

How to use experience to improve teaching practice

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In a previous edition of the South Sudan Medical Journal^[1] we made a commitment to publish a series of educational 'How to' articles. These are intended as guides to improve teaching practice.

Our aim is to target the core activities of the healthcare teacher (see Table 1). We are also seeking opinions from our readers. We would welcome questions and suggestions for educational topics.

How can these articles be used to improve teaching? Here, I set out how they can contribute to a wider process of self-directed learning by healthcare teachers.

Teaching is a practice, and it is learnt in practice. Each time we teach is different, even if we are teaching the same topic. Each time we teach we can think about what happened, what went well, what went less well, and why. We can decide how we could do things a little differently, making improvements based on our own experience and understanding.

David Kolb^[2] explains how individuals learn from experience. His model describes a process of learning through the synthesis of thought and action. Action, and experimentation with different approaches, gives us experiences. Thought allows us to make sense of those experiences: to describe them, to evaluate what happened, and to explain why things happened as they did. This deliberate process of action, evaluation and explanation, offers a basis for developing our ideas about what works and why, and for deciding what we might do differently to improve our teaching.

However, we are not limited to our own experiences and ideas. We can talk to colleagues about their experiences. We can read articles that give advice about teaching practice. We can grapple with learning theory, which seeks to explain how people learn, and so provides pointers towards how we might support that learning. In these ways, our personal experience is informed by the experience and ideas of others.

Table 1. Core educational activities for the healthcare teacher

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|--|---|
| 1. Teach in a range of settings | 1.1 Teach large groups |
| | 1.2 Teach small groups |
| | 1.3 Teach in a clinical setting |
| | 1.4 Support in-service learning. |
| 2. Assess performance | 2.1 Assess performance using formative methods. |
| | 2.2 Assess performance using summative methods. |
| 3. Support progress | 3.1 Respond to concerns about performance. |
| | 3.2 Review learners' progress against educational goals. |
| 4. Improve healthcare education | 4.1 Evaluate and improve teaching practice |
| | 4.2 Evaluate and improve a taught course |
| | 4.3 Evaluate and improve the clinical workplace to support learning |
| | 4.4 Carry out research in healthcare education |
| 5. Develop programmes of healthcare education | 5.1 Design a new course. |

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So, the depth and scope of our thinking-about-teaching is important. It is supported by the thinking of others, sought from colleagues, and uncovered in the literature. By utilising these additional resources, we become informed beyond our own experiences. This increases our potential for understanding our practice, and offers us further options for change and improvement.

As well as recognising the importance of deliberately acquiring information to supplement our experiential learning, Michael Eraut^[3] explains the importance of controlling this learning process through ‘metaknowledge’. Metaknowledge concerns self-awareness, knowledge of one’s own skills, strengths and weaknesses, and self-management. It too is learnt through experience and thought: thought that is ‘reflexive’, focused upon one’s own qualities. In learning to teach, we must also learn about ourselves.

The thrust of this is that learning to teach revolves around action that is mindful and controlled, supplemented by deliberately acquired information, and reflected upon in order to evaluate and explain practice, decide what to do differently, and develop ‘metaknowledge’. Figure 1 illustrates this self-directed learning process.

This model of self-directed learning allows us to draw out a number of things that we can do to support our improvement as teachers.

Teach, because teaching is learnt through practice. Practice allows experience to be acquired, and new approaches to be tried. Aim for teaching that is mindful and controlled, with attention given to monitoring and managing teaching ‘in-action’.

Seek information about your teaching, from students and from colleagues, because this feedback offers information

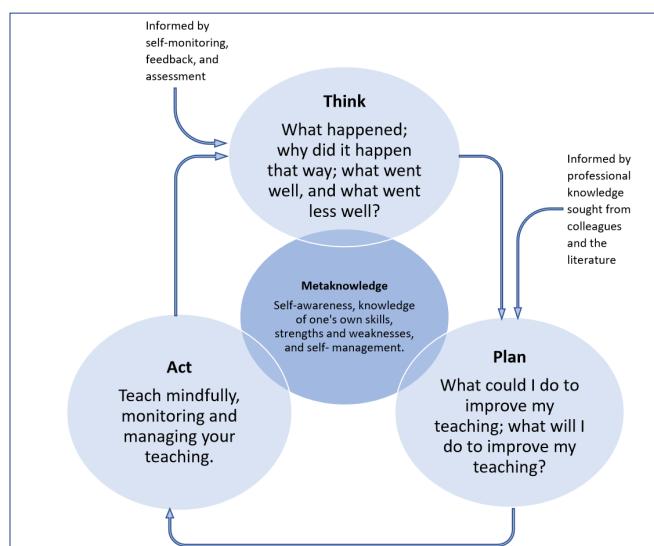


Figure 1. Learning to teach: experience supplemented by information, increasing our potential for improvement action (Credit: Rich Bregazzi).

Table 2. Personal teaching experiences: thinking about practice

A ‘teaching experience’ might be a particularly interesting experience, it might be an aspect of routine practice, or it might be something that gives you particular cause for concern.

1. What was the experience? Why have you chosen it for further reflection?
2. What happened? What was the outcome?
3. What factors shaped what happened; how did your own behaviour affect what happened?
4. How did you feel about it? What went well, what went less well, and how do you know?
5. What additional information could help you better understand the situation, or what you could do to improve? How can you find that information?
6. What have you learnt from this, and what do you intend to do in order to improve your teaching?

about how your practice is perceived by others, and adds an important perspective to your understanding of your teaching.

Assess what students have learnt, because formal and informal assessment helps you monitor and manage your teaching (it also helps learners to monitor and manage their learning).

Think about your practice, so that you can manage and better understand both your practice, and your qualities as a teacher.

Seek further information about learning and teaching, because knowledge about learning and teaching, sought from the educational literature and from discussion with colleagues, supplements our experience and offers new ways to understand ourselves and our teaching practice.

Implement plans to improve, because new understanding needs to be transformed into new practice, which gives us new experiences from which to learn.

Make time for your learning, because it takes time to think, to acquire information, and to plan how teaching can be improved.

This series of articles will contribute to your experiential learning process by providing ideas that can be adapted and used to improve your teaching. Meanwhile, Table 2 offers some questions that you can usefully ask of a specific teaching experience, to help you think about your practice, and so transform experience into learning.

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