

We interrupt your regularly scheduled program

**James
Dobson**



Recently two graduate teachers confided in me their feelings of guilt over using pre-prepared materials in their classrooms. They both really enjoyed teaching these programs, their students are doing some wonderful learning and they are not wasting time creating something that already exists. Their guilt emerged because they have been led to believe that teachers need to create the content for their students' unique needs. While catering for our students' needs is a crucial aspect of education, we can easily forget that the ways that we learn are generally very similar.

When I go to the doctor, I don't expect them to create the medicine. When I order a meal, I don't expect the chef to have grown the ingredients in their own garden. And when I go to the mechanic, they will order a part rather than make it themselves. So why do we expect all teachers to do the dual tasks of creating a curriculum and teaching the curriculum?

Don't get me wrong: it is important that teachers have the knowledge to create curriculum. It is a waste of time for thousands of teachers to be creating similar curricula in parallel. It is an unreasonable expectation that all teachers be able to produce programs of exceptional quality from scratch.

If you mention that your school uses a program, you are likely to hear the phrase 'programs don't teach students, teachers teach students'. There seems to be an adverse reaction whenever someone mentions that they use a program within education. This is a little strange given that *program* is defined as 'a set of related measures or activities with a particular long-term aim'. That definition could just about sit next to the word school.

Why are people hesitant about using the term *program* when discussing what they do in their classroom?

It is possible that it is because the term *program* is often synonymous with *commercial program*. I know I used to hold to the myth that commercial programs were something to avoid in educating our children. However, I now realise that some commercial programs can benefit schools.

P = Price

A key reason educators give for avoiding commercial programs is that somebody profits from them. There is an understandable scepticism about anyone making a profit from the education of our children. Of course, we need to be wary and avoid any snake-oil salespeople. However, when you look at the actual costs of many good programs you might be surprised. The actual cost is often not much more than the materials would cost.

The real question we should be asking is: "What is the price of creating our own programs?" When we start to add up the late nights that teachers spend creating, printing and laminating our resources, we start to see the real

cost of expecting every school to come up with unique programs. This cost is so significant that ‘workload’ has become the prime issue in schools in many jurisdictions, including Victoria. The cost of creating your own program is often much more expensive than purchasing one.

R = Ready to roll

One key advantage of using an appropriate commercial program is that they are often packaged to be easily implementable. This means that we have more time for planning other learning experiences. It also means that we are able to focus on *how* we deliver the program, rather than creating *what* we need to deliver.

Recently we implemented a new spelling program. After an initial half-day session our staff were ready to start teaching with the program. There wasn’t much for them to create, to print or laminate. Instead, they could shift their focus to reflecting on what worked in each lesson and how to fine-tune their practice to improve the learning of their students.

O = Organised

A commercial program organises the learning. A good commercial program organises the learning well. A good teacher can organise learning well too, but good teachers also have myriad extra responsibilities that keep creeping in the way. It takes time to sequence learning. It takes *a lot of time* to sequence learning well. Teachers often don’t have that time. It also takes expertise to sequence learning well. Many teachers are experts, but it is difficult to be an expert in every area that we are expected to teach.

A good program is well sequenced. The skills students learn are built on each lesson and this continues throughout the multiple years of the program. There is consistency between classes and the material that students are learning is delivered in a cohesive way. With a well-sequenced program, the teaching is organised and the learning is also better consolidated.

G = Graduates

When I was a graduate teacher, I was

provided with a folder of photocopied literacy worksheets for each week of the term. From this I was expected to craft a complete term of reading and writing learning. I was also busy working out how to manage student behaviours, communicate with parents, juggle teaching in an art room as we awaited new buildings, teach maths, science, history, do yard duties, participate in staff meetings...

Phew! I am exhausted just remembering this experience. It’s little wonder that so many teachers leave the profession in the first few years. We are losing people who have the potential to be amazing educators because they are not well-supported. One way that we can support them is to provide them with quality teaching materials.

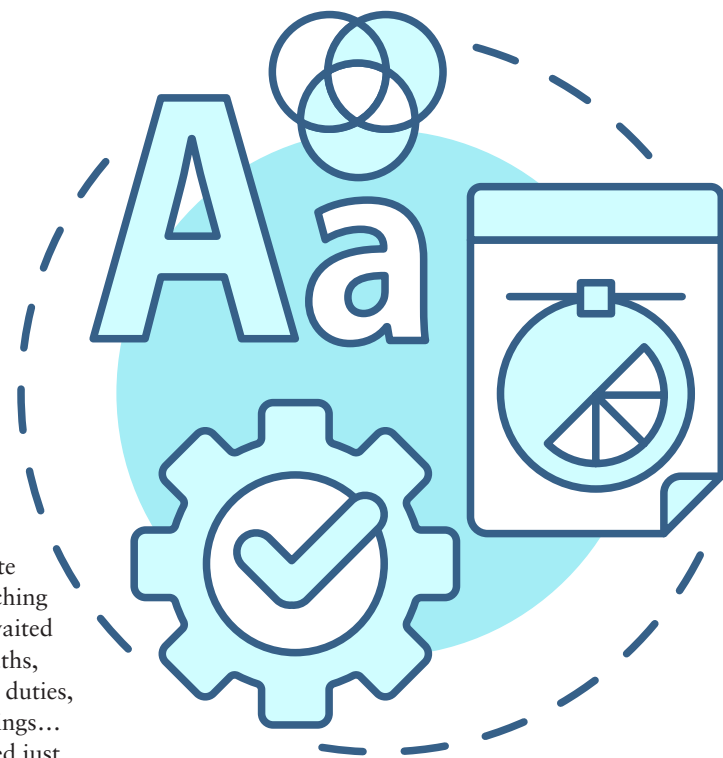
Why was there an expectation that I could turn the folder of photocopied material into a curriculum of anything near the quality of the experienced teacher next door?

I am not pretending that even with a quality program I would have been as good as those with more experience. But I think I would have been able to focus more on what really matters: my students’ learning. I also think that I would have spent fewer weekends planning and preparing.

Graduate teachers need to stand on the shoulders of the giants who have worked before them in education. This may be the experienced mentor next door, but we should also leverage the experience of those external to our school. Many programs have been created by experts who have worked tirelessly on them. Let’s not ignore this expertise.

R = Research

I would love more people to see what is happening in my classroom. My blog is partly an attempt to document my teaching so that others can learn from it (and I can learn from others). I want to know more about what makes teaching effective. This is tricky to discern when there are so many factors in a classroom. Is it the way I greet



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students? Is it how I frame questions? Is it the way that I manage behaviour? Is it the culture of participation that I build? Is it the explicit teaching? Is it a sense of wonder in my students?

There are so many moving parts in one single classroom that it is difficult to work out what elements are essential for effective learning. However, if a number of different classes are implementing a particular program and all are achieving similar results, then the program is likely to be a factor. In this instance we can begin to examine the program, rather than trying to consider all the aspects of all the different classes.

Many commercial programs claim to be 'research-based'. We need to scrutinise these claims so that we can continue to learn what contributes to effective teaching and learning.

A = Artistry

A funny thing happened when I started to use a commercial program in my classroom: I became a better teacher. I no longer wasted countless hours planning. My teaching became more targeted. I was able to pay closer attention to my students. Instead of trying to create an entire unit, I was focused on small tweaks that made significant impact on my students'

learning. In short, I could work on the art of teaching because the program dealt with the science of teaching.

Another myth is that programs turn teachers into automatons. This couldn't be further from the truth in my experience. I have had the privilege of observing many teachers. Even if they are delivering the same program, their artistry always shines through.

M = Miracles

Another line that does the rounds when programs get mentioned is 'there's no such thing as a silver bullet'. You will get no argument from me. Teaching is complex and to pretend otherwise devalues teaching as a profession. We don't need to complicate it further and to dismiss programs because somebody else created them. A program is not a silver bullet. Despite many programs being 'ready-to-roll', this does not equate to a 'plug-and-play' situation where anybody with a heartbeat could do the work of a teacher.

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S = Students' success

The most important aspect of determining whether to use a program comes down to the very reason schools exist: our students. Their success should be the factor that sways whether a program is appropriate.

If you do not use any commercial programs and your students are achieving wonderful success: congratulations! Thank you for taking the time to read this article and keep doing what you are doing.

Many of us are not in this position and believe that there is room to improve our students' learning outcomes. Perhaps someone has already done the hard work of creating a program that meets the particular long-term aims you are striving for. Perhaps a program that is suitable for your situation exists.

Not all commercial programs are created equal. Some are much better than others. And some are definitely not worth investing in. However, to habitually dismiss the use of all commercial programs increases teachers' workloads, and potentially disadvantages our students.

This article originally appeared on the author's blog, [Laying the Foundations](#).

James Dobson [[@jtdobson](#) on Twitter] is a Foundation teacher and Literacy Learning Specialist in regional Victoria. He has worked with students from a diverse range of backgrounds in Victoria and the Northern Territory. This has made him passionate about ensuring that literacy instruction is rigorous and robust. James blogs at <https://layingthefoundations.weebly.com/>