All teachers know that teaching is a profession in which everyone is a professed expert: everybody has been to school; hence everybody knows how to teach. It is a sad reflection of people’s experience of schools that most believe teaching is about repetition and that experienced teachers can switch to auto-pilot and then go and enjoy their abundant free time. Not so – unless you wish to head straight for massive burn-out.

Fortunately, there are those who have a different view of the profession and who care enough to actually write about it. Teaching on a Tightrope is a refreshing reminder that teaching is an art and that successful teaching is a creative process where a large number of elements have to be united. Jack Zevin, professor of education at Queens College in New York, has written several books on teaching, among them the well-known Social Studies for the Twenty-First Century (2007), which has undergone substantial changes since its title was Social Studies for the Twentieth Century. The size of the book Teaching on a Tightrope is in reverse proportion to the inspiration it brings. To quote the author: “This book is dedicated to the notion that all of us, as teachers acting in many capacities...”
during our daily routines of life, could benefit from an opportunity to reflect on the possibilities and potential for expanding our concept of instruction” (p. 25). As the subtitle, *The diverse roles of a great teacher*, indicates, the different roles that every teacher takes on are studied from several angles. This should by no means be interpreted as pretentious or dishonest, but rather as a frank admission – or even a celebration – of the fact that to meet the needs of different students, the teacher has to be able to play many roles.

The book’s overriding theme is that successful teaching should leave students with something meaningful and so it follows that the book’s keywords are interactive teaching, student engagement and creativity. Zevin knows that teachers tend to like a practical approach, so the book is exceptionally user-friendly. Readers are regularly asked to reflect on certain questions that will shed light on their own teaching or their ideas about teaching. Examples from classrooms bring exciting ideas down to earth. One of the seven chapters, entitled *Teaching as Art and as Science*, shows that it is not only possible to develop relationships between art and science but that it is perfectly natural to do so, since “Dichotomies in education are largely false because teaching is a complex act of overlapping goals, theories and practices” (p. 53).

The book is written with warmth and a sense of humour that will be encouraging to teachers who want to take their lessons to the next level. In a chapter on creativity, no attempt is made to disguise the ambiguous nature of creative assignments or the uncertainty it may bring to both teacher and students. This is seriously considered, but at the same time the author gives a piece of advice: “It’s an experiment: Let’s see what happens” (p. 69).

This notion of playfulness is very stimulating, especially as Zevin is capable of demonstrating how it can be applied to solemn learning. Perfect examples are the books he has written in cooperation with his colleague, David Gerwin: *Teaching World History as a Mystery* (2011) and *Teaching US History as a Mystery* (2011). In those books various topics are addressed in a systematic fashion from the mystery point of view, and “mystery packets” are offered to teachers and students – an approach that is guaranteed to give zest to the work in the classroom.

Those of us who are less innovative in our daily routines will be able to pick up ideas from *Teaching on a Tightrope*, although some may feel intimidated or overwhelmed by all this. Solace may be found in the final chapter of *Teaching on a Tightrope*, called *Teacher ‘Madness’ and Its Causes: Madness, Euphoria and Manic Depression in Teaching*. The author states that “Many teachers go home ‘mad’ or ‘crazed’ by the end of a week and are positively demented by the end of a term,” (p. 156). He then goes on to examine the causes and the expression of frustration, depression, anxiety, mania, compulsion, elation and euphoria, candidly dealing with the emotional effects of giving yourself wholeheartedly over to your teaching. Thus, *Teaching on a Tightrope* is both supportive and inspiring. It is a valuable addition to the library of the curious teacher.