

Max Malikow

Teachers for Life

Rowman & Littlefield, £11.99

This is one of those American imports and, like Krispy Kreme Donuts, the initial sugar rush may leave you feeling bloated and bewildered. We kick off with a citation from TS Eliot (the anagram of whose name – “toilets” – is always a useful anchor-point), some sickly acknowledgements to people who have influenced the author (including his Rabbi) and an introduction by Tom Lickona stating that “this is not your ordinary book about teaching” and telling us that being a teacher is “a high calling, worthy of the very best we can give”.

At this point it would be easy to put the book down.

But, like a misery-guts in Disneyland, it’s too easy for us to sneer at the emotions on public display here, and to miss the fact that at the heart of this book is some real wisdom acquired over thirty years of teaching. For example, I liked the opening section on learning which demonstrates vividly that knowing about something isn’t the same as learning it. Each year Max Malikow sets his students a task to change their behaviour – for example, to stop smoking or biting their nails. He reckons the failure rate

is 90%. Learning, he reminds us, is hard. Clearly we are in the hands of a classroom realist, not an academic zealot.

I also enjoyed the Socratic dialogue about whether teachers are born or made. It nudges us into reflecting on the essential ingredients in a great teacher. The author uses some thought-provoking ideas: is it “teacher as farmer” (getting hay down from the loft where the cows can get at it – that is, making lofty materials available to students)? Or teacher as raconteur (telling students the stories they need to hear)? Or teacher as hunting guide (showing them the territory but leaving them to fend for themselves)?

He writes interestingly about motivation, suggesting – radically – that in teaching any topic we should ask ourselves these four questions:

- Would I want to do this activity?
- Why would my students want to do it?
- Can I do any part of this lesson with enthusiasm?
- Are my students capable of accomplishing what I’m requiring of them?

How brilliant is that, especially the first question? Track a student around a sequence of lessons to remind yourself of the remorseless tedium that can be the schooling (as opposed to learning) that we sometimes inflict on young people. We ought to ask ourselves question one continually.

None of this, I think, will help you much if you're about to embark on a career as a teacher. I suspect you'll be looking for something much more practical, a manual which will help you learn the craft of the classroom. But for those of us whose mirrors each morning reveal an increasingly grizzled aspect to our looks, who think we've seen educational fads come and go faster than Secretaries of State, and who crave new perspectives and original insights, this book makes a thought-provoking read.

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