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At the cutting edge Harry Hudson

Teaching is moving at a pace, and there has never been a more exciting time to become a teacher. We know more now than we have ever known about how the brain works, and teachers can be more confident than at any time in history about the science of learning. What's more, there is still so much left to discover.

Yet at the same time, the majority of the country has no idea about any of this. Most people have no understanding of how teachers teach, and this became all too apparent during the pandemic, when millions of parents for the first time had to attempt to teach their children. And in so doing, they realised that there might actually be more to this teaching business than meets the eye.

For teaching isn't just about standing at the front of the class with textbook and board pen, throwing out knowledge in the vain hope that it sticks. It's not simply a case of 'charisma wins the day', as though it were some sort of popularity contest where the most-liked teacher automatically gets the best results. It's not as easy as just 'keeping them quiet' and letting the learning part just happen by osmosis.

For too long has teaching been unable to shake off the distinct whiff of amateurism, of so many thousands of individuals – atomised, unconnected – each doing their own thing in the vain hope that it would work, of no underlying and commonly understood concept of how to teach. Any idea that there might a 'science of teaching' would be perceived as a bit of joke. After all, how hard can it be?

Yet however close to reality that perception once was, nowadays it certainly could not be further from the truth. Twenty-first century teaching is a technical and scientific profession, underpinned by an ever-growing body of evidence about the science of learning. Recent developments in cognitive psychology have made the greatest contributions to teaching in the last century.

Developments in neuroscience now lie at the heart of teacher training courses, where aspirant teachers are being taught in a more rigorous and evidence-based manner than ever before.

To become a teacher in the twenty-first century means to understand how memory works and how we remember, it means to have an awareness of the best cognitive

conditions for learning, and, crucially, it means to keep up to date with the latest research so as not to be left behind.

This has been good for teachers and, more to the point, good for their students. It keeps teachers on their toes in the constant search for improvement, and it means that pupils now receive some of the best teaching that has ever been on offer - and their academic results are a testament to this. As a result of the introduction of science into teaching, the average standard of teachers across the country is higher than it has ever been.

None of this is to underestimate the human side of teaching, and indeed the great cognitive psychologists of the day emphasise that the relationship between teacher and student will always matter. No amount of scientific evidence will ever detract from the soft skills of teaching, but it will in fact only continue to confirm its value.

It was precisely this sort of human interaction which was so missed by both teachers and students during successive bouts of online learning. Google Classroom and Microsoft Teams were just not the same as the real classroom – how could they ever hope to be?

Science is therefore not there to replace the human factor, but merely to supplement and even enhance it. And indeed, the relationship between the two is symbiotic: good relationships are a necessary prerequisite for successful learning, but successful learning helps build and sustain good relationships.

This is an extract from a forthcoming book 'Must do better!' by Harry Hudson and Roy Blatchford.