What is a 'good' teacher?

Terry Phillips argues that 'good' teachers must satisfy not just their students in the classroom but also an extended network of stakeholders in their work

Teachers and teacher trainers, students and language school administrators, parents and training officers all talk about certain people being good teachers. School owners and manager know that they must, fundamentally, employ 'good' teachers for their business to be a success.

Who decides what a 'good teacher' is?

But do all these people mean the same thing by a 'good' teacher? What is a good teacher? What does a good teacher do in the classroom? What does a good teacher do when he/she is not in the classroom? And, as a teacher, which of the (potentially conflicting) definitions should you attempt to meet?

People involved in different parts of the education process probably have different definitions because they are each concerned with a different aspect of the process. People involved in different parts of education as a business may have different definitions because they see the objectives of employees as different.

A registrar may define a good teacher as someone whom the students don't moan about, a co-ordinator may say it about someone who sticks to the syllabus and finishes the course, a parent may use it about someone who knows and takes an interest in her child. A manager may define a good teacher as someone who gets on and does his or her job without making waves – oh, and does reserve lessons without making a fuss.

In research experiments, students have defined good teachers as people who make lessons fun, who personalise language and are genuinely interested in the students as people.

No consensus: Does it matter?

Until recently, the fact that there was no consensus on 'goodness' could have been seen as only a minor irritation. Teachers went into a classroom and closed the door, and what went on from then on was between the teacher and the students. When my first temporary ELT post was converted into a permanent one, it was on the grounds that the supervisor had 'not had any complaints about me from the students.' (Goodness knows why not. I didn't have a clue what I was doing half the time!) Schools ran what we are now encouraged to call in management circles a 'star culture' with each teacher twinkling brightly in their own constellation. Even then, it was potentially very dangerous for a teacher to be judged badly, without even realising it was happening, but the danger was more indirect than it is becoming.

Towards criteria for judging 'good' and 'bad' teachers

Times are changing. The door to the classroom is now open – well, ajar - and a new spirit of accountability for workplace performance is sweeping through the profession. Teaching, certainly high-quality ELT, used to have pre-entry controls and very little post-entry monitoring. But in many schools, lesson observation is now routine – not just in a spirit of assistance but in order to make critical judgements about performance. Some schools around the world have already gone further and applied simplistic single issue criteria - such as drop-out rate, or re-enrolment rate – to the judgement of teacher performance. These judgements are forming the basis of performance-related pay and even renewal of contract decisions.

In my opinion, there is nothing wrong with workplace performance standards, as long as:

- the criteria are correct
- the criteria are known and accepted by those who will be evaluated
- those doing the judging are qualified for the job

Indeed, in my experience, many teachers in the average staffroom welcome the 'bad' teachers being rooted out. This is in line with motivation theory. It is often said in management that employees not only want their good work to be recognised, they also want the poor work of others to be recognised.

So it is no longer possible to see the teacher as an independent operator, immune from workplace performance monitoring. It is coming and all teachers must become involved in the debate about what is a good teacher in the classroom, in order to ensure reasonable criteria, reasonable evaluation procedures and qualified assessors. But, important as it may be, beyond that judgement of classroom performance, generally made by the teacher's immediate superior on pedagogic grounds, teachers must be aware that they are constantly being judged by all the stakeholders connected with the business they work in. If a teacher does not work to achieve stakeholder satisfaction in the broadest sense, he/she may be judged wanting without ever realising that judging was taking place. In the medium term this can lead to loss of confidence in the teacher and, eventually, to loss of job and lack of good references.

How can one achieve stakeholder satisfaction? Clearly one must understand how satisfaction, in a business sense, is achieved and then identify the stakeholders.

Stakeholder satisfaction

Satisfaction is not the same as happiness. A teacher's job is not, for example, to keep the students happy. Happiness is metaphysical and not susceptible to the application of management theory. Satisfaction is practical and can be worked towards. Satisfaction, in these terms, is simply the difference between delivery and expectation. In other words, if my students expect something of me and don't get it, they will be dissatisfied. Conversely, if they get what they expect, they will be satisfied. If they get more than they expect, they will be extremely satisfied.

So, for any stakeholder that we identify, it is necessary to discover or, if that is impossible, assume, the expectations they have. In some cases, it is not possible to meet the expectations of a particular stakeholder. In this case, we must manage the expectations to ensure satisfaction. It is one thing to be told at the beginning of a course that you will not be able to pass FCE in three months. You may still be satisfied with a course that prepares you for a failed attempt. It is quite another to follow a course and then fail without any warning. Once we have discerned the expectation of a stakeholder, we must then raise our delivery to meet that expectation, or lower the expectation to the level at which we can effectively deliver. Often it will be a bit of both.

Stakeholders in the work of teachers

So who has a stake in the work of a teacher? Anyone with a stake is likely to have a view, and if you fail to satisfy their success criteria - however obscure they may be – you will not be judged a good teacher.

Once you start making a list of stakeholders, it tends to grow and grow. It's easy to start.

Primary stakeholders are your students, clearly, as customers – people who consume the service. According to Jeremy Harmer's research (in *How to Teach English:* Longman 1998), students want interesting lessons, a teacher who is interested in his/her job, someone who is knowledgeable. Overall, they want a person – not, presumably, an automaton. A teacher must certainly meet the wants of customers, for short-term satisfaction, but to ensure long term satisfaction, a teacher must meet their needs too.

But the students may not be the clients – they may not be the people who pay for the language training. The most common client in ELT is a parent, whose expectations may be very different from those of the student him/herself. Parents in different environments expect different things, but all will certainly want to be sure that their child is understood and respected. They may want clear evidence of learning. This can be difficult if the parent does not actually speak English. Nevertheless, the teacher must make an effort to provide evidence, perhaps, with young children, in the form of poems or songs they can take home. Training officers who send students on behalf of a company or a ministry may have very specific requirements which never quite get communicated to the teacher. It is essential, therefore, that the teacher teases out these requirements, perhaps by using a questionnaire at the beginning of the course to find out what the student has to do in English at work or, much more difficult, what they will be expected to do after successfully completing the course. Remember, if the teacher's success criteria are different from those of the client, dissatisfaction will result. I once had a disgruntled manager phone me up and complain that, although I had reported that a student had successfully completed the Beginner's course, he still could not write reports in English. That stakeholder expectation had somehow fallen through the cracks.

Understanding stakeholders' expectations

A teacher may say, with a fair degree of justification, that the expectations of customers and clients should have been discovered before the student ever made it into his / her class. But the fact is that they are often not, and it is then the teacher who will be blamed first for failure to deliver. So it is in the teacher's own interest to undertake expectation analysis just in case it has not be done or recorded correctly.

Teachers must then satisfy the expectations of their customers and clients or work to manage them.

There are many other stakeholders. Firstly, the teacher's supervisor has a stake in a teacher's success – if the customers are satisfied, it makes his/her job easier, but the interest goes beyond that. How does a particular course that a teacher is delivering fit in with the ladder of progression in the school? Is the teacher on track to complete the assigned syllabus? Will it be possible to combine that teacher's class with another at the same level for the next semester or will the teacher's disregard of the syllabus lead to problems? Has the teacher stuck to the assigned supplementary materials for the level or has he wandered like a magpie through them, plucking out the brightest jewels for each one-off class? If a teacher has done that, there will be endless cries of 'We've done this' from the students bequeathed to the next classes.

A teacher's colleagues have a stake in a teacher's success because any teacher is usually in a supplier/client relationship with his/her colleagues. This idea – the internal client – is central to a lot of modern management practices. It has been recognised for some time that most workers do not directly supply a client – they supply a colleague who in turn supplies a client (or perhaps another colleague who... etc.) Whilst a classroom teacher does have direct contact with external clients, he/she also has, less obviously, indirect contact through internal client / supplier relationships. My Elementary level graduates become your Intermediate students – and if I have failed to convey the delights of drilling, or taught them any study strategies or even, horror of horrors, failed to complete the Elementary syllabus in subtle ways that don't show up in the record of work book, you will have real problems when you take delivery.

Your current boss has a direct stake in your moment by moment success. A business normally grows not just by going out and getting new business constantly, but by selling again and again to existing customers. A school which is a leaky colander - losing as many students as it enrols at each semester - cannot grow. And there is a more hard-nosed reason for holding on to customers. The White House Office of Consumer Affairs has concluded that it costs five times as much to get a new customer as to keep an old one. So the ability of a teacher to encourage students, by direct or indirect means, not to drop out during the course and to re-enrol for the next one has a direct correlation with the success of the business as a whole.

Furthermore, the best marketing for a service is word-of-mouth and the best marketeers are satisfied customers. So if a teacher does a good job in the classroom, he/she will create a cadre of word-of-mouthers who will be more effective at brand awareness – and perhaps even brand preference marketing than billboards and mass media advertising. In order to achieve this kind of brand loyalty, a teacher must do more than meet the pedagogic needs of the student. He/she must be responsive to the softer-edged, more emotional wants - for respect, interest and concern for the student's welfare. As Harmer notes, the student wants to be taught by a person and, by extension, be related to as a person too. The teacher must also - and many find this difficult - become an integral part of the business and not deal it as if he / she were a representative of the profession policing the school in search of poor standards - and shopping the school to the students wherever it is found. Of course, management has a responsibility not to have poor standards, but, unless the teacher feels there is nothing to be done, it is far better to work with others on improving the standards rather than tell the customers and clients, thus undermining the business.

Admin staff have a stake in a teacher's success. All administration runs on timely processing of key documents, but such processing is often low down on a teacher's list of priorities when he or she turns up with five lessons back to back (including the dreaded E5 and an hour in the decrepit language laboratory). Yet a teacher's contribution to the work of the administration department on a particular day may be the difference between invoices going out on time or students getting their results so that they can be placed in new classes for next semester. And who gets shouted out if admin falls behind? Not usually the teachers. Admin staff very rarely see a teacher's contribution to language learning but they have a clear opinion of every teacher in the staffroom based on their contribution to form filling and the amount of mess they have to clear up when information is not available in a timely fashion.

So all around the staffroom, the student common room, the management suite and in homes and offices in the local community, the teacher is being judged - and most of the time he or she is not aware of the criteria which are being used. It may seem that it is impossible to control this judgement, but there is a way of at least influencing it. It is the responsibility of management to devise objectives which aim to meet the principal expectations of each of the stakeholder

groups. And these objectives must be SMAART. (See Fig. 2)

Working to meet stakeholders' expectations

Once the set of objectives has been worked out for each stakeholder group, they should be clearly communicated to that group, including stakeholders outside the business such as parents and training officers. In this way, there is a chance that teachers will be judged by relevant criteria by each stakeholder and not found wanting in an area which is unrecognised by the teachers as a target.

It is not easy to devise SMAART objectives for many of the areas which lead to critical judgements. If admin staff are prone to say, for example, that teachers are always late with the administration, it is necessary to pin down exactly what is to be done by when to what standard. In many cases, I have found that complaints about the internal client relationship stem from teachers not being aware of the work which is expected of them outside their daily teaching load. Making this explicit immediately improves the information flow. I am sure that I gained a poor reputation among the admin staff in one school where I was employed on a temporary basis - only when someone came to complain that I hadn't filled in form 432/6 or informed administration before 9.00 of the number of students for second lunch that day did I realise these were amongst my administrative tasks.

There are other stakeholders as far as the teacher is concerned. What does the teacher's next employer expect and how can the teacher, in their current post, work towards satisfying those expectations so that they move easily into the next job? What does the profession as a whole expect of a teacher? If a teacher meets those expectations, he or she can move seamlessly up the through the profession, should he / she so desire. If not, they will become stuck at one level.

Being a 'good' teacher means more than just useful, enjoyable lessons

To sum up: language teachers teach language in a classroom and are normally pretty good at making satisfied customers. Unfortunately, this is not enough to preserve the reputation of the teacher or build the reputation of the school they work in. It is also not enough to ensure long term employability for the teacher or upward movement through the profession. Everyone must become aware of the web of stakeholders involved in a language school and work to devising SMAART objectives to satisfy each stakeholder so that judgements are made on a principled and known basis.

Figure 1: Stakeholder satisfaction and its implications

S = D - E
where
S = Stakeholder Satisfaction
D = Delivery of the service
E = Expectation of the service

Implications
We must:

a) find out who the stakeholders are in the service
b) find out what each stakeholder expects from the service
c) find out the relative power of each stakeholder
d) find out how well the service is being delivered at present
e) identify areas where service cannot be delivered as required
f) adjust delivery and/or expectations to close gaps
g) find out what current stakeholder satisfaction is in each area
h) try to ensure that we over-deliver and under-promise to each of our stakeholders

Figure 2: SMAART objectives

For each stakeholder group, management must devise a small group of objectives which are:

Specific - who does what
- Measurable - how the performance will be judged and by whom
- Agreed – by the people who are going to work towards them
- Achievable - given the current performance in this area
- Relevant – to the needs of the stakeholders and the job of the teacher
- Timely – with a clear time within which they will be achieved

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