fact is that because I chose that specific location to revise the contents of that volume, all these years later I can still remember the location, the book, and, much more importantly, the details of the topics I was revising.

The fact is that that sudden change of location enhanced my learning on that day and ensured that I did rather well in that part of my final exams. The simple “trick” of going somewhere quite different and doing something quite different (in this case, borrowing my mother’s car, driving to a rather nice rural spot that I never normally went to, and then sitting on my own by a river reading one specific text that I had previously found somewhat impenetrable) means that the learning of that day has stayed with me in a way that would not have happened had I just had another afternoon at home or in the library.

That notion of learning in a different location is but one small topic within this volume. But it is one that works brilliantly, and it is one that throughout my teaching and lecturing career I have passed on to my students. Not all have taken up the idea – but some have, and some have been kind enough to let me know just how beneficial that and other study skill techniques have been.

And yet, sadly, it is true that by no means all of my colleagues over the years have shared my enthusiasm for study skills as something that should be considered as an inherent part of their teaching programme.

Each school is, of course, different. Some now have study skills as a regular non-subject-specific topic on the timetable starting in year 7 and continuing throughout the secondary school programme. Some teach study skills during an introductory week at the start of each school year.

These are both excellent ways of dealing with study skills. Less effective in my view are the approaches that centre around study skills as something best left to the period just before the exams, when they are classified as “revision skills”. Of course it is not for me to tell any school how to run its affairs, but from all my observations I can say that this is nowhere near as productive an approach as making study skills part of the whole secondary school programme.

But I also know that many schools are staying fairly quiet about their approach to study skills. This is probably a very sensible idea for we all know that if the rather excitable journalists who produce education columns in some newspapers were to write about schools that make study skills a part of their concern, then we would probably end up with stories about schools helping students to “cheat” their way to higher grades by using “learning techniques” and “memory tricks”. Such is the world in which we live.

Those of us working in education know that this is nonsense, but it is the sort of stuff that headlines are made of, and there is no doubt that as a nation we suffer from the fact that the release of exam results coincides with a time when there are generally precious few news stories doing the rounds. The shock horror headlines will continue until results stop rising and then they will be replaced by “education failure” headlines.

However, such trivia will never dissuade me from the belief that my duty as an educator is to give my students a firm understanding of the subject I teach, along with an ability to use and reproduce that knowledge as and when required. Since giving my students an understanding of study skills will help me achieve these ends, study skills will continue to be part of my work.

Inherent within this approach is the need on my part to teach in particular ways. Recalling, as I noted earlier, my own use of one of the techniques in this book while I was revising for my finals, my mind also wanders back to a lecture I attended in my final year, once again on the psychology of education.

The lecture was conducted in a typical lecture hall – the lecturer on the stage at the front, 100 or more students sitting in raised rows looking down on him. In the lecture he told us that of all the methods of teaching and learning available to mankind, the formal lecture was just about the most inefficient, rivalling reading a book while watching a television programme in terms of its effectiveness.

I remember the occasion not just for the irony of the situation, but also because the lecturer at least had the good sense to acknowledge that irony and to point out that just knowing the best way to do something does not then mean that one is always able to use that knowledge.

It was this thought that led me to include in the volume the “methods of teaching” section, for it is not just how the students learn that affects their grades, but also how they are taught.

Since “Raising Grades” was first published I have been kindly invited into numerous schools to present my views on the issue at INSET days and have been pleased to think that maybe this volume has been part of a change in the way teaching is conducted in some schools. The insights I have gained in such settings have greatly helped me as I have developed this volume.

I do hope you continue to find it useful.

Tony Attwood
August 2012.

Part 1: Methods of Teaching

1.1. Can teaching be more efficient?

There is no point reading about methods of teaching unless you believe it is possible to improve the efficiency of your teaching. That is to say, discussions of methods of teaching are about getting more teaching and learning out of the same teacher, the same resources and the same pupils, by changing the methods of teaching utilised.

The issue is rather like learning to swim. It is quite possible to learn to swim, and avoid drowning, without being much good at swimming. Someone who has studied swimming technique however might be able to show you how to swim in a much more efficient way – more output for less input. More result for less stress. Even an expert swimmer can improve – can squeeze that extra one hundredth of a second out of swimming a length. The same is true in teaching.

The complexities of improving output was revealed in the famous Jastrow case in 1900 involving introducing the Hollerith tabulating machine into the US Census Bureau.

The inventor of what was in effect the first desk top computer, suggested that the operators should enter about 500 records a day and this they duly did. If they ever exceeded this level of work, the result was high levels of stress among the workers. Worried by the stress levels the government insisted that the next batch of trainees were not told how many cards they could process, and within two weeks of training this new group were processing over 2000 cards a day without any stress or other ill effects.

The point is that although we may feel as if we are doing everything we can, and feel that any extra work would be quite impossible, these feelings may not be a valid measurement of reality. It may be that we could each of us teach more effectively with less effort.

This view is supported by the realisation that although most teachers learn about alternative methods of teaching on INSET courses, some still stick to their own favoured methods. This is not because these methods produce better results but because they as teachers are happier with their tried and trusted methods.

Efficiency is not a word often associated with schooling - but there really is no reason why it should not be so linked. Four books on school improvement topics close by as we write this (Harris 1997, Bennett 1995, Fullan 1991 and Hopkins 1994) muster only a single index entry on the subject for the 1000+ pages of text between them. The education library at the University of Nottingham, one of the major international centres for the study of school improvement, contains five efficiency references - all regarding the installation of efficient heating systems in schools.

Because efficiency is so rarely mentioned in education we must ask, is there some reason why this concept might be invalid in the educational context? Just because those in business and industry talk in this way, it does not mean that it is an inappropriate notion for education.

In terms of economics and democracy, most of us would surely agree that the search for efficiency is as natural in education as anywhere else. Of the approximately £18 billion a year spent on education in the UK, 93% comes from public funds - our money as taxpayers.

Even if it did not, and a suddenly generous Bill Gates funded education, we should surely still seek to be more efficient in schools, simply out of a professional desire to do our jobs to the best of our ability.

Thus on the face of it efficiency ought to be a valid concept in education. Let us try to give an example of how it might work in a school.

The head of maths might note that it currently takes ten hours to teach the principle of multiplying fractions up to a specific point, with an outcome of every pupil getting 90% or above on a test at the end of the ten hours. Why does the teacher not ask if with a different approach the same pupils could reach the same level of understanding in five hours?

Opponents in the school might argue that the “five hour” programme was too intense, that the “ten hour” pupils had more fun, or learned to love the subject more. The “five hour” programme (it might be argued) gave the same knowledge but the pupils hated the work. This is an unlikely scenario but if true, we would need to redefine our aims. We should seek the most efficient way of teaching the topic so that the pupils not only have a certain knowledge and the ability to use it in certain conditions, but could also express a certain measure of joy in the lessons (as measured on our patented joyometer). We would then seek the most efficient way of delivering the whole package. If we could do it in seven hours and retain the joy, then that teaching programme is more efficient than the ten hour programme, and we would adopt it.

If we could make all teaching just ten percent more efficient (i.e. achieving the same results using only nine hours instead of ten), it would be equivalent to adding six more full time teaching staff to every secondary school in the UK. This is equivalent to increasing the UK school budget by over £300 million per annum!

Of course I might ask, what am I going to do with my spare hours? Possible answers include teaching in greater depth to improve the grades, teaching another class who weren't previously being taught, taking one or two of those hours as free periods to prepare for other lessons, reading the latest texts on school improvement, arranging and attending school improvement meetings... I don't seem to have a shortage of ideas.

How do we actually increase classroom efficiency? Clearly we should not lose sight of the fact that we are working with people. The school does not become a machine. Nevertheless, it is inescapable that both effective teachers and effective departments are more efficient in the process of teaching and learning. Because they do it better, teachers gain more satisfaction for a job well done, and at this point stress levels decline. Through this process, the learning experiences of the pupils are expanded and as we all know, a wide range of experiences is itself beneficial from the teaching and learning point of view.

We therefore now turn to various high efficiency methods of teaching.

1.2. Making teaching multi-sensory

Where possible the pupils' experiences must be multi-sensory. Multi-sensory work was introduced by Montessori, and later taken up by special needs teachers who sought to find ways of improving the teaching of literacy skills to dyslexic pupils. Bryant and Bradley at Oxford University later proved that the multi-sensory method was the most efficient method of teaching for all pupils, irrespective of whether they are dyslexic or not.