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A Book Review of *Visible Learning for Teachers*

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Abstract

Teachers in practice often rely on intuition over what is transpiring in their classroom. John Hattie's 2009 title, *Visible Learning*, provided a meta-analysis of studies investigating student learning and achievement. Following from that title, Hattie has now brought those findings to a new readership with *Visible Learning for Teachers: Maximizing Impact on Learning*. This paper provides a book review of this title and its major contents on how to apply evidence-based research findings in the classroom.

1. Introduction

In 2009, John Hattie published *Visible Learning: A Synthesis of Over 800 Meta-analyses Relating to Achievement* which was the product of a journey of over 15 years looking at learning outcomes through education. As the expanded title of that book suggests, Hattie examined over 800 meta-analyses (in his *meta-meta-analysis*) which comprised a synthesis of some 50,000 studies looking at influences on learning. Beyond a simple integrated review of the literature, a meta-analysis looks to take data available from quantitative studies (not that qualitative studies are not important as Hattie acknowledges in his Preface) and convert them to a common measure (an effect size) whereby “the overall effects could be quantified, interpreted, and compared, and the various moderators of overall effect could be uncovered and followed up” (Hattie, 2009, p. 3). Far from a critique of the education system or a knockdown or marginalization of the hard-working teachers in it, Hattie used data to identify that many good things are in fact happening. Although research and literature into education is rich with recommendations of what teachers should do, notions of what makes a difference in classrooms, and evidence purporting the success of various methods or innovations, Hattie notes that there has been limited uptake by teachers

with their own theories and beliefs and in the context of the classroom. That context and the highly independent, relatively autonomous act of teaching which is conducted almost privately and where techniques and approaches are rarely challenged or questioned is often supported with an over-reliance on the idea that *anything goes*. This may also be in large part due to the nature of teaching where teachers must “identify and accommodate the differences brought with each new cohort of students, react to the learning as it occurs... and treat the current cohort of students as if it is the first time that the teacher has taught a class” (Hattie, 2009, p. 1) — which is the reality for the learners encountering this teacher and curricula. However, Hattie's overarching view is that *what works* in teaching and education should not be left to common sense and that correlations should not be mistaken for causes or as evidence of good teaching.

The follow-up book reviewed here is titled, *Visible Learning for Teachers: Maximizing Impact on Learning* (2012, Routledge). In it, Hattie's aim is to ask and answer which attributes of formal education in schools have the greatest influence on student learning and what features make learning visible (see Ritchhart, Church, & Morrison, 2011 for similar investigations and practice in *visible thinking*). Since his previous work has prompted so many questions, this title seeks to answer the most

common questions of (1) *Where do I start?* and (2) *What does visible learning look like in a school?* which in turn brought up a third question for consideration from Hattie (3) *What is the nature of learning that you wish to impact?* As such, Hattie's push for progress toward instructional excellence involves a call for evaluating impact, understanding impact, and taking action in response to the evidence and this understanding.

Of note is Hattie's mention in the Preface that the benchmarks he provides can be used "to create debates, to seek evidence, and to self-review to determine whether a school is having marked impact on *all of its students*" (p. viii). This was of particular personal interest since I feel that too often averages and comparisons of group means rule the observations and reported results from studies or class evaluations with little attention to those individual outliers a few standard deviations away.

Although developed around the big idea of visible learning, the presentation of the content is broken down to reflect the actual decisions that teachers face, thus making the title very readable and accessible for a diverse audience. The end-of-chapter exercises make it suitable for teachers-in-training as well for reflection by those in-service. It is certainly a title meriting being read through entirely, but the highlighted boxes of enumerated checklists to evaluate visible learning applications and the summary of the findings from the 2009 title along with the list of influences on achievement in Appendices B and C respectively also allow individuals or teaching collaborators to dip in occasionally for a reminder or some inspiration.

2. Book Review

2.1 Visible learning

In Chapter 1, Hattie elaborates on the notion of visible learning as a process or "the attributes of schooling that truly make the difference to student learning" (p. 1). Using the analogy of a computer, he contrasts the too-often discussed notions of *software* (programs in school) and *hardware* (buildings and resources) with the more critical *processing* or core attributes that make schools successful. Hattie goes on to suggest that *visible* refers

to making learning visible to both teachers and learners. *Learning* is conceptualized as knowing, understanding, and doing something about student learning. The author reminds us to keep this notion of learning as a common thread throughout the book and to view teaching in terms of its impact on student learning.

The first chapter also briefly revisits the data analysis from Hattie's earlier meta-analysis. The author cautions readers that if the bar is set at zero in deciding what works in education, then the conclusion is virtually everything and we can just keep doing what we have been. However, given the normal distribution from the meta-analysis data, with an average effect size of 0.40, the evidence shows that there are about as many above average influences on achievement as there are for those below the average. These real-world findings suggest that as teachers we need to be more discriminating and not accept just any intervention that has some effect, but to work with those factors leading to effects at or greater than 0.40.

Although very difficult to measure, not lost in Hattie's summary of data is his understanding of the importance of passion shown by teachers individually and collaboratively in their communities of practice. Furthermore, Hattie elaborates in this opening chapter that achievement in schools needs to be looked at broadly in terms of the chase of learning as well as non-school outcomes all of which contribute toward the development of critical evaluation skills necessary for active, competent, cooperative and understanding citizens. These premises set the stage for a story of teaching practice and the experience of learning as covered in the remaining chapters.

2.2 The source of ideas and the role of teachers

Part 1 is made up of two chapters. Chapter 2 "The source of ideas" reviews the main implications from Hattie's earlier 2009 title. This review of the evidence again puts forth Hattie's claim to focus on interventions showing results above the 0.40 hinge-point effect which was measured as the average effect from one year of schooling. Additional premises introduced include that it is critical how teachers view their roles. Hattie cautions

that this must go far beyond the cliché that *teachers matter* to a stance where educators see their primary role as being to evaluate their effect on learning. Some of the keys to visible teaching and learning are expanded on further on the basis that learning is not always pleasurable and as such teaching requires calculated, meaningful, deliberate interventions to direct learning. The chapter closes by revisiting the six signposts towards excellence in education from Hattie's 2009 book.

Getting away from the focus on students and the negativity over why we cannot do something or have the desired effect, in Chapter 3, as its title states, Hattie posits that teachers are the major player in the education process. This builds on the notions that passionate, inspired teaching professionals need to have command over teaching and learning strategies and pedagogical approaches and to know if they are working or not and be ready to adapt. Hattie looks briefly at the teacher's role from both institutional and self-belief perspectives and reviews data comparing expert and experienced teachers on five dimensions. Noting that "teachers' subject-matter knowledge had little effect on the quality of student outcomes" (p. 28), Hattie goes on to explain that it is "how teachers see the surface and the deeper understandings of the subjects that they teach, as well as their beliefs about how to teach and understand when students are learning and have learned the subject" (p. 28). Expert teachers are thus said to differ from experienced teachers not in the amount of subject knowledge or curriculum matters or teaching strategies, but rather how they integrate and organize and use this knowledge to combine new with prior knowledge, relate the current subject with other content in the curriculum, and adapt to address the student needs and teaching goals.

2.3 The lessons

Part 2 is comprised of five chapters breaking down the lesson from the viewpoints of preparation, the start, flow, feedback, and the ending. Yet Hattie cautions readers from defaulting to the perception of an overly linear path from planning to impact. Conversely teachers must seek to "foster intellectual demand, challenge, and learning because those are the more powerful predictors of in-

terest, engagement, and higher level and conceptual thinking that make students want to reinvest in learning" (p. 39). For Hattie, teaching practice is conceptualized as a way of thinking and doing and of learning incrementally and constantly from the deliberate practice in teaching. Although the title is developed around the idea of visible learning, Hattie also takes issue with structural issues of schooling and the often low return on time, resources, and funds wasted in those areas.

In Chapter 4, "Preparing the lesson," Hattie provides checklists for planning which are concentrated on prior achievement, learner self-attributes, and targeted learning before then looking at five components of learning intentions and the criteria for success. The lesson is also considered in the wider context of the curriculum and its progression under a fixed set of resources being delivered by teachers working collaboratively. Chapter 5, "Starting the lesson," examines the classroom climate, teacher talk, questions, types of understanding, the role of peers, methods, and the role of the teacher. Chapter 6 captures the nature of learning in the flow of the lesson under the guise of a combination of phases which can make the learning taking place in the head more visible. Here Hattie takes issue with the approach seen often in professional development and beginning teacher training where the focus is on teaching and not on learning. Chapter 6 thus begins with a look at the various phases of learning from a backward design perspective. It continues by examining the two major skills required for learning (which my foreign language educator colleagues can certainly identify with) — deliberate practice and concentration. The chapter closes with ideas on seeing the learning through the eyes of the students. Chapter 7 covers the topic of feedback and is structured with three feedback questions, four feedback levels, different types of feedback available, the frequency of feedback, and finally the student attributes. The end of the lesson is taken up in Chapter 8 under the perspective of the student, the teacher, the curriculum, and in terms of formative and summative interpretations of student learning, something which busy teachers sadly may too often overlook. A summary of the checklist points from this part of the book is provided in Appendix A in a very handy 5-page

questionnaire that can also be photocopied.

2.4 Mind frames

Part 3 wraps up the book with a single chapter on mind frames, defined generally by Hattie as how we think. Hattie begins the chapter by reminding us of the major theme that, more so than any of the other factors, the quality of teaching is what makes all of the difference in student learning and achievement. Hattie further reaffirms the message that “teachers, schools, and systems need to be consistently aware, and have dependable evidence of the effects that all are having on their students — and from this evidence make the decisions about how they teach and what they teach” (pp. 169–170). The chapter proceeds with three models: for systems, for school leaders, and for change. Eight mind frames about teacher and school leader beliefs are provided before a closing section on where to begin to implement change.

3. Conclusion

Success in teaching, as Hattie describes initially in his 2009 book, takes place after the lesson plan has been made, the physical layout of the classroom has been arranged, and the content has been delivered. The real *art of teaching* involves those things that happen next in how “the teacher reacts to how the student interprets, accommodates, rejects, and / or reinvents the content and skills, how the student relates and applies the content to other tasks, and how the student reacts in light of success and failure apropos the content and methods that the teacher has taught” (Hattie, 2009, p.2). With *Visible Learning for Teachers*, Hattie brings his collection of research-based evidence of what works to improve student learning and achievement to a new audience. Readers should however not be looking at this book for a quick fix as there is “no fixed recipe for ensuring that teaching has the maximum possible effect on student learning and no set principles that apply to all learning for all students” (p. 5).

In his Preface, Hattie sees the focus for teachers not on learning for the test but to more broadly involve “im-

pacting on the love of learning, inviting students to stay in learning, and seeing the ways in which students can improve their healthy sense of being, respect for self, and respect for others — as well as enhancing achievement” (p. viii). This title succeeds in its aim and goes a long way in guiding educators in the general practice of teaching and for the implementation of visible teaching and visible learning in their unique classroom contexts. For teachers willing to take an open-minded approach to their role in classroom actions and interactions with students, vital evidence-based answers to the question of *how to maximize achievement?* can be garnered. It is therefore suggested that all educators who are truly concerned with the learning and achievement of their students may want to have this title on their shelves to take a look at it now and again.

4. References

- Hattie, J. (2009). *Visible learning: A synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses relating to achievement*. Abingdon, UK: Routledge.
- Ritchhart, R., Church, M., & Morrison, K. (2011). *Making things visible: How to promote engagement, understanding, and independence*. San Francisco: Pfeiffer.