

# Oliver Quinlan



**The** Thinking  
Teacher

## Praise for *The Thinking Teacher*

I was recently sat at the back of a secondary school classroom in a Middle-Eastern country waiting for the lesson to start. Why was I there? I was on a fact-finding mission to inform me of what might be needed for a curriculum development project I had been commissioned to undertake. I had asked to meet key stakeholders: education ministers, funders, teacher-education college lecturers, school teachers and students. The ministry was suspicious of me wanting to go into a school – they had asked me to write curriculum materials to a brief for teachers to 'deliver', but why would I want to consult with teachers, more so students? They relented as I had argued that it would help me create better materials if I understood the audience. So here I was. The teacher walked in to start the lesson, powered up the electronic whiteboard and started by going through his intended learning outcomes point by point. My heart sank – I could well have been in any classroom in England. The lesson was good in many respects, but formulaic and predictable. There isn't anything wrong with learning objectives, learning outcomes and success criteria per se, it is just that their mechanical use often leads to uninspiring teaching and passive learning. Let's have some more thought from teachers beyond the obvious. I was thus intrigued to receive *The Thinking Teacher* to review.

*The Thinking Teacher* is not a 'how to' book; indeed, Quinlan notes that 'there is no one model of a highly effective teacher, no one set of things that these people do to make things happen'. There are many good teachers who achieve good results by following a tried and tested repertoire of teaching approaches. Quinlan argues that what separates the truly great teachers from the good ones is that they truly understand learning and the different forms it can take; they spot opportunities for encouraging it in ways that they were never taught to do. These are the individuals who can adapt their teaching to the changing world that young people are in; these are the individuals that move teaching forward. These teachers think for themselves and get their pupils to think for themselves too. I could not agree more.

The book is divided into twelve chapters each exploring an aspect of schooling with intriguing titles such as 'All you need is love'; 'Technology as a mirror' and 'Learning as becoming', but each with a consistent argument: teachers should reflect on their own practice and students should think for themselves if their learning is to be deep and meaningful. In Chapter 2, Quinlan asks: 'What kind of teacher are you?' and explains that how you define yourself as a teacher is one of the most powerful areas to consider. Rehearsed are the typical tensions between progressives (characterised by Dewey as being more interested in expression, the cultivation of individuality and interacting with the world in a way that prepares young people for participation in a changing world) and traditionalists (who see education as the transmission of a body of knowledge and skills formulated in the past). Quinlan argues that asking questions that we already know the answers to simply reproduces the world as it is, or was, but by asking questions that we do not know the answers to can lead to change – either a change in how we interact with the world or about how we think about the way it works. Indeed, the argument of Chapter 6 is that replicating 'best practice' is not good enough as this is a retrospective exercise; rather we should strive for 'next practice', that is, the best practice of tomorrow.

There is a thoughtful section on reflection and references to Donald Schon's concepts of 'reflection on action' and 'reflection in action', which are now standard as part of the curriculum in many teacher-education institutions, and most teachers are encouraged to continue learning from their practice by reflecting on it afterwards and considering how they could move forward in terms of

developing students. I also like the discussion of how much information we should supply learners to help them formulate problems and come up with solutions. There is a strong argument to give learners 'spaces to think'. On the use of silence, Quinlan writes: 'Imagine what would happen if when you asked a question you met the answer with silence. The result could be similar to providing thinking time before choosing a member of the class to answer.'

Following Mick Waters's excellent book *Thinking Allowed on Schooling* (2013), we now have another 'must buy' book for the thinking teacher: *The Thinking Teacher*. Continuing the same theme, Quinlan gets the reader to move on from thinking of 'learning as acquiring to learning as becoming'; in other words, he is advocating a classroom based around students becoming participants in the subject rather than possessors of certain, closely defined slices of it. This shift in thinking transforms a subject from a collection of knowledge or skills to be gained to a field of discussion, a community and a space.

**Dr Jacek Brant, Institute of Education**

This is not a teaching manual. It's not a guide to help you impress your senior leadership team or Ofsted. There are no checklists or worksheets. And you'd struggle to place it one side or the other of any of the either/or debates about education that are the current focus of so many pedagogues and politicians.

Quinlan doesn't have an axe to grind, nor a method to sell – he simply wants all of us involved in education to pause and take some time to think, properly, about what we're doing and, perhaps more importantly, why. Through a series of gently challenging essays, he questions ingrained assumptions, suggests avenues of mental exploration and encourages honest, open reflection. There are some practical ideas you could try out in your own classroom, but the main aim of this book is to inspire you to develop yourself as a 'thinking teacher', who will naturally help to nurture thinking children with the skills and aspirations to shape a truly successful and fulfilled future.

**Helen Mulley, Editor, *Teach Secondary* magazine**

'If we want thinking children, we need thinking teachers', says Oliver Quinlan at the start of his book. He's dead right – and systematically and skilfully he shows us what that means. The result is a book of considerable depth, yet written with a lightness of touch that makes it eminently readable. For me, now approaching my thirtieth year as a teacher, I learnt a huge amount that was new and was nudged to rethink ideas that I have for too long taken for granted as the only way of doing things. Like all the best education books, this one left me genuinely excited about my work as a teacher and thoroughly refreshed in my own thinking.

**Geoff Barton, Head Teacher, King Edward VI School, Suffolk**

Oliver Quinlan makes an impassioned plea in this manifesto for teachers and school leaders everywhere: don't stop thinking. He makes a convincing case that making time to think is not just the key ingredient of great learning, it's also in the make-up of our top teachers.

**Ewan McIntosh, founder NoTosh.com**

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The

# Thinking Teacher

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Many people have influenced me over the last five years through their blogs, tweets, and our all too occasional face to face discussions at events. Thanks to everyone who has shared their nuggets of insight, and their reflections on learning online.

Of those, I must particularly thank Ewan McIntosh, for his clear thinking on opening up learning to the challenges of the real world, Doug Belshaw for his ideas on Digital Literacy and ambiguity and Carl Gomblich whose ongoing thinking on the place of academic disciplines in the connected world has changed my thinking.

Many of the ideas in this book grew from posts on my blog, and most of those were prompted by the many young children I have worked with in schools and students at Plymouth University. I hope I have managed to develop your thinking as much as you have all developed mine, working with you has been a great privilege.

The final thanks must go to my family and friends for their support whilst writing this book, and always. Most of them have listened to me verbally working out ideas for this book many times, and have often helped me to see the wood for the trees. I am lucky that there are too many people here to name individually, but thanks to all of you for your support and friendship.

To my Mum and Dad I owe thanks for the obvious reasons, but also for bringing me up to value exploring possibilities, not getting stuck in boxes and thinking differently.



# Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i> .....	<i>i</i>
<i>Preface</i> .....	<i>v</i>
Introduction .....	1
1. All you need is love .....	19
2. Lenses for teaching .....	27
3. The futility of utility .....	37
4. Technology as a mirror .....	41
5. Quantifying learning .....	53
6. Best practice or next practice? .....	67
7. Regulation: lessons from finance .....	81
8. Minimum viable lessons .....	89
9. Worse is better .....	99
10. Learning as becoming .....	113
11. On inspiration .....	121
12. Don't settle .....	125
Conclusion .....	137
Further thinking .....	139
<i>Bibliography</i> .....	147





## Chapter I

# All you need is love

Why are you a teacher? This question clearly has a vast landscape of answers, but many of them involve the concept of or the word 'love'. Teaching can be hard work, but the majority of teachers gladly take this on because they 'love the job'. For some this means loving the enthusiasm and energy of working with children and young people, for others it is about performance, for others again it is the sense of achievement they obtain from seeing someone 'get it'. The 'light bulb moment' is powerful, equally so for the person whose teaching allows the light bulb to go on as well as for those who see more clearly as a result.

Being in a job you love is a great privilege. It also seems, on the face of it, like a fairly pure intention; if you do something because you love it then that implies you are not doing it for the money. With the driving force of money, many people would argue, comes the potential for selfishness and corruption (although it must be remembered that whilst teaching may be perceived to be behind other professions, such as medicine, in the remuneration stakes, school teachers in the UK do not exactly work for free). Loving your job is a joy. It can give you tremendous energy for the long hours and the setbacks, not to mention adding much enjoyment to your days.

The problem with building a career solely on what you love is that falling in love is easy and seductive, but staying in love is quite another matter. A Department for Education paper in 2010 reported that five years after training almost fifty per cent of teachers in England were no

## The Thinking Teacher

longer teaching in state-maintained schools.<sup>1</sup> Staying in love with this job is hard.

As someone who went into teaching quite young, I felt that loving working with children was a big driver for my choice of career, as it seemed to be for many of my fellow students when I was training. It can be a joy to work with children – their energy and enthusiasm are contagious and they often see the world in different, interesting and thought-provoking ways. Conversely, that energy and enthusiasm can cause a whole lot of tension for those who don't appreciate it. This can be seen in the adverse reactions of those who clearly don't love working with children if they are ever put into a classroom situation or even just survive a children's birthday party. When working with children, it helps if you are able to cope with a bit of chaos sometimes; it helps a lot if you are able to actually appreciate it. Children are full of delight, so in the early days it is easy to fall in love with a job that involves sharing in their enthusiasm for the world.

We have a word for people who do something just for the love of it – amateurs. This word is also used to describe someone who is inexperienced or incapable, although this is not necessarily the case. Being an amateur does not preclude someone from being very good at what they do. In fact, the hours of experience, driven only by personal passion, can result in very skilled individuals. To see such people we only need look at the worlds of the arts and sport. Individuals who have developed a skill purely for the love of it might seem like an attractive proposition, but ask yourself whether, if you had something important that needed to be done, you would rather a professional or an amateur undertook it. Of course, it depends what that task is and whether there is a genuine choice, but for something as important and as long term as educating your children, most people would choose the professional. Whilst

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<sup>1</sup> Department for Education, *A Profile of Teachers in England from the 2010 School Workforce Census*. Ref: DFE-RR151 (2010). Available at: [dera.ioe.ac.uk/11897/1/DFE-RR151.pdf](http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/11897/1/DFE-RR151.pdf).



amateurs may have the skills and the passion, we are living in a world increasingly characterised by the specialisation of roles, so without taking on something full time it is very difficult to build up the necessary experience and expertise in an area. Amateurs are not our first choice because they are part-time practitioners – they need to do other things to earn their living. As such, it is often perceived that they will probably not have the required commitment or incentive to stick at it when things get tough. This is probably unfair to many of the skilled amateurs out there, but that is the general perception – that having a love for something is not enough to guarantee seeing it through to completion.

So, if love is not a firm enough basis for building a career, then what is? My thinking on this has been influenced by ex-Apple interface and software designer Bret Victor. In his talk 'Inventing on Principle', he begins by renouncing the idea that people should define their career by 'following their passion' or 'doing something they love'.<sup>2</sup> Victor clearly loves creating digital tools – his enthusiasm for creatively manipulating computer code shows through despite his unassuming manner – but that is not enough to drive what he does. Being driven by a love of creating tools would only propel him to create for the sake of it, and not necessarily to develop the innovative and influential designs that have defined his career.

Rather than love, Victor argues that our careers should be driven by following a principle – 'something that you believe is important, necessary and right, and using it to guide what you do'. Whilst we may be able to fall in love, it is much harder to stumble across a principle; to develop one takes time, experience and thinking.

The strength of basing what you do around a guiding principle is that, by being well thought through, it is much harder to shake than something based purely on love. The daily grind can cause you to fall out of love

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<sup>2</sup> B. Victor, Inventing on Principle [video] (2012). Available at: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=PUv66718DII](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PUv66718DII).



## The Thinking Teacher

with something, and it is hard to retain that light-hearted enthusiasm associated with love when faced with targets, inspections and challenge. A principle, however, is based on something deeper, something tangible that you are trying to achieve, something which despite challenges can remain an aim to strive for.

Part of the reason that a principle is hard to come by is that it needs to be specific enough to have meaning, yet general enough to be applied to everything you do. A general principle for a teacher could simply be for the young people they work with to learn. Whilst this is in many ways a laudable aim, I would argue that it is too general to be of use each day in the classroom. Think for a moment of the many 'vision statements' with which schools choose to subtitle their prospectuses and websites. Most of them could not be argued with; 'preparing students for the future', 'developing the whole child' and similar statements are full of promise, but you have to question how often they genuinely shape what happens in each classroom, each interaction that a teacher has with a young person.

As a designer of computer interfaces, Bret Victor's principle could be to simply make something new or to push things forward. On the face of it, these would be good aims for making a difference in his field or as a way to get his name noticed. However, his principle is much more specific: 'creators need an immediate connection to what they are creating'. This principle isn't focused on the applications that he develops, but the experience of the people who will use them and how the process works; something that he can bear in mind at every stage in the process. By being more specific, he has found a principle that shapes *all* of his actions, and as a result he has built a career that has led to genuine innovation.

Education *is* a field built from principles. Almost everyone involved in education has a commitment to the principle of educating children. The problem is that there are so many different interpretations of what the



concept of education actually means that it needs to be defined more precisely. Walking into a classroom each day and aiming to educate is not going to provide a real focus unless the goal is more specific. To some teachers, education is about building a deep appreciation for their subject and how it matters in the world; to others it is about preparing young people for specific future careers; whilst others would define it as opening students' eyes to the way the world works and the opportunities it presents. How would you define it?

One educational organisation that is based around a strongly defined principle is the charity Teach First, which recruits high-achieving graduates to work in 'challenging' schools. Their principle is that 'no child's educational success is limited by their socio-economic background',<sup>3</sup> which is backed by a set of five values that are set out in detail and to which everyone in the organisation must sign up. What is interesting about their ethos is that despite recently becoming the single biggest recruiter of new graduates in the UK,<sup>4</sup> it immediately limits the scope of their work. Teach First is clearly focused on the achievement of children traditionally limited by their socio-economic background, which focuses them on particular demographics, areas (and therefore only some schools) and the target of 'educational success'. Not jobs, not earnings, not ambiguous notions of 'preparedness for the future', but educational success. This is further defined in their mission statement as meaning achievement in maths and literacy at primary school, GCSEs at secondary, and university graduation. Whether or not you agree that these are worthy goals, Teach First and their teachers have a precise set of principles they can aspire to, focus on and take into the classroom every day. The organisation also expends considerable effort trying to ensure that everyone they take on agrees that these are worthy goals – they aim to recruit people who are working towards the same, closely defined end.

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3 See [www.teachfirst.org.uk/AboutUs/](http://www.teachfirst.org.uk/AboutUs/).

4 See Science Guide, Teach First Top Recruiter (15 July 2013). Available at: [www.scienceguide.nl/201307/teach-first-top-recruiter.aspx](http://www.scienceguide.nl/201307/teach-first-top-recruiter.aspx).



## The Thinking Teacher



When you are ground down by the intensity of the job and the hours are taking their toll, holding on to the fact that you love your job can sometimes help. However, if you are experiencing more than a brief period of stress then this becomes a matter of cognitive conflict. It is the job that is making you feel this way, so holding on to the fact that you love it is hard – clearly, at the moment, you do not or it would not be causing you stress. A principle is not about whether you love something or not, but what you are trying to achieve by doing it. A principle is not fundamentally challenged by how hard it is; in fact, if a job is worthwhile it *should* be hard – the challenge of the situation often only makes it stronger.

Working with children and young people can be an exciting experience that fills you with energy, but sometimes it can sap that energy like nothing else. If loving working with young people is the underpinning purpose of what you are doing, this will be pretty hard to sustain at those times when that very thing is the source of your frustrations. If, on the other hand, you are underpinned by the principle of preparing young people to succeed in society, then often the very things that are frustrating you about their behaviour are the issues that need to be addressed to achieve your purpose. It might be a challenge, but without it there would not be the opportunity to address how they might learn to work with each other, or with you, without creating such stress.

A principle is also something to hold on to when the job is going in a direction that was perhaps not what you intended when you signed up to it. When the paperwork, inspection pressures or politics mount up, it is easy for the career you love to become hard to like. If that is why you are there, then it can be hard to stay, but a deeper principle can give you the sense of satisfaction to get through the difficult times.

Strong though it might be, a principle is not an all-sustaining panacea. It is not going to keep you in a situation that is no longer right for you. In fact, basing your career on a principle might make it more obvious when you are in an organisation or a situation that is inappropriate for you. If your principle is not aligned with the people you work with or the organisation you work for, then it could be time to seek out somewhere new. Equally, approaching the choice of new jobs with this in mind can be a useful tool for finding the right place to work. It is often very difficult, as a teacher, to get a feel for what working in a particular school will be like. More often than not, the decision will be based on what will always be a rather artificial tour of the school by one of its leadership team, and the equally artificial experience of teaching a lesson on an interview day. Unless you have managed to do some temporary work there first, the choice of whether to take up a job offer can be a shot in the dark. The clearer you are on your principles, the more prepared you will be to make judgements on this. Everything you see in your brief visit can be compared with what you will have already defined as important, and the clearer you are, the more straightforward it will be to decide whether what you see fits with what you believe.

Career paths can be messy, and not everyone gets the chance to rigorously define their principles and goals like organisations such as Teach First. Individuals come into teaching for all sorts of reasons, at all sorts of times in their lives and are not always given the opportunity or the encouragement to explore their convictions. Regardless of when in a career it happens, defining your principles is something everyone should do, because to be really effective at anything requires a focus. So, if you have a strong principle for what you are doing, write it down now; if you don't yet, then start thinking. We all have a vague feeling about what we are aiming for, but it needs to be articulated to make it specific enough to work with. Once you have written it down, take a look at it from the point of view of someone else and ask yourself if they could challenge you on what an element of it actually means. Keep on refining it until it is clear, and remember that this might mean making it more limited in



## The Thinking Teacher

scope. Do not fall into the trap of many school mission statements of trying to say everything and therefore saying nothing. What you come up with will probably have been there all along, but moving it from a feeling to a statement helps to distil it and transform it into something that you can apply every day.

Of course, your principles will shift and change over time; as new challenges are faced and further questions are asked they will develop and sometimes end up radically altered. What matters is that they *are* considered and defined, that the principles which underpin what you do can be returned to and drawn on in the difficult times. The result of this process will be a direction and a purpose that can meet those challenges and questions. Loving what you do is the fun part, but teaching should rest on firm principles that keep you doing what you love even when love is not enough.





## Chapter 2

# **lenses for teaching**

What kind of teacher are you? How you define yourself as a teacher is one of the most powerful areas to think through. There are some labels that come easily – the age group you teach, the subject(s) within which you work, perhaps the type of school or area that you teach in. These are probably the answers you would give to someone in a social situation who asked you about your job, but there are also deeper answers – answers which reflect on the purpose you find in teaching and the approaches that you take to it. Whilst the first set of answers may come quickly, these deeper responses often do not. Despite the fact they shape every decision you make and every interaction you have with your classes, they are often left unsaid and largely not thought about explicitly.

We all have lenses through which we see the world. These lenses are shaped by many things, and often they differ depending on the context. We choose our lenses depending on how we want to operate, although this may not always be a conscious action. Our lenses are first shaped by our family experiences, and frequently this is the strongest influence affecting things like our values and morals. Our lenses are then further shaped by our schooling, again in terms of values but also by the subjects we study and the approaches within which we learn.

We tend to think mostly about the specific knowledge and skills that each subject we study gives us, but each subject also informs us about different ways of looking at the world. Sometimes this is explicit. For example, when studying literature or drama it would be quite normal to discuss in detail the perspectives of characters or writers and their motivations for behaving or communicating in the way they do. There is



'If we want thinking children, we need thinking teachers', says Oliver Quinlan at the start of his book. He's dead right – and, systematically and skilfully, he shows us what that means. The result is a book of considerable depth, yet written with a lightness of touch that makes it eminently readable.

**Geoff Barton. Head Teacher. King Edward VI School. Suffolk**

Whilst good teaching is widely reported as the number one key to raising achievement in any classroom, educating teachers in the art and science of teaching is an expensive business. Simply training them to deliver a curriculum, on the other hand, is a whole lot less troublesome. But we need teachers who can think – who can reflect on the process of learning, on pedagogy, on the nature of children and on the role of the professional 21st Century educator and, in doing so, seek to improve their profession on a daily basis.

**When we genuinely help our teachers develop into being better thinkers, we help our children to become better thinkers too.**

Quinlan gets the reader to move on from thinking of 'learning as acquiring to learning as becoming'; in other words, he is advocating a classroom based around students becoming participants in the subject rather than possessors of certain, closely defined slices of it. This shift in thinking transforms a subject from a collection of knowledge or skills to be gained to a field of discussion, a community and a space.

**Dr Jacek Brant. Institute of Education**

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**Helen Mulley. Editor. Teach Secondary magazine**

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**Ewan McIntosh. founder NoTosh.com**



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