

# Foreword

Teaching is one of the most responsible professions on earth. Teachers mould the lives of their students forever. At best, teachers can help develop their students' confidence, help them to think deeply, and encourage them to make the very most of their innate talents. The profession is understandably, if excessively, ringfenced with safety procedures which may discourage the spontaneous, the unusual and the individual. It does not follow, however, that teaching needs to be bland for fear of causing harm.

Paul Harris's book is to be greatly welcomed. Teaching is not like being a doctor, whose task it is to diagnose ailments and then recommend treatments. The risks of missing a condition, misdiagnosing it, or recommending the wrong medicine or treatment could be very serious. The medical profession is rightly hedged by regulations and conditions to help ensure proper procedures are followed. Teaching, in contrast, has much more in common with being a parent than a doctor. Mistakes are rarely life-threatening and thus, teachers can be much more adventurous in their approach, and fuller of joy and spontaneity.

The best teachers in my experience have a deep understanding of the rules but also an inner freedom and confidence to be themselves. They do not abandon their personalities in a jar by their front door when they leave for work in the morning. And their students benefit enormously from being in touch with real human beings, rather than fraught and suppressed ones who are mouthing their words in a way that lacks human warmth.

Paul Harris explores the 'conditions' that can stymie the free flow of a teacher's personality and individuality. He first examines the terminology of 'unconditional teaching' and looks at the purpose of lessons, before reconsidering the conditions that can define them and offering practical ways of navigating them. In the final part of the book, he addresses the teaching methods which can be adopted to achieve unconditional learning, he stimulates self-reflection and offers encouragement to teachers who want to pursue this approach.

The best books about teaching are those that challenge and provoke the reader into reflecting on what they are doing and open up new ways of thinking and being. Forty years ago, when I was studying to be a teacher, I wrote my thesis about the 'unreflective practitioner' – I wish I had access to Paul Harris's book at that time. It would've made me a much better teacher.

*Sir Anthony Seldon*

*Former Vice-Chancellor of The University of Buckingham,  
Educator and Contemporary Historian*

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‘... because if you’re not learning, what’s the point of my putting in all this effort and giving you lessons?’

This is a condition that can play a major role in a teacher’s attitude towards a student; it can have a substantial influence over the way a teacher views that student and ultimately, the way that student is treated.

*‘I’ll teach you, as long as you’re learning.’*

The interesting question this raises is of course, how do we know whether our student *is* learning? And the associated question, what exactly *are* they learning?

Here are a few questions for you (be honest in your answers!):

- Do your students *always* play their G major scale with the F sharp after you’ve carefully explained how it comes to be there and reminded them to include it?
- Can they confidently read music that may be significantly simpler compared with pieces or songs they are currently learning?
- Are they happy to rattle off all the scales they’ve ever learned?
- Can they confidently play or sing all (or most) of the pieces or songs they’ve ever learned?

If the answer is *not exactly* (and for most of us, if we are being honest, it probably *is*) then we would have to admit that maybe what we have taught has not always been learned. Or what our students have once learned now seems to have been un-learned.

Of course, few of us will probably be able to recall everything we’ve ever learned, and there’s nothing wrong or unusual in that. Some things we learn temporarily (verification codes or a route, for example), some things for which we have no longer-term use simply disappear from our memories, some things stay with us always, and other things (with enough effort) might become accessible if we really need to remember them.

But in learning to play an instrument or to sing and to read music, we really need our students to learn (and remember what they’ve learned), and then gradually build on that learning through effective understanding and making good connections. Otherwise, won’t progress be impossible, or at least less

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## Looking inwards

Finally, we need to look inwards, maybe quite deeply inwards into our own personalities, to determine whether we are thinking in ways which can reduce – and perhaps even eliminate – some of our conditions.

There are three areas to consider: **self-awareness**, **empathy** and **ego**.

### Self-awareness

First of all, we need to develop high levels of self-awareness. In particular, we need to be aware of what we say and do, and the effect this has on our students.

There are two main considerations here:

- Being aware of our deep values and beliefs and how they affect our behaviour and expectations.
- Being aware of how we are perceived by others.

High levels of self-awareness can lead to high levels of self-control (or self-containment)<sup>45</sup> – we begin to manage what we say and do more carefully. That's not to say that we can't be instinctive and spontaneous. And if we are balanced and self-aware in our approach, we can shift smoothly from instinctive and spontaneous responses to more intentionally considered ones when required in order to move forward positively. This behaviour derives from a deeper understanding about the consequences of our actions, and so we become more aware of our conditions.

It also embraces what psychologists call mentalisation: our potential capacity to understand the deeper reasons that drive and underly our behaviour. More simply, it's the ability to know oneself intellectually, which can guide us to more informed choices and actions.<sup>46</sup>

We have, to some degree, already considered this when thinking about our more hidden conditions. Without getting too deeply involved in psychological matters, it is useful to self-observe (be aware of) our behaviour, recognise the effect it has on our students and respond accordingly.

### Maintaining the flow

If a lesson is going along well, if both teacher and student are effortlessly engaged and each activity is developing logically and sequentially from the last, then there is nothing to concern us. Just maintain that flow – the positive energy (in both student and teacher) will be unmistakeable. But if things are not going so well, we need to recognise:

- if we have said something our student doesn't understand;

<sup>45</sup> Which in particular means having control over one's actions, impulses, or emotions.

<sup>46</sup> For further discussion on mentalisation you might like to try *Attachment in Psychotherapy* by David Wallin (Guilford Press, 2015).