

Understanding Expertise in Teaching

CASE STUDIES OF ESL TEACHERS

THIS BOOK SETS OUT to explore what constitutes expertise in teaching with particular reference to the teaching of ESL. Tsui suggests that while a great deal has been written over the years about teaching, the question of what constitutes expertise in teaching remains a somewhat vexed question. How is it recognised? How is it developed? What insights from research can be offered teachers wishing to improve their teaching and hopefully, achieve expertise?

An initial discussion of what other research about expertise has had to say leads to a review of the rather more specific research about expertise in teaching, examining what has been said of the features of expert and novice teachers. Such discussions, as well as reviews of the literature on teacher knowledge, then lead to a detailed account of four case studies of ESL teachers in Hong Kong, all of whom taught in the same (not particularly privileged) school. 'Marina' is identified as the teacher with expertise, while 'Ching', 'Eva' and 'Genie' all operate with varying degrees of experience and expertise. The object of pursuing the four case studies is to arrive at some account of what are the characteristics of the expert teacher. Marina—who has the greatest number of years of experience—has developed considerable insights and expertise in the course of her career, while significantly enhancing her understandings by undertaking study, first for a Postgraduate Certificate in Education, and later by gaining a Master's degree.

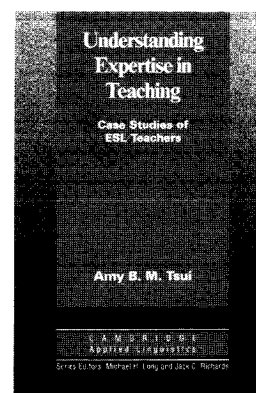
A very careful documenting of the teaching activities, values and beliefs of the four teachers eventually leads Tsui to a discussion in the final chapter of the book on *Understanding expertise in teaching*. Like Lave (1988) whose work is cited several times, Tsui adopts the view that in studying the teacher one must study that person in contexts of action, working with students and colleagues. Teacher expertise, like teacher knowledge itself, is in part a condition of being successfully 'situated', understanding and working with the class, its personalities and its possibilities. But more than this, teacher expertise, in Tsui's view, is in part a condition of 'conscious deliberation and reflection on experience', both of which, she argues, are 'central' (page 259). In this latter argument, Tsui disagrees with at least some of the authorities she has cited, who are not persuaded that conscious reflection is a necessary aspect of the expert teacher. The expert teacher, in addition, is

possessed of 'theorised practical knowledge', brought about—in Marina's case—by a successful blending of what experience has taught her, and what her university studies have taught her of how to theorise the fruits of her experience. Marina's successful adoption of the role as an 'agent of change' in her school is an exemplary instance of how she took some theory to which she had been introduced (about the values of 'process writing' approaches) and used this to lead her colleagues in effecting curriculum changes that would address some practical problems to do with poor writing by the students. Expertise is not definitive, Tsui suggests, in that the teacher is always learning and new perspectives will be adopted, new challenges faced. Expertise is also 'multiple', in that it is many faceted, in that it is often distributed across different individuals who will have particular skills in specific domains, and in that, like teacher knowledge itself, it is constructed in interaction with others in contexts of real work.

The book offers an exemplary account of case study methodology, and is at its most interesting and lively when Tsui sets out in detail much of the lives, styles of working and aspirations of her four teachers. Tsui says of the aim of the study that it is 'to explore the concepts of expertise in teaching and to further our understanding of expertise as a process, using ESL teachers as case for investigation' (Page 67). I think the book succeeds admirably in capturing the sense of 'process' in the achievement and enactment of expertise. In fact, I believe the notion of expertise as 'process' is one of the most important contributions of the study, providing a useful corrective to the tendency to see expertise as having some kind of definitive and finished status. How the process of being a teacher expert is enacted, however, as Tsui would also agree, depends on the very social settings in which the teacher works. In this sense, perhaps more than Tsui realises, this is a case study in ESL teaching in the Hong Kong situation. Studies of expertise in teaching ESL in other settings would very likely also capture a sense of 'process', but it would not necessarily be realised in similar ways.

REFERENCES:

- Lave, J. (1988) *Cognition in Practice: Mind, mathematics, and culture in everyday life*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press



by

A. B. M. Tsui

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Frances Christie,
University of Sydney.

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