

# **Whole Class Teaching**

A paper for the Campaign  
for Real Education

Irina Tyk



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## **About the Author**

Irina Tyk is the Head of Holland House School, a coeducational independent school for children aged 4 to 11. The School's most recent Ofsted Report states that "Holland House provides an outstanding quality of education overall and enables pupils to make outstanding academic progress."

Irina Tyk has written three books to raise reading, writing and arithmetic standards among young children. They are:

The Butterfly Book, published in 2007

The Butterfly Grammar, published in 2008

The Butterfly Arithmetic, published in 2011

The Daily Mail's Education Correspondent, Sarah Harris, wrote of The Butterfly Book, "The method is simple — a no-frills and no-nonsense approach to teaching children to read...The results speak for themselves."

Using The Butterfly Book, children at Holland House School have been shown, by independent assessment over a number of years, to have among the highest reading standards in the country. Five-year-olds reach a reading age equivalent to eight-year-olds.

Irina Tyk was a director and teacher of The Butterfly Project which ran summer courses for children from 1991 to 2009. These very successful morning classes now continue at a number of venues run by different teachers and organisations.

Currently, *The Butterfly Book*, *The Butterfly Grammar* — and Irina Tyk’s latest books, *The Advanced Butterfly Reader* and *The Junior Butterfly Reader* — are being trialled as *The Butterfly Initiative* in a number of maintained schools by Real Action, a charitable trust, under the terms of a grant from The Education Endowment Foundation.

Irina Tyk has for many years promoted synthetic phonics as the best way to teach children to read and to imbue children with their first classroom experience of integrating concepts by reference to the 44 sounds and the corresponding combination of the 26 letters of the English alphabet. This is now advocated by Ofsted as “an indispensable tool” to teach children how to read and is promoted by The Department for Education as the best way to boost reading standards.

Irina Tyk often presents her views on reading and other educational issues in the press and media. Her views were expressed in *Culture in the Classroom* (published by The Centre for Policy Studies, 1996) and in a speech to The Family Education Trust that was published in 2009 under the title, *Education and Culture*.

## **Whole Class Teaching**

Attitudes to education, to the role of teachers, to the methodology of teaching, both in general and in the school classroom, have changed quite dramatically in the last few decades. Technology has advanced at great speed, global communication has expanded and expectations of what should or should not be taught in the classroom have placed new burdens upon parents, teachers and upon all who are responsible for the education of the young.

In keeping with new technology that gives voice to one and all, it should come as no surprise that the hierarchy of voices in the classroom is nowadays far removed from what it used to be. The time has long passed when it was appropriate for pupils to sit in unquestioning obedience while the teacher ruled like a dictator. An advanced liberal democracy educates children very differently to an illiberal dictatorship.

The civilities and exchange of ideas that come with democracy must be reflected in the classroom. Teachers must treat their pupils with respect and pupils must treat their teachers with respect. A good teacher presents a range of ideas to his pupils. A good teacher is ever-ready to consider a range of ideas from his pupils. Democracy is not anarchy! As democratic government relies on rules, laws and conventions to protect the few from the many, so the spirit of democracy in the classroom relies on a relationship between teacher and pupils that allows the teacher to teach and pupils to learn. It is a relationship of mutual respect. The context of this relationship is that the teacher knows what pupils do not know. It is a relationship that requires transference of knowledge from the teacher

to each and every pupil. It is a relationship that enables a teacher to imbue his pupils with understanding too.

What is the best way for a teacher to teach? What is the best way to transfer knowledge and promote understanding in the minds of young pupils?

In essence, there are three models. There is the Mr Gradgrind style of teaching that brings dictatorship into the classroom. The teacher declaims like a dictator and the pupils write everything down to learn by rote. Nowadays, there is an entirely different style of teaching that is to be found in our nation's classrooms. It is sometimes called child-centred learning. It is easily recognised. Children sit in little groups, often with their backs to the teacher, working in groups or in teams. The teacher walks about from table to table, giving advice and making suggestions. In such a setting children sometimes mark each other's work. It is called peer-marking. The teacher is facilitator. He is no longer a teacher.

There is another kind of classroom. It is a space in which the mind of the teacher is in the ascendant. It is a space in which the teacher seeks to engage the minds of every pupil, all of whom face the teacher so that they can see him as an audience watches an actor in the theatre and so that he can watch their faces, ever-ready to respond to the greater or lesser interest of his audience.

The teacher is an actor. He speaks and he walks about like an actor. Sometimes he is passionate, sometimes he is humorous and sometimes he is irreverent. Sometimes he speaks the lines of learned men; sometimes he improvises. His pupils are his audience. They watch him and listen to him in rapt attention. The good teacher sees

inattentiveness in his pupils and is quick to correct his failure to be interesting.

Let it be said boldly and loudly: the teacher who stands at the front of the class, the teacher whose every gesture and every word places him centre-stage and places his pupils in the position of a responsive and attentive audience is a very good teacher. He is the kind of teacher that all children deserve.

Children want to learn. Later in life, if they so wish, they may teach!

Children like to play as well. Play is an important part of learning. However, the structured and rational mind is soon dissatisfied by playing for its own sake. A thinking child wants to play for a reason and with reason. He wants to invent his own rules, devise his own strategies and indulge his own sense of improvisation. Before a child can play, he needs a thinking mind, a mind that is ready to play. Thoughtlessness, in play or in work, achieves nothing of value.

There is plenty of time to play. The teacher's principle concern is the development of his pupils' minds. Children can play when they are not being taught.

Without doubt, technology allows for the speedy access to information at any time and place of our choosing. At the touch of a button, one can find out anything one wants when one wants it.

For all the wonders of technology, it is doubtful that it has improved the quality of learning at all. Learning is not about the speedy access of information. Information is not education. Learning to think, learning to understand and

learning to do is education. Human beings, who are skilled in the art of teaching, make better teachers than computers. Never mind the specious interactivity of modern technology, it cannot replace the interactivity of the mind that teaches and the mind that learns.

The sense of individuality that comes with a computer screen is of course a fiction. Each child who sits alone in his bedroom in front of his laptop is the same child who is wired up to a faceless social phenomenon that dispenses information and exploits the innocence of childhood without an iota of personal responsibility. Those who look to technology as the salvation of young children make a great mistake.

The mantra of personalised learning that comes with modern technology is a misnomer. It is profoundly impersonal. It lacks personality. Computer screens do not have personality. Teachers do!

Picture rows of pupils sitting comfortably in front of screens, downloading a plethora of information. Information is neither knowledge nor understanding! One does not write well by 'copying and pasting'.

Information is most useful. However, it is the role of the teacher to imbue pupils with the means to judge the quality of information, to judge its reliability and its usefulness. Information is neither teaching nor learning. It is the gathering of facts. It is, more often than not, the gathering of the names of things; it is not the gathering of the understanding of things.

The best way to teach today is no different to what it has always been. The classroom may look different, the tools may have changed. The teacher may use chalk, black-

boards, interactive white boards, pens, pencils, pointers, screens, laptops and any or all of the technological paraphernalia that is currently available to aid and assist him in his art. What facilitates and expedites teaching and learning does not replace teaching and learning. A teacher is not a purveyor of information; he is a purveyor of knowledge, of what is known, of how what is known came to be known and how more may yet be known.

Modern technology brings endless pictures and images into the home and into the classroom. A picture is not an argument. In the context of the classroom, pictures are either aesthetic or illustrative. By all means, let children learn about aesthetics. Their lives will be the better for it. Mere illustration, however, offers relatively little. Pictures of Isaac Newton or Einstein offer no instruction about their work. Even the photography of war ignores the origins and outcomes of conflict between nations. History cannot be learned by pictures. Not a lot can be learned from pictures. Let pictures remain where they belong: as nostalgic mementos, as decorative and, most importantly, as a means of artistic inspiration.

The best way to teach remains what is often called 'whole class teaching'. It means that a teacher teaches a class of children at one and the same time. The teacher faces his class and the class faces the teacher. To put it metaphorically, the teacher takes the place of a conductor of an orchestra; he knows which voices to bring out, when to play more quickly and when to play more slowly. He knows when the score must be followed exactly as it is written down and when it may be interpreted more freely.

Many a conductor conducts with his eyes. A good teacher keeps eye contact with all his pupils. Otherwise, how will he watch those who watch him? Otherwise, how will he

watch those who listen to him? Otherwise, how will the teacher see who is learning and how will the pupils see who is teaching? It is a teacher's privilege to stand at the front of the class and teach. It is the privilege of children to be taught in this manner.

The purpose of teaching in the classroom is to introduce pupils to the different languages of different subjects: arithmetic, which is the language of numbers, English, which is the language which carries grammatical structure and clarity of thought and expression, literature, which is the language in which great writers tell stories and disclose ideas, science, which is the language of discovery and proof, art, which is the language of shapes and colour, history and geography, which are the languages of time and place. Each of these subjects has a language of its own; the language of each subject is not discoverable without a teacher's voice. Languages must be taught. Languages are best learned in the company of a man or woman whose manner of speaking the language of maths or literature, of science or history, brings to the child a sense of fascination and a desire to learn more.

Teachers must speak well. Ideally, teachers should be trained as actors are trained.

Teaching is too important to be merely arbitrary in its choices. Each lesson stands on its academic content. There is no snobbery in academic enrichment. Every child should have the right to an academic education. Obviously, children of more academic disposition will seek to further their knowledge of what interests them most. However, every child needs an academic foundation: he must learn to read independently and easily, he must learn to count quickly and proficiently, and he must know something of history and science.

As the child learns, so he asks questions. He learns how to ask questions and he learns to construct good questions. Of course, there are ways and means of asking questions in any orderly and well-regulated space. The democracy of a classroom is never anarchic. Children do not shout or move about as the mood takes them. The teacher listens to questions carefully and answers them with the utmost patience and respect for the pupil.

Always, the language of rational learning, of asking rational questions and answering them rationally, remains uppermost in a classroom that is always civilised and is always thoughtful. Computers are neither civilised nor thoughtful. Machines are made by thoughtful men. Let children acquire the minds, the thoughtfulness and the creativity to make new machines, new computers, in the future. Before they do so, they will learn best in classrooms that offer more inspiration, more education and more rational debate than any computer offers.

Dialogue is an intrinsic part of the way in which children learn from teachers. Computers are incapable of dialogue. Were they capable of dialogue, computers would still lack the nuances of voice, the improvisations and spontaneities of the teacher who thinks quickly on his feet to turn every question into a lesson.

In the absence of dialogue, there is monologue. The teacher stands in front of the class and delivers lessons in the style of monologue. He must not soliloquise. A teacher speaks aloud to teach, not to give voice to his private and personal preoccupations. That is why a teacher should be trained in the art of acting. Actors learn how to deliver monologues. Actors learn how to engage

audiences by the way in which they speak, further to the words that they speak.

Let it be said clearly and unambiguously: one teaches a class of children by teaching the whole class, which means that a teacher stands in front of all the children in the class. He or she teaches the whole class. Nowadays, it is called whole class teaching. Previously, it was called teaching!

The usual objection to whole class teaching is all too familiar. It goes like this: such is the divergence of ability and background in a class of children that it is next to impossible to pitch a lesson to the right level for one and all. This is to misunderstand whole class teaching. Every teacher knows that different children respond to a variety of strategies. Every teacher knows that different children have different abilities and come from different home environments. To teach is to perform. To teach is to embrace a repertoire of ways and means to capture the interest of the audience. In a classroom, the audience is a class of children. A good teacher fishes with many hooks. One hook captures one child, another hook captures another child. Many hooks capture many children.

It follows, therefore, that a skilful teacher does not pitch his lesson to the least able child or to the most able child in the class. Whole class teaching is not far removed from Aristotle's identification of 'the golden mean'. He defined it as the desirable middle between desirable and undesirable extremes. It is a matter of balance and harmony. There is balance and harmony in whole class teaching. At its best, every child finds the right instrument to play in this orchestra of learning.

In the classroom, the middle ground need not be dispassionate. On the contrary, teaching at its best is passionate. Why should pupils care about knowledge and ideas that arouse so little feeling in the teacher?

I do not speak of the relatively few children who may be considered 'Special Needs' on the basis of objective assessment. Their needs are different. They may learn best on a one-to-one basis.

The same may be said for the equally small group of unusually brilliant children. They too may learn best and learn most on a one-to-one basis.

The overwhelming majority of children learn best in whole classes.

### The rudiments of whole class teaching

1. Each lesson holds to an objective academic standard. Pupils do the same work and use the same books. The ubiquitous work sheet, which is a form of rote learning to occupy children who must wait their turn before the teacher comes to them, is neither appropriate nor necessary in the context of whole class teaching. Work sheets engender passive learning; whole class teaching engenders active learning for the duration of the whole lesson.
2. Whole class teaching brings transparency to teaching and learning. The teacher has prepared his lesson. One cannot prepare a lesson for different groups of children. The teacher who subdivides his class, subdivides his lesson and subdivides his teaching.

Some pupils learn one thing, other pupils learn another thing. Who can say what was taught in class when nothing was taught to all the class?

3. Whole class teaching is democratic. It brings together children of different backgrounds, ethnicities and abilities. It brings cohesion, not division, to the experience of learning. It condemns no child to the ignominy of the table around which are huddled the weakest and lowest-attaining children. Paradoxically, whole class teaching allows every child to shine, especially under the auspices of a well-trained teacher who is adept at bringing out all the voices under his care.
4. Whole class teaching makes the best use of time. Instead of walking around and giving a few minutes to each child individually, the teacher's contact time with his pupils is extended to half an hour, forty minutes or more. Only whole class teaching provides pupils with the stimulation of learning from the beginning to the end of the lesson. Whole class teaching is the antidote to the boredom of sitting around tables, writing in workbooks, waiting for the teacher to come to you. In what is called whole class teaching, no pupil waits for his teacher!
5. Whole class teaching encourages confidence on the part of the pupil. Each pupil laughs and struggles with his classmates. Each pupil learns with his classmates. The togetherness and comradeship that are so prized in sport should be equally prized in the classroom. Children learn from one another too. One child's answer may enlighten other children; another child's problem becomes everyone's problem. The teacher is seen to be fair or unfair, to be reasonable or

unreasonable, to be inspiring or uninspiring. Whole class teaching offers no hiding place to the teacher or to pupils, and that is a very good thing.

6. Only when a teacher stands in front of the whole class does he have the opportunity to digress. Digression plays an important part in teaching. It allows the teacher to make connections between one idea and another, often in different subjects, so that pupils learn the degree to which principles of rational thinking extend to the entire range of human endeavour and understanding. Digression should not be confused with mere anecdote and gossip. Digression is a road map of understanding; personal anecdotes lead back to their provincial origins.
7. Only whole class teaching promotes independence of thought in relation to each and every pupil. As a child's attention is held by the teacher, he must think for himself and ask his own questions. He cannot fall back on the safety net of a particular group of children who are his table-mates for a day or more than a day.

### How to deliver whole class teaching

1. The teacher stands at the front of the class. He must speak clearly and in a manner that is likely to hold the attention of his pupils.
2. All the pupils sit facing the teacher. They must listen carefully. They must keep silent when the teacher is talking and ask questions in the approved manner; they must observe the conventions of classroom discipline as set out by the teacher.

3. Text books are not a lesson plan. One does not teach by reading to the class what each child can perfectly well read for himself.
4. Let the classroom be a space in which children are encouraged to doubt, to inquire, to demand reasons for everything. When the teacher teaches all the class, he can respond to every child's question.
5. Use modern technology as a more immediate form of dictionary and encyclopaedia. It is an invaluable source of information. Neither dictionaries nor encyclopaedias make good teachers.
6. Above all, whole class teaching should never be boring! Learning can be fun!

### Some further thoughts about teaching

- Reject the mantra that excellence is unobtainable, that competition is bad and that all must have prizes. This patronises children and ignores their own desire to succeed.
- The purpose of education is to train the mind, to make pupils aware of the knowledge and great achievements of the world, to teach pupils to think logically and to express their opinions clearly and concisely. Only whole class teaching offers so much!
- A teacher wastes his time when he repeats himself endlessly to one group after another group of children. Let him speak to all the children in his class at one and the same time.

- Knowledge is transmitted by language. The more a teacher masters language, the more he masters the art of teaching. The better a teacher masters the transmission of language, the better he masters the art of teaching.
- Knowledge is objective. It is reliable and rational. Knowledge is knowable. The transference of knowledge from a teacher to his pupils is an invaluable gift that a teacher gives to his class.
- Output is not input! A teacher is measured by what his pupils have learned, not by his own hours of lesson preparation.
- How much children have learned or not learned is best discovered by objective testing. To well-taught children, tests are not a fearful imposition. They understand their importance and appreciate the opportunity to shine on the level playing field of a test that asks the same questions of all the class and allows each child to answer in accordance with the individuality of his own retention and his own mind.
- Education should never be parochial. Education should far exceed the boundaries of personal experience. One does not learn about the Elizabethan period of history by 'dressing up' in clothes of the time. At all times, teach children about the history and geography of a world that extends far beyond what passes before their eyes. A child's mind must contemplate more than he sees. Moreover, one does not learn about literature by watching films of great novels. Children should study literature to learn about literature and study films to learn about films.

Hannah Arendt wrote:

The teacher's qualification consists in knowing the world and being able to instruct others about it, but his authority rests upon his assumption of responsibility for that world. Vis-à-vis the child it is as though he were a representative of all adult inhabitants, pointing out the details and saying to the child: This is our world.

- Education should not encroach upon a child's right to privacy. The inner sanctum of every child's mind should always be respected, save for the times when there are reasonable grounds to be concerned for his moral or physical safety. A child has the right to the privacy of his own diary and to the privacy of his own thoughts. A classroom is not a place of institutional surveillance. It is a place in which respect for others goes hand in hand with freedom of thought.

Bertrand Russell wrote:

When you want to teach children to think, you begin by treating them seriously when they are little, giving them responsibilities, talking to them candidly, providing privacy and solitude for them, and making them readers and thinkers of significant thoughts from the beginning. That is if you want to teach them to think.

- All work that children complete should be marked by the teacher. Peer-marking is wholly unacceptable. No child is qualified to mark and comment upon the work of another child.

- Teach at a speedy pace. Tempo is vital to teaching.
- Children should learn at a steady pace too. Tempo is vital to learning.
- However well-intentioned, it is a mistake for the teacher to wait until each and every pupil understands the content of the lesson. Do not be afraid to move on, safe in the knowledge that there will be further opportunities to revise and revisit. The least able pupil in the class must never set the tempo, just as the most able child does not set the tempo.
- Technical skills are only in place if responses are speedy, automatic and immediate. This is particularly true for mental arithmetic. Mental arithmetic imbues a child's mind with number bonds that can be recalled at a moment's notice, without working sums out on paper and without counting on fingers. The four functions of addition, subtraction, multiplication and division should be mastered fluently and at great speed, the earlier the better. Calculators do not imbue children with a 'feeling' for numbers; calculators do not give children the invaluable sense of number bonds.
- Consign all work sheets to the dustbin.
- Teaching is an intellectual exercise. If the mind is not engaged, no learning and no teaching have taken place.
- A teacher is not a facilitator, a parent, a social worker or a corrector of society's ills. As Isaac Bashevis Singer said on receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature:

Children don't read to find their identity. They don't read to free themselves from guilt, to quench their thirst for rebellion or to get rid of alienation. They have no use for psychology. They have no use for sociology. They still believe in God, the family, angels, devils, witches, goblins, logic, clarity, punctuation, and other such obsolete stuff.

Let the teacher teach "the obsolete stuff"!

- Beware of experts, particularly experts in education! Once upon a time, there were no limits to what a pupil should learn and might learn; nowadays, there is the very curious notion that pupils are better off when they know less. Knowledge and understanding should never be confined to the orthodoxy of experts. Today's expert is out of date tomorrow. The mastery of teaching, like the mastery of all things, far exceeds what the experts tell us.
- Grammar matters, in spoken and written English, in English lessons and other lessons. Grammar is the way we order our thoughts in language. The neglect of grammar is nothing other than the neglect of thought itself.
- Surprise is of the essence: never ask pupils to read in a particular order, never ask questions in a particular order. Pupils should always be 'on their toes'. Predictability is dull!
- Learning poems and passages of prose off by heart, so unfashionable nowadays, is greatly to be encouraged. In this way, the best use of language and the most beautiful expressions of thought impose themselves on the mind of a child.

- Always remember that one can never learn too much!  
Do not deny other children what one teaches one child  
by abandoning whole class teaching.

The art of whole class teaching allows for debate and discussion in an open forum. It allows for questions that challenge accepted ideologies, ideologies that are often aided and abetted by the full weight of technology, media and the received wisdom that carries the authority of being so widespread and of such long-standing that it is no longer called into question.

A classroom is our world in microcosm. It is not a private space where a tutor has a one-to-one relationship with one pupil at one particular moment in time. A classroom is a stepping stone from home into the wider world, a multi-faceted and multi-dimensional teaching space where one person, a teacher, engages in a dialogue with more than one person, his pupils. The dialogues and monologues of education are best conducted in the style of whole class teaching.

*Irina Tyk*

*September 2014*



## **Other titles by Irina Tyk**

- *The Butterfly Book*, Civitas, 2007  
ISBN 978-1-903386-61-3
- *The Butterfly Grammar*, Civitas, 2008  
ISBN 978-1-903386-60-6
- *Education and Culture*, Family Education Trust, 2009  
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- *The Butterfly Arithmetic*, Civitas, 2011  
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Irina Tyk is the Head of Holland House School, a coeducational independent school for children aged 4 to 11. An authoritative voice in the field of education for more than thirty years, she is often called upon to present her views in the press and media.

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