

Perhaps the greatest danger is that people who can do things well tend to assume that others will benefit most from copying what they do.

Can those that do – teach?

There's an old saying... "Those that can – do: those that can't – teach." The implication behind this saying is that anyone involved in teaching is only doing so because they cannot make a success of actually doing the job (whatever the job is). This is obviously untrue, as I know from my own experience of returning to dental school to teach undergraduates while still in practice. I found that being able to *do* periodontology was no help when it came to teaching it, and I had to work really hard at not only the theory of periodontology, but also the application of that theory and how the two linked. I found teaching a tremendous help in not only improving my own treatment of patients, but also my confidence in what I was doing. However, the saying remains – so I would like to look at it from insideout, because I feel doing so reveals a little-appreciated danger for people when it comes to postgraduate and practice training.

Perhaps I should explain myself more clearly. Instead of saying "Those that can – do: those that can't – teach" let us rephrase it as "Can those that do...teach as well?" In other words, does being able to do something well mean you can also teach it? If not, perhaps we should question the wisdom of using recognised experts for courses, conferences and consultancy without first checking to see what experience and expertise they have in educational practice as well as their clinical and/or management expertise.

For example, many is the time I have attended lectures (both as an undergraduate and after graduation) where the expert (and he or she genuinely is an expert) before me has droned away while no-one listens. Even worse, though somewhat rarer, I have watched people mishandle overhead projectors and use totally inappropriate acetates to 'support' their presentations to a long-suffering and often tired audience. These people not only demonstrate beautifully their lack of knowledge as to how to use audiovisual aids, but also a total disregard for the basic principles of presentation. Knowing a subject well is no guarantee of also knowing how to present or 'teach' it.

However, despite my emphasis on teaching, the real question is not "Can someone who knows teach?" but

"Can people learn from someone who knows?" This is a very different question. Learning requires more of a facilitative approach from the 'teacher'. This is much harder than traditional teaching, but ultimately far more effective.

In essence, what I am describing is behaviour change. All learning involves a change in behaviour (apart from the occasional time when we 'learn' we are doing something right) and facilitation involves the art of helping people first discover and then implement a change in what they do. I suspect most educationalists would agree that we are still 'discovering' how to do this effectively, but despite this there is a body of knowledge building up on the basic principles of good facilitation. I have no doubt at all that knowledge of these principles has nothing to do with being an expert in a subject or being able to 'do' something well. In fact sometimes the reverse, as people who can do something well often have trouble understanding why others cannot.

Perhaps the greatest danger though is that people who can do things well tend to assume that others will benefit most from copying what they do, and thus their teaching makes this assumption in the way they approach the subject. A more effective approach is to analyse why it works for them and focus on the principles behind their success, enabling others to adapt those principles to suit their own circumstances.

We all have different values and motivations, different circumstances, different objectives, different patients and different attitudes in everything we do. Successful learning involves an understanding of the basic principles which can be communicated through effective facilitation, followed by reflection to work out the most effective way to achieve what we want. For a teacher to achieve that takes more than simply a good knowledge of the subject.

So can someone who can do – teach? Maybe...but I would like a bit more evidence of their expertise and experience in teaching before I part with *my* money.

Mike Grace, Editor
m.grace@bda.org
doi:10.1038/sj.bdj.4811128