

## BOOK AND EBOOK REVIEW

# Why do I need a Teacher when I've got Google? 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition by Ian Gilbert

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This book is subtitled “the essential guide to the big issues for every teacher” and that makes clear both its audience and its mission. It addresses its audience of teachers, making clear that they can see themselves as essential in educating the next generations and attempting to clarify their new role in the digital age. It also takes its mission to tackle ALL the big issues seriously; the breadth it addresses is awesome. However its way of speaking to teachers is to include much polemic and exhortation whilst attempting to briefly provide reasons and this leads to feelings of being browbeaten and a shallowness in its detail and reasoning. Reading more than a chapter or two can leave you exhausted. That said, as an attempt to cover all the issues a teacher may need to know about and show where further study may be useful, the book could be very valuable. And it is not designed to sit down and read sequentially, but rather each chapter is designed to stand alone giving useful information on a specific issue. As the author says in the introduction:

“this book is not designed to help you teach better. But it is intended to help you become a better teacher ... it is designed to make you think. And then do.”( page 1).

So first to get all the grumbles out of the way and then to review what it does do. The book is not an academic tome, it is honestly popularist. I wish it were better referenced, so that I could have all the wealth of evidence there is behind what the author says to hand in this one text. Also, that he removed many of the asides, some of which are ill judged, for example someone trained as a postman will have, and indeed should have, a view on education and educationalists should be able to put their point of view across to that postman. Although I, like Gilbert, would be loath to advise him on being a postman or take advice from him on teaching. The chapter titles often obscure rather than illuminate what is in the chapter, which can make it hard to find what you are looking for.

The book is a series of statements and allusions, some very poorly referenced, so that it would be very difficult for a reader to know where to look for more information or really know that it is out there. For example, in Chapter

11 neuroscience is discussed and in four packed pages there are just two references and a footnote. The references stated are not really very helpful to those who may want to know about the adolescent brain and how such ideas as “pruning” affect the processing in the prefrontal cortex of the brain and thus cause many of the issues that confront teachers day in day out. None of what the author says would be regarded as controversial, just that referring a little more to those whose work he has obviously read would seem appropriate. It would also stop the feeling that teachers cannot be readers, and need everything presented on a plate that pervades throughout this book. If Gilbert really wants teachers to do more thinking and help their students grow and develop then perhaps expecting them to want to read more deeply about issues that they are exhorted to care about may be a start. In this chapter the reader is told that “movement and learning go together” which appears in the main to arise from an example from a sea squirt which “loses” its cerebellum when it settles down and ceases to move. Thus teachers are told “strapping young people down for hours on end to uncomfortable chairs is all about teaching and control and nothing about learning” (page 81). The argument as presented here is flimsy in the extreme, but it is not wrong, in this case a further text is presented as a “wonderful book” from which I interpret that it may be worth reading for myself.

The book has thirty two chapters ranging from “Save the world” to “It’s the brain stupid” and “How are you smart”. In each short chapter Gilbert seeks, and for the most part succeeds, to identify myths that currently pervade thinking about education and to debunk them. As may be expected from the title much of the content of the book is a cry from the heart to stop thinking that a teacher’s job is to fill students minds with facts and to start identifying what the role of the teacher actually is. To this end he recruits much research from neuroscience, assessment theory, the history of education, sociology, psychology and anywhere and everywhere he can. As I have said before, prior to reading this book it is best to prepare to be overwhelmed by fact and anecdote, but also prepare to find some gems and to do some thinking. The mere fact that this book is bursting with so much information and evidence really shows how difficult it is for teachers to have what they need at their fingertips when they need it. The field of education is huge and impossible to do justice in 231 pages but the author has a good try.

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Throughout the book Gilbert seeks to set out what good teachers can do that “google” cannot. He discusses the need for some pupils to show their learning orally as the written word is difficult for some, sometimes due to their cultural traditions and sometimes due to disabilities. Can computer learning teach those who cannot access written material easily? He shows that trust and care are vital to learning, humans learn from those they trust and who respond to them. Can computers offer respect and care? Above all the good teacher is flexible “ If they don't learn the way I teach them I will have to teach them the way they learn”( page 156) and whilst computers are improving it will be a long time, if ever, before they can offer more than a simple selection of screen-based learning experiences. The most important question he poses, is whether teachers are there to impart facts or to provide guidance, motivation and stimulation in ways that enable children to learn. “What does it mean to be a teacher?” and “what is the meaning of education?” he asks continually and with good reason. “Is your job to teach pupils to pass exams? Or is it to teach children to think and, from there, grow as morally sound and decent people who are educated to know right from wrong and use their education accordingly?” (page 140). He is overt about his answer to these questions and lays out the way that he sees vested interests ranging against teachers who do not want to answer “yes” to the first question. Many teachers will find it difficult not to see themselves as exam score producers for their students, after all they are judged on these criteria above all else. Those teachers will find Glibert's messages hard to act on, especially those within many academies. Perhaps his audience is wrong, perhaps it is society as a whole he should be seeking to influence. Perhaps the question to society should be “what do you see as the role of the teacher and how do you want your children educating?”.

Quite terrifying is Chapter 31 which is devoted to the billions that are currently being siphoned from the education of young people in England by huge corporations. In this chapter Gilbert lays out how the range of interests could be forcing education towards the use of computers

and edging out teachers who are the most expensive part of any education system. The academy and free school system, as currently seen in England, is portrayed as pernicious and he shows how much money is siphoned off these schools' budget by management teams headed by friends of the Conservative party, into the Cayman Islands. His referencing here is quite tight. Gilbert's call to teachers is to show that they are worth the money society spends on them, “What is your defence against people and organisations with influential friends, substantial chequebooks and the kerching of vast profits echoing in their ears?” (page 223).

Scattered throughout every chapter of this book is the answer to the question of why we need teachers, good teachers pay attention to research and try and work with the brains of young people, caring for them and offering a structure that enables them to grow but does not constrain their creativity. A good teacher respects and influences the students in their charge, they do not control them “You can control yourself and influence your students. What's more your influence is greater than your power. Don't be a control freak, be an influence freak” (page 208). A good teacher provides a role model and a moral compass. A poor teacher damages the students themselves, damages their life chances and damages society. He agrees with Bill Gates (page 231) that we need criteria that help distinguish the one from the other, but he does not subscribe to the idea that such criteria are simple to set out or to apply. A good teacher does a great deal of thinking, reasoning and reflecting, her students remember her for life, but such qualities cannot be measured by a simple checklist any more than a good education can. “But the good ones, they change everything. What's more the future of the world depends on them” (page 231)

As a call to arms, to do something about the education of young people now, before children are tested so much they have no time to learn, education is seen only as the memorisation of easily remembered facts and creativity dies, this book provides the weapons and the ammunition. The book has something to say that is worth listening to and acting on.

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