

Book review:

The Truth about Teaching: An Evidence-Informed Guide for New Teachers

Greg Ashman's recent book, *The Truth about Teaching: An Evidence-Informed Guide for New Teachers* is not just appropriate for new teachers – many existing teachers could benefit from reading it too.

It addresses several current, and often controversial aspects of teaching and education. Ashman starts by providing some context for the reader in the form of a discussion about some of the history of education, including the different approaches to education (e.g., constructivism). Those studying to become teachers may not be exposed to this type of critical look at the history of education in their courses.

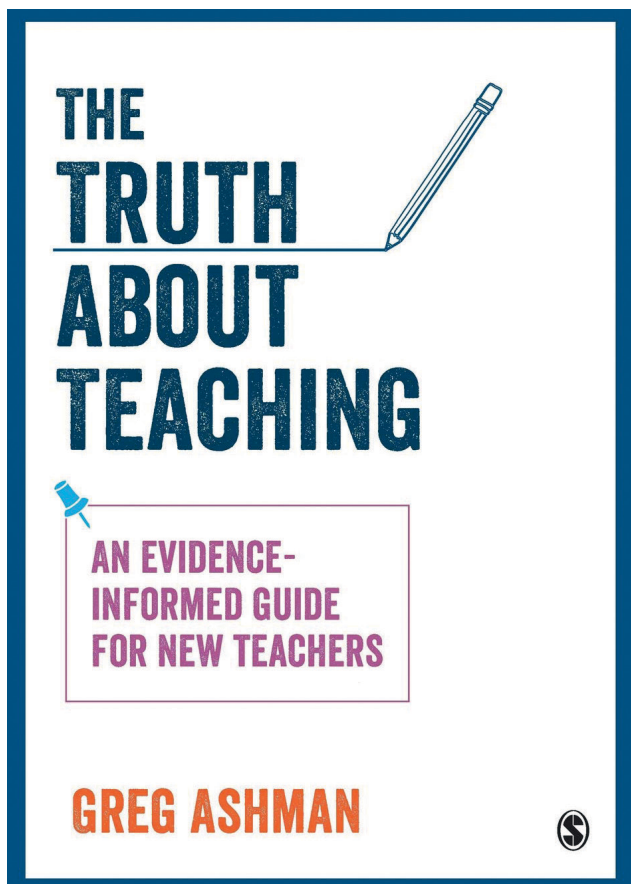
One of the main themes of Ashman's book, discussed across several chapters, is that of teacher workload (and being a classroom teacher himself, this is a credible account). There is a chapter devoted to classroom management in which he covers behaviour management, an area where *teachers generally get inadequate training*. While this chapter is about much more than just classroom behaviour, Ashman does give some quite practical examples of strategies that teachers can use in their classroom (e.g., catch them being good, criticise privately, follow through), and the chapter itself serves as a good introduction. Ashman takes a proactive approach to classroom management with a view to protecting/maximising instructional time. Even if new teachers didn't get anything else in their teacher education program, they would get a lot of good information on classroom management just from this chapter.

The emotional load of teaching is considered, as is the cognitive load (plan your lessons to reduce this), and the time involved in teaching and related activities. Chapter 8 looks at marking and feedback and it seems it is time for a bit of a rethink of this. Although it is true that marking and feedback are not the same thing, teachers spend an awful lot of time giving written feedback as part of their marking. Ashman reminds us all that, "teaching is a more efficient way of providing feedback than writing to all of your students and so this should be a primary method" (p. 126). So, most feedback should be given immediately and verbally, as part of the lesson – how freeing is that?!

A chapter is devoted to explicit teaching (and another to alternatives to this). Ashman discusses the different definitions of 'direct instruction' and why this can be a problematic term, and gives his take on explicit teaching, which is teacher-led, but also highly interactive. Instructional context is explored (whole class versus small group teaching). It is true there is a trade-off here, but assuming there is only one teacher in the classroom, whole class teaching is likely to be more efficient and produce better outcomes than lots of small group instruction in which students engage mainly in independent work. Ashman articulates the myth that explicit teaching is only effective for teaching basic skills and that alternative approaches are needed for more complex concepts, higher-order skills, and critical thinking: "critical thinking, something that all teachers wish to develop in their students, rests upon knowledge of the matter that you wish to think critically about" (p. 89). This quote



**Alison
Madelaine**



“Critical thinking, something that all teachers wish to develop in their students, rests upon knowledge of the matter that you wish to think critically about”

- Greg Ashman

sums up the problem with expecting students to perform higher-order tasks without having a good foundation in the necessary lower-order skills.

In Chapter 10, Ashman takes on the phonics debate, and again, cites the evidence from three major reports on the role of phonics in learning to read. He states that synthetic phonics is the superior method, and as much as I would love this to be the case, there is some question about *whether the available evidence supports this claim*. Ashman gives some of the history behind the reading wars (citing the work of Jeanne Chall and Marilyn Jager Adams), and again, makes the point that those who advocate for a more systematic approach to teaching phonics don't exclude the use of good quality children's literature (as many Whole Language advocates would have us believe).

The last chapter is a very interesting one in which Ashman considers whether teaching is a profession. In answering this question, he looks to other professions like law and medicine, and concludes that teaching seems to be somewhere between an occupation and a profession. Ashman suggests some ways of moving teaching closer to becoming a profession; for example, it would need to regulate itself and develop a shared understanding of which teaching actions are appropriate and which are not. These both seem like big asks in 2019. Another suggestion is that teachers become more interested in and actually engage with education research. This seems more doable, but of course relies on education research, and how to consume it (with a critical eye), being included in pre-service teacher education programs.

The Truth about Teaching is definitely recommended for those studying teaching, those new to teaching, and even those who may have been in the classroom for a few years and would like to rethink the way they teach.

Dr Alison Madelaine is a Senior Research Fellow within the MultiLit Research Unit at MultiLit Pty Ltd. She is also Clinical Director of the MultiLit Literacy Centres and is involved in the development of Initialit-2, a whole-class reading and spelling program for all children in the third year of schooling. Alison has had hands-on experience teaching students with reading difficulties in Australia and South Carolina, USA, and she has also provided consultation to the delivery of MultiLit's literacy programs to disadvantaged students in several projects, including those in Cape York in far north Queensland, inner city, Sydney, and in Sydney's Western suburbs.