

**Book Review**

**What Teachers Need to Know**

**What Teachers Need to Know About Teaching Methods**

Peter Westwood, 2008

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In this age of methodological shift, Westwood's timely book '*What teacher's need to know about teaching methods*' provides teachers with the theoretical insights on different methods of teaching. According to Westwood (2008), teaching methods are determined partially by the nature of content and partially by the theories about how students learn. In this light, he discusses the suitability of teaching methods to particular subjects and group of students analysing different theories of teaching and learning along with underlying principles and methods. He also defines the role of a teacher in the learning process and looks at the latest research on what contributes to effective practice, providing lists of references for further study and exploration.

**Revisiting the Book**

The book is divided into seven chapters ranging from conceptualisation of teaching and learning to assessment of learning. In the introductory chapter, Westwood familiarises readers with the nature of teaching and learning in light of constructivist and instructivist theories. The constructivists claim that the traditional didactic teaching of transmitting knowledge has been unsuccessful; hence, learners must construct knowledge from their own experience. Here, the constructivist theory of learning seems to be aligned with 'student-centred' teaching methods. In contrast, the instructivists stress that direct teaching, also known as teacher-centred method, can be extremely effective if explicit instruction is given to the students. The author further deconstructs these contrasting views focusing on their efficacy to different *kinds of learners* and *areas of leaning*. The discussion makes it clear that neither the students-centred nor the direct instruction can be '*one-size-fit-all*' method for all students.

The next two chapters cover the suitability of direct teaching and student-centred methods on the basis of purposes. Firstly, the author sheds light on how direct teaching, most often done through lectures, can be used successfully in the classroom. According to him, teachers can bring variations in direct teaching by planning the content, managing the time, presenting the content in an interesting way, using audio-visual materials, explaining and demonstrating clearly, etc. He claims that a well-presented lecture can be effective in bringing about learning, particularly in the upper level when the main goal is to transmit key information to the students. However, it appears less appropriate for the young learners when the objectives of the course are *affective*, dealing with development or change in feeling, emotions and attitude and *social*, requiring interaction, cooperation and communication among students. Secondly, he talks on different student-centred approaches like problem-based, project-based, resource-based and computer-assisted learning. These inquiry-based and discovery learning are believed to be highly appropriate for involving students more actively in acquiring knowledge, skills and strategies.

The fourth chapter considers how the characteristics of students can influence our choice of methods. The author suggests that in selection of method, we need to consider different kinds of learners such as young learners, gifted students, students with learning difficulties, and physical and mental disabilities. Teaching methods and curriculum content should be appropriate to students' age and their individual, social and cultural backgrounds. For instance, inquiry and problem-based learning methods are highly suitable for gifted students but they may not be appropriate to students with disabilities. Therefore, we need to adapt teaching to meet learners' needs and characteristics.

Professional skills and attitudes of effective teachers are discussed in the following chapter entitled *Effective Teaching*. Here, the author mentions the pedagogical skills of effective teachers based on the key evidences from research. According to him, an effective teacher is supposed to have different skills in different contexts; among them presenting and explaining content, questioning, adapting and differentiating instruction and giving feedback can be taken as the most common skills. In this sense, teacher effectiveness does not seem to be concerned with any particular teaching method; rather with the way in which teachers operate in their classrooms.

The sixth chapter deals with assessment of learning including purposes or types of assessment such as formative, formal and informal, diagnostic, dynamic, curriculum-based and outcome-based. Westwood suggests that formative assessment can be better conducted by observing and interviewing the students, giving them test and appraising their works. Assessment seems to be taken as an integral part of effective teaching with the belief that students learn more in classes when assessments are frequent, and feedback is offered regularly.

Finally, the gap between research and practice is analysed in the last chapter of the book. He argues that much of the evidence from educational research does not seem to be

read by teachers. Besides, even when they are presented with evidence from research, many of the teachers seem to reject it. They feel comfortable with their own way of teaching and they are often resistant to change as adopting new teaching methods may require more preparation and planning time, and presentation skills. Thus, the evidence from research hardly reaches the actual classroom.

### **My Take**

Based on my close study and careful analysis, I found the book very insightful for teachers in order to understand the underlying principles behind different teaching methods, and make an appropriate selection of the methods based on the context. This seems to challenge a dominant belief regarding teaching methodology that the teacher-centred methods have been outdated and learner-centred are always beneficial. The reading makes it clear that we should appreciate both teacher-directed and child-centred teaching methods but should not take any of them as all good or all bad. The book is well organised; each chapter begins with the key issues, explores them substantially, and ends with multiple links for further readings, especially for practical implications. This also makes a good blend between theory and practice. Since the discussion is presented mainly in light of psychological theories; it is generic in nature and can be advantageous for teachers from any background or area of specialisation. At the same time, this also implies that the book might not offer anything specific to English language teachers as it lacks to bring language learning theories in discussion.

The book can be useful for Nepali teachers at least in two ways. First, it will deconstruct different myths about teaching methodology. For instance, lecture is often perceived in the negative light as traditional, old-fashioned, and useless method although it is observed to be one of the widely used methods in Nepal. Reading this book will not only change their views but also provide them with some ways to improve lecture method. It will also make them aware that using a classroom approach based firmly on constructivist principles might not guarantee better learning for all students and every subject. Sometimes, as in the case of addressing 200 students in a classroom, lecture can be the only suitable option to deliver content. Next, as Westwood claims, we can find visible gaps between theory and practice in the Nepali context, too. In this context, the links for further reading presented in this book encourage teachers to bridge the gap as they provide practical ideas to apply research-based practice in the classroom.

### **Conclusion**

To sum up, the book seems to expand basic teaching knowledge and classroom experience providing essential information about a range of subjects necessary for today's teachers to do their jobs effectively. I realised that the book has changed my perspective about teaching methods and it will surely make teachers aware that both constructive and

instructive approaches have important places in teaching and learning, but may not be equally effective for achieving particular goals. One single method of teaching cannot suit all types of learning; different methods are required to achieve different types of learning objectives. Therefore, methods of teaching should be selected according to their fitness for specific purposes and learners.