

# Courage and Teaching

Alan P. Williams

The Centre for the Study of English Language Teaching

JOURNAL Volume 11

FUKUOKA JO GAKUIN UNIVERSITY

# Courage and Teaching

Alan P. Williams

## Abstract

To improve the quality of learning that takes place behind classroom doors, a lot of research is currently done on the characteristics and qualities of effective teachers. Based on the findings, some researchers contend that teachers who have a lasting effect on their learners have a rich, wide, and encyclopedic knowledge of the content they wish to impart. While not denying the importance of knowledge in general, others maintain that stellar teachers have a set of pedagogical skills that ensures learning that is deep. There is another, more philosophical approach to teaching that seeks to identify the intellectual virtues or the qualities of mind good teachers possess. Philosophers who advocate this line of research argue, for example, that teachers who are fair and open-minded exert a more positive effect on those under their charge than those who are unfair and dogmatic. This paper will follow this promising tradition of relating mental dispositions with quality teaching. It will argue that courage is an important mental trait that empowers teachers to influence their students in productive ways.

*Keywords:* courage; experimentation; alternative beliefs; questioning; feedback

## Introduction

In the past, sages, prophets, and philosophers mandated how teaching should proceed and much of what they counseled stemmed from common-sense observations or traditional lore preserved as irrevocable and sometimes even holy. Today those involved in educational research hope to improve the standards of education by the discoveries and insights their studies reveal. Because school learning is multilayered and complex, research can explore a wide range of areas and issues that have a bearing on learning. There are studies done on textbooks, analyzing the kinds of texts and comprehension questions that support or impede learning.

Ranging from chemical formulas and mathematical equations to historical dates and geographical jargon, textbooks are usually replete with factual information and data and students are expected to store these facts into their long-term memory often through rote learning. Studies show that the ability to question and analyze what one reads is not nurtured because students spend most of the time faithfully absorbing the facts for upcoming quizzes and tests. Research has also scrutinized the effects standardized tests have on classroom learning. In many educational settings, students are forced to take high-stake tests so that the school board can analyze the scores and compare the academic levels of different schools. But as Kohn (2004) claims, because teachers are expected to prepare their students for these tests, valuable classroom time is spent going over past exams and practicing test-taking strategies instead of reading quality literature or exploring the wonders of the natural world. Furthermore, the questions that typically appear on these tests are cognitively unchallenging since they don't demand anything much beyond the retrieval of factual information found in the texts. There is also work done on students' family backgrounds. A mountain of evidence demonstrates that many students from poor, working-class families struggle academically at school because their parents cannot for financial reasons create an optimal learning environment at home by purchasing quality books and computers and hiring private tutors. Educational studies on textbooks, tests, and family backgrounds are all important because they give us a reliable, though partial, picture of what students are experiencing both in and out of school and can also suggest concrete measures that might transform schools for the better.

Besides investigating textbooks and the students' socio-economic environment, there is a growing number of studies exploring teachers as a means for fostering learning. This is both an obvious and understandable approach to take, since students meet, interact, and respond to what teachers say and do in class. Research focused solely on teachers can vary in what it concerns itself with. Some researchers, for example, zero-in on the pedagogical skills that many experienced teachers use. There is a lot of evidence documenting how good teachers orally pose questions that challenge students to reflect carefully on the materials covered in class. Effective teachers also assess their teaching in light of the answers students give. If their responses are superficial and confusing, teachers can revisit the same material by adopting a different instructional strategy.

Creative teachers are also adept at fostering an environment conducive to learning. They have strategies to pique students' interest at the beginning of class and know how to handle those who engage in off-task behavior. Alongside studies on pedagogical skills, researchers inquire into what teachers know about their subject and pedagogy and how they make use of their knowledge to aid student learning. Obviously, teachers who have a shallow understanding of their subject cannot be expected to instruct in a manner that provokes deep understanding. But teachers who know a lot about the subject don't necessarily succeed in delivering their knowledge. As research attests, they must have an accurate understanding of what their students know so that what they deliver will be within their zone of comprehension, not outside their level of competence. Teachers will fail to teach division if their students don't know how to add or subtract. Also, productive teachers are familiar with the misleading, inaccurate beliefs students have about the subject they teach. Teachers can facilitate the process of learning by correcting the misconceptions that hamper the acquisition of new knowledge. Students of physics, for example, struggle with the basic principles of mechanics because they wrongly assume that the natural state of motion for any given object is rest, not uniform velocity.

As King (2021) shows, there is a flourishing field of inquiry in philosophy that tries to identify the mental, cognitive characteristics people in general and good teachers in particular have. Its primary focus and concern is on the intellectual traits that help teachers think, analyze, and reflect more productively. Examples can help illustrate the nature of these traits. Empathy is an invaluable disposition that enables teachers to interact with their students in constructive ways. Instead of being aloof and indifferent, teachers can convey concern, warmth, and commitment by placing themselves in the situations their students face and trying to understand matters from their perspective. Students' willingness to learn amidst frustrations and obstacles is usually strengthened when they realize they are taught by teachers who care about their future and well-being. Empathy is also an indispensable trait when studying ancient history or foreign cultures. Teachers can become more appreciative of ancient mores and customs if they can enter into the mindset of those who lived in the past and try to perceive the world from the framework that was once standard and normal. Fairness is another intellectual virtue that can foster a healthy, vibrant learning environment. Teachers who are fair do not give a particular group of students preferential treatment because

of their gender or race. They give their undivided attention and energy to everyone in class, and don't ignore or sideline those who struggle with their work. Fair teachers don't maintain double-standards, setting high, rigorous standards for competent students and lowering the academic bar and expecting minimal work from those who find academic work challenging. Teachers who value fairness expect everyone to work beyond their capacity and meet high standards. Another disposition that characterizes teachers who excel in their work is perseverance. From lesson preparation to classroom management and student counseling, teaching is a field which abounds in challenges of various kinds. Whatever the obstacle, effective teachers have the ability to overcome the hurdles they face without giving in too easily. They typically thrive on the challenges they face, and value the sense of accomplishment that follows when they deal successfully with their problems. Those who lack perseverance don't have the resources to face the daily challenges teaching brings. They succumb to pressure and experience burn out, often leaving the profession disillusioned and emotionally shattered. Open-mindedness is another frame of mind that contributes to good teaching. Teachers who are open-minded are willing to revise their beliefs and values in light of new evidence. They are not dogmatically committed to the beliefs they hold, protecting and guarding their cherished beliefs from falsifying evidence. Because they are open to new ideas, they are willing to learn at all times, listening attentively to the ideas of experienced colleagues, reading about the latest findings on education, and valuing the feedbacks their students give. The mode of instruction open-minded teachers adopt usually undergoes changes, but those that reflect and embody valuable insights are lost to those who are closed to anything new and innovative. A lot can be learned about productive teaching if we study closely the dispositions that shape the ways teachers experience and respond productively to their work.

Courage is another important mindset that can aid teaching in a myriad of ways. It is a trait that is usually characterized as a mean between two extremes. On the one hand, cowardice is a feature shared by those who avoid things that pose a minor threat to their well-being. A coward would be someone who avoids taking a walk alone in a safe forest on the grounds that she might be stung by a bee or followed by a stray dog. On the other hand, people are rash when they think and act in situations that demand more careful deliberation and judgment. A rash person won't

think twice about taking a walk inside a woods known to be infested with hungry wolves and bears. Someone with courage avoids both extremes. They are generally predisposed to overcome fear and anxiety so as to help achieve the ends they regard as important. They don't easily succumb to anxieties that inhibit rational thought and action.

But what does courage have to do with teaching? We often characterize firefighters who risk their lives entering a house in flames to rescue a child as courageous. Or we view police officers who put their lives at risk pursuing dangerous, violent criminals as courageous. We also appraise the courage of anthropologists who spend countless months and years with primitive tribes in rainforests to further our understanding of ancient rituals and taboos. Courage, however, is not usually a quality associated with teaching. After all, teachers don't jeopardize their lives chasing thieves and arsonists. Nor is it part of their job requirement to live in a downtrodden habitat, devoid of all the comforts made possible by modern science. But as this study will attempt to show, courage is a cognitive trait that characterizes teaching at its best and we risk carrying a misleading and one-sided view of teaching if we fail to recognize its importance in effective teaching.

## 1. Exploring the unknown

Notwithstanding the allure of following the same tried and trusted teaching routines, teachers with courage are willing to come out of their comfort zone, experimenting with new instructional approaches and learning new subjects. As a result, they often succeed in delivering classes that inspire students.

Courage is an accolade bestowed on those who willingly explore somewhere they have never been before. We admire those who have the audacity to challenge themselves to depart from the familiar, cozy landscape they are used to and venture into an area that to them is marked by mystery and unforeseeable challenge. Courage is definitely needed when exploring unfamiliar terrains, imbued with uncertainty and unpredictability. There is always an underlying sense of anxiety because anything can happen anytime. Those who lack the sense of adventure tend to stick to what is familiar and love to immerse themselves in situations that don't necessitate sudden improvisations or drastic changes. Though we can sympathize with the unadventurous types who are perfectly

content undergoing the same experience over and over again, we are rightly hesitant to label them as courageous. The unpredictable, unknown path is not for the faint-hearted, since potential danger lurks at every corner.

Teaching too can be a courageous endeavor, where teachers leave behind what they are accustomed to and tread the path that leads to a destination that is unknown. In more concrete terms, what does it mean for teachers to manifest courage by exploring the untrodden? First, teachers can venture new grounds by adopting and setting tasks they have never implemented in class before. To be sure, it is extremely reassuring for teachers to recycle tasks that have worked in the past. Based on previous experiences, they can predict the amount of time it will take their students to complete the assignment and the areas they will find challenging. Despite the benefits gained from reusing tested and tried tasks, experimenting with hitherto untried activities can help break the monotony that can easily pervade teaching once teachers become reliant on safe and secure teaching routines and patterns. A series of new tasks unfolding in the classroom can bring novelty, change, and surprises, dispelling the overly familiar world of teaching brought by standardized routines. Another advantage that results from departing from teaching habits is that it helps teachers become less complacent and certain about their profession. When new tasks yield unpredictable results and outcomes, teachers are forced to realize that teaching doesn't follow a smooth, clear trajectory, where everything follows a predetermined plan. New tasks bringing forth unexpected results can help teachers question their confidence brought by the repetitive use of the same tasks over the years. Unjustified overconfidence can become a problem for many teachers, as it hampers professional development. Teachers are more willing to learn about the subtleties of their craft and grow professionally if they are less sure of what good teaching entails. The third rationale for testing innovative tasks is that if they help achieve the learning objectives, they can expand the teachers' teaching repertoire, enabling them to add variety into their lessons. Students are easily distracted and lose concentration if they are forced to do the same task in class. On the whole, they respond favorably to variation. If teachers can spark and maintain their learners' interest with a wide range of activities, there is a higher likelihood that their lesson objectives will be met. And teachers can learn a lot from newly tried tasks that don't work. Teaching is a trial-and-error process, where the

blunders, the errors, and the mistakes enable teachers to learn more about the optimal conditions of learning and the thousand-and-one factors that can impede the acquisition of knowledge. Failures in the classroom are all blessings in disguise.

Besides tasks, teachers can depart from the known and enter the unknown by adopting new approaches to teaching. Teachers are used to being the focus of attention, delivering clear and objective facts to be copied faithfully into notebooks. There are teachers who break away from this traditional role. As Williams (1994) argue, in contrast to what students expect, brave teachers deliberately try to make the lessons more difficult and confusing rather than presenting neat and tidy packages of information for rote memorization. Instead of supplying students with ready-made answers, they pose questions that challenge their preconceptions. In response to claims learners make, they ask for evidence, justification, or elaboration. In such classes, student reading consists more of texts that articulate and defend different points of view, not texts filled with pieces of information which have to be committed to memory. Though there is less emphasis on the delivery of knowledge, teachers lead more discussions, encouraging students to support their views with reasons, take more time to think before voicing their views, and critique the views others give. This type of pedagogy is psychologically unsettling because it doesn't meet student expectations of the teacher being the fountain of knowledge and wisdom. Yet those who have the courage and adopt innovative teaching methods can achieve learning outcomes that more orthodox approaches to teaching have problems achieving.

For teachers it always feels safe and secure to study the themes their field typically raises. But teachers can also pursue their work with courage by studying a subject that is beyond their field of expertise. A teacher of physics can learn ancient history or a language teacher can undergo systematic training in pure mathematics. Entering an entirely new discipline as a neophyte is daunting. It is analogous to a tourist visiting a totally strange land, surrounded by exotic architecture and people speaking an unfamiliar language. But what is the merit for learning a new discipline? First of all, it helps teachers realize the formidable challenges their students face when studying their field. It is easy for teachers to forget the obstacles that stood in their way when mastering their subject because they most likely got first acquainted with it many years ago. And as Neuhaus (2016) observes, most teachers loved and were good at their



field as students, making it difficult to empathize with students who find their subject challenging. By learning a totally new field, teachers can learn first-hand what it means to become a beginner, struggling with the fundamentals. Also, teachers can deepen and enrich their understanding of their field of expertise by relating it to their newly acquired knowledge. For example, a teacher of literature can expand her understanding of Dickens if she learns more about the socio-cultural milieu that shaped the ways in which people in the Victorian era thought about religion, science, and politics. Her newly acquired understanding of history can surely help her make more sense of what the characters in the novels say and do. By studying the theological world of such towering figures like Augustine and Luther, a teacher of art can shed light upon the religious motifs, symbols, and themes that appear in the portraits of Mary, Christ, and his disciples. There are bound to be points of contact between subjects that have different domains of inquiry. Knowledge acquired in one discipline can be applied and put to good use in other fields of inquiry.

Moreover, teachers pursue the unfamiliar and teach with courage when they introduce taboo topics into their lessons. In any given course of study, there are many standard topics teachers are expected to cover in a systematic manner. In language teaching, students are exposed to the target language through reading about, say, shopping, holidays, and festivals, since they are popular issues that are thought to arouse interest. Courses on English literature usually prescribe a list of canonical texts that have withstood the passage of time and teachers expect students to become acquainted with standard literary issues such as plot, subplot, and genre as they follow the narrative. Instead of adhering rigidly to the curricular guidelines, teachers with courage create the space and time to touch upon and investigate themes that are commonly regarded as taboo. Besides exploring standard themes, there is a place for teaching taboo topics in the classroom because an important purpose of teaching is to shock and jolt students by means of delivering materials that don't mesh with their expectations and covering content that forces them to think about questions they ordinarily avoid. A foreign language teacher with courage can set aside the usual teaching materials on entertainment and fashion and probe the meaning of, say, death as a class. As Gawande (2014) rightly points out, death, though inevitable, is a subject people avoid discussing. Though death isn't a popular topic of conversation, the teacher can share her thoughts and experiences concerning some very sensitive

topics like suicide, depression, and ill-health, and elicit personal anecdotes from her students that relate to the issues being covered. Students can read the last words given by death row inmates to understand the psychological state people facing death go through. Students can as a writing exercise write their own obituary, describing their accomplishments and regrets or write a dialogue between friends reminiscing about the deceased at a funeral. Taboo topics have the potential to add novelty into the classroom, coupled with the power to make students ponder themes that are ordinarily marginalized in education.

In summary, teaching can embody courage when teachers implement new tasks, adopt new approaches to teaching, study an unfamiliar discipline, and cover taboo topics in their lessons. Departing from what is familiar can give rise to anxieties, but advancing into the unknown brings advantages that are lasting and enduring.

## 2. Exploring Contrary Beliefs

There is a tendency for teachers to protect their beliefs out of fear of being wrong. But effective teachers have the courage to explore beliefs and ideas they don't personally hold. And through learning about these beliefs, they deepen their understanding of teaching and benefit student learning in many ways.

People are inclined to shield the beliefs and values they endorse from criticism. They not only protect their convictions, but actively seek their support by associating with people who share their beliefs. In the political realm, for example, liberals support gay marriage and the women's right to abortion while conservatives champion the nuclear family as the backbone of social harmony and condone premarital sex. To deepen their political commitments, liberals watch videos and read blogs that reflect their values and conservatives avoid exposing themselves to left-leaning views because of their conviction that they pose a moral threat to society. Because both liberals and conservatives fail to discern much value in what their political opponents espouse, they don't take the time to study closely the views they are opposed to. Due to their limited understanding of their opponents' political beliefs, they often resort to caricatures and stereotypes that don't give a fair and accurate account of what their adversaries maintain. There is also very little constructive dialogue between atheists and people of faith

in the public sphere. Each accuses the other for being dogmatic and narrow-minded. Amidst the clamor and din, there lacks the serious exchange of ideas. Convinced atheists protect their core beliefs—secular morality, separation of state and religion, naturalistic metaphysics, etc. — from religious scrutiny and orthodox believers defend their faith, guarding sacred scripture and their core creeds from the onslaught of skeptical arguments. Both atheists and believers work hard towards bolstering their convictions. Atheists immerse themselves in views sympathetic to their cause and distance themselves from what they regard as religious bigotry and fanaticism. The religious attend communities of faith and strengthen their faith through joint prayers and the reading of scripture, all the while ignoring what they consider to be the ravings and chanting of infidels. Both the religious and anti-religious community serves a similar function: “to buttress our sense that we are right, and protect us from constantly contending with the possibility that we are wrong” (Schulz, 2010, p.156).

The field of education resembles politics and religion for being an area that evokes conflicting thoughts and opinions about a range of issues. Teachers can become defensive of their stance in education, preserving their cherished beliefs from threats posed by opposing ideas. How do teachers preserve their beliefs from what they conceive to be threats? Out of fear of being mistaken, teachers can decide to simply ignore the objections raised by their opponents. For example, teachers who are convinced that schools should teach patriotism and the virtue of being loyal to the leadership can turn a blind eye to arguments put forward by critics of patriotic education as unworthy of serious attention. Teachers can also categorically dismiss their opponents’ position by characterizing it as a silly and irrational stance to take. Teachers critical of religion are often unwilling to seriously consider the rationale for religious education because they caricature religious faith as nothing more than irrational, superstitious beliefs from a primitive age that cannot withstand criticism. Another strategy used when confronting beliefs that are incompatible with one’s overall standpoint is to focus on the weak arguments they put forward so that they can be rebutted with ease, thereby further reconfirming the truth of one’s position.

Teachers protect their beliefs from criticism because they fear that what they uphold as true might in fact be wrong. They cannot face the fact that they might have to revise their philosophy of education if it is found to be fallacious. For many, it is safer to remain ignorant of one’s shortcomings

and errors than to face and admit one's mistakes. But notwithstanding the temptation to set up a bulwark around our beliefs, making it immune from countervailing evidence and logical critique, many teachers muster the courage and carefully examine the views that are not congruent with what they personally endorse. To put the matter differently, without courage, teachers would forever be ensconced in their pedagogical positions, becoming overly protective of their beliefs and never growing professionally through exposure to new ideas. Instead of trying to reconfirm their position by studying works that vindicate and support what they hold dear, courageous teachers learn about positions contrary to their convictions. For example, as Gannon (2020) contends, radical educators view teaching as a way of transforming students into agents of social change. Educators who seek to empower students with the skills and knowledge that eradicate unjust socio-economic structures, can and do learn more about the importance and virtue of transferring tradition and wisdom to students from traditionalists, who eschew any attempt to use education to promote political ends. Traditionalists themselves reexamine their underlying belief in the value of teacher-centered didactic lectures in light of the criticisms posed by radical educators who are convinced that teachers should play a more facilitative role, guiding and supporting their learners. moreover, teachers who cannot discern the point of devoting hours every week teaching painting and sculpture to students who are not appreciative of art can reconsider their convictions through learning more about the ways in which art can cultivate imagination and foster creativity. Those who value art as an indispensable subject with manifold cognitive benefits can reevaluate their commitment to art education, taking into consideration the points – science (not art) drives the economy, art doesn't train the mind, etc. – made by the critics of art. Teachers with courage become acquainted with and learn from views they personally find difficulty accepting. They are not trapped in their own little world, unwilling to expose their beliefs to scrutiny. They willingly search for ideas contrary to their own, knowing that they can never remain content with what believe.

But why should teachers study alternative points of view in education? Why can't they just learn from those who have the same frame of reference? One merit that often follows when people grapple with ideas they don't personally share is they realize that the answers they accept to questions are not as definitive and straightforward as they previously

thought. Those who don't carefully examine an issue from multiple perspectives erroneously believe that the answers they accept exhaust the possibilities of what can rationally be accepted. By becoming acquainted with alternative views, they come to understand that things are more complex and subtle than what they imagined. The realization of the subtlety of educational topics can and often do encourage people to rethink and reconsider their beliefs more carefully. An additional value is that those who study and learn about views they don't share become more tolerant and less dismissive of these views. Through a sympathetic and close study of their opponents' beliefs, they often become cognizant of their strengths which previously escaped their notice. Beliefs that initially seemed bizarre or even immoral can draw attention, illicit understanding, and even foster sympathy because of their merits. Tolerance is an extremely important attitude to have towards beliefs we don't share because when this frame of mind is undermined or discarded, people who hold different views can be ostracized, ridiculed, harassed, and despised. Teachers need to strive hard to create a community where different beliefs and values coexist harmoniously and where every teacher respects the convictions that give meaning and purpose to their coworkers' lives. As Furedi (2011) writes, "The act of tolerance is not a grudgingly extended altruistic gesture...It represents a positive appreciation of the necessity for a diversity of views and for conflicting beliefs" (p.22). Another reason why teachers should learn more about views they don't embrace is that they help them realize the faults and errors that are inherent in the beliefs they actually hold. It is generally quite challenging to assess critically the beliefs we hold since criticism requires people to separate and distance themselves from their beliefs and examine them from a vantage point outside themselves. Teachers can critically reexamine their personal beliefs by stepping outside their conceptual scheme and adopting a point of view critical of what they believe. And by adopting a different vantage point, errors and problems intrinsic to their beliefs become more salient. For instance, a firm advocate of multicultural education can, after reading works contradicting her position, question the value of teaching indigenous creation myths as a viable alternative to the Big Bang cosmology. Teachers of science who embrace scientism can acquaint themselves with the questions science cannot address, and thereby learn about the limits inherent in a purely scientific form of inquiry. Courageous teachers are not intimidated by views they don't accept. Rather, they see them as sources

for expanding their horizons and correcting their fallible beliefs.

To conclude, teachers need the courage to face and learn from the beliefs they don't embrace. By carefully studying beliefs contrary to what they hold, teachers can become more tolerant towards such beliefs and deepen their understanding of what they believe.

### 3. Raising Questions

Effective teachers raise questions and scrutinize the traditions that are found in schools. Posing questions is vital. It has brought changes in the past and it is bringing changes in the present. It is, however, not easy for teachers to subject norms to criticism. Those with courage are bold enough to take the risk, believing in the power of critical questions.

There are countless standardized traditions in schools. Through the years they spend in the classroom, teachers internalize these traditions as normal and natural. That is, the familiar routines and conventions that are found at schools are accepted as norms that teachers should comply. What, then, are some of these norms? Teachers are given the authority and power to establish classroom rules and regulations that determine what students can and cannot do. They are expected to enforce these rules and they have the right to punish those who violate them. Teachers are also given the prerogative to assess students' work and rank their students from highest to lowest. Besides evaluation, the teachers' fundamental role as an educator is to impart their knowledge and understanding for students to retain. To fulfill this central obligation, teachers dominate and control classroom discourse, spending most of the time talking and posing questions. For the most part, teachers equate the familiar with how things ought to be done, accepting the status quo as not in need of any change.

It is tempting to accept tradition as immune from error. Often we endorse the familiar as perfectly natural because we lack the imagination to envision how things can be different from the way it actually is. Also, we tend to support the status quo if it works in our favor. We would be more critical of the present states of affairs if we were subject to problems and difficulties they engender. Whatever the underlying cause to remain content with the ways things are, teachers need the courage to raise critical questions and scrutinize the status quo. Those who lack the courage to interrogate the norms that shape schooling simply acquiesce to habitual routines and conventions, trusting and having faith in tradition.

The very act of posing questions is important since it helped improve schooling in the past. Corporal punishment, for example, was commonly practiced by teachers. Disobedient and incompilant students were physically punished to cultivate the virtue of obeying authority. This form of punishment had the effect of instilling fear amongst many students and undermined their joy for learning. As more teachers voiced their opposition, fewer teachers resorted to violence as a means for establishing order in the classroom. Now it is rightly regarded as a barbaric and immoral punitive measure for teachers to take. Various kinds of discriminatory practices were also common in schools. To mention just one example, girls were for many years denied the right to earn an education, for they were thought to be intellectually inferior to boys, lacking the cognitive power and competence to handle academically challenging work. Many teachers who couldn't fathom the rationale for depriving girls an education interrogated this unjust system, resulting in its demise. Though girls won the right to study at schools, they were forced to follow a separate curriculum that was less rigorous and demanding. Their education largely consisted of acquiring practical skills like sewing and typing that would be useful when rearing a family at home. This policy of segregation was intact for many years, serving the interests of the powerful and the elite. Again, this systematic abuse of power gradually ended when teachers and the public sought a more equitable system of education that reflected the genuine needs and interests of the female sex. Moreover, before the vast proliferation of higher learning amongst the general public in many western countries, most universities followed a curriculum that primarily focused on theology and the classical languages. Students spent hours analyzing the complex grammars of Latin and Greek, translating abstruse passages to conventional English. Hours were also spent reading scripture to deepen their religious conviction and nurture lasting piety. This emphasis on theological training and the learning of classics constituted the standard course of study. Changes were brought when educators started questioning the legitimacy and propriety of a firm grounding in theology when the world was following a secular trajectory, where capitalist principles were creating an industrially advanced, technological society. Following the demands for change, new subjects were added to the curriculum, offering students a richer education. Whether large or small, past changes in schooling were in part brought about by teachers who distanced themselves from the status quo and

raised pointed, unsettling questions.

The critical assessment of tradition is also bringing changes in education today. Teachers aware of conventional pedagogical practices that hamper learning are raising awkward questions that are instigating changes. Consider the giving of homework, a practice followed by many schools. Many teachers who are committed to the central tenets of progressive education doubt the value of assigning work to be completed at home, when students can be making more productive use of their time with their family or by pursuing their personal interests. There are schools that incorporate the concerns teachers have and reduce the amount of homework they give. Schools are also radically rescheduling their timetable so as to support student learning. A fundamental concern teachers educating adolescents have is their students' lack of energy and concentration during early morning classes. There is a physiological cause that underlies their apathy. Teenagers are tired when school starts partly because hormones known to induce lethargy are released early in the day. Schools reflecting the concerns of teachers are starting their first-period classes later in the day, bringing positive academic results. Or take assessment. As Resnick (2017) convincingly argues, many teachers are wary of the standard multiple-choice-type questions their tests are supposed to include because it is difficult for such questions to assess their students' creativity or imagination. Schools paying heed to this criticism are replacing standard tests with portfolios, where students submit a wide range of creative and original works and projects for assessment. Another question many teachers are raising in various educational settings concerns their students' lack of general knowledge and understanding about the world. Teachers bemoan that they know very little outside their sphere of interest and are unwilling to venture outside the ambit of what they know and learn something new. In part because of their frustrations and worries, many schools are adopting a knowledge-based curriculum that seeks to impart a wealth of knowledge in all the subject areas and help build within students a secure and solid foundation of knowledge. It cannot be denied that educational reforms are sometimes imposed on teachers and students in a top-down fashion. And school authorities ignore the questions posed by teachers who daily meet and interact with students. But incremental, piece-meal changes to existing practices that reflect the criticisms of teachers can be found.

Teachers also need to respond critically to new conventions, since



schools are forever evolving, where new traditions are established to help address and solve arising problems. We now witness, for example, the emergence of new modes of instruction using YouTube videos and blogs written by celebrities to make learning more entertaining. Many teachers are reluctant to set long and challenging reading texts, for they are convinced that students raised in a culture saturated with shallow entertainment and catchy music videos cannot stay focused for long while reading passages of dense prose. Often the amount of reading expected of students is meagre and the content is devoid of academic rigor. Teachers of writing are equally reluctant to assign research essays since students can easily search sample essays online and submit them as their original work. And as Bok (2020) documents in detail, facing an increasing number of students suffering from depression, nausea, and a deep sense of meaninglessness, schools of higher learning are introducing new courses on the nature of happiness and how to find meaning in life. The educational landscape is gradually but steadily changing, as new modes of learning are replacing traditional instruction. As new traditions become entrenched, teachers will need to subject them to scrutiny, preserving what is educationally sound and jettisoning what is not.

It is not entirely easy for teachers to question deeply ingrained traditions that impede learning. Once teachers become accustomed to the ways things are done through years spent at schools, they become less surprised, puzzled, or disturbed by what they experience on a daily basis. Familiarity subdues or attenuates the sense of puzzlement teachers may have initially experienced. Their predicament is akin to tourists who become used to strange and exotic cultural mores as they spend more time living in a foreign land. Another reason why raising questions can be a challenge is because it takes considerable courage to doubt the status quo. School authorities – principals, deans, provosts, etc. – want teachers to adjust themselves to existing routines and patterns, and are often unwilling to modify accepted norms to suit their teachers. Those who question how things are done are thought to be uncompliant and rebellious, not subservient to and respectful of authority. They are marked as trouble-makers who are not willing to fit in and conform. They are viewed negatively for trusting their own judgements concerning what is right and wrong and not questioning their reactions and responses to what they experience at school. Those who wield power have a thousand-and-one responsibilities to fulfill such as meeting parents, organizing workshops,

securing ties with the communities, etc. Given their workload, they won't view favorably those who add more things they have to attend to. In addition, critical questions are troubling for school authorities because they often lack clear, definitive answers. Whenever they cannot generate unambiguous responses to problems posed, they appear incompetent, unworthy of leading an entire community of educators. But teachers who are agents for positive, constructive change are brave enough to withstand such negative conceptions. They have the courage to take a stand on issues they think are important, even if they put their popularity at risk. Notwithstanding the image they might present, they are driven by a healthy form of skepticism that casts doubt upon the norms that govern what ordinarily takes place at schools. And it is thanks to teachers' bravery of valuing quality education over their reputation that has helped advance education.

In conclusion, teachers with courage are willing to raise awkward questions if they discern impediments to student learning. Their criticisms are often instrumental in eradicating ineffective traditions that many take for granted.

#### 4. Getting Critical Feedback

Teaching, unlike some professions, is a craft that can be improved in many ways. One invaluable source of professional development is getting critical feedback from sympathetic, learned colleagues. This overall approach to improvement demands courage, which can be a challenge for many.

Jobs differ in terms of whether people can reach a point where there is little room for improving their performance. Arguably, cashiers serving customers at supermarkets and janitors vacuuming the floors and cleaning the walls of office buildings can perfect what they do through experience. Nor would many question that security guards can fulfill their responsibilities without committing serious blunders after gaining in experience. On the whole, people who undertake mechanical, repetitive work can master their craft and fulfill their job requirements without worrying too much about how their performance can be bettered.

It is not uncommon for teaching to be construed as a mechanical endeavor, requiring nothing much besides mastering a number of pedagogical skills like talking loudly, writing clearly on the board, and

orchestrating drills effectively. In fact, many schools are encouraging the use of teacher-proof textbooks and worksheets precisely because teaching is thought to be a mechanical undertaking, encompassing a series of non-cognitive skills that can be internalized through overt, repetitive training. This is an unfortunate mischaracterization of teaching. Teaching cannot be reduced to a set of skills that can be mastered once and for all. Anyone who has spent time in the classroom knows that teaching is an exceedingly complex profession that always leaves room for improvement. Even with years of concrete teaching practice, teachers can always perform better in the classroom, delivering lessons that arouse more interest and help learners better retain what they are taught. Every aspect of teaching is susceptible to improvement. For example, curricular aims and objectives can be made more clear by replacing vague, abstract language with more concrete outcomes students won't struggle understanding. A learning task that was hard to follow because of its longwinded instructions can be simplified by discarding unnecessary explanations. Quizzes which assess the retention of facts and data can be made more cognitively challenging by testing the learners' ability to draw inferences, make predictions, or make comparisons. Instead of starting a topic by telling their students to open their textbook to a new page, teachers can find a much better way of capturing their attention and sparking their interest in what they are about to learn. Or a teacher finds a new poem rich in simple but powerful metaphors, analogies, and similes that can be used to study the effects of different literary devices. During morning lessons when students' level of energy is low, the teacher uses fun, physical icebreaking activities to good effect rather than beginning the lesson with an elaborate review of what was covered during the previous class. There is virtually no end to how lessons can be made effective by revisions, experimentations, reflections, and reassessments. Teachers wouldn't need to engage in constant professional development if classroom instruction were reducible to mechanical skills.

There is a wide range of sources for professional development, though each source presents challenges and difficulties to teachers. Academic research is an invaluable source for insights into pedagogy and learning. Experimental studies on memory, motivation, and learning styles can have an important bearing on classroom teaching. Teachers can acquire new instructional strategies through learning more about what triggers curiosity, what dampens motivation, and what aids the retention of

knowledge. They can also revise or discard teaching practices and materials that don't comport with what the latest findings are revealing about learning. Though it is advisable for teachers to keep abreast of the latest, relevant findings, improving pedagogy by means of research is not without problems. Studies are often highly technical. The language used to express their insights is often impenetrable because of jargon and the quantitative analyses that are used to evaluate data cannot be understood without an advanced understanding of math and statistics. Teachers without the relevant background knowledge are bound to struggle when trying to understand their content. An additional problem is that teachers cannot take the findings for granted. Academic research is contested, where researchers are critical of the methods used and the results obtained by others, especially if they accept a different theoretical framework or belong to another school of thought. Teachers can also develop professionally through learning more about the field they teach. Those who teach English can deepen their understanding of the life and thoughts of Shakespeare and apply and make use of their knowledge when their learners study his sonnets and plays in class. Teachers of modern history can explore the Greco-Roman world so that they can draw parallels between Athenian democracy and contemporary forms of democracy to help illustrate how the past can illuminate what happens in the present. Despite the many benefits of deepening one's knowledge, however, many teachers simply don't have the time to learn more about their subject area. When not in class teaching, they are busy marking tests, preparing classes, and meeting students, not leaving them much time to pursue their studies.

Another source for professional development is for teachers to receive critical feedback from their coworkers. They can share their lesson plans that outline the general flow of what they do in class and the activities they create to help achieve concrete learning goals. They can also share sample quizzes and tests that reveal what students are expected to know and what thinking skills they have to demonstrate. Student work is another valuable source of critical assessment. The mistakes and errors students commonly make can unveil areas they find to be difficult. Teachers who are conscientious about their work keep reflective journals that document in detail what they experience in class. They provide invaluable insights into their thought processes as they try to make sense of the incidents that take place in class. Though teachers can obviously learn a lot about their personal strengths and weaknesses in teaching as they go over their past

lesson plans and quizzes, it is often difficult to reflect on their work both objectively and impartially. There is, for example, a tendency for teachers to become blind to their personal shortcomings. They might be incapable of detecting how their quizzes are short on questions that ask students to explain and justify the answers they give or how tests often include questions that have more than one correct answer. Teachers can also fail to notice the kinds of tasks and activities they tend to overuse in class and those they tend to underuse. A teacher of foreign language can set tasks that focus on accuracy without offering her students much fluency practice. Or her lessons might have a strong focus on acquiring input through reading and listening and lack activities that require students to speak or write the target language. Having a critical yet sympathetic colleague willing and able to provide constructive feedback is immensely valuable for teachers because she can often notice things that escape their awareness. Going over the materials for the first time, she can examine them with fresh eyes, noticing patterns and regularities. And teachers can create more valid tests, more challenging tasks, and more interesting reading texts by incorporating the critical feedback they receive, providing more effective lessons to their learners.

Notwithstanding the advantages of receiving critical input, it is a challenge for teachers to approach their coworkers for feedback. Sharing one's work takes an enormous amount of courage because one is in effect becoming vulnerable, showing the quizzes and assignments for inspection. The feedback can also be negative, pointing out mistakes that need to be addressed. Those who evaluate negatively can question the competence of their colleagues and the negative mindset can color the way they view what they do and say. Because exposing what one does to critical scrutiny can be threatening, it is tempting for teachers to avoid critical feedback altogether. And teaching is actually a profession where teachers can remain relatively anonymous if they shun exposure. Once they close their classroom doors, what they do in class is not subject to public viewing. Those lacking in courage can take advantage of this anonymity that is intrinsic to teaching, not revealing what they do in class. But teachers with courage do not yield to this temptation. Their zest to provide quality education drives them to contact people they think can offer assistance. And there indeed are teachers who are forever improving their performance and growing as educators by attending seriously to the criticism their colleagues give.

In summary, teachers can improve their teaching practices by subjecting their work to critical feedback from colleagues. Because the sharing of work makes one vulnerable and exposes both our strengths and weaknesses, it requires teachers to have courage. And many do engage in this form of professional development, despite the challenges it gives rise to.

## Conclusion

One promising area of research which can help advance quality teaching is to examine the mental traits that characterize effective teachers. This study argued that courage is a valuable trait that empowers many highly efficient teachers. Courage in teaching can take different forms. Teachers convey courage when they depart from standardized routines and set new tasks and adopt new approaches to teaching. Any departure from the familiar can be unsettling but the rewards are many. Teachers with courage also expose themselves to and learn from beliefs they don't share. The process of studying alternative beliefs is often unnerving, since these beliefs can question and undermine what we hold dear. Another way in which teachers often demonstrate their courage is through raising questions, scrutinizing the conventions and norms that typify schooling. These questions have helped eradicate unproductive, immoral traditions found in schools and they will continue to help bring positive changes in the future. Furthermore, those with courage are willing to subject their teaching to criticism, learning how their pedagogy can be improved. Courage is a trait that brings many benefits in the field of education, and it is courageous teachers who will continue to make lasting contributions to student learning.

## Bibliography

- Bok, Derek. (2020). *Higher Expectations*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Furedi, Frank. (2011). *On Tolerance: A Defence of Moral Independence*. London: Continuum.
- Gannon, Kevin M. (2020). *Radical Hope: A Teaching Manifesto*. Morgantown: West Virginia University Press.
- Gawande, Atul. (2014). *Being Mortal*. London: Profile Books.
- King, Nathan L. (2021). *Excellent Mind*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kohn, Alfie. (2004). *What Does It Mean to Be Well Educated?* Boston: Beacon Press.

- Neuhaus, Jessamyn. (2019). *Geeky Pedagogy*. Morgantown: West Virginia University Press.
- Resnick, Mitchel. (2017). *Lifelong Kindergarten*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Schulz, Kathryn. (2010). *Being Wrong: Adventures in the Margin of Error*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Williams, John. (1994). *Conflict in the Classroom*. New York: SUNY Press.