

Seven areas of teaching theory every new teacher should know

As a teacher you've got to be an expert in so many different areas. You need to understand the way pupils think, learn and feel. You need to understand your subject, how it is taught, common problems and solutions. You need to embed the craft of classroom practice as well as the underlying theory. You need a clear vision of the outcomes desired for your pupils, and a sharp understanding of how to assess where they are on the journey toward them. You must be reflective, self-critical, yet confident and engaged. You need to be able to appraise new information and evaluate what you already do. It is exhausting writing it, let alone doing it.

I've developed seven suggested areas of theory that every new teacher should aim to know. One of the wonders (or perhaps weaknesses) of the teaching profession is that you'd be hard pressed to find anyone who would fully agree. But hey, this here is my party and I'm choosing my favourite slices of the cake.

The Top Seven

Each of these boxes gives you a starting point. Some of this knowledge needs to be embedded into your everyday practice, while other pieces need further exploration and debate.

1. Theory of motivation

What motivates children to learn, or not? What makes them ready to learn? This is the domain of motivation theories. Important examples are:

- Mindset theory. Carol Dweck's findings show that students believe either in unchanging innate talent ('fixed mindset') or that effort and hard work produces success ('growth mindset'). Understanding this theory should inform the language you use with pupils and how they talk about their own work.
- Intrinsic versus extrinsic motivation. Ryan and Deci's ideasⁱⁱ around internal and external causes of motivation show how we can affect future behaviour and motivation and plan to engage, to reward and to sanction.
- Self-efficacy theory: Bandura's ideasⁱⁱⁱ explore the behavioural, environmental and cognitive factors that affect a pupil's self-belief.
- Attachment theory^{iv}: Ainsworth and Bowlby give insight into how children's relationships to adults are affected by the type of care and interaction they receive in early life, and the implications for classroom practice.

2. Theories of learning

How does knowledge and experience get into a pupil's mind? How does it stay there most effectively? How do you build upon it most effectively? These questions are covered by theories of learning and were the subject of great philosophers such as Piaget and Vygotsky. I shall court controversy and wrath, however, by focusing mainly on more recent findings from cognitive psychology:

- Working memory theory^v: Baddeley and Hitch created a simple model of how an external stimulus makes its way to long term memory via the working memory through a process of

encoding. This will help you consider how to chunk and repeat information based on previously encoded ideas, in order to avoid overloading the working memory. It also emphasises the importance of active attention to learning.

- Retrieval theories: Bjork's work^{vi} on learning and forgetting can support you in identifying how to increase 'retrieval strength' of memory through repetition, interleaving ideas, repeated testing, spaced out repetition.

3. Theories of pupil literacy

Language is the basis of all teaching and learning, and every teacher needs to know how pupils acquire language and skill in speaking, reading, and writing.

Children from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to have reduced vocabulary and more limited speaking skills. By understanding the causes and effective interventions, you can help 'close the gap' in your class.

Some key readings here are the (sometimes controversial) works of Diane McGuinness^{vii}, as well as Geoff Barton's "Don't Call It Literacy" and David Didau's "The Secret of Literacy".

4. Theories of behaviour management

One of the fundamental elements of a successful classroom: how can you stop behaviour from being a barrier to learning, and encourage positive behaviour *for* learning? Some people would have you believe this is only about creating the right motivation and engagement to learn, but frankly that won't help you with an already-boisterous class on Friday afternoon!

A key theory (albeit not without its critics) is Assertive Discipline. Canter and Canter's approach^{viii} boils down to:

- Catching students behaving well, recognising this and having clear rewards.
- Communicating clear, simple rules as to what is acceptable, do not excuse transgressions and have clear sanctions. The teacher's authority is always paramount.
- Being clear, assertive and consistent in dealing with issues rather than passive and hostile.

If used entirely robotically, this approach can be problematic, but if relationships are strong (consider motivation and attachment theories) then these ideas form the bedrock of most successful behaviour management.

5. Theories of assessment

Teaching is at its worst when it involves simply delivering content and at its best when it helps teacher and pupil take a clear journey. Teachers *must* precisely and frequently check what pupils know.

A 'big beast' of research in this area is, Wiliam and Black's "Inside the Black Box", discussing the theories of Assessment for Learning^{ix}. I won't attempt to summarise this research, as more damage has been done to education by superficial understanding of this idea than almost anything else.

Read, explore and *deeply* understand these ideas, which go so far beyond shallow reinterpretations of 'lesson objectives on the board, comment-only marking and three-part lessons' that so often abound.

6. Theories of teacher learning

'Physician, heal thyself', goes the famous proverb. Likewise, teacher, teach thyself! We have a collegiate, collective responsibility to improve together.

If you understand the principles of effective teacher professional learning then you can help yourself and your colleagues to grow and develop effectively. Key readings in this area are Timperley et al. in their New-Zealand-based Best Evidence Synthesis^x, Cordingley et al in the EPPI synthesis of professional development research^{xi}, and Viviane Robinson's work on student-centred leadership^{xii}.

7. Research literacy

Whatever you do, don't take my word for anything here. Become research literate and you will be able to judge each study on its own merit.

Identify claims being made and trace these back – e.g. were they claims from research or simply from a commentator claiming authority? If it's from research, what is the quality and how was it evaluated? Was it peer-reviewed?

Finally, even if the idea sounds like it might be valid or true, consider the 'opportunity cost' - the time and effort it may take to engage with the idea, versus possible benefit of simply spending more time on existing or alternative ideas.

Two great syntheses of ideas in this area are Daniel Willingham's "When Can You Trust the Experts" and Tom Bennett's "Teacher Proof". Many higher education institutions also offer courses on research literacy and methods.

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ⁱ <https://web.stanford.edu/dept/psychology/cgi-bin/drupal/cdweck>

ⁱⁱ <http://mmrg.pbworks.com/f/Ryan,+Deci+00.pdf>

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://stanford.edu/dept/psychology/bandura/> and
<http://stanford.edu/dept/psychology/bandura/papers/papers-self-efficacy.html>

^{iv} http://www.youngminds.org.uk/news/blog/676_attachment_theory_in_the_classroom and
http://www.academia.edu/638681/Early_Childhood_Teacher-child_Attachment_A_Brief_Review_of_the_Literature

^v <http://www.york.ac.uk/res/wml/Info%20parents%20and%20teachers.html>

^{vi} <http://bjorklab.psych.ucla.edu/research.html>

^{vii} http://www.dyslexics.org.uk/reference_books.htm

^{viii}

<http://assertivedisciplineclassroommanagement.pbworks.com/w/page/54424891/Canter%27s%20Assertive%20Discipline%20Model>

^{ix} <http://www.journeytoexcellence.org.uk/resourcesandcpd/research/summaries/rsassessment.asp>

^x http://www.iaoed.org/files/EdPractices_18.pdf

^{xi} <http://epi.ioe.ac.uk/cms/Default.aspx?tabid=274>

^{xii} http://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/data/assets/pdf_file/0015/60180/BES-Leadership-Web.pdf