

Using the Teachers' Standards

This extract from 'What makes a geography lesson good?' by Margaret Roberts is based on a lecture given at the 2011 GA Annual Conference. It should be noted that the current Teachers' Standards were not introduced until 2012 and the text refers to the previous Standards for QTS.

'I am arguing for a more holistic viewpoint because I am concerned about how lists of standards have influenced PGCE students' lessons and judgements about them. When I became a PGCE tutor in 1982, there were no external criteria to guide my judgements. Although HMI at that time inspected PGCE courses and had internal criteria on which they evaluated lessons, these criteria were not published until after 2000. It was not until the 1990s onwards that I had to take account of a succession of externally determined standards. In 1992, CATE (the Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education) produced a list of competencies that student teachers had to demonstrate. These were replaced in 1998 by the Teacher Training Agency's list of standards for Qualified Teacher Status (DfEE Circular 4/98). These standards were substantially revised in 2006 and again in 2008. The 2008 standards published in Professional Standards for Qualified Teachers Status (TDA, 2008) will be replaced with new standards in 2012. The fact that the standards have changed several times over the last twenty years, indicates that the elements that contribute to good lessons are open to debate. Most people involved in education would have their own views on what should be included in such a list. There are some advantages of having national standards, even if they are contestable and open to interpretation. They provide guidelines for PGCE tutors, students and mentors. They provide common standards across the country so that there is greater consistency between different institutions. They also highlight some aspects of lessons that might otherwise be neglected.

In spite of these advantages, however, they are often used in PGCE courses as tick lists, for which students have to provide evidence of achievement. This can resemble girl guides or scouts collecting separate badges and having achieved them moving on to the next. The standards, of course, are not like this and most need to be demonstrated again and again. There is a tendency to give attention to standards not yet achieved and to focus on separate elements of a lesson rather than to consider lessons as a whole. I have heard mentors comment that a lesson was good because it had objectives on the board or because questions were well distributed or because numeracy was included (often simply the drawing of a graph) etc. These achievements might signal progress by a PGCE student, but in themselves do not make geography lesson good. Indeed, I have observed lessons which have been judged to be good because of progress in particular standards, when the teaching and learning of geography was very poor. In other cases, I have observed lessons in which the teaching and learning of geography was impressive, but which were nevertheless strongly criticised because, for example, they lacked a plenary, or lacked pace. The checklist can distort judgements by acting as a blinker to what is really happening.

Another problem with lists of standards is that they appear to be of equal weight. But some standards are more important than others and have to be demonstrated in every lesson.'

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