

Learning is a marathon, not a sprint

In my NQT year, I was observed teaching a year 8 group *Holes* by Louis Sachar. In order for students to learn what I needed them to learn, we had to read part of a chapter. When my observer came to give me feedback, they commented that this part of the lesson - the reading - lacked "pace" and students weren't making progress.

For the rest of the year, regardless of what students were studying, I always made sure that observation lessons involved little to no reading lest I should receive the same comments again.

As I began to gain experience, I looked back on this observation and realised that how unhelpful the feedback was. Discussions about the appropriateness of *Holes* as a year 8 text aside, how are students meant to learn about a text if reading it is frowned upon? Is reading really an activity in which students learn nothing? I had been left feeling that an integral part of my teaching was, essentially, meaningless.

Since then, the word 'pace' has been a recurring feature of both observations and pedagogical debate. I talk quickly: students have commented on it and my nickname at school was 'Six', the name of Blossom's fast-talking friend in the early-1990s comedy show of the same name. As a result, observers often comment on the fast pace of my lessons. I gladly accepted this feedback as a compliment. But, what I realise now, is that 'pace' was used as a byword for 'getting through stuff'. And that's not really what 'pace' is about.

All teachers can rattle through content, if needed, but does this really lead to anything meaningful? At the end of a lesson, you may have *covered* the content, but how secure is student understanding? Have you given them a cursory introduction, or will they be able to apply their understanding to their own work, appreciate the purpose of their learning, and link their learning to other relevant topics and skills?

Pace is notoriously subjective. It's a word that floats around classrooms and corridors, without definite meaning attributed to it. For my subjective take on the word, discussions about pace should consider the following:

- *Pace isn't about the amount covered in a lesson, but **the depth of coverage**. In this way, it's connected to another ambiguous term: **challenge**. There is nothing to be gained from 'getting through' a topic, or introducing unnecessary information for the sake of it.*
- *Lessons that are appropriately paced are also **purposeful**. Students enter the lesson to a clear sense of routine, all activities are included for a reason, and teaching is responsive to ensure that all students are actively engaged in their learning.*
- *Pace is also about **minimising 'down time'** in lessons. From handing out worksheets, to moving between activities, the way a teacher manages these moments can help to ensure that learning time, and pace, isn't lost.*
- *Effective **explanations, questioning and modelling** can all help to maintain pace within a lesson. In fact, any strategy that actively involves students and requires them to '**think hard**' is likely to maintain purpose and pace within a lesson*

Nowadays, I wouldn't think twice about spending time in an observed lesson - or, of course, any lesson - reading. In fact, the whole concept of planning an 'observation' lesson is one that I now wholeheartedly disagree with.

But, my understanding about pace has changed. As an NQT, I really hadn't given it much thought (it also wasn't a term that anyone really discussed). However, it is now central to my lesson planning, as I'm sure it is to all teachers.

So, read a book with your class. Discuss for an extended period of time. Take the time to revisit areas of learning... do what you believe is appropriate for your class, but make sure that depth of learning and purpose are at the heart of it.