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Teachers Not Teaching in the Classroom: A Critical Examination of Arguments for and Against

Dr. Kiran Kumar M N
Head, Department of BCA, BMS College of Commerce and Management, Bengaluru – 560 004, Karnataka, India
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Abstract - The phrase "teachers are not teaching" is used both as praise for a shift from lecturing to facilitation and as criticism of teacher disengagement. This paper critically examines the arguments for and against reducing traditional didactic instruction, drawing on landmark meta-analyses, controlled experiments, large-scale assessment data and policy cases from India, the Netherlands, Sweden and the United States. The evidence shows that structured active learning outperforms passive lecturing in undergraduate science settings, and that students often misjudge how much they learn from each method. It shows equally that unguided discovery is ineffective for novices, that teacher–student relationships and teaching presence are associated with engagement and achievement, and that disadvantaged learners lose most when teacher support is withdrawn, as the COVID-19 school closures and the subsequent learning losses in India illustrate. The paper argues that the real issue is not whether teachers teach but what form teaching takes. It proposes a context-sensitive framework that matches the balance of explicit instruction, guided activity and independent inquiry to learners' prior knowledge and learning goals while keeping teacher presence constant. Implications for practice, policy and teacher education are outlined.

Keywords: ***teacher role; student-centered learning; active learning; direct instruction; teacher presence; learning outcomes; educational equity***

1. INTRODUCTION

The role of the teacher is being redefined. For much of the twentieth century the teacher was the main source of knowledge, delivering content through lectures and directing classroom activity. Contemporary pedagogical thinking challenges that model and proposes that teachers act as facilitators or learning designers who structure inquiry, design meaningful tasks and build collaborative environments [1, 2]. In India this orientation is reflected in the National Education Policy 2020, which calls for less rote learning and more experiential, competency-based teaching [3]. The shift has produced a colloquial complaint, and sometimes a boast, that "teachers are not teaching".

The expression carries at least three distinct meanings. The first is *not lecturing*: the teacher deliberately replaces extended exposition with problem-solving, discussion and group work. The second is *disengagement*: the teacher is physically or psychologically absent, leaving students to manage themselves. The third is *substitution*: teaching is handed over to technology, recorded content or student self-direction. These meanings carry very different consequences, and much of the public debate goes wrong by treating them as one.

This paper addresses four questions. (1) What evidence supports reducing teacher-led, didactic instruction? (2) What evidence supports retaining explicit instruction and strong teacher presence? (3) What do documented real-world cases show about how both play out in classrooms and school systems? (4) What framework can reconcile the evidence? The aim is to move beyond a binary of "teaching versus not teaching" toward a position that respects both the evolving nature of teaching practice and the importance of teacher expertise and presence.

The question is practical as well as theoretical. In large systems such as India's, where teacher preparation, class size and learning levels vary widely, policy slogans about moving "from teacher to facilitator" can be implemented in ways that remove support from the learners who need it most. A careful reading of the evidence is therefore a prerequisite for sound policy and for the daily decisions of individual teachers.

2. SCOPE AND APPROACH

This is a narrative critical review rather than a systematic review. Sources were selected purposively for relevance, methodological strength and diversity of context. Priority was given to meta-analyses, controlled or quasi-experimental studies and national

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assessment data, and policy cases were checked against primary reports (for example the ASER Centre reports and the original journal articles) wherever available. Because the selection was not governed by a formal protocol such as PRISMA, the review may be affected by selection bias, a point taken up in Section 8. Much of the strongest experimental evidence on active learning comes from undergraduate science courses, so claims are qualified where findings are extended to school education.

3. CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND: A SPECTRUM, NOT A BINARY

Pedagogical approaches are best viewed as lying along a continuum of teacher guidance. At one end is *direct (explicit) instruction*, in which the teacher presents, models and checks understanding. In the middle is *guided active learning*, in which students work on tasks, questions or problems under structured teacher support. At the other end is *unguided discovery*, in which students are expected to find or construct the target knowledge largely alone. A meta-analysis of 164 studies by Alfieri and colleagues found that unassisted discovery was generally less effective than explicit instruction, whereas discovery supported by feedback, worked examples, scaffolding or elicited explanations was more effective than explicit instruction [4]. This pattern is central to the debate: what matters is not whether students are active but whether their activity is guided.

Two classic papers frame the controversy. Kirschner, Sweller and Clark argued that minimally guided instruction fails because it overloads the limited working memory of novices who lack the knowledge to organize their search [5]. Mayer reached a similar conclusion and favoured guided discovery over pure discovery [6]. Hmelo-Silver, Duncan and Chinn replied that problem-based and inquiry learning are not minimally guided at all, because they embed heavy scaffolding [7]. Properly read, the two camps agree more than the rhetoric suggests: both reject unguided discovery for novices, and both endorse structured activity supported by an expert teacher.

4. ARGUMENTS IN FAVOUR OF MOVING BEYOND TRADITIONAL INSTRUCTION

4.1 Evidence from large studies and experiments

The strongest case for reducing lecture time comes from decades of comparative research. In a survey of 6,542 students in 62 introductory physics courses, Hake found that courses using interactive engagement achieved an average normalized gain of 0.48, against 0.23 for traditional courses, a difference of about two standard deviations [8]. A meta-analysis of 225 studies in undergraduate science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) found that average examination performance rose by about half a standard deviation under active learning, and that students in traditional lecture courses were about 1.5 times more likely to fail (roughly 34% versus 22%) [9].

Real-world example: Peer Instruction at Harvard. Eric Mazur's physics classes at Harvard interrupt short presentations with conceptual questions that students answer individually, discuss with neighbours and answer again. Reporting ten years of data, Crouch and Mazur found that this method improved students' conceptual understanding and their quantitative problem-solving compared with the same instructor's earlier traditional lectures [10]. The teacher still explains, but exposition is brief, targeted and followed immediately by student thinking.

A caution is needed on generalization. Most of these studies took place in university science courses, where students are older, more motivated and more selected than school populations. Evidence from schools is more mixed and depends heavily on how much guidance the activities contain [4]. The findings therefore support structured active learning in principle, but they do not by themselves show that school teachers should lecture less in every subject and grade.

4.2 Engagement and the "feeling of learning"

Student perceptions can mislead. In a randomized crossover experiment at Harvard, about 150 undergraduates in an introductory physics course were taught the same topics in two ways: by polished lectures from highly rated instructors, and by an evidence-based active-learning approach. Students in the active sessions scored higher on a test, yet they rated their own learning as lower, and enjoyed the lectures more [11]. The authors suggest that the extra effort of active learning is misread as a sign of poor learning, and that a "superstar lecturer" can create an illusion of understanding.

The finding matters for the "not teaching" debate in two ways. First, it warns against judging teaching by student satisfaction alone, an issue for any institution that ranks teachers on feedback scores. Second, it implies that teachers who adopt active methods must explain to students why the approach feels harder, since early resistance can otherwise undermine it.

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4.3 Higher-order thinking, agency and the teacher as designer

Lecture-based teaching tends to emphasize transmission and recall, whereas inquiry, problem solving and peer explanation foster conceptual depth and transferable skills [1]. When teachers become designers of learning pathways rather than sole sources of content, they create room for student agency, metacognition and self-regulation. A recent review describes a graduate course in molecular cancer biology at a Chinese university that was redesigned from a teacher-centered to a student-centered format, with the authors reporting gains in both academic performance and personal growth [1]. Such single-course case studies are suggestive, not conclusive, but they illustrate the practical form that "not lecturing" takes. Evidence from mathematics teacher education points in a related direction: teachers who taught through student-centered methods reported greater growth in their own pedagogical content knowledge than those using direct teaching [2].

4.4 Equity and differentiation

A whole-class lecture assumes a single pace, which disadvantages students who are behind or far ahead. When the teacher is freed from continuous presentation, time opens for targeted small-group support, enrichment for advanced learners and formative assessment that adjusts challenge continuously.

Real-world example: Teaching at the Right Level (India). The clearest large-scale example comes from India. The NGO Pratham found that many children could not follow the grade-level curriculum because they lacked basic skills. Its "Teaching at the Right Level" (TaRL) approach groups children for part of the school day by what they can do rather than by age or grade. A series of randomized trials led by economists at J-PAL found that early versions delivered through the regular school system failed, and that training and materials alone had no effect. The approach worked when dedicated time was set aside and teachers or volunteers were supported to use it, and by 2017 the "additional hour" model had reached nearly five million children in more than 100,000 schools across 13 states [12]. Notably, TaRL is not a case of teachers stepping back: it is structured, assessment-driven, intensive teaching that happens to be differentiated rather than delivered to the whole class.

4.5 Preparation for lifelong learning

Specific content may become outdated, but the capacity to learn independently and adapt does not. Teaching that gradually transfers responsibility to students supports intrinsic motivation and the habits of autonomous learners, which is one of the declared aims of the National Education Policy 2020 [3]. The argument is persuasive as a statement of educational goals. However, as the next section shows, autonomy is an outcome that teachers must build, not an assumption they can start from.

5. ARGUMENTS AGAINST: WHY TEACHER PRESENCE AND DIRECT INSTRUCTION REMAIN ESSENTIAL

5.1 Relationships and teacher presence

A large body of research indicates that the quality of the teacher–student relationship is associated with learning. A meta-analysis of 119 studies concluded that learner-centred teacher–student relationships, characterized by warmth, empathy and non-directivity, correlate positively with participation, motivation and achievement [13]. A separate meta-analysis of affective teacher–student relationships found that positive relationships were associated with higher engagement and achievement, and that negative relationships were associated with lower engagement [14]. Importantly for the present debate, "learner-centred" in this literature describes the teacher's *relationship* with students, not the withdrawal of teacher guidance. Hattie similarly argues that effective teachers act as "activators" who direct learning and monitor its effects, not merely as facilitators [15].

The same holds online. In the Community of Inquiry framework, "teaching presence" (designing the course, facilitating discourse and providing direct instruction) is one of three interdependent elements alongside social and cognitive presence [16]. A meta-analysis found that teaching presence is positively related to students' satisfaction and learning in online and blended courses [17]. Thus even where teaching is mediated by technology, teacher presence is not optional.

5.2 Direct instruction and cognitive load

Novices lack the organized knowledge that lets experts navigate open-ended problems, so they benefit from explicit explanation, worked examples and gradually reduced support [5, 6]. Some content, such as a standard algorithm or the causes of a historical event, is simply most efficiently conveyed by an expert.

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Real-world example: Project Follow Through (United States). Between 1968 and 1977 the U.S. government ran the largest educational experiment in its history, comparing models of early-grade instruction in disadvantaged communities. In the evaluation by Abt Associates, the Direct Instruction model, a scripted and teacher-led programme developed by Siegfried Engelmann and colleagues, was reported to produce the strongest results on basic skills and also favourable results on cognitive and self-esteem measures, while several "open" or child-centred models performed less well [18]. The findings remain contested. Critics point to variation between sites and to problems of design, while Bereiter and Kurland's reanalysis largely reaffirmed the advantage of Direct Instruction for basic skills [19]. The lesson is not that one model wins everywhere, but that explicit teaching was effective for foundational skills among disadvantaged pupils, and that implementation quality mattered as much as the model.

5.3 Classroom order and the hidden workload of facilitation

Student-centered classrooms do not emerge by themselves. Brophy's synthesis of research on effective teaching stresses that productive classrooms depend on teachers establishing routines and expectations, monitoring students actively and providing feedback and support [20]. Teachers who appear to be "not teaching" because they are not lecturing are therefore typically doing demanding work: designing tasks, circulating, questioning and intervening. Facilitation without this work degenerates into the second meaning of the phrase, disengagement.

This hidden workload has implications for teacher preparation and workload. Facilitation-based lessons require more planning time, a wider repertoire of questioning and feedback techniques and the confidence to manage a classroom in which many things happen at once. Systems that adopt active-learning policies without adjusting training, time and class size risk producing the disengaged version of the model [12, 20].

5.4 Vulnerable learners: what happened when teachers were absent

The COVID-19 school closures were an unplanned natural experiment in what happens when teacher-led instruction is removed and replaced with self-directed and remote learning. Engzell and colleagues studied about 350,000 Dutch primary students, in a country with an eight-week lockdown, equitable school funding and the world's highest rate of broadband access. They found a learning loss of about 0.08 standard deviations, equivalent to roughly one-fifth of a school year, which was the same period schools were closed, and losses up to 60% larger among students from less-educated homes [21]. If this occurred in the Netherlands, the authors reasoned, losses were likely larger where infrastructure was weaker.

Real-world example: India after school closures. The Annual Status of Education Report (ASER), a household survey of about 700,000 rural children, found that the share of Std III children able to read a Std II-level text fell from 27.3% in 2018 to 20.5% in 2022, and the share of Std V children able to do so fell from 50.5% to 42.8% [22]. By ASER 2024, the Std III figure had recovered to about 27%, a recovery that coincided with a national policy push on foundational literacy and numeracy [23]. The survey cannot isolate the causes of recovery, but the sequence is instructive: when sustained teacher-led contact was interrupted, foundational learning fell sharply, and it recovered when teaching was restored and prioritized.

5.5 Limits of technology and self-directed learning

Technology can extend teaching but has not replaced it. The first decade of massive open online courses (MOOCs), which promised to democratize learning through self-paced study, ended with what Reich and Ruipérez-Valiente called a "pivot": the learners who benefited most were already educationally advantaged, and most enrolees did not complete courses [24]. Instructor-supported formats do better because they supply structure, feedback and human encouragement.

Real-world example: Sweden's return to books. Sweden rapidly expanded the use of tablets and digital resources in the 2010s. After declines in the country's fourth-grade reading results in the international PIRLS assessment between 2016 and 2021, and in the PISA results to 2022, the government changed course in 2023 and committed substantial funding to printed textbooks, with the Karolinska Institute urging a focus on printed books and teacher expertise [25]. The causes of the score declines are debated and cannot be attributed to digital tools alone, but the policy reversal shows how quickly systems have rethought the substitution of teacher-led instruction by screens.

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5.6 The teacher as mentor and moral guide

Beyond subject matter, teachers provide encouragement, role modelling and a sense of belonging. These dimensions are consistent with the relationship evidence above [13, 14] and are particularly important for students who feel alienated from school. They cannot be delegated to software or replaced by student autonomy; they require sustained human relationship.

6. SUMMARY OF REAL-WORLD CASES

Table 1 summarizes the cases discussed above and the lesson each offers for the debate.

Table 1: Real-world cases and their implications

Case	Context	Key finding	Implication
Harvard physics experiment (2019)	Undergraduates; randomized crossover; active versus polished lecture [11]	Higher test scores after active learning, yet students felt they learned less	Active methods work but need student buy-in; do not judge teaching by satisfaction alone
Peer Instruction (Harvard)	Undergraduate physics; ten years of data [10]	Better conceptual and problem-solving performance than earlier lectures	Brief teacher explanation plus structured student thinking
Project Follow Through (USA, 1968–77)	Early grades; disadvantaged communities [18]	Direct Instruction reported strongest on basic skills; results contested	Explicit teaching is effective for foundational skills; implementation matters
Teaching at the Right Level (India)	Primary schools; randomized trials, scaled to government systems [12]	Worked when dedicated time and support were provided; failed when merely added to grade-level teaching	Differentiated, assessment-driven teaching is an active teacher role
Dutch school closures (2020)	About 350,000 primary students [21]	Loss of about one-fifth of a school year; larger for less-educated homes	Remote self-study is a poor substitute for teachers, especially for disadvantaged students
ASER 2018–2024 (India)	Rural children; national household survey [22, 23]	Std III reading at Std II level: 27.3% (2018), 20.5% (2022), about 27% (2024)	Foundational learning is sensitive to interruption of teaching and to focused recovery effort
Sweden's policy reversal (2023–)	National policy; PIRLS/PISA declines [25]	Return to printed textbooks and teacher-led instruction	Technology should support, not replace, teacher expertise; causes remain debated
MOOCs (2012–2019)	Open online courses [24]	Benefits concentrated among advantaged learners; low completion	Self-directed learning needs strong prior skills and support

7. SYNTHESIS: A CONTEXT-SENSITIVE FRAMEWORK

7.1 Teaching as design, explanation and relationship

The two bodies of evidence are reconcilable once teaching is no longer equated with lecturing. The evidence for active learning shows that *students must do the cognitive work*; the evidence for presence and direct instruction shows that *teachers must make that work possible*. Teaching therefore comprises at least four activities: explaining, which is brief, clear and expert-led; designing, which creates purposeful tasks and sequences; monitoring and feedback, which adjusts support in real time; and relating, which builds trust and belonging. A teacher who is not lecturing but is performing the last three well is teaching intensively.

7.2 Matching the mode to the learner and the goal

The balance between explicit instruction and student activity should change with learners' prior knowledge, the learning objective, the subject and the setting. Table 2 summarizes a decision framework derived from the evidence reviewed. It is a synthesis offered for testing, not an empirically validated model.

Table 2: Matching the teacher's role to the learning situation

Learning situation	Recommended teacher role	Illustration from this review
Novice learners meeting a new, foundational concept or procedure	Explicit explanation with worked examples, then guided practice and gradual fading of support [4, 5]	Basic-skills gains under Direct Instruction [18]

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Learning situation	Recommended teacher role	Illustration from this review
Learners with partial knowledge; conceptual misunderstandings	Short exposition followed by structured questions, peer discussion and feedback [10, 11]	Peer Instruction in physics
Wide variation in prior attainment in one class	Grouping by current level for part of the day; targeted small-group teaching [12]	Teaching at the Right Level
Advanced learners; ill-structured, complex problems	Inquiry and project work with monitoring, probing questions and timely intervention [1]	Redesigned graduate science course
Remote or blended delivery	Visible teaching presence: structured design, regular feedback and live interaction [16, 17]	Community of Inquiry; school-closure evidence [21]

7.3 Illustration: one lesson, three readings of "not teaching"

The following scenarios are constructed for exposition and are not empirical data. They show how the same topic, introducing linear equations to a Grade 8 class, looks under the three meanings of the phrase.

- **Not lecturing (well designed).** The teacher spends eight minutes modelling how to solve one equation, showing each step and the reasoning behind it. Pairs then attempt two similar problems while the teacher circulates, notes common errors and asks probing questions. A short quiz on a mini-whiteboard shows who is ready for harder problems. A small group that is still struggling is taught again at the front while others move to a puzzle task. The teacher is rarely at the board, yet every minute is teaching.
- **Disengagement.** The teacher distributes a worksheet and sits at the desk marking, telling students to "figure it out" in groups. Some students finish quickly by copying, others stall on the first question, and no one checks understanding before the bell. This is the failure that critics describe, and it is not facilitation.
- **Substitution.** The class is directed to watch a recorded video and complete an online exercise independently. Confident students progress; those who lack prerequisite skills click through without understanding, and the platform reports completion rather than learning. Without a teacher monitoring and responding, the weakest learners are the least visible.

The three classrooms may look equally "teacher-light" to an observer, but only the first reflects the evidence on guided active learning, and it requires the most expertise.

7.4 Teacher presence as a constant

Whatever the mix of methods, the evidence treats teacher presence as a constant rather than a variable. Presence means that students perceive their teacher as attentive, approachable and invested in their progress, and that the teacher actually monitors what each student is learning. It cannot be automated or outsourced, and it matters most for students with the least support outside school [13, 14, 21].

7.5 Implications for practice, policy and teacher education

- **Practice.** Plan lessons around what students will do and think, not only what the teacher will say. Use explicit instruction deliberately, for foundational content, and follow it quickly with active practice. Explain to students why effortful methods feel harder [11]. Use formative assessment to decide when to explain, when to step back and when to regroup.
- **Policy.** Avoid reforms that equate modernization with reduced teacher input. Reforms such as the National Education Policy 2020's emphasis on experiential learning [3] are more likely to work when they are accompanied by time, training and structured materials, which the TaRL experience shows are decisive [12]. Technology investments should be evaluated against teacher-led alternatives, as Sweden's experience suggests [25].
- **Teacher education.** Programmes should teach both the research on active learning and the research on explicit instruction, relationships and classroom management, and prepare teachers to diagnose where their students lie on the novice–expert continuum.
- **Evaluation.** Student satisfaction ratings should be complemented by measures of actual learning, since the two can diverge [11].

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8. LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This review has several limitations. It is narrative rather than systematic, so it may over-represent well-known studies. Most of the experimental evidence on active learning comes from undergraduate science courses in high-income countries, and its transfer to school education, to other subjects and to large, resource-constrained classrooms such as those common in India is not established. The real-world cases are heterogeneous, differ in design and quality, and in several instances (Sweden, ASER recovery) do not permit causal conclusions. Project Follow Through's findings remain disputed. Finally, the framework in Table 2 is a synthesis awaiting empirical testing.

Future research should (i) test context-sensitive sequencing of explicit instruction and active learning in Indian school classrooms and across languages and subjects; (ii) examine how class size and teacher preparation moderate the effects of facilitation-based methods; (iii) study how teachers can sustain presence in blended and technology-supported settings; and (iv) evaluate long-term effects on motivation, equity and lifelong learning, not just short-term test scores.

9. CONCLUSION

The claim that "teachers are not teaching" describes three different things, and the evidence supports a different verdict for each. Where it means that teachers lecture less and structure more student activity, the evidence is largely favourable, particularly in undergraduate science. Where it means that teachers are absent, disengaged or replaced by technology, the evidence is clearly unfavourable, and the costs fall most heavily on disadvantaged learners, as the Dutch and Indian experience of school closures shows. Where it means that teaching has become less visible because it is now design, feedback and relationship, it is a description of more demanding, not less demanding, professional work.

The best-supported position is therefore an integrated one. Teachers should explain what novices cannot discover, design activity that makes students think, keep close enough to every learner to know what they understand, and remain visibly present throughout. The question for schools, colleges and policymakers is not whether teachers should teach, but how to equip them to teach in this fuller sense.

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