Rumination 1# - What makes a good teacher?

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What makes a good teacher, or framed differently, what is a sign of a quality teacher in a school (or university)? One side argues that teacher practice is too little informed by the use and reflection upon research-based evidence about what generates learning and high student outcomes. The good teacher is up-to-date and does not act upon instinct or a feeling about what is right. The other side argues that the good teacher is a connoisseur. By this it is meant the teacher is able to make decisions that allow for context, the arrival of unpredictable events, sudden changes in student atmosphere in the course of a lesson and so on.

This is not a new debate (see Gadamer below) and it seems each generation has its own version of the science of teaching vs. teaching as a moral practice/upbringing. The former talking of ‘what works’, of science, and the latter of ‘what is valued’ and the voice of experience. It is not amiss to ask: are we measuring what we value, or valuing only what we can measure?

The German philosopher Gadamer in his rightly famous work from 1960 Wahrheit und Methode (Truth and Method), argued that Method was associated with the desire to lock all knowledge creation and practice into a strict adherence to methods, based upon the logic of means to ends. Truth, by contrast, arose in a more playful, ‘living in the moment’ experience and letting things suddenly arise or transpire according to the context and needs of individuals.

The following explores what happens if the pendulum swings too far in the direction of the evidence-based or methods view of education:

“To assume that research on ‘what works’ may replace normative professional judgment, is simply to make a totally unwarranted jump from the is to the should. But perhaps worse: Such education with the support of newer and more reliable "scientific research" will be able to more easily dismiss the educational practitioner’s right to act on the basis of their own experience of necessary (un)certainty and hesitation about what may work in situations where events come galloping as on a conveyor belt. It will ignore many of the sources that can help to provide educational practice with nuanced, sensitive, contextually poignant, insightful and often indeterminate experiences.” (Steinsholt in Steinsholt and Dobson, 2009)

So what makes a quality teacher? It is not an either-or choice. Quality requires reflection upon research-based evidence of good practice, but it also requires the skills
of the connoisseur who is able to make deviations from the curriculum to progress learning to suit the unique needs of the classroom or individual student.