The Unbearable Lightness of Being A Teacher

TEACHER TALK
2007 – 2010

"When one teaches, two learn."

Thoughts on

Education / Teaching / Language

by David Deubelbeiss
About the Author

David Deubelbeiss is a TESOL professor and teacher trainer presently living in North Bay, Ontario. He has traveled and taught around the world. A “working man’s teacher”, he enjoys red wine, good food, good conversation and just “being here”. Find out more about him through his google profile.

About this book

This book was written for myself. Yes, it was a selfish act. I think all good things are somehow born of the ego. My daily writing was for my own professional development but I do think other teachers can profit from my own ruminations – thus, this book.

It represents my thoughts in 3 main streams. Reflections of a general nature on education and the role of “schooling” in society. Thoughts on language and the “magic” of this great code. Writings about teaching and more practical aspects of teacher development. Some are focused on ELT (English Language Teaching) but are applicable to any teaching setting.

Dip in and enjoy. Click on most photos to get secondary sources when viewing the PDF version. Get the PDF at http://eflclassroom.com/books/blog2. Some sources are linked to my teaching community – you’ll need a quick registration (because they are unavailable elsewhere).

The purchase of this book helps support a new model of textbook delivery – teachers helping teachers. It is supported by a large professional development community and an author that will respond to your needs. Your purchase supports all the activities to support practicing teachers through EFL Classroom 2.0.

Thanks in advance, enjoy the book. Any feedback and comments much appreciated.

David Deubelbeiss

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ON THOUGHTS IN EDUCATION
The Unbearable Lightness of Being a Teacher

“In the sunset of dissolution, everything is illuminated by the aura of nostalgia, even the guillotine.”

It is that time of year, time to say good bye. Time to close books and put away pencils and go on our way towards that “next thing”. End of semester, the bell rings one long, loud time. People come and go like ghosts, it is over. We await the “new” and September when there is rebirth and the cycle starts again.

And that’s how school is.

I’ve never gotten used to it. This saying good – bye. It is like a heavy mist that weighs me down all summer, all time apart. Where do the people go that were SUCH a part of my life? Why this hither and yonder and higher and lighter? Where do they all go? And why must I partake in it? Who clangs the bell that makes all this happen and keeps the circle spinning ’round? Who wiped away my sky?

“Anyone whose goal is ’something higher’ must expect someday to suffer vertigo. What is vertigo? Fear of falling? No, Vertigo is something other than fear of falling. It is the voice of the emptiness below us which tempts and lures us, it is the desire to fall, against which, terrified, we defend ourselves.”

It is even worse for adventurous EFL teachers. We flit from one school, from one country to the next. We get to know students and the community but always remain on the outside because there will always be a time to move on…. we are always saying good-bye, everything shifts underneath us and there is no “terra firma”.

When I finished my second practice teaching session during Teacher’s College, my mentor teacher – Jim McClacherty at the end of the session took me for a walk on the pitch outside. He had a somber air to him and I though it was just because he felt burdened by some personal problem. He scratched at his beard as was his habit and kept chit-chatting as we walked on the field where he had once coached me as a teenager. Now here I was and he was trying to come up with some “wisdom”. Finally, he stopped and looked me in the eye. He said, “David, you are a teacher now. And there is some secret you have to know. There is a lot of pain in teaching. The hardest part of teaching, the most pain, is in saying “good-bye”. You are constantly saying good-bye to so many people/students that you gave your heart to. Your heart is broke a thousand times by this treadmill of human potential. It is the most painful thing, always saying good-bye. Nobody ever stays. ”
“And therein lies the whole of man’s plight. Human time does not turn in a circle; it runs ahead in a straight line. That is why man cannot be happy: happiness is the longing for repetition.”

I’ve so often thought of Jim throughout my years. The best teacher I had – the best because he was courageous enough to deal with the “heavy” stuff, the stuff that is seldom looked at but always there. And I feel that terribly this year, this semester. A lightness that comes from being “nowhere” and having so many teachers and students just pass through my life, like my life were some kind of magical treadmill. Where does the center hold? What matters? Do we just have to keep playing our part and are we mere players on the stage of life?

When Tereza came back from the dance floor with the young man, the chairman asked her to dance, and finally Tomas has a turn with her, too.

“Tomas”, she said to him out on the floor, “everything bad that’s happened in your life is my fault. It’s my fault you ended up here, as low as you could possibly go.”

“Low? What are you talking about?”

“If we has stayed in Zurich, you’d still be a surgeon.”

“And you’d be a photographer.”

“That’s a silly comparison to make,” said Tereza, “Your work meant everything to you; I don’t care what I do, I can do anything, I haven’t lost a thing; you’ve lost everything.”

“Haven’t you notice I’ve been happy here, Tereza?” Tomas said.

“Surgery was your mission,” she said.

“Missions are stupid, Tereza. I have no mission, No one has. And it’s a terrific relief to realize you’re free, free of all missions.”

I have been searching my whole life for “lightness” and I’ve traveled the world. Yet, I find within me, a need, a sorrow, a melancholy that aches for “weight” and community/people and things that stay, endure and matter. What I’d give to not go through “a course” with its 15 weeks and then the repartee. It is like death itself! What I’d give to remember all the thousands (I’d even venture 10s of thousands) of teachers I’ve encountered online or off – what I’d give to have them in my life and as a whole and not some light breeze. I ask again, where does the center hold?
“The goals we pursue are always veiled. A girl who longs for marriage longs for something she knows nothing about. The boy who hankers after fame has no idea what fame is. The thing that gives our every move its meaning is always totally unknown to us.”

But maybe I’m wrong. I do know I still have a lot to learn. Something has pulled me into teaching and it gives me so much. I do enjoy the lightness too. I can disappear. I have no demands placed upon me, to a long term degree. I can be who I am and if not accepted, off to the next job, the next teaching position. I am the captain of my own ship.

Yet my ship has no rudder and the crew come and go with each new port. I’ve confused them all and all I remember are the faces. The destination? There is none, just constant harbors to get new supplies and rejuvenate – that is the teacher’s lot.

“We can never know what to want, because, living only one life, we can neither compare it with our previous lives nor perfect it in our lives to come.”

It is the end of the semester, so many students coming to my office and then going….going off to god knows where. Lost in this world’s busyness. Lost to my ship, a fleeting memory of time and space. Lightness. Unbearable lightness. And one day I’ll meet a student on some street with no name and I will not know their name — only their face. I have to take faith that is enough. Such is the lot and the unbearable lightness of being a teacher.

“There is no means of testing which decision is better, because there is no basis for comparison. We live everything as it comes, without warning, like an actor going on cold. And what can life be worth if the first rehearsal for life is life itself? That is why life is always like a sketch. No, “sketch” is not quite a word, because a sketch is an outline of something, the groundwork for a picture, whereas the sketch that is our life is a sketch for nothing, an outline with no picture.”

What to do? I live, I teach, I do my best. There is an ideal I long for but I seem incapable of finding it. Teaching seems contradictory to it. I want things to stay but nothing stays, life, my life, just keeps marching forward. I look underfoot but see no treadmill. Yet, everything keeps moving despite my protests. The moment won’t last nor linger.

“There is no perfection only life”
5 Lessons For Educators from “The King’s Speech”

One of the nice things about the small city I moved to recently, is that it has a wonderful theater downtown, minutes from my house. Every Sunday, they have a $5 showing and tonight they showed “The King’s Speech”. Great movie, highly recommend it despite my aversion to “period pieces”, especially British ones! Go see it and if you are in the mood, think about the lessons that it might have for us teachers. Here are 5 points I took home from this remarkable film:

1. The importance of the “informal”, especially when dealing with language learning.

Lionel, ever the informal Aussie, really insists on a first name basis for their teacher – student relationship. He insists on calling the king, “Bertie”. Moreover, he stresses informality and humor in the teaching environment. This is so important a concept for language / literacy teachers – lightening the “affective filter” so language may be acquired. Here’s a clip to remind us of this important dynamic of teaching. {and also note how there must be a name – research suggests that using a student’s name during instruction can alone, raise scores and help learning, as opposed to no name being used.}
2. **Credentials are over valued.**

There is a scene at the end of the movie where the king is angry/overcome upon learning that “Dr.” Lionel has no official “credentials”. That he learned everything through the “teacher’s college of hard knocks”.

The point is – teachers are not trained or taught, they are developed. This is a big point. Credentials are not as important as we think, in our over crazed world for a certificate, any certificate. Recently I was looking through the local college’s course offerings – you can get a diploma in anything! And it takes 2 years! Dog grooming, two years. Flower arranging, two years. Oh, don’t get me started….

In TEFL, I will keep praising the backpacking teacher. Sure, there are some bad apples but overall, the profession benefits. I’ve witnessed too many great teachers in action, great teachers without a modicum of formal training, to think otherwise. Teachers should be judged on what they do in class and have done in classes. A system of merit not credentials. Bertie proves this.

3. **Teaching is mostly about relationships.**

In the movie, the relationship between teacher and student grows as it goes through a rocky series of ups and downs. The movie shows a man teaching/helping a student, not teaching a subject. The personal is evident and attended to by the ever consummate professional, Lionel.

Teaching is about the relationships we form with students, how we connect with them. It doesn’t have to be overly personal but we have to connect on some “human” level, to be successful and make a difference. Further, we have to also realize our students have their own lives and background. Just like the King, each student has their own world they bring into the classroom. Teacher’s must know their students – administrators have to give teachers more time to develop relationships and less time for paperwork and lesson drafting.

4. **A Teacher’s Belief is what counts.**

Passion makes the “great teacher”. Passion for their subject but also passion for their students. Lionel truly believed in his student, the king. Truly, 150%. He told him, he kept with him along the struggle to succeed and learn. Never discount the power of a teacher’s faith in their student to transform the world. We all remember our homerun teachers. And what made them have such an impact on us, was the faith in us that we felt they had. Research too shows this is more than just emotional snake oil. In blind studies, a teacher’s belief in their student’s ability (thinking they were teaching a class of high achievers when they were not) increased the student’s own scores. Yes, faith can move a marking sheet!
5. Childhood development is crucial to long term success.

“Bertie” experienced a lot of trauma in his development. His “inability” both in stuttering but also (and they are sides of the same coin) emotionally was because of a lack of a proper environment when growing up. We have to continually fight for all students to get the support and nurturing that is required at an early age so they may succeed at school.

A lot of what we see at school – what we call failure and non-achievement is not because of a student’s own laziness or inability. It is societal. We don’t value the young until it is too late, despite our pronouncements and platitudes. If we put as much money into universal early education and child development as we did Trident subs – we’d have a much different world in our high schools and universities. I kid you not. Look at the damage Bertie suffered. Many will tell you it is just “physical” etc… Don’t believe the buggers – it is all about how the child is raised in 95% of cases. We need to follow more, the principles of re-education.

Let’s too, also remember how determining environment is for language and literacy development.

If you haven’t seen the movie – here’s a trailer to wet your appetite. Enjoy!
Teachers – Who Needs Them?

I just came home from the movies. In the film I saw (The Kids Are Alright), one character when asked why he dropped out of school says, “I just thought it was a big waste of money for something I could learn myself, from a book.”

This was something I had realized early, sitting in the town library one “PD” or professional development day, years ago in grade 8. I was flipping through a National Geographic and chanced upon an article about Jane Goodall. I was stoked, we had been talking about chimpanzees in class! I started reading and wondered why we’d learnt none of this in class! OMG! And then it dawned on me – I could learn from a book. School was for sports and girls but really ineffective when it came to learning.

As the years went on, I realized more. That actually I had been wrong. Not that school wasn’t a more effective way “to learn”. No. I understood that a book really wasn’t as perfect a tool of learning. For the cerebral and imaginative – a book was great. But for show and tell, for constructive learning, participation, modeling – it was a dud. You couldn’t learn how to build anything from Popular Mechanics, you’d only learn how to talk about it, write about it and comment on it. Books weren’t a replacement for teachers or schooling. There was still a need for teachers and people in the learning equation.

Now, (and isn’t it ironic, me a 20 year in, teacher), I’m not so sure. I think we don’t need teachers. Nor schools. Now before you go further, take a deep breath and allow me to explain, explain how I’ve become such a heretic. I’ll keep it short, I promise.

After hearing the line the film, it dawned on me that it should be updated to, “I just thought it was a big waste of money for something I could learn online”. The internet has allowed us, the amateur, to prosper. We can teach each other but more importantly we can show, demonstrate and learn not only in a “reading” way but also in a “real” way. Teachers are everywhere online – they are the mailmen, the musicians, on video, on screencasts. They are you and me.

Even more important is the notion of authority. School has survived because of authority. In a way, it is kind of like a prison sentence. You have little say over it, you MUST and there is so little opportunity for rehabilitation or reform. It is a process that you have to undertake in order to be part of society. You are punished if you don’t. It is mass social programming, dollar driven, even more so today. So school and education continues with only polite postering about reform and change. It is self perpetuating. No wonder that the calls for radical reform of education of the 60’s are still so relevant, loud and true.
I’m a student of the enlightenment and believe that learning is liberating and beneficial to all humanity. Illuminating, labitur lux, it lets the light in. It benefits us all and all the splendors around us come from ideas and education. However, everything has its time and place. Schools too, designed as mass market assembly lines, disseminating discrete, memorizable bits of public knowledge are long useless and defunct. If mankind is to develop, we must go from the public realm and into the private – from the liberation of the mass to the liberation of the self.

Mark Twain said, “don’t let your schooling get in the way of your education.” So true. But if you think about his words, you also can gather the notion that we shouldn’t throw away schooling. He doesn’t say school is bad, nor I think believed it. School has its place and necessity. I wouldn’t have given my best years to a classroom, if I hadn’t believed so. But we should take the teacher out of the school and make school a place of learning not teaching or being taught. Teachers should become mentors, motivators, encouragers, friends, councillors, anything but what they are at present. Students should get help, not be told what nor how to learn. They can figure it out, evolution tells us so.

In the weeks to follow, I hope to elaborate on these few late night thoughts I’ve laid out. Lots about “Superman” and the snake oil salesmen in the education business. Lots more about self-learning and the possibilities of technology as a liberating force. Stay tuned.

I also highly recommend Andrew Finch’s “Teachers, Who Needs Them”. It’s a good read from a good man.

To end, a couple quotes on the tip of my brain.

Learning is not a spectator sport. ( why do we make it so with our schools?)

A teacher is one who makes himself progressively unnecessary.
– Thomas Carruthers
The Future of Learning

I have written and pounded the pulpit long and hard on the issue of teachers “getting out of the way”. Ranted and pleaded with teachers to be more inductive in their approach, more sandbox about the learning environment.

No greater compliment to my own constructivist and technology enabled vision can I find than Sugata Mitra. He’s a wonder and I’ve been writing about him for the last 3-4 years. I try to spring him into any of my lectures, on as many occasions as is possible. He really makes it clear, usually through the voices of children – that they can learn on their own. That indeed, one of the biggest obstacles to student learning is the teacher (and by default, the administration and curriculum).

I’ve now found the perfect presentation by Sugata – The Future of Learning. It outlines in lively form, all his research and thoughts. You got to take a look. Yes, his other talks are wonderful but here, he lays it all out succinctly and of course with his trademark giggle. A gem.

Things I found particularly important, even revelatory:

1. The discussion at the 1 hour mark is the major highlight. Sugata rightly suggests that we should unfocus from content – the content can be found easily. We need to ask the right questions and turn into question based curriculum experts. Also a great part about designing the right classroom…

2. Students CAN obtain educational objectives on their own. Sounds impossible? Well, watch/think/listen.

3. Students CAN create the curriculum. This is especially important to note for language teachers. We shouldn’t straight jacket how students process information and interact with information. We must remove the doctrine, the brainwashing of our curriculum – make it active. The answers are available and the students know how to get to them. Teachers have the job of making the information relevant, that’s all. (and turning the curriculum upside down).

4. Technology provides tools that enable students to become self directed learners, life long learners.

5. Learning is self organizing, social and even organic. It is for teachers to assist this process and allow its creation through arranging the proper learning environment. There
doesn’t need to be outside intervention (by teachers, staff, admin, parents) for emergence to happen. Learners are their own way.

6. The “I’m going away” methodology. He reminds me that the cause of all learning is desire/hunger. “When learners have interest, learning just happens” says Arthur C. Clarke and Sugata. Reminds me of my own experiment collecting student’s questions – What’s Worth Knowing.

7. A new discontinuity has arrived. We’ve profoundly underestimated how fast, what, how high students can learn. Students need strong reading skills, strong search skills and a belief system that says anyone can learn anything, any time.

So much more….

If I’d been there though, I’d really have liked Sugata to talk a bit about the difference between “knowing” and “understanding”. Students can learn facts, information – but I still think they need to learn the “nuance” of information.

What are your thoughts about the implications of Sugata Mitra’s research and findings?

How might we change our teaching, our own “system”?

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I really enjoyed Charles Leadbeater’s – “We-Think” (see the cool video clip of its premise [HERE](#)). He really hit the nail on the head when it came to how the world was changing due to communicative technologies, Web 2.0 and the rise of the “amateur” and mass participation in innovation/ideas.

Today, watched for a second time, his Ted talk. He tackles education this time, how education will be transformed in the future (and specifically where). He does a good job and of course we all love his accent! However, I was a little put off.

There have been many others long before he got on the stage, championing a future of education that is more leveled, participatory and learner driven. He acknowledges some of them but not enough for me. I guess that is how it goes. The dedicated do the leg work and then the well funded, quippy and fueled come along and scoop up the accolades (I’m thinking of others, like Seth Godin for example).

Here’s [my own manifesto](#) from a few years back….

Still, he does the championing well and I urge everyone involved in education to think about these issues. **Here are the important ideas as I see them:**

* the school is defunct and an outdated concept

* the future delivery tool for knowledge will be some form of the cell phone
* education can be brought to people, on demand.

* students need to be “attracted” (he says “pulled”) and not pushed. Otherwise it is useless.

* technology disperses knowledge, knowledge becomes “cheap”. It brings learning to the people.

* education is about engagement. Inquiry based curriculum is the future and we should be, “teaching through”.

* technology allows learning without a teacher. Peer and shared learning/cooperative learning evolve.

* learning needs to be practical and productive (not about the neck up only)

* education will be scaled down, small and local but everywhere.

In any case, glad he’s realizing these things and speaking to others, awakening!

What does this make you want to do?
Having recent stepped back from teaching, I’m starting to see the forest for the trees and been thinking a lot about the “competitive” nature of our classrooms, our schools and our western educational systems.

First off, I’m not a warm and fuzzy “humanist”, asserting that we shouldn’t measure or mark students. Not at all. Competition is healthy if done without long lasting “selfish” and negative consequences, if done for the benefit of learning. That said, I do find some very disturbing things about how we line up and race students down the learning path. This has been my experience and here are a few of my observations.

1. The race is to the quick?

How come we make learning into a sprint? Why not a marathon? Why not off track or even against yourself? What I mean is, we chunk up learning into discrete units of time and space, usually a few weeks or months. Students memorize and “learn” in a short period of time. We then say they have “learned”. We then say who has won, who gets the ribbons and who is “dumb”. But what have they won? And what about the students who learn over time, the hedgehogs and late bloomers? Why should we look at learning only through a short time frame and in terms of learning having an expiration date?

2. Teaching to the top.

The competitive nature of our education system, our labeling and grading, our ranking and judging of students – creates a hierarchy. And one of the most severe consequences of this, is so many teachers without clothes. Meaning, teachers teaching to the high end, to the audience that is listening/responding. They really and truly have no clothes though – unaware that so many others are left along the road, not really learning and yet still afraid to tell the teacher they have no clothes (for they aren’t teaching those that truly need it, the others at the top will learn nevertheless and sometimes inspite of the teacher). Why do we continue to teach to the top and create schools where only the “top” fit in?
3. Values out the door – dog eat dog.

When we mark a student and compare students, aren’t we making education into one giant scramble up the intellectual garbage heap? Is that the end game and role of education – to create individuals who are constantly comparing themselves, ranking themselves against others? Supremism / Superiorism / Elitism / Cliquism seems to be the end result, along with a lot of individuals laid to waste along this road. Why must there be failures for others to succeed? Who ever said it should be so?

4. Intellectual Grandiosis

This is the disease that our competitive education system holds up as a sign of health. Why must the end goal of all education, from kindergarten to university, be the creation of a being that counts only from the neck up? So asked Ken Robinson. I totally agree. Why should the race just be along the path of facts and books and rationalism? Why don’t we value our quirky ones, or our athletes, or our very empathetic and kind students? Is not empathy something we learn and should value? Why do we worship the rotting library of academia?


Our students “know” and the competitive system assures so. However, that doesn’t equate to understanding nor even the enacting and proper use of this knowledge. There are many students who do intuitively understand and who we don’t value because they can’t explain it. Why should we equate “winning” with being able to explain? We undervalue and undermine the great force of intuition and wisdom in our competitive market place.

5. Institutionalized Powerlessness

We value human beings by how many years of competitive schooling they’ve had. X number of years and you have it made, you are of the “powerful”. You’ve climbed to the top and are given “value” for such. But what about those who’ve learned by themselves, who gained knowledge while on the toilet or from the tube or their Toshiba laptop? Who is the great decider that tells who should go left and others go right? Isn’t our educational system to blame? How we consign people to failure not based on merit but solely because they didn’t run the educational race?

Just a few thoughts about how competitive education has become. We make it so, to our detriment.

I hope the next blog post, to outline some ways teachers can be subversive and help all students with as little labeling as possible.
The Objective Of Education Is ………

I usually stay on topic but more and more lately, I’m becoming a bit of a preacher in my workshops and lectures. It happened today and so I thought I’d share a bit about my philosophy of education and what I think is paramount for all teachers – English as a second or foreign language included.

When I first started teaching, I dotted every i, crossed every t and really was high energy. I had daily/weekly/long term plans and forms for even the smallest of things like “washroom signout”. I was ready. However, what I was really missing was a philosophy of education. Oh, I had one but it wasn’t rooted in real life experience, it was just your regular – Teachers should be conscientious, student centered, prepared yata yata….. (not to demean these things but they do begin to blend into each other. My students suffered as a result – I didn’t know what the priority actually was…..

What I was missing and eventually gained was an understanding of what life is about. HAPPINESS. I began to ask my students every lesson – “Are you happy?” and I suggest every teacher end their day with that question. It should also inform all teaching practice.

I don’t mean that happiness is everything but it is paramount. Other concerns can’t be realized, other goals will be left un or half met if happiness is not achieved or happening. And I don’t mean the smiley faced, cheerfulness that we usually call happiness. I mean, happiness as how we feel content within our skin. In my kind of happiness, I can still be a little sad but still overall happy.

A.S. Neill has a quote I’m fond of echoing whenever I need sustenance and perspective as a teacher. “I’d rather graduate a happy street sweeper, than a thousand neurotic prime ministers.”. A kind of paraphrase of e.e. cummings’s “I’d rather learn from one bird how to sing than to teach ten thousand stars how not to dance.”

Let’s remember that the objective of education is a happy and well adjusted individual.(in Korea, this is even written into the Nat. Curriculum Objectives as “Hongik Ingang”) Kudos to all teachers who make sure their students go home happy!

Here’s a fav. poem about teaching that also relates to what I discussed above…. How important school is and how important consequently is our job….our job to bring “happiness”.

(find here some resources and readings on Happiness and education / teaching)
I remember all those thousands of hours
that I spent in grade school watching the clock,
waiting for recess or lunch or to go home.
Waiting: for anything but school.
My teachers could easily have ridden with Jesse James
for all the time they stole from me.

From: Richard Brautigan, Rommel Drives on Deep into Egypt
Learning As A Self Organizing Principle

One thing I’ve become convinced of as a teacher, is the fact that WE can be our own worst enemy. Meaning, somehow our own experiences, our 1,000s of hours in the classroom observing teachers, have conditioned us to “be teachers” and that this gets in the way of the success of our language classrooms. We believe we are already experts and we then, self – perpetuate old attitudes/styles/paradigms. We play the role without thought to the outcome!

In my own career as a teacher, I’ve slowly had to ween myself from my own biases. Those biases coming from my conditioning through all that time spent watching and coming to know what a “teacher” means. Our own experiences are the greatest barrier to our success as a teacher – I believe. It is so hard to really let learning be “alive” in the classroom and to step back as a teacher and let the students take control. It is SO hard to shut up and to just let the drama unfold. We as teachers are too fond of our director’s chair and its perks! We also don’t trust our students. We also don’t believe that “play” = “learn”.

What I’m getting at is, seeing we are dealing with “language”, we should agree that it is an organic conditioning. It should be “learned” with as little evasiveness as possible. Further, we should realize that learning is primary to the human condition. Students WANT to learn, they really do. Each and every one. The problem is US and we teachers need to step aside more and realize that if we trust, if we have set down the right soil, learning will organize itself! Yes, it will.

I firmly believe that more teachers need to look at their lessons and turn them upside down! Too often, we play the role of the teacher, controlling and commanding to death. Then, when it is time to let the students free to practice and produce language – the bell rings! It is as if we went to a movie and the first hour was a never ending trailer!
I’ll even go further. We need to let our students organize the learning. Let our students share and teach. Let our students decide more of what happens. Let our students muck about and risk/try. Let our students have some fresh air and hopefully their lungs will fill up with possibility and they’ll be energized. Every student WANTS to learn, it is the conditions which stully and offer up so much oxygen empty air.

Sugata Mitra, an Indian MIT professor undertook an experiment that really highlights the issues I’ve discussed. He put a computer into a wall of a slum in Delhi and watched to see if the children could learn/teach themselves. How they did! He replicated the experiment throughout India and came to some startling conclusions. Watch his TED talk and his 4 main conclusions. You’ll really think about how just maybe we the teacher are the problem, not the students!

See it Here! I’ll be speaking at a conference shortly about this Push / Pull dynamic in education. Asking teachers to be more inductive in approach. I’ll put up some of the material and ppts here. For now, if you have a moment, please read Andrew Finch’s great and thought provoking essay – Teachers? Who needs them? And think more about what Sugata Mitra says about teaching and learning (and also the role of technology and where we should invest dollars in educational technology!) Another Way to teach.doc
Making School So It Doesn’t Stink

My daily writing is something I put a lot of myself into. A way I have a conversation with myself as much as with you the reader. It is organic and natural.

As I look over the last year and 250 + posts, I see one very important theme emerging like a crooked stem off the trunk. That theme is student autonomy. Giving students more freedom and choice in how they interact with the curriculum, with how they learn and schedule, with how they hook into their own passion/interests. That’s my point with SCC, “student created content”. That’s my point with posts about Sugata Mitra and his “I’m going away now” methodology. That’s my point with posts reflecting on teacher development. How can we get kids excited about learning again? Passionate about the possibilities the world offers?

In language teaching – we too often don’t build upon what students know and can do. We charge ahead through the book and syllabus, regardless of whether there is “soil” for growth. Whether there is student passion and interest.

We should focus on the abilities and the “CAN” of students. Build from their prior knowledge and interests. That’s the only truly valid approach. What do my students want to know? How can we get there based on what they already know?

This morning, I watched this energetic talk by Chris Lehmann – a talk about how we have to harness the energies and abilities, the “CAN” of students or risk a totally broken system that just spins its wheels. It is a good representation of most of what I’ve been doing here on this blog, this past year.
“Getting Out Of The Way”

“but I gave them the room to just do the thing. Figure it out, go create”
– Diana Laufenberg

One of the things I’ve often done with teachers and students alike is just give them a set of materials, say flashcards and then, “just get out of the way”. Let them decide how to use them and let the learning objectives naturally emerge from their own processing and interaction.

It’s scary but it is the new paradigm that we are facing in education. Diana Laufenberg in her short, valuable TEDx talk – hits on this among other things. That with information surplus, kids no longer have to come to school to get information or be “informed” or “lectured to”. They come to school to be part of a learning culture where they engage with the content/curriculum – they don’t just consume it.

We have to give students a reason to come to school. And not just to be around their friends. We have to give them the chance to explore what THEY want and in their own fashion. Student created content – the mantra I’ve been expounding through my textbook is something appropriate for our day and age. It allows students to try, to try again. It emphasizes “doing” rather than “repeating”. It de-emphasizes the teacher as the “general” and makes them more of a “producer” that behind the scenes gets everything in place.

Take a watch, Diana offers valuable examples of the Sugata Mitra methodology of “I’m going away now”. A method that won’t just be experiential in the future but rather what teaching is all about….
The objective of education is learning.

The objective of education is learning. Or not even that, I’ll interject. The true objective is “contentment”, a well adjusted individual.

And the only way to reach this objective is to tap into the “feeling good about oneself” that is always there in each student. To give them success, that feeling of success that they define and set. And you do it by rubbing relationships together and giving students the space and freedom to be. The space to do what they can and want to do, what they can dream to do – not what you’d want them to do or what you’d want them to dream about or what the “state” would deem proper.

Anyone who’s read my blog more than a week knows I keep coming back to this one salient point. Teachers need to seek their own demise. Teachers need to have the courage to get out of the way and let their students climb, fall, reach, fail.

Nuff said. Watch this video on how students can “learn” from their own volition and drive. How teachers CAN get out of the way and still be successful teachers.
Chopping Wood (as a metaphor for teaching)

I’m returning to my home and native land Canada in a few weeks and I’ve been thinking incessantly about “chopping wood”.

Chopping wood isn’t easy! Most city folk who try it, look like bumbling fools. Even if they manage to do okay, they last only a few short minutes. It’s a workout!

I’ve chopped many a pieces of wood back of the house on our farm – so let me share a few of my insights into this very misunderstood art.

1. **Force is not what it is about.** It is all about striking in the right place. Not dead center but thereabouts. Find that spot and you are a winner, she’ll give way like butter to a hot knife.

2. **Your axe is you.** You are one with the tool. Respect it and keep it sharp, constantly sharpen it.

3. **Each piece is different.** Some will give way with one blow. Others, wet, old, knotty – you’ll have to turn over and hit with the back of the axe head. Those are the victories you’ll remember.

4. **The chopping block matters.** Low, flat, hard and wide. Steady and stable. It should stand the test of both time and energy/force. Old and cranky is the best.

5. **Listen to the sound as the axe meets the wood.** There is a lot to be learned from that.

6. **If you keep at it, you can chop wood with your eyes closed.** I swear you can, it is an art of the most ancient kind – the art of interacting with the physical forces around us.

7. **Choppin wood is a necessary but very lonely job.** I know of no machine that can chop wood. It is one person and one swing at a time, over and over. The winters keep coming and the labor must be done.

8. **Chopping wood is very important.** Our house needs wood to last the winter, to keep the cold away. We chop wood not for sport but of necessity. Respect that, honor that. It isn’t a weekend hobby.

9. **The wood has to be stacked.** Yes, it is fun chopping but at the end of the hour or the day – you have to measure it all. Find a way that suits you – cross pile, stack straight,
lump and cover with a tarp. Whatever works for you but you’ll have to do this. We need the security of knowing we are safe, there is that pile there to keep the cold away.

10. **Chopping wood burns A LOT of calories!** It is tiring and after a few hours swinging the axe, you’ll be ragged, tired, dragged down…. You’ll get fit but it will always at times “hurt” and be “stressful”. So be warned. But the benefits far outweigh how tiring chopping wood can be!
So there you have it. My few words of wisdom straight from the chopping block.

*UPDATE:* Here I am, freshly arrived in Canada and chopping wood!
Graduation Address: Teaching Is …. 

I just came home from attending our graduation. I gave the closing speech, sending off all the teachers to adventures in classrooms in Korea and around the world. Another honor I’m humbled by and my speech below (not the exact speech, I actually always get “off topic” and it is there where a lot of the learning happens!) is about sharing some lessons I’ve learned over the years. I considered using “Oh, the places you’ll go!” by Dr. Seuss but went with my heart, my own heart.

So I have some good news and some bad news. The good news is – you’ve graduated! (applause). The bad news is you got to get out there and teach every day!

Okay, I’m half joking. Teaching isn’t that bad. But it is a roller coaster, so be prepared. My sister followed in my footsteps and became a teacher. I speak to her from time to time and I can always tell from the sound of her voice, whether she’s had a bad teaching week or a great one. Ain’t no inbetween!

And that’s teaching, never a dull moment. Be warned. Be patient and the bad moments always wane and the sky opens, joy appears. It’s a rollercoaster.

Let me start with a story, “The Girl and the Butterfly”.

Congratulations!

▶ Click play button to view presentation
There was a young girl who wanted to be a great teacher. She was sitting at home one rainy summer’s day and was annoyed by a butterfly trapped inside and beating its wings against the window. Angrily, she got up and grabbed a newspaper to kill the butterfly. However, as she approached, she heard a faint voice, “Don’t kill me, you need me, you need me. Don’t kill me, you need me, you need me. “

Okay, now on with my presentation about teaching. Oh! You want to hear the end of the story? Well, if you listen well to what I’ve got to say – I’ll tell you the ending. Just be sure to remind me, okay?

I’ve been teaching quite a few years and I’ve stored away some jars of kimchee, some kernels of truth that might get me through those rainy days. Let me share them briefly with you

**One. Teaching is a delicate thing.** Be careful, respect how important you are. You are an engineer of human souls (to borrow Stalin’s term for writers). You effect and touch eternity. Remember that – as much good as you do, so to you may do harm. Be gentle, tread lightly and always think of that main objective of education – HAPPINESS.

Foster and develop community in your classroom and the learning will take care of itself. There is a reason why teaching is closely aligned with patience, peace, understanding.

**Two. Teaching is the art of the every day.** It is made of a million small acts. And those acts should be beautiful. Yes, dream big but remember that teaching is done one thing, one step at a time. One nose wipe, one lesson plan, one check mark at a time. Do each of those well and your garden will be green. Or as Voltaire once said, “cultivez votre garden” – take care of your own garden and your beauty will multiply.

**Three. Teaching is serving and sharing.** It is being transparent and honest enough to say, “I don’t know but let’s find out”. Indeed, this is the biggest message I’ve learned over the years – that teaching IS service. A calling to make the world a better place through your actions. Share yourself and your teaching and you spread a great wind of justice and “the good” throughout the world. Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. said it much better than I ever could.

**Four. Teaching is learning.** I learned so much from you! Yes, it is true. From ideas on how to teach “Who stole the cookie from the cookie jar” to thoughts about linguistic transfer. You’ve taught me a lot. And as a teacher, if you are to survive out there – you’ll have to keep curious and keep open and keep learning from your students. They have a lot to teach you.

**Five, a most important one.** Teaching is teaching those in need, those who can’t make it on their own. It is about the lower level and struggling students. Count your successes by these students – how you’ve helped them. The others, the brilliant and motivated
students – they will make it with or without you. You are a teacher for the others, those that can’t and those that need you.

**Lastly, one of the hardest truths.** Teaching is saying good bye over and over and over. It is a treadmill and on that treadmill pass so many people we form relationships with, who we commit to and share great parts of our day. They come and pass constantly. That’s tough. I was told this by my own teaching mentor during a practice teaching session way back when. Never understood it until recently. Every good thing has a cost. This is ours. So in ending, I’ll say congratulations and “good bye”.

Oh, yes, the story about the girl and the butterfly! I almost forgot.

Well, that girl grew up to become a teacher, one of the greatest and most revered teachers ever. She touched thousands of lives. One day, very old, she was dying in the hospital. All her dear friends were gathered around her bedside. They asked her one last thing, “Please tell us your secret to being such a great teacher.” The old lady replied, “Remember that story about the butterfly? Well, when I opened the window and let it free, it turned into a beautiful angel. And that angel told me that my reward would be that wherever I went, I’d find students that need me. And so it came to pass. Wherever I taught, I found students who needed me. And it was through that need, that I became a great teacher. The secret is being needed by your students.

So go out there and find students that need you. There are many and you can make a difference!
The 5 Enemies

Now back in Canada – I’m getting some time to just sit with a book and ponder. Mostly because it has now been one week of wicked weather – snow blinding and the banks are so high, you don’t know where the yard ends and the house begins.

One benefit to this has been revisiting my “children”, my books. Today, I picked up Thomas Merton’s “The Way of \textit{Chuang Tze}” and thought about the tao while I loosened my bowels in a nice warm washroom. His famous story of the 5 enemies.

I’ll quote it verbatim – it is so insightful. (and has some application to my previous blog post about – “bad teachers”. But at the end, I’ll apply the 5 enemies to education/teaching. As a way of showing the ways we have the wool pulled over our eyes and off our backs as we are fleeced so innocently.

\textbf{The 5 Enemies} (I believe the copy right has lapsed, so I’m safe 😎)

With wood from a hundred year old tree
they make sacrificial vessels
covered with green and yellow designs.

The wood that was cut away
Lies unused in the ditch.

If we compare the sacrificial vessels with the wood in the ditch
we find them to differ in appearance:
One is more beautiful than the other.

Yet, they are equal in this: \textit{both have lost their original nature} (my italics).

So if you compare the robber and the respectable citizen
you find that one is, indeed, more respectable than the other:
Yet they agree in this: they have both lost

the original simplicity of man.

How did they lose it? **Here are the 5 ways.**

**Love of colors bewilders the eye and it fails to see right.**

– think of how teachers use the latest gadgets. Think of the trash heaps of over priced technology. The dazzle of the next technique. Think of how we as teachers forget the core message and objectives and instead reach for the glitter and show. Think of how so much schooling is about keeping up appearances and grades and not focusing on the important stuff of character and right livelihood.

**Love of harmonies bewitches the ear and it loses its true hearing.**

– Do we listen to our students, to their needs? Do we get overwhelmed by the messages of those above, so sweet they are to our ear. No child left behind, student’s first, teach every child, progress, differentiation, standardization. Don’t we march to the pied pipers tune? Do we try to do too much and thus, end up doing very little? Are we deaf from all the pronouncements of a “crisis in education”. Why can’t we listen to that child inside us?

**Love of perfumes fills the head with dizziness**

– How often do we make decisions for our career and job and not our students. How often are we filled with authority and power when we know this is a moat that keeps student’s out of the castle of learning? How often do we “play” the part of a teacher, loving ourselves for ourselves while the whole rat race marches towards Gomorrah?

**Love of flavors ruins the taste.**

– It is so easy to just keep doing what you are good at, isn’t it? So comfortable. But what about the taste of the classroom – hasn’t it gone stale? Why aren’t we listening and refusing that flavor?

We love it when our class is working fine, each day finished on time and all is well. But what of the flavor?
Desires unsettle the heart until the original nature runs amok.

– When was the last time you laughed and played with your students. Rolled on the carpet with them? What has become of our initial spirit that was there that first week as a teacher? How has our desire got in the way – when will we as a teacher, let go? Let go and just learn instead of always preparing to learn?

These five are the enemy of true life.

Yet, these are what “men of discernment” claim to live for.

They are not what I live for:

If this is life, then pigeons in a cage

have found happiness!

Chuang Tze

“Give a man a fish, you feed him for a day.

Teach a man to fish, you feed him for a lifetime.”

Thank you, sensei, for all you have taught us.
The Classroom as a “Liveable” Country

With the events in Egypt unrolling these past days, my mind has been on them and also on the wider question, what makes a “liveable” country?

I took down from my bookshelf, a treasured book, Notes from the Rainforest, by Gyorgy Faludy. Gyorgy is/was a mind like no other. He had traveled and lived all over the world and on one small page, he listed his 10 requirements for a country. If it didn’t have at least 5 of them, he recommended running for the nearest border.

I’ve been honored to visit a lot of classrooms. And I think, the same question is valid for a classroom, as for a country. So I thought it would be interesting to list Gyorgy’s points and then write up a similar dictum for that of a classroom. Be prepared – some of my own statements are meant to challenge and be extreme. Here we go…. What others could you add?

1. Freedom to leave without an exit visa or baggage search is assumed.

1a. Classrooms have children there that want to be there. If they don’t, they are free to leave and do something else. What a child didn’t achieve in one class IS NOT counted against them in the next.

2. Faces of the population are generally cheerful.

2a. Students are relaxed and smile a lot. They are free to laugh and show their emotions.

3. Public rudeness is rare.

3a. Students respect their classmates and address them in a polite fashion.

4. Fairly elaborate manners are expected of everyone after the age of seven.

4a. Students have been taught how to behave in the classroom. There are routines and expectations.
5. Public libraries are uncensored, well-stocked, and much-used.

5a. The class has lots of books (a mini library), materials, decoration – all accessible for student learning and borrowing.

6. Little or no hunger or squalor is evident and the accumulation of wealth is not generally thought of as the Meaning of Life.

6a. All students have access to nutritious food. Poverty is not a barrier to learning at school. The classroom has no obvious social pecking order.

7. Violence is rare and, among the police, severely forbidden.

7a. Students are not punished corporally nor with emotion. All forms of violence are not tolerated (by students or teachers) and disqualify a person from the class. Violence by teachers, strictly forbidden.

8. A general attitude of “live and let live” is seen.

8a. The classroom is not driven by “results”. It does what it can one day and that is enough. There is no “guilt” of not keeping up.

9. No political prisoners are taken.

9a. The classroom is void of religious, political and social indoctrination. It is a place of tolerance of ideas and where ideas are thought about and challenged, not gulped down.

10. Few are destitute and those are charitably treated.

10a. The disabled (learning / mental / physical) are a part of the classroom (for part of the day) and are seen as equals in all ways.
The Subversive Teacher

Are you a subversive teacher?

A teacher is that rare individual who coaxes the existing knowledge systems of his students out of hiding, drags every last tentacle of the monster from the depths into broad daylight, hoses off the slime, wrestles it to the ground when it puts up a fight, and finally gives it a heart transplant. That’s subversion. That’s teaching.
- Thor May, Subversive Teaching

In my discussions with working teachers – those times we just let our thoughts take us places (and I try to do this every session, let them use their English in a free way) – in these discussions we always reach conclusions which contrast with the “official line”. We conclude that a lot of what we do is, “playing school”

This could be about curriculum. The teacher MUST teach the book but it is awful and boring. So the teacher is subversive and covers the book quickly while providing creative, effective instruction for students the rest of the time. The teacher brings the hidden curriculum to the fore but in a quiet, “unofficial” way.

This could be about assessment. The teacher MUST assess students but is not given the time or maybe has to use high stakes methods which really don’t give a good indication of the student’s effort, progress. So the teacher fudges the numbers and blends things – making sure that those students who don’t fit into the regular testing mould – get their due.

We might not go so far as Robin Williams and have students rip out the thoughts of J. Evans Pritchard but good teachers do similar quietly subversive things.
Teachers subvert. In our discussions we always talk about how we smile, nod and keep things pretty while doing some other things which we really know will help students learn. It is our classroom after all, despite all other pretensions. Good teachers know how to be subversive. Not in any rebellious or revolutionary sense but in a quiet way, a subtle way.

Without teachers doing these subversive things every day, I don’t think there would be a lot of progress in “official” education. I really do. Partly it is a coping mechanism but mostly, it is teachers being true to the real spirit of education which isn’t “a book”, “a curriculum”, a competition” but rather connecting with learner’s and motivating them to discover, to learn.

Two books that have influenced my thinking are now classics and they speak in a similar vein. Postman and Weingartner’s, *Teaching as a Subversive Activity* and Illych’s – *Deschooling*, I highly recommend both. They still apply today, these ideas of slowly changing the system through what we do in our classrooms, in education. (I especially love Postman’s thoughts about Teacher’s College and designing curriculum).

Are you a subversive teacher?

teaching as a subversive activity.pdf

AfterDeschoolingWhatIvanIllich.pdf
Let Me List The Ways I’m Subversive

Postman and Weingartner in *Teaching as a subversive activity* talk of subversion being even a tiny act, even as tiny an act as thinking about who you are as a teacher. Subversion begins there, in that kernel of self truth.

They asked teachers,

**Why do you teach?**

*I can control people.*
*I can tyrannize people.*
*I have captive audiences.*
*I have my summers off.*
*I love seventeenth-century non-dramatic Elizabethan literature.*
*I don’t know.*
*The pay is good, considering the amount of work I actually do.*

*Obviously, none of these answers is very promising for the future of our children. But each in its way is a small act of positive subversion because it represents a teacher’s honest attempt to know himself. The teacher who recognizes that he is interested, say, in exercising tyrannical control over others is taking a first step toward subverting that interest. But the question – ‘Why am I a teacher, anyway?’ also produces answers that are encouraging: for example, that one can participate in the making of intelligence and, thereby, in the development of a decent society. As soon as a teacher recognizes that this is, in fact, the reason he became a teacher, then the subversion of our existing educational system strikes him as a necessity. As we have been vying to say: we agree.*

I think teachers, especially those in any leadership capacity, have to start thinking about “subversion” differently. It is the small steps that count in reforming education, not the grand pronouncements and sweeping reforms. It is our own acts before and among our students and colleagues that matter.

How do you subvert the system, in your own little way? How do you keep “sane” and keep “counting” despite a system that stamps approval and keeps the emphasis on product and not process?

**Let me list the ways I do….**

1) I always ask probing, challenging questions when I can. Each and every opportunity, even forsaking the “lesson” and the “book”. Who cares about Unit 2, exercise 3 – “The Family”. It can wait. Let’s ask why there aren’t any colored people in the book or let me relate how I was adopted and how complicated my own family roots are…. 
2) Every student gets an A. I follow the Benjamin Zander (see video below) school of assessment. If admin asks me to tweek, I will, but ever so slightly and softly.

3) Standards? My standard is the twinkle in student’s eyes and that they “know that they are knowing”. It isn’t how high but HOW, plain and simple.

4) I talk to colleagues and share information and resources. I make my teaching transparent and my classroom door is always open. I even run out and drag in people from time to time….

5) Paperwork gets done, no more and no less. I refuse to package it or throw a ribbon around it. Let nothing be cosmetic and let my desk be a mess. Paperwork comes last, my time in the classroom comes first.

6) Student choice. I always give choice. If the curriculum says talk about shopping and students are talking about P.Diddy – I don’t give a diddy. They are practicing their English.

7) Taking detours…..see most of the above comments. The learning happens on the off beaten tracks and as we get lost and rediscover our own path through the woods to grandmother’s house.

8. I don’t get concerned if students are off task (so long as they aren’t bothering others). Of course, I try to motivate them and urge them on and get them engaged. But if that fails, I don’t give a damn if they just chill out. It is their life – they are responsible for it. That’s a big lesson I try to season my lessons with constantly.

What about you? Any ways you subvert the system, big or small. Any ways you break out of the matrix? What about this one by the delightful Benjamin Zander?
Food For Thought

Recently, S. Korea announced that despite all the hostilities and tension with N. Korea, they would deliver food aid to the flood ravaged nation. (see AP article here.)

This got me thinking about my own views on food and then knowledge.

You see, I’ve always, always, always been adamant that food isn’t something one owns. It is to be shared and it is anyone’s right when at my house or in a restaurant, to share anything that is in my cupboard or on my plate. Food is sacred, life giving and not something to covet. It is the source of all our being and like one wouldn’t bottle and refuse air or oxygen to others in need – so to food.

Now I realize the practicalities and don’t take it to an extreme. “Need” is the definitive word here. Someone not hungry and who just wants to clean out my cupboard and resell my food – would get a swift kick. S.Korea is giving food aid because N.Korea needs it and that supercedes all else.

A brief aside. I remember once in Corsica, a very famous German politician came and visited us. We had an amazing evening of wine and food and conversation, laughter and music. The politician drank voluminously but finally, jet lagged and it being late, got up to go to his room. Dead drunk, he pulled out his wallet and threw some money on the table. Then, proceeded to go into the house where he fell upon the first visible “comfort”, a sofa and passed out. Hilarious but it solidifies the point that food is to be shared, it isn’t something just bought and sold.

What about knowledge? I truly believe that much of the bounty and abundance of modern society is because of the free and mostly unfettered flow of information. It is about access to the food of the brain – knowledge/information. Those that need – our students, the curious, the motivated and creative – they all should have access to it.

It is becoming abundantly clear that something is going and growing amiss. So many organization and individuals covet and commoditize knowledge. We put it into books beyond the access of many people. We take open source products and sell them, when it costs pennies (and I know about this – I offer free video conferencing and Learning management systems to schools or teachers and I am far from rich. But I find individuals selling these same products for hundreds of dollars / month!). Ads are with everything, even though cost is not prohibitive. Access is being charged to a higher and higher degree – in many cases, extravagantly almost to the point of usery. (one small beam of light, Tim Berners – Lee, one of the creators of the Internet, has called for FREE access for all).
Why do so many go blind to this? As the internet consolidates, the walls ARE closing in and I think more educators should push back.

I won’t rant on. My post today is just to give everyone some food for thought. What about giving education a pass and letting students truly have full access to the world of knowledge. Allow teachers full reign to use knowledge and information in an educational setting?

Utopian? Yes. As Shelly said, “a man’s reach should exceed his grasp, or what’s a heaven for?”
Music Makes The World Go Sound

I spent a good bottle of red wine and some time (and whatever you are told, don’t believe ‘em – time is cheap) watching 60 Minutes and this gem about how classical music and the spirit of Gustavo Dudamel is trying to bring ” the system” to America and make despair into hope.

I’d like to say how this relates to education but first a confession, a coming clean. I love my parents but have always resented that I didn’t learn a musical instrument while young. Nietzsche declared that, “without music, life would be a mistake”. I totally agree. If I had to chose between music and love, music would be it. But I’m clueless about creating music other than through words, words that too often are mistranslated and mangled. You see, there’s the rub and why we should learn a musical instrument – music doesn’t lie. It just is and we all know what it says……. but enough about me and also semiotics. Let’s talk education.

I find this video clip so fascinating not just because music can help children find hope and see the worth of working towards something and being disciplined. I find it fascinating because it is this same model we should bring towards “knowing”. Why do we kill the spirit and hunger of children, rip out their desire to know? This is the biggest question we have to answer in our day and age.

Music can uplift but I think we can build schools and communities of knowledge in the same way that “the system” of Gustavo does. People who care, nurturing the young in the spirit of inquiry. That’s what it is all about. Creating community and fostering the young. Paying back. And creating “HUNGER”. 
As I look out on my own students, as I reflect on my own former classes — I remember so little hunger. The younger they were, the hungrier they were. But somewhere, the fire was quenched and nobody cared enough to keep it aflame.

I think the concept of school needs a whole rethink, just like classical music education. School should be for those who “want”. Without hunger, it is plodding and pedantic (for both student and teacher). We need to localize and begin by deregulating the teaching profession and using all the wonderful teachers in our communities who are left at the side (I’m thinking the elderly, the disabled, the early retired, the estranged). Where is the love people? And let me say, just like Gustavo is doing by buying musical instruments — we have to begin to “pay” students tangibly. It is this that is lacking in our educational (babysitting) culture.

If ever there was another musical maestro of Gustavo’s ilk, it is Benjamin Zander. He gets it too – it is all about motivation — view his TED Talk for the lecture of the century.

I hope we can do for education what Gustavo is doing for musical education. Let’s open the doors to student desire and open schools to the wider public……

PS. Thank you Ellen Pham for getting me to watch this – I previously saw the 60 min. episode about “the system” in Venezuela and thought it was the same. Happily not.
In Praise Of Backpacking Teachers

I think backpacking English teachers get a bad rap. Truly they do. And especially from the more “senior” and “accomplished/established” members of our profession – ELT (English Language Teaching). Why so? I have only praise for this unseasoned, fertile, fecund and procreant soil of our profession. So I sing their praises and I’ll tell you why.

A few weeks ago, I attended a plenary given by David Nunan. Now, I have nothing but great respect for Dr. Nunan. His “The Learner Centered Curriculum” had a very deep effect on my own teaching. His textbooks are some of the few that truly take up the cause of good teaching and task based learning. Kudos to him – I even wrote [a previous blog post](#) all about him.

**HOWEVER**, at this plenary and also at a subsequent lecture – he brought up the topic of “the backpacking teacher”. He strongly suggested backpackers were the reason that ELT doesn’t have a stellar reputation. He decried their lack of formal training and called for “standards” to be put in place. Boldly, he stated that “we would never want our surgeon to be untrained, so why do we accept an untrained teacher?” Basically, he has come to believe in the Dick Cheney view of teaching – that the world will only be safe if everyone is a card carrying member, stamped and approved by some agency. That regulation will be the salvation of our profession and allow the gates of Valhalla to open and angels to sing. I say – POPPYCOCK.

I’m all for well developed certificate programs. I’m all for professional development and “serious” teachers. I’m all for teachers being trained. But please – don’t bring in the gestapo and the stamps and the “vested” interests to rule over and batten down the hatches closing the doors to any who don’t have the “magic qualification” to get in. There are many reasons to celebrate the deregulation of both language and language teaching! Let me sing them….

**Teaching is something a person does.** It is not per say, a “knowledge set”. You can know your ABCs to your ZPDs and still be a lousy teacher. I have hired, fired teachers and run language schools. I’ve seen too many who “know” but can’t do. I’ll take those with ability over knowledge any day! [Studies of teacher training programs](#) have even shown that attending one can make you a “worse” teacher! I **sing the praises of backpacking teachers**!

**Teaching is about character.** I hear teachers talk endlessly about qualifications, criteria, programs, courses ad nauseam. But unfortunately, it won’t translate into the classroom unless you have “the right stuff”. Those personal qualities that allow you to relate to
others and drive’s a person to “figure it out” and do a good job. And nobody is going to measure that – we are all an experiment of 1. We need people who enjoy people – not people who enjoy “being” a teacher. **I sing the praises of backpacking teachers.**

**Learning English is about “the encounter”.** Students all over the world benefit from meeting within a school setting, a foreign teacher. It builds bridges and builds peace and understanding. In a small way yes, but also a significant and human way. The diversity of the people they meet is important. Let’s keep sending out an army of English speakers across the globe – an unregulated army that is about “people meeting people” not students meeting a qualification. **I sing the praises of backpacking teachers!**

**If language is anything, it is freedom.** Language is our clay – we do not benefit students by creating any type of “filter”. ELT should not become some kind of “human trafficking” and means by which others who can transport, stamp and certify get rich. I’ll take the mistakes and errors that come with freedom any day. **I sing the praises of the backpacking teacher!**

**Teaching is something that one becomes, not acquires.** It is like language, organic. It is not about “pass Go and get $200”. It is about the relationship between student/teacher. Nothing else and nothing more. I reject any bureaucratic invasion that would cull and castrate the ELT profession. Less walls and tear down those that do exist. Let the students decide who is a good teacher – not Mr. Voller from IATTEFLACCTAA . We are strong because of the diversity and endless froth and mix of our talent pool. We need teachers from the minors and the C leagues. Why? Because they might just become someone like David Nunan! **I sing my praises of the backpacking teacher!**

Go and reign dominion over the English students of this earth, my backpacking teachers! Each should have his flock and let your staff be a piece of chalk. I sing your praises and give my blessing. There are none more deserving than those who venture out and befriend the needy English students around the globe.

*** The above does not mean that we shouldn’t have strict background screening of potential teachers.
My Own Egyptian Moment

“He not busy making his students come alive, is a busy not teaching, and dying”.

I’ve been watching the events in Egypt with intense sentimentality and empathy. An extreme desire and understanding. You see, I’ve seen it before and don’t want it to turn out the way it did before.

One of the wonderful things as an EFL teacher, especially in our formative years, is that we get to travel and throw our hat down in very exotic places. My hat and home was Kyiv, Ukraine, Sept 2000. I spent almost a year and was daily participating in the first orange revolution against the dictator Kuchma. A killer, he murdered a journalist and I wrote, walked, yelled, screamed and eventually was run out of the country the following spring. It is a long story but if interested, please learn about Gyorgy Gongadze, his victim.

But during that winter of 2000 – 2001 I learned how a dictatorship can survive and can sweep up protesters and make them disappear. It happened, the trucks came in the middle of the night (as they probably will in Egypt).

But it made me become less the “teacher by numbers” that I had been and more a teacher that took his place and commitment to change students and the world seriously. A critical pedagog – though I hate the label, any label. But what I am online is more or less a birth of those days.

My job became, beyond the mere teaching of ideas and the transmission of knowledge, to transform students and let them realize their own potential and voice. To get them to awaken. I had had my Egyptian moment as I was hit and run down Lutheranskaya by baby faced guards. Then, returning, slinking home (my apartment was right beside the Presidential administration building) and seeing the same teenagers, smoking and laughing by the military bus, telling stories about their “fights”.

So what I’m saying in a nutshell is this – teach beyond the horizon. Teach so students realize the dignity of themselves. Teach how the powerless should meet power and teach that every person counts. Teach that we must make powerlessness be heard. Teach that we must awaken others and ALL be teachers. That is the only legacy a teacher can truly herald – to call others to be teachers that empower others to be born.

I’m busy doing that in my own way these days. I think a little smarter than I used to be (while still understanding the beast that is an institution and laws and the body politic). I had my Egyptian moment and now I am out in the desert doing my own thing. I really am. I want to be free and lead my own life. That means, I’ve left probably the best English
teaching job in Korea. That means leaving security like so many in Egypt and really trying to live free – to in a Syssiphusian and Camus like sense – struggle daily to win my freedom.

Let’s all try as much as we can – to be free and born free. We can do that by teaching our students well. Let’s do it for Gyorgy’s beautiful twin daughters. Let’s start calling all angels.
The Spirit Of Education

The holiday season is here and I thought I’d take the opportunity to speak openly about something that has been bothering me for a long time – the selling of lessons/materials for teaching, online. I want to speak openly and strongly while reminding our community and teachers everywhere of the important “spirit” that runs through our profession as it does Christmas and the miraculous metaphor therein – giving without thought of receiving.

The last few months, there has been a lot of chatter about teachers selling lessons online. If interested, see this [article](#) and [blog post and comments](#) – for more details/background. Also, [his radio show](#) has some great interviews with teachers on the subject….

Selling lessons? I really don’t buy it. For many reasons I’ll outline but mostly from the standpoint that unless they are of AMAZING quality or offer something which is of “NEW” value – it is a rot that afflicts our fine profession – a profession that I care deeply about. So please forgive any harsh words I may utter. I have created thousands of lessons, materials for students/teachers. FREELY. I bring that perspective to the table. I may be an extreme example but I believe my opinion is in the light and will only benefit this world. Let me tell you why…..

First though, let’s talk about what education is. Let’s remind ourselves what the spirit of education is.

**Education is not a possession or commodity.** It is a process and its meaning is in the etymology of the word “educare” – to draw out… It is about bringing to fruition the full potential and development of a person. This is done through awareness and knowledge.

There was a day when knowledge was kept in the bottle and this genie was a play thing of the rich and “noble”. However, slowly but surely, the spirit of this genie escaped from the bottle and spread around the world. Today, this spread of knowledge is gaining momentum. There is less “possession” and secret knowledge, less “pay or you don’t pass go”, less selling and more giving. This is only increasing with the internet and the power of social networking. Selling lessons by teachers eats at this spirit. It is not in the spirit of education and the hope that each child will be fed fruit from the tree of knowledge. Selling lessons is a sick way of trying to put the spirit of education back in the bottle – I reject that in the belief that *education is a human right*, for all beings. Enshrined in charters but most importantly, hidden and known in the heart of all humanity. **It is the duty of every teacher to spread knowledge freely as a gift and not covet it.**
Look around you! If you are like me, you will have books, food, toys, phones, TV, electricity, hot water…. Now ask yourself, how did this come to be? In a word – the free movement of ideas. I emphasize FREE.

Societies that allow for the free movement of knowledge and ideas flourish, those that don’t, rot (like the former USSR). Education is a vehicle for the transmission of ideas and knowledge. It is the main pipeline by which this happens. Selling lessons by teachers seems like a small thing but it leads to a slippery slope. We need to stop this and stop the clogging of this vital artery. I’d encourage all public boards of education to even persecute those teachers who sell knowledge as if water to a parched man in the desert. It is against the profession’s faith and the spirit of education.

But let me refine my microscope and be more specific about why I see “selling lessons” as an affront.

1. Teacher’s make the argument, “I don’t get paid enough” so this supplements my meager income. I politely suggest they look for a new line of work then. First, why cannibalize their profession? – aren’t they taking money from the same teachers that have the same “meager” incomes? Isn’t there a better way to go about getting a higher salary than the lowest denominator? Moreover, whose knowledge is it anyways? Teachers learn in their classrooms – the content/lessons they make are the sum total of their experiences. Are the teachers going to share some of the income with their students who contributed to this knowledge? Or the school board or their school? Who owns this knowledge? I’ll also add – if you feel you aren’t making enough teaching – look around the world and see how many are born into poverty and without an education – toiling for pennies a day. Your cries in this vein are to be mocked, I mock them and see the majority of teachers selling lessons as those not “in need” but who want a six slice toaster instead of a two slicer.

2. The best teachers make their own materials/content. This is a fact and conclusion I’ve arrived at after 18+ years of teaching. By making our own materials, we figure out the learner, we get into their shoes and see the learning process much more clearly. Selling lessons discourages others to make their own lessons. It really does and it makes and fosters a community of teachers that forsake sharing/giving and who harbor secrets like some “Masonic Lodge”.

Selling our lessons makes it less likely that others will share and create community and talk about resources. We need open doors to our classrooms and ideas, not a “pay and pass Go” system. How would all our wonderful workshops work if everyone just went there and auctioned off their ideas instead of sharing them?

3. Selling lessons is unethical. Yes, there I said it. It damn well is. Why? Well, especially in my field, TESOL, but also anywhere, there are millions of new teachers desperate for lessons and help in the classroom. Desperate! I was there and been there. So what do they do? They go online and buy, buy, buy…. There is no filter except the almighty dollar. Most get preyed upon and end up buying very poor resources that just keep students busy
and not learning. The vicious cycle continues. Most who sell lessons — get income from desperate teachers who don’t know where to turn. It is as unethical to sell in this market as it is to charge $10 for a bottle of water after a hurricane (some tried during Katrina and were thrown in jail – why is it different in education?).

4. **Selling lessons is plainly against the spirit of public education.** If you want to sell, start your own store and take off the frock of “teacher”. Don’t be a Jekyll and Hyde. I firmly believe you can’t work for the benefit of just your own students – an educator is for all children/students. Our classroom no longer has 4 walls. The role of the public educator is to help those that need help. Truly, in our classrooms, our role is to help those who will have difficulty achieving. The high achievers in your class will succeed irregardless – our job is to help those who really need it. Selling lessons is against this spirit of giving and helping.

5. **Time.** Who are these lessons we sell for? How much time will we take away from our classroom while designing these lessons, tweaking them, styling/coloring them? *Aren’t we forsaing our job by outsourcing in this fashion?* I envision teachers being consumed with their “lesson selling returns” and less consumed by Johnny’s needs in the classroom.

6. **Selling lessons eats away at the spirit of collaboration within education.** It suggests we shouldn’t share and help. It spits at such fine endeavors as [OER](https://www.oercommons.org) (Open Education Resources), Richard Baraniuk’s [CNX](https://cnx.org) (for low cost textbooks), [Open Universities](https://www.open.edu) and so many other open source and educational sharing sites. I’ll return to my first thought – selling lessons *clogs up the pipeline of knowledge*. It shatters the view of a future where all students, all people will have access to knowledge and teachers will have access to the best of everything to help students. And at the end of this process, for the temporary pennies teachers gain, it undermines our own prosperity and future.

7. **It isn’t necessary!** There is plenty FREE out there and plenty of sites where you can get what you need for your teaching. Don’t feed this Moloch!

Wikipedia – Wow, what an idea! I’ll leave you with the message of its founder Jimmy Wales;

*Imagine a world in which every single person on the planet has free access to the sum of all human knowledge. That’s where we’re headed. And with your help, we will get there.*
The “other” Side Of Being A Teacher

This month I’ve had my head full of “spring” and in particular that spring 40 some years ago in 1968 when students around the world became very “educated” and aware and sought to change things for the better. I didn’t live through that spring and I don’t condone everything that happened then BUT it was something I feel is missing in students/teachers these days — a sense that teaching is not just about the subject but also about LIFE. That teaching should follow the Socratic dictum of helping lead students to be SCEPTICS and who critically challenge the present order — all in the name of the “good”.

Students nowadays are more concerned than ever with “business”. Not just the subject of business and getting a better job but also qualifications, diplomas, certificates, marks, status. This culture is very conservative and doesn’t seek to challenge the authorities or question the very fundamentals of our society (because that would endanger their “position” and future). It is as if students these days, especially in university, feel that they have to keep quiet, feel they should just party and get good marks because “protest” and student movements would threaten their future possibility within society. This I believe profoundly effects our world.

We need students who question and challenge. Without these “soil turners”, the world just keeps spinning in violence, keeps along the same “moral/immoral” path and there is in a way, so much less salvation, less “spirit” in this world. My own hope is/was that the internet might be a way to fan the flames of youthful inquiry, protest against injustice. I’m not so sure…...

I remain convinced, we missed the boat so long ago in ‘68. Yes, the cries and demands at that time have changed things in some ways — race, women, liberality, a peppering of more freedom. Still, the flower never bloomed on the stem. So many great critical theorists in education tried and offered solutions to the educational malaise in 1968 and thereafter — I think of Illych’s incredible pamphlet, “Deschooling” or Postman’s “Teaching as a Subversive Activity” — both babies of that time’s bathwater. Yet their ideas and vision is left unfulfilled (though still as valid today as ever). The question is “why”?

The recent French movie, Cannes Palme D’Or winner, “Entre les Murs” – “Between the walls”, about a French teacher who challenges authority and his students really
showcases what hasn’t happened in teaching worldwide. So few educators like this or like Sidney Portier in “To Sir with Love”, so few teachers who teach the other side — not the subject but “consciousness” and making students aware of the conditions in which they live. Today, so few teachers “risk” and take their students into that place where they truly become aware and in control of their own reality. So few teachers ever ask their students to “fight the power” and try for Socrates notion of “the good”.

Teaching, especially teaching EFL, is not just about the “subject”. It is about human relationships and engagement. It is about trying to affect eternity and in my estimation the greatest thing a teacher can do is to “lead”. This is teaching at its best. Lead. Lead your students to think outside the box and always be full of spring…..

Here is a video which challenges the present status quo, especially the war in Iraq. We need more teachers to ask of their students — “why is the world full of violence?” , our future demands it……… I reject our present climate of teaching — the very apolitical sense and fear which pervades teaching. It is truly sad. The teacher’s role is not just the subject but THE subject — the good……

I’m reminded of my own reading of de Tocqueville and his prescient view of “democratic despotism” and the teacher’s job being to awaken others out of this ever present threat. He writes…

“For their happiness such a government willingly labors, but it chooses to be the sole agent and the only arbiter of that happiness; it provides for their security, foresees and supplies their necessities, facilitates their pleasures, manages their principal concerns, directs their industry, regulates the descent of property, and subdivides their
inheritances: what remains, but to spare them all the care of thinking and all the trouble of living? ....After having thus successively taken each member of the community in its powerful grasp and fashioned him at will, the supreme power then extends its arm over the whole community. It covers the surface of society with a network of small complicated rules, minute and uniform, through which the most original minds and the most energetic characters cannot penetrate, to rise above the crowd. The will of man is not shattered, but softened, bent, and guided; men are seldom forced by it to act, but they are constantly restrained from acting. Such a power does not destroy, but it prevents existence; it does not tyrannize, but it compresses, enervates, extinguishes, and stupefies a people, till each nation is reduced to nothing better than a flock of timid and industrious animals, of which the government is the shepherd.

I have always thought that servitude of the regular, quiet, and gentle kind which I have just described might be combined more easily than is commonly believed with some of the outward forms of freedom, and that it might even establish itself under the wing of the sovereignty of the people.”

He called for a “vigilant” population — informed through education. I call on all teachers to rise to that challenge and standard. And maybe question, with passion like Pink....
Thoughts
On Language
The Indelible Nature of Language

Can you be my psychiatrist? May I admit something?

I’ve always had a severe sensitivity to language – especially the proclivity to pun incessantly. I kid you not – full blown Foerster’s Syndrome. It is under control but today I’ve had a hard day with the word, “indelible”. It has been in every second sentence and almost every thought.

I looked it up:

**Definition of INDELIBLE**

1
a : that cannot be removed, washed away, or erased
b : making marks that cannot easily be removed

2
a : lasting
b : unforgettable, memorable
— in·del·i·bil·i·ty noun
— in·del·i·bly adverb

I don’t know why but I keep thinking of how indelible language is.

Language effects us, subtly and its invisible fingerprints are all over us. Wish I had an infra red scanner to show the marks of language. It plays with us and effects our behavior. It taunts and teases us with possibility. Ah, how marvelous this ability through word to make things appear that are invisible! Yes, it is possible. Think, “cheesecake” – there, I made it appear, I even made you taste it, in your own fashion.

Now, (and as any of my prior professors certainly know), I am not a Sapir Whorfian. Those kooks that believe that because language DOESN’T contain something, you are lacking in certain faculties of universal make up. My god, Stephen Jay Gould never tackled them, but certainly is laughing in his grave. That I don’t have any numbers above 7 in my language – does not mean I couldn’t ever understand the concept of “a million”.

But I don’t intend on arguing Sapir – Whorf. I just would like to say that despite my criticisms, as a poet and a man who suffers from a sickness of “words” – there is power to language and it does effect us humans who use it and take it in. It does transform. But not in the resolute way culture does, that I’m not certain about. However, it changes us in
the way we behave as language speakers. Language effects language and we are so unaware of its power over us. Let me relate 2 experiences to clarify this.

One. I remember walking into a kindergarten in Korea where an Australian teacher had been teaching, hardly teaching. (that’s a pun – got to stop it! But all kindergarten teachers should be hardly teachers). I remember walking in and participating in the lesson and being utterly blown away by the Australian English accents of each and every Korean tyke. Here, they’d been learning English less than 6 months and were speaking like they’d just walked out of the outback.

Two. I used to work as a steel worker. Loved walking the beams and did it throughout university and for 3 years after. One summer, we had a big project and hooked up with another team. (usually our crews were light, 3 main guys and 2 helpers). Well, this crew cursed and swore with the best of them. Every second word was “Mother this” and “F that”. I was always the gentleman but one day while visiting my sis and family, my sis pulled me onto the patio and said, “David, you got to stop speaking like that or you are going home!” I’d picked up the swear words and was giving it like the best of that crew.

I’m remembering this after watching the Sopranos for the past month. Trying to debrief and just chill a bit. Now, I must admit, I’m the only guy on the planet who has probably never seen or heard of the Sopranos. But I downloaded P2P and have finished 2 seasons so far. And I’m speaking like Tony! OMG.

Which brought me and brings me to the sneaky and indelible nature of language. It effects our language behavior and as a teacher – we really effect our students, in the time we spend with them as language models. So often, we unindelibly (is that a word, spell check say no) want to effect our student’s language and language behavior, however, language will have its own way. It will act and effect you, “indelibly”, be warned. Language is powerful – it can throw men off cliffs and make others machine gun crowds. It is a sneaky thing.

I guess that is why those Hindu’s of old used, “OM”. Best when dealing with IT, to keep IT off guard.

If interested in this, you might like Stephen Fry’s take or you might like this article…..
What Is Language?

“in the beginning was the word, and the word became flesh”

Today I was reading Roger Cohen’s column (I’m quite his fan, never was but recently he’s take some very intelligent and courageous stands on issues from nuclear disarmament to Palestine) Loos and Language. That was enough to take me on a meditation of “What is Language”. It is so powerful this clay we teachers work with! I remember, me a German by name and birth, in Canada. I remember hearing the word “German” and thinking of “germs”, “bad”, “dirty”. That still rests with me, though I’ve traveled all over German and become a germanophile. The power of language. So here is my meditation.

Language is thought made visible. We might even extend that to emotion made visible. It is the electricity that lights up human experience and allows us to “not be an island”. From the swamp of thought, a tree grew and declared itself alive – this tree of life was language…..”for in the beginning was the word, and the word became flesh.” It made something permanent, solid and resistant against the chaos of that within……

Words? They die quickly without life in our inner thoughts as we “think aloud”. They live forever in the written word, scratched on a stone wall. Words – they allow us to complete desire, “I love you”, “I’ll have eggs, over easy” or they allow us to kill and control desire – rules, laws, edicts. One imam today declared a fatwa, with 10 words only, thousands march…… Words are power and an expression of our ultimate existential powerlessness….a national anthem plays at our opening ceremony, this language creates us as a culture. Yet, I open the newspaper and a writer demands the ex-president of Korea be jailed. He disrupts culture, he uses words to mix and destroy as well as build…..Language builds and destroys, blows bombs and kisses……

Language. It is both that which is compressed with meaning – poetry, song. It makes the young girls cry, as I heard Barry Manilow sing today. Yet, it is mundane, a ritual and meaningless, robotic. “Hello, how are you?”, “I’m fine, thank you. And you?”. I must have said this a dozen times today but don’t remember, so insignificant it is/was. Auden’s comment goes well – “Poetry makes nothing happen, but it matters” (so many forget the last part of this quote!).

Language is loud or soft – a drum for how we feel. They say a picture speaks a thousand words but nothing speaks of quality better than sound, meaningful sound. This
sound and fury that is the very essence of life and which we haltingly call, “soul”. The yawning that I just made as I stretched, is as much a word as “Pandiculation” – however we might think otherwise. I communicate myself or like Whitman, use language to sing, continually sing, “the song of myself.”

**Language is the music** I listen to every day. A kind of on/off which provides meaning. As Nietzsche so well said, “without music, life would be a mistake.” I say, “without language, life would not even be, a mistake”. Language gives us ourselves — we have a name, Thou art that, Tat Tva Asi sayeth the Brahman. Meaning, everything begins with calling something by the right name. Today I asked for a “pencil”. However arbitrary at the bottom language is, it is precise in functioning. I had to call it by its right name…..I will never be anyone other than “David”. A rose, is a rose, is a rose, as Gertrude Stein might have explained. We may well want to call it another name but it is consigned this for perpetuity.

**Language. It is a time machine.** First I’m talking about my weekend, next, I’m 5 years down the road, looking at new career moves, finally, I’m right here now, drinking my coffee and talking to you, whoever you are. Time allows us the joy of travel, the safety of this kind of travel.

**Language is identity.** A man walks into my office and says “kaput”. He and I share a Germanic bond. We know something’s wrong. From the hooligan’s cry to the babies babble, language links – it is a cacophony of sound, a stream of nonsense that has no space, no pause. Yet we pause it, we make sense out of it. We perform miracles because of it. Like the miracle that from the finite number of letters available to me, from the finite number of sounds I can wind — we may create the infinite number of sentences and “crie de coeur”. Miraculous, through language we are all as if gods.

**Whatever else language is, language is freedom.** It is an endless creativity, a gift of pun and playfulness. From one thing, we can build an infinite of another and on and on. Language gives us power because ultimately, we feel like we make the rules – whatever the ghost in the machine. When I’m teaching, I’m empowered – where do these words come from, that just appear out of nowhere? What a god I am! From nothing – I create something!

Without language, we’d be chained to the now, chained to the wall of our self. Imprisoned, a Guantanamo of our own making. That’s why I say thank you to language, through language. That’s why, I care about the words I use and that’s why I try to learn more about language. **It is the sun the beckons our human spirit.**
“You can tune a piano but you can’t tune a fish”

Words, words, words. Sometimes I feel like becoming a monk solely for the reason to be beyond words, of no need of words, away from words and their slinking skullduggery. They are cruel and they often don’t mean what they mean.

I know I’m groping for trout. I’ll get to that point in a moment. First, let me tell you what set off this minor mental meandering.

My wife has been doing some translation work and she asked me about this sentence -

“The watch is going”

I immediately told her that it meant the watch was “dying” or almost finished.

She looked at me puzzled and asked if it might mean something else. I thought about it and couldn’t think of anything else it might mean (so clouded we are by the force of WORDS).

She said, “might it mean that it is working?” And then it hit me, of course, that is what it does mean! And then it hit me again, blyme – isn’t that the exact opposite of the first meaning?

You see, words have got us by the throat and they won’t let us go. They are our arrrr arrrr real taskmasters. It is us who are groping for trout.

And that brings me to the title of this little piece.

You see, often when I get confused, I seek refugee with those who have even got more confused by the same demons. So I took down my newly unpacked volumes of William Gass and cracked open an essay or two. More exactly, his essay on “Groping for Trout” where he elaborates on how we create our own meaning of things and there is no center that holds…. 
“No, we can put order anywhere we like. There’s not a trout we can’t tickle, a fish for which we can’t contrive a net. We can find forms in ink blots, clouds, the tubercular painter’s spit: and to the ants we can impute designs which Alexander would have thought himself vainglorious to dream of. But to think of order and chaos in this relative way is not to confuse them, or put conditions out of the reach of judgement. There are clashes between orders, confusions of realms. Not every arrangement is equally effective. And we must keep in mind the relation of any order to the chosen good.”

Hmmm. What I think good, great Gass is saying is that we create the meaning, not the words! I guess, I see this point. And time, that destroyer of all things is the worst culprit. It changes the meaning and let’s some things endure, others die. And our words get full of confusion. We now drive on a parkway and park in a driveway.

Still, I’m not quite sure if words don’t have their own “hold” and power. Not to do a Wittgenstein but as a teacher, honored to be a meister of words, I’ve seen how words have their own force, independent of human will or even Fromkin and Rodman.

Think of fAt and fit. Does the eye lie? Or what of all those guttural sounds that all represent a disgUst? William Blood wrote a whole book on the poetic alphabet centuries ago and his point still stands — words (by default sound) have their own power independent of man. This is how the hole expands with slit — slat — slot (and even “slut”) as the vowel sound widens?

I guess I’m not making a lot of sense. But that is precisely the point. Words don’t make sense, so we do. Or we make sense and words do. Or perhaps the truth is somewhere between?

To end on a lighter note, a story. Long ago, teaching ESL to new immigrants to Canada, I received a note from Snezenka, a Serbian student (and I kid you not, her name means, “Snow White”). It was a letter apologizing for missing some classes. At the end it read, “P.S. Thank you for the massage.” As I read it, I was really confused. She was a beautiful woman and had this really happened? I was working long hours and who knows…. but then, after some long thought, my mind started “going” — it dawned on me. It was simply a spelling mistake, “message” not “massage”.

I’m still like that, still groping for trout in the wonderful stream of words.
Words, Words, Words

A snowy morning on the lake here in Canada. A beautiful view.

However, as I look outside, I’m thinking about language and how it “takes us away” from meaning. This statement may seem totally illogical but if you think about it like I have this morning, you can’t but come to that conclusion. The more words we add, the further we get away from the meaning, the essence of what we want to say.

Take for example my words above – “A snowy morning on the lake here in Canada.” That’s fine as is BUT if I add to that and describe it more – rather than get a more precise meaning, as I “add”, I “cover” other things up. Words obfuscate, words aren’t enough or are even harmful to communication. There are no words to describe what I see and feel. Perhaps this is why at heart, all true poets are torn and melancholic. Their “words” always fail.

I might tell you about the ripples on the lake. But then my meaning of cold / Canada is diluted. Meaning, kills meaning. Language takes us further away from what we want to say – everything we “say” is translated from the thing itself. Everything is lost in that translation. Words betray us but yet we have to live with them…..

We often associate intelligence with language. The more languages you know, the more intelligent you are. We often equate literacy with language. The preliterate are “primitive” and “slow”. I really think that is false. Language allows us one form of communication but at the expense of even more powerful means of communication. It is the fat lady singing the blues in the room, the umbrella on the operating table, that which gets all the attention but which distracts us from “the thing itself”. Maybe Wittgenstein was right when he said, “Philosophy is language idling”. We need more idling in our own lives.

In teaching – we teach more than words, more than language. I’ll leave it at that. Let’s think about how as a teacher, a language teacher, we teach more than words. Language IS more than words but we rarely think of that……

Here’s a powerful video clip that says what I want to say, much more clearly (you might even use this in class). Maybe I’ll return and clean this up with fewer words, once I get a coffee in me!
**Vocabulary. Does Size Matter?**

We live in, by and through words. Baudelaire famously said, “Life is a forest of symbols”, meaning, we walk through life as we would walk through words.

Yet, though on one hand “words are mightier than the sword”. On the other hand, “Actions speak louder than words”. Which is it?

As a teacher, we face a similar dilemma in our classrooms. Do we teach students “words” or do we teach them “how to use words”. Which is more important? How to find the right balance? Ah, the tension of it all! And to wit, “Words — do they really matter?”. Doesn’t a lot else count and that past the first few thousand words, we get little pay off?

I’ve always found it fascinating how so many parents that I meet, want their children to have a large vocabulary. It is like a rooster and his comb. There is a strong belief that if you have a large vocabulary, the world is yours — all other kinds of problems are solved. You’ll make more money, you’ll climb up the social ladder, you’ll be healthier, you’ll have more friends, life is your oyster. Have a small vocabulary and you are a midget of the verbal world. Neglected and a circus oddity.

But is this true? And what does vocabulary size say for us teachers and our own practices? Let me know what you think.

I’m off on this diatribe and mental exercise after reading this morning’s New York Time’s, *On Language column* about vocabulary size. Also, after asking my students (teachers) about how many words they think a basically fluent second language speaker probably knows and getting answers no where near the mark!

IN short — here’s how the levels match up with vocabulary size for EFL (not ESL) students.

**Level and Vocabulary Size**

A1

<1500

A2

1500 – 2500
** But it takes getting to the magical 7-8,000 word level to really be advanced and fluent. Some studies have suggested that for studying in an English university where academic language is needed — we are looking at a vocabulary size of 12-13,000 words

I’ll begin by stating my own position. Probably different than all those lexicographers and vocab. specialists. I THINK VOCABULARY IS OVERRATED. I’m a big one for process and quality. How you say something is much more important than the words you use. Further, the majority of people on this planet DON”T have the vocabulary of Shakespeare or Eminem. And the goal being “communication”, does size really matter?

The growth of research into vocabulary frequency and corpus (here’s a good place to start) has truly been phenomenal. We now have an idea of word frequency in many settings. (Jonathan Harris’ Word Count for the internet is also very handy). But I think many researchers and teachers have become too enamored by words (and being a poet I know their ability to hypnotize, ensnare, enchant and woo). Here in Korea, I find too many students memorizing long lists of vocabulary in search of a holy grail. (given by teachers who also believe in this holy grail).

I’ve also witnessed the return of the lexical syllabus, books with sneaky agendas for “growing vocabularies”. Seems even the internet can be accused of promoting the view that vocabulary size = fluency. So many powerful sites dedicated just to learning vocabulary (many times out of context – here’s my list of bookmarks for some browsing).

Given all this – I still prefer a student with good communication skills and only 1,000 words of vocabulary over a student with a 5,000+ vocabulary that speaks choppily and with no “style”.

So my tips for the teachers in the trenches.

1. don’t focus on vocabulary size. Focus on meaningful production.

2. when learning words (as all beginners must), students should concentrate on verbs. They are the flypaper to which the flies (nouns) stick.
3. teach any vocabulary in context. Not randomly (like with a word search or a list). Teach it with a dialogue or by talking about a situation or using it for a real communicative act.

4. A word is not a word is not a word. Meaning, don’t teach just one definition. Use the same words in different contexts and environments. Knowing “x” number of words does not do anyone any good if they only think of a word as one thing. It isn’t. A word can mean many things, it collocates and is truly a camelion. Teach your students to appreciate this.

This video – though dated, is fascinating. What is a word. I’ll leave things at that…..nothing is certain in our field and I enjoy this marvelous feature of language!

**PS.** you might also try [this test](#) of the most frequent 100 words of English. [Here’s my presentation of them all](#) (use with your students)

**PPS.** If you want to test your student’s vocabulary size – you can’t go wrong with [Paul Nation’s short tests](#). Also, see [THIS DISCUSSION](#) for many vocab. teaching resources including [this Vocab size test](#) – to find where your students rank (Korean version in the previous link).
Should We Teach A Standard English?

Throughout the years, one thing above all continually astounds me about my fellow English Language teachers, researchers, writers, administrators and even students. What is it? Well, it is how conservative they are about language and how they believe there is a “standard” English that should be taught.

I vehemently disagree and really believe we should be totally descriptive and teach with the aim of introducing students to how people actually use the language. Whenever doubtful about usage – I don’t turn to a grammar book but to another foreign speaker (or a few of them). They are my standard, they are my constantly updated living dictionary.

Recently, I ran into the argument that a teacher was dead wrong to use in class - “I have ran many companies”. That it was an “error” and “incorrect”. The correct sentence is “I have run many companies.”

I said my usual – poppycock! That right now, many teenagers and youth are using this form, so it is appropriate and that it actually is very forward leaning. Language changes, we should make our students aware of this variety and help them to “tolerate the ambiguity” of language.

What do you think? Are you one who believes we should teach a “standard” form of English or like me, do you believe we should guide our teaching by how the language is actually used. Are you a kind of prescriptivist or a descriptivist?

By the way – one great place for grammar discussion is Richard Firsten’s Grammatically Speaking. Also get recent editions through The Essential Teacher Magazine.
Using vs Manipulating Language

Recently, I came across two lesson activity ideas online. On the surface both seem like good activities however one they contrasted nicely with each other and highlight the difference I see between USING and MANIPULATING language.

First the activities.

MANIPULATING Language: Cut up letters of the alphabet and put into an envelope. Maybe 5 sets of the alphabet. In pairs or small groups, students make as many words as they can using the “letter tiles”. Read them out afterwards. Winners get a prize and also the longest word!

USING Language: Brainstorm some of the student’s favorite pop groups. Write them on the board along with ways to say you like them or don’t like them. Next, on a small slip of paper, students write their favorite group from the list. Then, they walk around the classroom asking others who is their favorite group. Also, why. If the student likes the same group, they link arms and continue finding fellow “group” lovers. When finished, the teacher asks, “Who likes “x”? and the students shout out “We do!”

What I find is the difference between “good ” teaching and “not so good” teaching, lies in the difference between these two activities. Manipulating language and word games can be great but only as a seasoning, not as a classroom meal!

We don’t learn language through simply manipulating words and letters or definitions. Ask anyone who has studied for the TOEFL test, if it helped their overall fluency as much as getting their hair done and chatting with an English hairdresser.

It is all about MEANING and as teachers, we should always have our activities pass this litmus test — is meaning being negotiated? Do the two parties have to communicate and listen to and share information? When we Manipulate language we are doing Anything But USING language , we are ABusing language and treating it as a thing and not something that is of life.

Manipulating language is mechanical. It does not seed the user’s brain so that outside that context, the language can be referenced and used. It is in one file, it is conditional.

Using language is organic. It is how language was created and how it is used everywhere, every moment. It allows small roots to take hold and grow in those that would acquire it in this fashion…

I know this is highly theoretical but as teachers, let’s reflect on this and do more Using of language and less ABusing of language…
Music Is More Than The Language Of Love

It also might be the origins of thought…… think about it.

This video is fascinating. It shows music on a very intense and personal level, conveying information just like language. Music is language, the language of personal expression.

Jesperson’s long ago suggested a “sing – song” theory of language origins. That as mothers sang to their children, language slowly arose.

As with so much “conjecture” there is a lot of truth to it, I believe. But even more true would be to note that music probably WAS the proto-language, the mother of all mother languages for thousands of years. Music was a means of personalizing, of conveying information about the person’s thoughts and feelings – just like this man does so skillfully. Slowly, it did become a formal system I believe, not as many think, because it gave some kind of adaptive advantage. Rather, because it felt good (though you might argue this was “adaptive”).

Steven Mithen is an archaeologist I wish I’d read earlier in my studies. His “Singing Neanderthal”, puts forth his own theory that music developed first – as humans expressed emotions. Then, language developed on top, as a means of conveying information. Music or his “Hmmmm” was the protolanguage” and how people did communicate before formal language. It is a wonderful read and I highly recommend it.

I have a personal connection to this topic. Not just as a poet but also because of one of my own afflictions – Forster’s syndrome. Broadly defined, it is obsessive punning but for me, it manifests not just in pun but in the rhythm and flow of language. I’ve learned to control it and monitor it – through a little voice in my head. But get me drinking or in the right mood and words just connect and flow, as music, with a deeper and more visceral connection. One word leads to another, automatically and they connect by some mysterious force of rhythm, meaning and rhyme. To me, this is my own connection, in my genome and being, with the ancient origins of language.

It does any teacher well to ponder the connect between music and language. As I watch this video, the man IS communicating to me. Directly and viscerally. It is communication and language. To me, it makes sense to think in Mithen’s terms. What do you think?

If you liked this post – this site offers lots of info. about language origins. Or read my post and meditation on language origins.
“The teacher must orient his work not on yesterday’s development in the child but on tomorrow’s.”

– Lev Vygotsky

At a lecture last week, I mentioned Vygotsky and several teachers were curious and asked me for more information. It got me thinking about my own relationship with this collossus and sharing some of his “necessary” words with others. Go [HERE](#) for an archive of resources about the man.

Vygotsky was a Soviet (Belorussian) psychologist who did most of his important work in the 1930s. He’s known for his lucid writing and such terms as ZPD – the Zone of Proximal Development (not to be confused with scaffolding which is a mental and individual construct), cultural mediation, self regulation and a More Knowing Other (MKO).

He was a true blue “constructivist”, viewing language as a social construct, being learned through “others” and being developmental. His thoughts on the role of “play” and learning are well worth looking into. He’s one of the father’s of modern social cognition. A man well ahead of the times.

Vygotsky’s seminal work is “Thought and Language”. I’ve kept it by my bedside for a number of years, particulary with Pinker’s recent work in the same vein – “The Stuff of Thought”. Now, you can read most of it online. [GO HERE](#). I’ve attached my favorite chapter (#7 – Thought and Word) which goes into the concept of how we think in words, to ourselves or what Vygotsky labeled “egocentric speech” or “inner speech”. A key to understanding language and how it is acquired, a key to pulling back the curtains and glimpsing the puppeteer. Enjoy his lucid thought.

[Lev Vygotsky 1934 Chpt 7 Thought and Word](#)
Thoughts

On Teaching
In Praise Of Praise

I sat down this morning, coffee at the ready, ready to write some advice to new teachers about the coming school year. I thought about the usual things – classroom management, organization, icebreakers, action research, personalizing, then for some strange reason I started thinking of Mr. Worth, my high school math teacher.

Mr. Worth was a string bean of a man always smiling. He always was standing outside of his classroom greeting every student and not just his own. Smiling, grinning, with a kind of Jim Carey stance – he’d shout out to each student, “Hey, James looking good today!” or “David, wow, what a game yesterday!” . He would do this all the time, over and over. To me, he was my educational human growth hormone. I felt good, I believed in myself, I tried my best because of him. And he did this for everyone in the school AND outside of school. You’d meet him in the mall and as you tried to avoid contact, he’d come rushing up and pat you on the back, saying, “I heard you are thinking of coaching soccer – great idea, you’d be wonderful at it!” or something such.

Mr. Worth did a few other things that I think are important to note. He always spent time asking us about our lives and talking “shop”. He’d sit at the front and blather back and forth with us about “Mork and Mindy” or the latest U2 album (I’m showing my age!). He’d laugh with us and be jovial – then, he’d roll up his sleeves and say – let’s get to work!

Doug (I’ll now call him Doug – I got to know him well enough after I left school) also had a unique way to give tests. We always had a review before a Friday test. He’d wink and say, “I can’t tell you these questions will be on the test but if you do these well – you’ll see much the same on the test!”. And we’d do the algebra problems and as we solved them, he’d keep winking and nudging as if it were a big game and he was telling us the answers. But HE WAS TELLING US THE ANSWERS! Sure enough, the next day, test day, the same questions were for the most part on the test. At least enough of them so a duffus at math like myself could do well and could learn.

Why am I telling you this – this personal stuff from my past? Well, I think that Doug knew what it takes to get a student to succeed – success! Nothing breeds success like success, so the old saying goes. Doug bred success not just through accomplishment but through the power of praise. We’d do well on the test and he’d personally say to those struggling (like myself), “wow, you did quite good, great work, keep at it!” And I did, I tried harder at math and though I didn’t have the greatest mark, I learned, I really learned!

Praise is so, so, so underrated by teachers. In my own years teaching, I’ve become convinced that teachers should be taught to praise students ad infinitum. We are as much cheerleaders as teachers. Failure is learned. Smart kids and not so smart kids can “fall off
the map” if they don’t encounter praise from their teachers. It happens every minute of every day in our classrooms.

However, there are several things that a teacher has to do right when praising.

1. Make the praise specific. Don’t use generalities. Doug always praised a specific act, a specific state. He referenced the praise and in that way, we knew it was genuine and not just robotic, soulless. We knew he was aware and connected to us as individuals.

2. Make the praise about the “doing”, the achievement and not intelligence. Meaning, don’t praise a student saying, “You are so smart”, “You are the best”. This actually demotivates students and turns them off of learning at school. Why try when you are so smart and teachers think so? Read about Carol Dweck’s amazing research into praise and about the student Thomas – this should be read by all teachers at some point in their careers.

3. Praise is not encouragement. Praise is something that is sincere. If you endlessly encourage students, they will “achieve” to please others and not for the sake of learning. Praise can be an intrinsic motivator if it is sincere, spontaneous and given without any intention of manipulating the student’s behavior. Praise must be without conditions – encouragement usually comes with the unspoken, “you’re still no good – you aren’t there yet” feeling. This article outlines well these principles. Alfie Kohn scoffs at praising students – thinking we will create, “praise junkies”. I completely disagree. It is all in how it is done. Human behavior and psychology are not black and white or push button. I can only say he should stop self showmanship and aggrandizing and think a little deeper about things. If he ever wants to debate this, he knows where to find me.

So if I have one piece of advice to new teachers – accentuate success and the positive through praise. Be like Mr. Worth, as much as your personality will allow you.

And in ending, a big thank you to Doug. You’ve passed the torch and that’s all that a life needs to do – to be a “success”.

Interested in reading more on the notion of “Praise”? Start with Joe Bower’s powerful essay in ebook form.
An Amazing Teacher

We have many, on EFL 2.0, many videos of teachers teaching their students. It is so revealing and helpful for teachers to watch these, watch and see the little things. It really is in the little things that a good teacher becomes GREAT.

This teacher I’d hire in a heart beat. He’s a genius. Really and truly. Even though he is teaching French, you can see so many small things that he does so well — so many things to inform your own teaching. Two I’ll highlight.

1) he lets the students speak and respond in their L1
   – I find this so refreshing and it should be the norm. Students should respond to communicate, not to a set format (L2). When they are ready, the target language will come. He is wonderful in getting the students to focus on this so important aspect – meaning.

2) Contextualization. See how expressive he is. See how he makes eye contact and uses his voice. See how he asks questions in a closed way – so students can respond. See how creative he is and how he bridges and helps students deal with the ambiguity of a second language. Pure genius!!!!

Medal of honor. This is part of a series on Annenberg for MFL (Modern foreign languages) “Teaching Foreign Languages” – but also wonderful for EFL teachers. Language is language, a rose is a rose.
Teaching – Then and Now

“Where is the life we have lost while living?”

- T.S. Eliot

I have had the honor and pleasure to interact with a lot of new teachers over the last 6-7 years. Energizing and invigorating.

One thing however that seems impossible to convey to them, is just how much teaching abroad has changed over the last 20 or so years. It has changed dramatically (and for the better, for the most part!).

I go back 20 years, starting my teaching career in 1990 in Karlovy Vary, the Czech Republic, just after the Iron Curtain fell with a loud thud. But I’ve talked with even “deeper” veterans, like Thomas Farrell who was teaching in Korea when it wasn’t even on the radar of anyone (and go listen to his plenary if attending IATEFL – he’ll be a breath of fresh air from across the Atlantic!). He has stories that even make my own seem “modern”.

It seems that there are now fewer and fewer – isolated spots. The world is truly a village for all but a few teachers. Teachers now can consider themselves so lucky, in many ways. Here are just a few that come to mind.

1. English is everywhere.

These days, I would get the Herald Tribune 4am in Seoul, on my doorstep. I light up my computer and stream Al Jazeera in English. In 1990 in Karlovy Vary, I used to wait anxiously every Sunday outside the “Tabak” for the one copy of Maxwell’s superb “The European”. Often it didn’t come and I had zero English unless an English movie came to town. Even on TV, nic, nothing in English. (and even then, remember watching “Trainspotting” when it came to town and not understanding a thing – like it was a foreign language!)

2. Technology helps teachers.

Back in 1990, I didn’t have any EFL Classroom 2.0 or other place to get resources with a click of the button. Not even a photocopier! We did have a machine (for which the name escapes me) that you’d crank and get some ink smeared copies if desperate. Textbooks were one of two kinds. Cambridge or Oxford – that was it. No computers, no projectors or IWBS. No context to reinforce the teaching. It wasn’t easy and you had to learn how to
chalk talk or else. I am surprised I haven’t lost my health due to all the chalk dust I used to inhale!

3. No more isolation.

Nowadays, teachers can phone their family and friends very easily. There is facebook and skype. You can keep in touch easily. Back in 1990, it cost almost a weeks salary to make a call home! Suffice to say, I wrote letters and went 6 months without hearing my parent’s voices. It was a lot tougher. It was go native or go home. Knedlicky and smazene syr (dumplings and fried cheese). No starbucks and TGIFs offering Western tastings. I remember hearing the news Tesco had opened in Prague (maybe 1993?) and was amazed when I went there to get peanut butter! OMG.

And let’s mention here that professional development is so much easier. You even don’t have to leave the school or your home! Twitter, SNs, Facebook – ideas come to you, the talk comes to you. I remember the first professional development conference I ever went to – in Liberec. It was an exhausting 3 day journey for an afternoon of a few workshops.

4. English suffices.

English in now a true “lingua franca”. These days, there are always enough English speakers abroad – that there is little need to learn the local language. Of course, I think every teacher should (depending on the context) but it is no longer a requirement in order to survive your year(s) teaching abroad. I had to learn Czech – otherwise I’d of gone stir crazy. So I did. And perhaps that’s one of the upsides to teaching yesteryear. That and the crazy low prices that everything cost (I’m thinking of the .25 cent Czech beers when I first went there!).

There are some great memories – “how happy we remember our days in hell” – said Dante. I remember throwing my jug down to the gypsy boys who’d for a few crowns would fill it at the corner pub. I remember Thanksgiving dinners at my place where teachers from all over the C.R. somehow miraculously found out I had got “real” turkey and cranberries and would turn up yearly in ever larger numbers. Great memories of running the miles of pristine forest trails. Memories of singing with my good friend Drew in many pubs, late into the night. Ah…. there was an upside to the isolation – the suffering made me suck longer and harder on the joys therein.

I know there are probably still a number of teachers teaching in conditions like I did years ago. I’m generalizing but I think the point is valid – our teaching environments have changed considerably. For the better. I’m happy for it and TESOL has come a long way – growing more and more into a real teaching profession, less ruled by linguists and academics. A lot has changed.

What about the other old timers out there? What about the “Then” and “Now”?

[ Still want more Then and Now? - no better photos on this theme than those of Irina Werning. Amazing and a must see. ]
Faking It

Today, my “much better half” insisted that our dog Chico could understand Korean. She showed me how he could understand Korean and sit and stay, even give paw. I had a good chuckle. She really believed he knew Korean. Not much different to many teachers who believe their students understand them in the classroom! Chico, like so many students, was great at “faking it”. Doing the right thing for the wrong reason.

I think all of us teaching English, have to remind ourselves that though it might seem that our students understand – a lot of time, even most of the time, they are faking it.

I remember especially in my first years of teaching, fully thinking that the nodding, the “yeah, yeah”, “ok” of my students indicated that they’d understood. However, what was happening was probably much like this famous Far Side comic.

Our students often are “bewildered” (to borrow a term Frank Smith uses often in reference to children learning to read). There is overload and the brain is overcome. But there exists a powerful need to believe in the pragmatic elements of communication (the facial expressions, gestures, eye contact etc..), also the hints and inferences of half meaning that pass along as communication. We want to understand so much and we want to communicate and please the other so much – that we “fake it”. Nobody wants to say, “I don’t understand”.

Not that faking it is all bad. It is only bad if “learning” is your aim. If you want to be social, faking it can be a great strategy. Or if you are asking for directions in Spanish and are confronted with a flood of Spanish that you can’t understand at all – it can be a quick way out of a sticky situation.

Still, as a teacher, we should be aware of how learners, “fake it”. Otherwise, we can’t adjust our lessons and content appropriately and we become teachers who “fake it”. And yes, they exist! In my experience, “faking it” is an art undertaken in abundance by teachers. Like the Cuban joke about communism, “they pretend to pay us and we pretend to work”, — “teachers pretend to teach and students pretend to learn”. It happens a lot.
So be aware of the dynamics of communication in the classroom. Do your students really understand you? (and they don’t have to understand everything but they also shouldn’t be overwhelmed). If they are faking it, it is time to think through your lesson delivery and maybe do a few of the following;

1. **Model more, explain less.** Think through how you’ll explain the stages and activities of the lesson.

2. **Get Ss speaking and doing the explaining.** They’ll bring it down to the level of the audience and the communication will be much more effective.

3. **Ask follow up questions to assess student understanding.** A very handy request for teachers is, “So, could you repeat back to me, what I want you to do / what I said / explained?”

4. **Speak less** – decrease teacher talk time and let students have more opportunity for production rather than reception of language.

But the important thing to remember is to ask the question – “Do my students understand me?” and conversely, as a learner, to ask, “Do I understand?” Start from there and stop faking it – that is unless faking it provides some side benefits outside of learning. If you know what I mean……

This “Kids in the Hall” video highlights it all.
A lot of teachers have been reading a previous post entitled “Faking it”. There I outlined my belief that a lot of students and teachers were, “playing school” and that not as much learning as possible was occurring.

I have another thought to add.

I recently took a poll on EFL Classroom 2.0 about the relative importance of productive vs receptive activities in the classroom. Here are the results.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Selection</th>
<th>Votes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>speaking and writing (output)</td>
<td>67% 16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>reading and listening (input)</td>
<td>33% 8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Most teachers believe that more learning occurs through production rather than reception. Not a surprise to me but I think it unfortunate. Also, a major reason why so much English language teaching is ineffective. I believe that our teaching should weigh on the side of reception (especially in the beginner – intermediate levels) and not production. I think we have the horse before the cart.

I’m reminded of Krashen and a statement he made that has stuck with me over the years. Probably the one statement that really puzzled but then informed me and my own teaching. He said (and I paraphrase);

“speaking is a result of language acquisition not the cause”

Now this IS a contentious issue (and see my Canadian compatriot Merrill Swain’s research on [CO – or comprehensible output](https://example.com)) but I do agree that most teachers have it wrong, do it wrong. Reception and input (comprehensible input) does lead to quicker and stronger acquisition of language.

I think teachers wrongly have the mindset that speaking and writing are “better” due to several things;

1. they are more “active” and so there is the appearance that acquisition is taking place.
2. a misunderstanding about the difference between learning and acquisition.

3. they want to be “a teacher” and there is a belief that a teacher just doesn’t let the students read books or listen. There is a belief that a teacher must be in control, command, order, engage etc.....

To gain fluency, of course you need to speak and write – but this is the icing on the cake – not the cake itself! It comes later in the process of learning a language.

If you want to be a fluent writer – read a lot.

If you want to be a fluent speaker – listen a lot.

It is that simple and I think a lot of our schools, our teacher training programs etc... have it dead wrong. Also, this is why I believe self directed learning and the use of technology is very effective for learning languages (but like everything, only if done well – and that is where the teacher comes in).

Now maybe I got it all wrong?? If so, let me know.
Technology. Everyone wants to learn it and everyone wants the “key” that might open up the door to these skills.

Truth is, there is no easy way! I’ve been mucking about and learning as I go – for a long time. And that’s what I love about technology and education. I can learn by riding my waves of motivation – surfing toward possibility. There is so much damn possibility! However, how best can you learn to get up on the surfboard and feel the power and freedom of that wave? How?

Well, most teachers learn by doing and trying and struggling. I do think there is an easier way – you can benefit from a course. However, IMHO and from my own experience being wrong – most technology courses are given in the wrong manner.

I was prompted to think about this after commenting on Jeremy Harmer’s blog post about technology and by default, his own efforts to learn an audio recording program. I commented that I thought despite how most training programs work – that an embedded approach is the best way to “teach” technology.

What do I mean? Well, as the above tweet so nicely relates, it is about making technology the servant, the means and not the king or product. Technology should be taught in the process of teaching other things – it should not be the focus. Programs are ill effective when they take the, “Let’s learn how to do subtitles” approach.

I’ve been there, I’ve done it and it effects little change in teachers. They get a nice little diploma, maybe a pay raise, maybe a confidence boost but that’s mostly it (except for those spark plugs and you don’t ever teach them – they’d learn even if exiled on the moon). Why do I think this direct, technology course approach is ineffective? Because we learn by doing but even more so with technology through “purposeful” doing.

One thinker extraordinaire is Michael Polyani (the lesser known of a family of thinkers and of many amazing Hungarian intellectuals of his era). I read him extensively while in university, especially his “Personal Knowledge“. To me, he is brilliant in his explanation and support of “tacit knowledge” over explicit or what he called, “focal knowledge”. As he famously said, “We can know more than we can tell.” This speaks volumes for both language trainers and teachers.

Focal or explicit knowledge (or Polyani would say, “knowing” for knowledge is never a static phenomena) is something we are directly attending to. We can count it and define it and share it. Tacit knowledge is an ability or skill to solve a problem based on one’s own
problems and concerns. It is very difficult to show another person or “transfer”. Both have a place but some things (like skills, like technology) are not very well transferred by way of explicit knowing. You must learn it indirectly. [and please note, I'm massacring Polanyi's subtle thought - he'd never so brutally divide these two ways of knowing...]

To explain by way of a good metaphor, let’s think of an apprentice. An apprentice might go to school but more often than not, he/she observes, tries, imitates, practices. They don’t follow strict steps or listen to someone tell them how to lathe a 3/8 inch pipe. They do it but most importantly, they do it as an actual, real and personal thing. Not just for the sake of learning….. They don’t think, “Wow, I’m learning how to lathe a pipe!” What they are thinking is, “this will work well and fit perfectly”.

It is kind of like loop feedback. You model the technology in use and teachers learn by seeing it in use as it should be and then using it not in and of its own sake but for an outcome that is non technology related. You see, we never use technology in order to use technology (or few of us do, maybe those unfortunates showing off their latest ipad while doing squat). We learn technology by using it as a means to something else.

Let me give a practical example. Take the usual course on “Moodle”. You go there and learn and practice tutorials on how everything works. Then maybe you do a final project to show how brilliantly you can “do” moodle. My way is completely different. You don’t take a course in moodle. You’d say take a course in curriculum development and learn moodle as you learn about curriculum development and develop your online syllabus. Two different animals. You learn tacitly. You make it personal.

In my own teacher training classes, I have got trainees using technology to produce learning outcomes that aren’t technology related. That’s the way to go. And of course, I got many teachers saying, I can’t do that! However, they always managed – LOL! And that’s how we learn, we struggle and we try but not in the name of technological competence but in the attempt to do something else, communicate something else. Technology is a means, not an end.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Typical Technology Training</th>
<th>Embedded Approach</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Watch the instructor show you on a screen</td>
<td>Watch the instructor use the technology to teach something else</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complete a follow along exercise practicing the technology</td>
<td>Use the technology to create or present in class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning is explicit</td>
<td>Learning is tacit</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Examples**

- Instructional modifications
- Make a presentation with subtitles to the class
- Personal Learning Network
- Create a folder of bookmarks on “x” topic to share
The 7 “Sensational” Sins of
Great English Language Teachers

Yesterday, during a teacher training workshop, I was reminded of a theory I had about “great teachers”. Long ago over many beers, in a pub in the Czech Republic, I outlined the idea that a great teacher was a “heretic”, a kind of rebel with a cause. Great teachers broke all the rules because they had first learned all the rules (to paraphrase Lao Tze). My theory was rooted in the tradition of Illych and his “Teaching as a subversive act” – I called it “The 7 Sensational Sins of Great Teachers”. Here it is fully described and with more clarity (or perhaps less…?) than a beered up brain might offer. A confession, may I one day need to get into the big retirement home for teachers in the sky.

#1 The Teacher as a THIEF.

A great teacher will do whatever it takes to help their students learn – this includes stealing. In many foreign countries, good, authentic English materials are at a premium. So what does the good teacher do? She steals! I would walk into all the 5 star hotels in cities around the world and calmly, with an air of authority, scoop up a stack of premium travel magazines. My students would have wonderful reading material! See some brochures laying around the travel agency? Scoop them up too! A friend has a book that is laying around collecting dust? Steal it – if it will help your students! (maybe leave a note, if possible). Great teachers STEAL. They steal words from others. They photocopy and STEAL ideas from others. They do whatever it takes to get their students learning.

#2. The Teacher as a LIAR.

A great teacher tells a tall tale and a good yarn. He makes the students believe that it is “real”. A great teacher twists the facts of his life and gets the students interested in “the story”. When teaching, I would tell my students fantastic stories of my day, my life. I kept them engaged with the language, who cares if it wasn’t “fully” true? A great teacher lies — tells their students things to motivate, damn the truth! Think about it – we do this, so let’s admit the sin and come clean.
#3 The Teacher as a TYRANT.

A great teacher controls EVERYTHING, despite the illusion of student centeredness and student control. She manipulates and gets what she wants to happen, not what might happen. A great teacher pulls the strings of students and merely gives them the pretense of randomness, choice, freedom. You are choosing who will present first? The teacher does the Ennie Meanie Minny Moe but always knows where it goes! The teacher organizes the classroom, says who can go to the washroom when, says, “Open your book” and commands “close your book”. The great teacher has a look that says, “Off with your head if you so much as even twitch!” The great teacher is truly a TYRANT.

#4 The Teacher as a FRAUD.

The great teacher not only lies but also commits fraud. We pass out cheques that will bounce. We make statements that students will learn and speak English just like the queen of England if only they do everything we say! We are frauds! We cheerlead and exhort our students to study, no matter they won’t ever learn to speak much or have the opportunity to practice in an English country. We make English sound so easy just by speaking it so well ourselves! We fool them and ask them to pay, pay, pay….. We laugh all the way to the bank. We are frauds whatever little good we do eventually do! As a young teacher, I was told by all the ivory tower types I prayed and worshiped before – “be yourself in the classroom”. What poor advice! I quickly learned that I had to be whoever I had to be – to get the students to learn. It was a confidence game, it was a con game. I put on many hats, many faces, many costumes. Whatever it took to pull off the con, the fraud. Forget being yourself! The classroom is an artificial place where we sell the students on its “reality”. We make them believe that if they do it there, they can do it anywhere…. We aren’t much better than Barnum – “There’s a sucker born every minute”. We are the used car salesmen of education.

#5 The Teacher as an ADULTERER

The great teacher loves their students – really loves them. They are intimate with them, they look them right in the eyes with love and connectedness. They talk about the most intimate details of their lives with students. A great teacher shares all their thoughts with students, allows them into the most narrow corridors of their soul. Our spouses, girl and boyfriends are unaware how we break their hearts! How we share with our students and allow them into this precious corner of our heart. We will rush out at all hours to do things for our students, with our students. Leaving our loved ones cold and alone at home…. let’s face it – we are ADULTERERS in everything but the act alone.

#6 The Teacher as a BUFFOON

The great teacher is a performer, a trapeze artist walking along a tightrope of language. We laugh, we make faces, we do the most degrading things infront of our students. We
will crawl on our knees and act like a baby as we “roleplay”. TPR? We sing and dance like a monkey. We have no dignity, we have no decorum. We are buskers, shaking our tin cup of change and asking students to pay the price with their “acquisition”. We dress up and wear wigs, masks, make up, props and puppets. We are clowns that hope through laughter, learning will last.

#7 The Teacher as a SLOTH

The great teacher is slow….. They pause a lot. They have the students repeat, repeat, repeat. She asks their students to copy things a million times and makes the classroom a place of review, review, review. She is a sloth that brings language to a slow breeze that can be easily enjoyed and felt by students. No storm here! Great teachers move slowly around the class and take their time. Who cares about the lesson plan! It’s about the experience, let’s slow down and savor it together. The great teacher is the greatest of sloths, a Frenchman slowly savoring each piece of filet mignon.

Caution: there is a lot of satire in the above. Use with more than a few grains of salt.
In Praise Of The Slow Classroom

If there is one piece of valuable advice that could fit almost ALL teachers – it would be to “S L O W D O W N!”

One area of course is in terms of speaking speed. Teachers need to let students process language and really suck the communicative juice out of words. They need CI along with their O2! Comprehensible Input in the form of being able to follow the speaker and let the gears of their LAD (Language Acquisition Device) grind them bones and make the bread.

Teachers need not slow their actual speaking speed but like any good public speaker they need to pause. And pause often. Students need time to think about the content of which the words deliver. Only through pausing can teachers really help their students to both become “thinkers” and also use the language they model for language acquisition. People trying to process language, need a lot more time than native speakers. If you think you are pausing too much, you are probably pausing just right!

However, there is a much greater reason to S L O W D O W N. Learning. Yes, that’s right. Teachers try to do too much! And in doing so, they do less. Teachers need to slow down and not try to accomplish so much. Stick to that one objective, all else is naught, in the lesson plan. Just bells and whistles and empty wind. Stick to the one
objective and relax! Enjoy your students, bring humanity and quality to the fore and let quantity hang out at the backdoor, spinning in circles.

Learning is not “going somewhere”, it is not cumulative nor exponential. It is human and the relating of the individual to the world. At all times it is atemporal and against that slave master time. Teachers need to let their students enjoy, let their students soak up the connections and relationships everywhere. With language, students need more time actually playing with the language, producing it and just hanging out with it – instead of pounding it into death with quick strokes of the hungry and heavy plated hammer of memory and destruction.

And why do I say this? Well, language as Chomsky so often related is GROWTH. It isn’t something born quick, it is to be watered slowly and not built with a jackhammer and speeding dump truck. It is organic and needs time, water (the teacher) and sun (love/the human relationship).

I’d recommend this video (Yes, another TED talk from me! I use our player avidly!) by Carl Honore. He makes many valid points about our lives and which equally apply for teaching. Just note though, how he misses the boat by actually delivering a speech about “slowness” in supersonic speed! He’d of done well to convey his message in the actual process…..however, still a good talk.
Lastly, while writing this, I was reminded of this poem of one of my favs – Irving Layton. “There were no signs”. I think I’m reminded of this poem because it speaks to me that learning is not a destination. Learning is the destination!

There Were No Signs

By walking I found out
Where I was going.

By intensely hating, how to love.
By loving, whom and what to love.

By grieving, how to laugh from the belly.

Out of infirmity, I have built strength.
Out of untruth, truth.

From hypocrisy, I wove directness.

Almost now I know who I am.
Almost I have the boldness to be that man.

Another step
And I shall be where I started from.
Learning With Your Students

I’ve always been one of the guys screaming for a more student centered focus in language instruction. Especially with such a “human” and “deep” subject as language — a social oriented subject — this has to be the case. We learn language by social interaction – the research is unequivical on this point. If a baby has no social interaction or little, their language skills are dramatically effected — same with the L2. If you learn a language in a very direct, teacher centric fashion, your acquisition of that language will be stunted. We learn by interacting/doing and so I’m going to continue cheerleading task based, communicative based, project based, student focused lesson delivery.

But I will go further and suggest that it is the “little” and very subtle emotive and human things we do when teaching that really make the difference in our student’s learning. Little micro teaching details that bring us closer to the learners/students and make teaching less about preaching and more about social interaction and LEARNING WITH THE STUDENTS!

Charles Leadbetter recently wrote an incredible article on this very topic. He’s a guy I’ve followed/read over the years and nobody says it better….A must read and especially for his recommendations for teachers.

Here is one quote;

**Learning is best done with people, not for them. It is most effective when learners are participants rather than recipients. The central element in promoting learning, therefore, is promoting relationships—teacher-pupil relationships; peer-to-peer relationships; and children’s relationships with siblings, mentors, and role models. All the traditional and high-tech resources of education—from whiteboards to the Internet and even to classrooms themselves—are best understood as different kinds of interfaces for relationships that support learning**

There are some things a teacher can do to lessen social distance and stop the direct instruction, teacher in front of the class syndrom. Here’s a preliminary list.

1) **Use a name!** Studies have shown that when students are addressed by name, their brain lights up and is much more perceptive to learning/input. Much More! Just using a name can make a difference, even a nickname. Seems that when we hear our name, our ego is inflamed and because of this “connection” cerebrally, we learn and connect the input better . One caveat — when asking questions, don’t use the name first! Address all students with the question. Then repeat and direct, using a name a second time. This way all students first , become attentive and take in the question.
2) **Inductive Teaching!** Let students play in the sandbox that a classroom can become. Turn your regular lesson upside down and start with the “Activate” portion of the lesson. In groups, just give them the materials and let them figure it out! Try it, it will take the pressure off you and you can at the end, summarize and direct, but only at the end.

3) **Bend down!** When addressing students, sit in a chair or get on their level. This decreases social distance and brings emotion and intimacy into the instruction. Simply put – we learn much better when on the same level as the one we are learning with!

4) **Amplify and emote your voice!** Get a microphone. It is so simple to plug in a microphone to a CD player’s external jack and use it in the class. Your students will hear much more clearly and this will decrease social distance because they will pick up on the emotion in your voice much better. Recent studies have confirmed that just by simply improving the audio in classrooms – student learning DRAMATICALLY increases.

5) **Question based curriculum.** Let them pose the questions about what they want to know and then go from there. This is more for Content Based Instruction but it can be a powerful student centered way to design curriculum – what do they want to know? Then, students research and report….

This is just a preliminary list, much more you can do to learn WITH your students…think about it and start to make a change if you haven’t already!

Direct instruction is a dinosaur and we have to bring our students into a more socially filled and dynamic learning environment.
It’s Not How You Start – It’s How You Finish

I’ve long given one piece of advice that I think seldom gets voiced often by teachers or teacher trainers – at the end of a lesson or day with students, ask just one thing, “Are you happy?”. And get the students to say they are happy.

You are probably wondering why that is so important? Well, please watch Daniel Kahneman’s talk about happiness. He relates well how important it is how we end things, how important “ending” is to happiness (and also the story we make of it). The remembering self is so important to happiness, it governs so much of our time spent on earth.

It’s how you end your class that counts. It effects how the students remember it. I won’t bore you with my dumbed down explanations – listen to the Nobel Laureate and think of the implications for our own teaching and how we should end our classes with students.

If interested in happiness and teaching – see my own talk and resources here.

Also, this guys great piece of advice!
High Expectations

I have a long history with the holocaust and especially Victor Frankl. I have bought the book and given to so many people – I really think I should start my own church! Man’s Search for Meaning (or the story of Logotherapy). But my post isn’t about my fixation with the holocaust or the lesson’s within, nor Victor Frankl and myself. This post is about setting up your classroom for success.

It is like Victor says – “crabbing”. Set the goals high. If you fall short, it will be much higher than where you ever could have gotten otherwise.

Let your students know your high expectations – in your own fashion and with your own style. It isn’t an act or a game or an order. It is your belief in your students, each and every one. We are all miraculous and a gift to existence. Make each one see that and you will be landing on many a far away runway.

And then, when you are not teaching, you can sit content and be happy that many are arriving at their destinations because they had the “afront” and the “idealism” to reach high, to fly high. The wisest words I ever heard were on some sloppy Sunday sermon show – the evangelist saying, “if you fall, fall looking up – because if you can look up, you can get up. And if you can get up, you can do so much more….”. Reach high, or what’s a heaven for.

There is also the research that shows that teachers who truly believe their students are “smart” or “intelligent” – get better results – all things equal. The power of belief and the power of high standards, can make a big difference.

I’ll end my sermon with a sermon. Martin Luther King Jr. He says it differently but the message is the same. The Drum Major Speech.
It’s The Small Things That Count

The small things count.

Everyone seems to know what teaching is. We organize, we write on the board, we give out handouts and homework, we ask questions, we mark and get ready for the next day. Is it so simple?

I believe it isn’t – the devil is in the details. So many teachers believe that their teaching would be better if they had a better book or they had fewer students or the administration were better or if the classroom were arranged differently or if ……… I’m skeptical. Maybe some of these “larger” things do affect instruction but just as important are the details, the micro teaching skills.

Malcolm Gladwell in a recent New Yorker article, wrote adroitly about the “quarterback” problem in teaching. How so many teachers, like so many quarterbacks, don’t make the cut in the big leagues – despite credentials, awards, accomplishments. My belief and those researchers he mentions, is that teaching isn’t about those things. It is about what you do on your feet and HOW you do it. The small skills make great teachers, especially great language teachers. Like quarterbacks, we can’t predict with certainty a teacher will be good. However, once on the job, there are many things we can see that give us an idea, a hint, assurance.

It is the small things that seem to multiply and cause a lot of the poor teaching outcomes we witness in our classrooms and others. I’m a firm believer of this — that quality of instruction counts and even more so, the quality of the small things we do in our classroom. I’ve seen a teacher with the mere twinkle of an eye transform a classroom. I have. I have seen a teacher merely by looking students a little longer in the eye, holding their gaze, get better results from students. Micro skills count big time in our people-driven profession of language teaching.

Teaching is an art but an art we can learn. Experience counts but we can climb up that steep hill so much quicker if we learn about the small tricks that good educators do so naturally.

I’ve been fortunate this last year. I’ve been a guest in many, many classrooms. (but unfortunately as part of a formal evaluation system – that’s another story, ugh…). A lot of what I saw confirmed my faith in the small things counting. I’d like to share some of them with you here.

These more micro teaching skills/acts are all things we could focus on for a week or two, or three (myself included!), one at a time. Choose one you think would benefit you and make it a goal to improve on that one. Further, make the goal “SMART” (specific, measurable, attainable, realistic and time bound). Maybe even keep a reflective journal about it and/or get feedback from colleagues. If daring, video tape yourself and measure your change. It will make a big difference in your teaching.
a) **Have a signal, including an audio signal.** I use a bell and have the students freeze on the first ring. Then lightly tap and the students can relax and focus on the front.

b) **Personalize instruction.** Use students’ names as much as possible. The brain lights up when we hear our name! Have regard for their perspective. Learn the art of listening, with all your face/body! Create a space where they feel they can be who they are. Go from the general to the particular – especially guiding instruction towards the student’s world. I once watched a great lesson on learning how to tell the time. Everything was letter perfect yet not once did the teacher ask the students during the lesson, what time it really was. Good teachers bring the curriculum down to the student’s world and let them personalize and connect to it.

C) **Use personal space wisely.** Bend down to the student’s level as much as possible, even when giving direct instruction. Speak to students eye to eye. Get a chair and don’t be afraid to sit in it and speak from there. Power can destroy a student’s ability to focus and take in language. Further, many pragmatic signals are lost when a teacher stands at the front, reigning over the students. When instructing make eye contact with students, one at a time. When making a point – hold eye contact for a longer time. Rapport is such a major factor in instruction – the twinkle in the eye as Benjamin Zander calls it. In about 1-2 min. in a classroom, all else equal, I can tell if a teacher is “great”, just by the rapport that is there with students.

D) **Use the whole classroom.** It is your home and field, use it all. Students need that variety. Inexperienced teachers stay too much within the “hot zone” around the front and teacher’s desk. This leads to ineffective instruction. Sometimes when evaluating teachers I’d secretly mark the floor and count how long the instructor spent outside the “hot zone”. Invariably, it was the better instructors who always did. Yet, when delivering a message and content, “don’t move!” Let the students focus on your message/meaning and not your movement.

E) **Know when to step back.** Learn how to “disappear.” This is a must for a language teacher. Give the chalk to the students. I know it can make you feel powerless but it will lead to some amazing results. Conversely, know when you need to be there and be present. The researchers in the article call this quality, “wherewithal” – an ability to understand the dynamics of the classroom and your own effect on that. I spent a year teaching a grade 8 ESL class in Toronto. I think I did a good job but when it came to math I was struggling. Especially with algebra. But one day I handed the chalk over to Jasmine to “take control” and solve the problems while I discussed something with another teacher. Wow! The whole class had changed – I could almost taste the learning happening. From that moment on, Jasmine was “the math teacher” and I was just the helped at the side.

F) **Modify and aid understanding.** Underline words, use a laser pointer, use a microphone (this actually helps learning, even in tiny classrooms). Use your voice as a tool to emphasize words/content. Gesture in a controlled fashion. Monitor student understanding and modify the feedback appropriately. Expert teachers do this saliently
and find the right phrase, the right feedback to scaffold the learner and make learning happen.

G) Pause more. This point needs to be emphasized more and is a major factor in a lot of student “bewilderment” (a word I borrow from Frank Smith who uses it in reference to the receptive realm and students learning to read texts with too difficult vocabulary). Don’t slow your speech but modify it by pausing. Count to 3 if you have to, between sentences. Count to 5 after asking a question. Students need time to process a second language; the cognitive demands are huge.

H) H is for happiness. Not really a “micro” skill but something I want to mention. I’ve learned to end all lessons by asking students if they are happy. They might not be but invariably, just by getting them to say, “Yes, we’re happy!”, they become happy. Great teachers give students a feeling of success and from that success – happiness.

You can view many of my other blog posts outlining these principles HERE. We do make a difference! This research based article highlights this and many more of the qualities I’ve outlined.

For an overview of many of these ideas GO HERE.
Barriers To Learning A Second Language

Learning a second language isn’t easy. There is a lot that can get in the way. It isn’t as automatic or sure as we’d suppose. Depending on the person, there can be some high barriers to learning another language.

I’m teaching a unit on this in a certificate course and thought I’d make my own list. (yes, could have flipped open my Gass and Selinker but then I wouldn’t be learning anything, would I!?) I’d love it if you could read and add something I missed or tell us which you think is the most important to spend time diminishing. I put them into 5 categories.

Barriers to Language Acquisition and Learning

Social

- peer group  - socio-economic status  - L1 education and literacy
- parental/family support  - access and support

Psycho / Emotional

- affective factors (anxiety, social bias)  - self belief
- motivation (low intrinsic and extrinsic forces)  - attitude towards language and learning
- social disposition / character

Biological

- psycho motor skills  - cognitive functioning
- L1 development / childhood developmental factors
- physical impairments (deaf, blind etc…)- psychological fitness  - age and health
**Pedagogical**

- type and method of instruction  - improper materials and curriculum
- little access to input (native speakers / audio material)  - school and classroom culture
- lack of learning skills, strategies  - teacher/student relationship
- planning and use of time

**Cultural**

- language transfer and interference (L1-L2 closeness)
- cultural values regarding risk taking, openness  - government policy and investment
- dislocation, movement, war

And the greatest barrier?
A Hierarchy Of Classroom Needs

I just got home after a morning of observing two classrooms. One was wonderful, a place that all students would long to be in. One was dreadful, a place that students would only just barely tolerate and where one student actually said, when asked to make a metaphor using the word school, “School is jail”.

What made them different? On the face of it they were both nice looking places. The teachers both looked “teacherly”. Everything seemed to transpire as teaching should. Objectives were noted, tasks were given, worksheets completed, reviewing done. Still, I was left with this stark difference. From where did the light shine on the one and the darkness overcome the other?

So I got to thinking about Maslow for some reason. Good old Maslow. Boldly stating the obvious, he clarified a lot for us. Like a true genius he made us see what is always there. That life does have a purpose and it is to become “self-actualized”, a being that participates in their own creation and growth.

I got to thinking that we could well apply his findings not only to students but even more succinctly to “classrooms”. What are the “needs” of a classroom? What makes them different and helps them achieve the ends and their purpose? Here below is a summary of my afternoon’s ruminations.

1. A Classroom’s Physiological Needs

Every classroom needs the basics. Adequate lighting. A cool and controlled temperature in which to “think”. Resources for which learning may be enabled. These might be chalk and a board or a Macbook. These might be paper, scissors. This might be evidence of learning on the walls and around the classroom. There should be in the classroom, a look of a place that respects knowledge. This is a classroom’s most basic “need”. Design it so that this is apparent. It could be just a few books in a treasured spot but make sure your classroom has an appearance of a place that worships “thought”.

2. Safety Needs

Of course classrooms should be places that are physically safe. No sharp edges, fire extinguishers checked and ready, windows secure. However there is a bigger “safety” concern – that of its soul. Is the classroom a place where the child trusts the teacher and feels warmth and security? Is the classroom a place where a child would come to, to feel safe and “at home”? Is the class bright and warm – not just in look but in spirit? Make your classroom into a place where student’s feel “safe”, every student.

Nicolas Hobbs in his “Re-education Process” outlines how vital trust and security are in education.

“Trust is the glue that holds teaching and learning together .... The first step in the reeducation process is to help the young person make a new and very important distinction that adults can be counted on as predictable sources of support, understanding and affection.“

3. Belonging and Love Needs

A classroom is a place where human beings gather. As such, it needs to be a place where every member feels at home and “belongs”. Each student needs to feel ownership of the classroom – that it is his/her classroom and not just a place they have to pass so many hours or a place to drop their backpack.

We should ask, “Do the members of the classroom care about each other, really care?” Do they have each others back? Is the “power” of the classroom leveled, so that caring might occur. Nel Noddings, who has written so eloquently about this issue states,

The caring teacher strives first to establish and maintain caring relations, and these relations exhibit an integrity that provides a foundation for everything teacher and student do together.

Meaning, that if there is to be a caring classroom, teachers must first commit to this as a priority and investigate why it isn’t occurring. A teacher must forge a “relational” view of learning by getting all students to participate and also by lowering the “power threshold” and making the classroom a community not a kennel.

Activities where students cooperate and get to know each other are vital to this. Without them – a classroom is a vessel full of tedium, weighed down, it goes nowhere.
4. Esteem Needs

I have arrived at the conclusion too many classrooms do not offer students real “success”. Our classroom’s are about competition and “a winner”. They are about comparing and ranking and assessing each to each. How in god’s name can we ever create self-esteem when there is only one king or queen and so many lowly failures?

“If you want to live a happy life, tie it to a goal, not to people or things.”
Albert Einstein

Classroom’s have to be places built upon the fundamental tenet that each student will experience success. Teacher’s must create classrooms where success is contagious and an ongoing event. I’m convinced, through thousands of hours of observing classrooms – I’m absolutely convinced we’d have a lot more “successful” people in society, if only teachers simplified everything. We teach to the top and try to pull everyone up. We shouldn’t. We should join the principles of special educators and teach to the bottom, letting everyone ride that wave as they wish.

There isn’t enough success in our classrooms. Thus, there isn’t enough self-esteem. Too often, classrooms are rooms where people are sorted. This one left, this one right. The teacher is the SS guard and students can hear the german shepherds nipping at their heels. Classrooms should not be “concentration” camps – they should be places where children feel and experience the elation of achieving something and tasting their potential. They find this on the sports fields and in gyms and music rooms – ask yourself why they don’t find it in the regular classroom?

If a child leaves your classroom without tasting the delicious food of success. If you haven’t reminded the students of what they’ve accomplished and achieved — your classroom has a dark cloud hanging over it.

“Men were born to succeed, not to fail.”
Henry David Thoreau

5. Self – Actualization

This is what it is all about. Every classroom should be a place where students can realize their full potential and participate in their own development and creation.

The only way this can occur is if the prior conditions have been met. Further, there needs to be a freedom for the student to choose for themselves, what they want to do and what they want to be. Teachers need to control less and put the onus on students to find their own path towards the goals of the classroom.
Assessment: Have We Got It All Wrong?

I just spent an exhausting but stimulating weekend away from home attending a conference. Nice, engaging teachers and sessions. The last session was an open mic panel discussion and one of those on the panel Mike Misner, an extensive reading enthusiast, commented that “we should assess students by HOW MUCH they have read, not how well they can read”.

On the way home, Devon Thargard (from Super Simple Songs – a simply great site for those teaching young learners!) and I got discussing this as we zoomed along on the bullet train. My own thoughts were also zooming along.

I got to wondering that maybe we have it all wrong – we shouldn’t micro assess. Rather, because language ISN’T a body of knowledge and facts – we should base assessment solely on what the student does. Now I’m not talking benchmarks and functional checklists. I’m talking – a very general assessment of how active they are, doing whatever they are asked. Devon commented that we should “judge” based on how much the student was using/encountering/being active with language. Mostly because that is the only way to be honest. About the only thing we are sure about in regards to language acquisition and learning is — the more students are encountering language, the more they are learning. There are too many other factors involved to discern or go any further in our conclusions about “what a student is learning?” or “if a student has learned”.

I have always thought it would be great to assess speaking by having students wear a device that counts how many times their mouth moved and pronounced an English word. Add them up and you got English mileage and a speaking score.

You could go further and develop head gear which records students actively decoding and “thinking” English. If it is glowing the purple English color – high marks! A teacher could quickly scan the class and SEE who is learning.

Or how about writing. Couldn’t we assess students by how much they write. They are learning more and after all – the goal of us language teachers is not to create a poet but to create a person who can write in a basic, communicative fashion.

How can we create the odometers of the English language? Is there any technology out there that might help us?

I know I’m writing mostly in jest but I think these are valid things to think about. Let’s assess students by how active they are with language and forget all the fine points.....
Less Is More

First, let me warn you that this piece is a bit confessional. It might not right now apply to your general situation but hopefully these thoughts about my own life, might have some bearing on your own life and teaching.

Yesterday, I was skyping with an old friend who I admire a lot. We talked about the usual stuff. Sports, food, gossip etc…. then, he gave me a piece of advice that has led me to write this. He said, “David, you do too much!”.

Now, I had to think about that. Meaning, yes, I do a lot and am always being labeled, “a hard worker” etc… But I’ve never felt like I was working “hard”. Rather just being who I am and doing wasn’t working, it was being. However, I’m reconsidering.

My friend went on to suggest that “less is more”. That by doing so much, my impact, my usefulness to others, was not as effective as “doing less”.

Now, I’ve always espoused the wisdom of a motto I came up with, “Live simply, simply live”. But suddenly, I am now confronted with the fact that even if I enjoy doing so much – it might not be the right thing. This “more” might lead to “less”. Kind of like when you eagerly throw a lot of spice on your pasta and then find it is inedible.

I’m moving back to the farm in Canada. Going back to chop wood and think/write. But I also think it is a good time to “do less”. To really do some more simple but in that way, more “powerful” things.

It is something we should think about in our teaching. We should all forget these monikers like “unplugged” and “dogme”. Really, they are only approaches that stand for “Simple Teaching”. We do too much with our students in language. We need to slow down and do less. Doing less is more. I won’t elaborate but I hope you/me/we/us think about that and the effect it could/will have on our teaching. My guess is something DRAMATIC. I talked a bit about this in this post about teaching skills.

In my own teaching, I am guilty and this is the number one thing that teachers/students have complained about. I throw too much at them, have them do too much. It is overwhelming. I have to think about this criticism and develop and do less, to do more.
So expect to hear less from me online. But in a very important way, that will be MORE.

[to finish, please enjoy this talk (not about tech despite the name) by Barry Schwartz. Lots of food for thought/researched examples by this fine man/thinker.]
Manufactured “Teachable Moments”

Have you ever had a “teachable moment”? Do you think we can actually make them happen or are they totally arbitrary, unpredictable by nature?

First, let me explain by way of a story, what a teachable moment is.

When I was first teaching, I taught LINC, language instruction for newcomers to Canada. Basically, adult ESL for new immigrants. My classroom was on the 5th floor of a downtown skyscraper, all glass windows on the side opposite the board.

I was preceding with my regular lesson on “How to withdraw money at a Canadian bank”. As I was writing on the board, suddenly there was a series of loud “ooohs”, “ahhhs” and shrieks behind me. I turned around and wondered what the heck was happening. I saw 2 middle aged women jumping up and down, up and down like small kids. Their faces were glued to the glass and they began exclaiming, “Snow! Snow!” They were from Brazil and this was the first time they’d ever seen snow. It was just a few small flakes but they were overcome.

As the teacher, I really didn’t have much choice but to start teaching about snow and use the opportunity of “reality knocking” to teach about the weather and anything snow related. The whole class just went that way and started asking questions to the women, “There is no snow in Brazil?” , “Is it what you expected?” “Have you seen snow on TV?” etc….

This was a teachable moment and we began talking all about snow, brainstorming snow related vocabulary etc…… It was a unique opportunity to harness student motivation and to connect the classroom with the real world. A real teachable moment.

A few other teachable moments I remember in my teaching career were:

1. A butterfly entering the classroom – which led to a lesson in science and entomology.

2. A mother coming into the class to ask a question – which led to us interviewing her about her new business.
3. A student’s broken arm – which led to a lesson on our own prior accidents and ways to prevent them.

Can you create teachable moments or must they arise purely “by chance?”

Teachable moments are powerful “learning” moments (for teaching is learning). In many cases, unforgettable. A kind of student driven “Eureka”. An epiphany where you connect with the subject in ways that aren’t possible in the traditionally delivered, head on, step 1,2,3 lesson plan. But can we try to make them happen? I believe we can and should as teachers.

I think there is a “Teachable Moment Spectrum” ranging from strict control and the following of the lesson plan to a very liberal approach that seeks student “reality” as the generator of teachable moments. We don’t have to rely on chance!

Finally, here are some great thoughts from a teacher’s own experience.

Teachable Moments

Photos by Frank Ward and Nodira Turaeva
Teaching isn’t easy. And especially long term. It wears at you. It numbs you. You can only take so much…..

Burnout is something every teacher will continually confront – even those of us with the best of jobs. Entropy is a law that applies to teaching as well as physics. Nor, is there a sure fire, one size fits all solution. Some teachers will have to just push through it. Others need to change things up a little. Some, change things up a lot and maybe head off in new directions. Some teachers will even get motivated by digging deeper and pushing hard (yes, it is true!). Some teachers will just need to step back and take a break.

That’s what I am doing this year. It is hard without my own classroom (though I’m teaching online). I miss the contact, miss the involvement. Miss my nice big office and the starbucks 20m away! Still, I needed it and needed a new challenge. This year, really trying to do different things, start up and be independent. I work from home, have my new office finally set up. Doing some consulting for a few companies (most notably EnglishCentral) that I believe in (and I’ll only support companies with vision and that have the teacher’s interest in mind). Will be starting my own School of TEFL. I’m near my family that I love and am now officially back from self imposed TESOL exile.

This is how I’ve always dealt with teacher burnout – by stepping back. As the French put it, “reculez pour mieux sauter”. Stepping back so to jump further forward.

It is a principle we all have to learn to obey. When to push, when to step back. As an athlete, my job wasn’t only training well – it was also perfecting the art of doing nothing. Only with rest, does growth come. I am also thinking now about long jumpers – how they step back, rock back and forth as they look down the runway before leaping so far far ahead…..

My stepping back involves getting in touch with my self. Teaching takes so much selflessness and pulls you so much away from yourself – you need this, all teachers need this. For me, stepping back towards myself involves renewing old habits. Like reading and poetry. Like running. Like making materials for teachers.

I returned to my old karaoke making today – inspired by a song I love and used to spend hours running the streets to. U2 – running to stand still. Perfect for your students and also you – many of you who might be “running to stand still”.

Stepping Back to Jump Ahead
Excellence is not a singular act, but a habit. You are what you repeatedly do."

“Endurance is not just the ability to bear a hard thing, but to turn it into glory.”
Teaching As A Rube Goldberg Machine

Teaching effects eternity. It really does.

Our lives effect eternity but not near as perfectly and precisely, not near as powerfully nor presciently as teaching.

I’ve been thinking lately about my own effect – how I stumbled along and began EFL Classroom about 6 years ago just posting up a few resources and thoughts on a free website I built - the BATCAVE. And since then, like a Rube Goldberg machine (try this example too and maybe get students describing ), one thing led to another. One thing had an effect that nobody could really predict but somehow through all those effects, one BIG EFFECT did happen. A thread ran through all the pushes, pulls and dispersion of energies.

It’s amazing how in our classrooms, just like EFL Classroom – this same thing occurs. And you never know what you do or what you say – how it will effect eternity and keep that thread threading……

As students, we also have been effected by teachers. I remember a cold autumn evening, like tonight, many years ago. Just a few months into being 16. Hitchiking home to the farm after X-country practice. Hitch hiking home under a dim street light along a highway that led into black. Out of nowhere came a runner, my French teacher Lionel Desjardins. He stopped and asked me what was up. He could have just waved and kept running but he stopped. We talked or rather, he talked and I nodded. I won’t reveal our conversation, it remains private but just that he cared, made a difference. He set things in motion, in a way that led to this, to that and to where I am……

We are so blessed as teachers, to weave such fabric. Almost godlike, we touch the future and keep alight something which we are still searching a name for….

I don’t know what it is but I do know we are a Rube Goldberg machine that gets us there as we butterfly along. Let’s keep touching eternity and keeping the world on its axis. My hats off to all those teachers that daily make this miraculous thing happen.

To end or rather abandon this post – I’ll send you off with this amazing Rube Goldberg video by Ok Go.
The Loneliness Of The Long Distance Teacher

I’ve been wanting to write this post for a long time – years actually. Finally, here in the airport with time to kill and waiting for my flight “home” to Canada, I have the time and motivation.

Teaching English as a “profession” and living in multiple foreign countries has so many advantages. We hear about them and read about them all the time. The cultural differences, sites of interest, the exotic local appeal, new experiences and stimulations. However, there is a dark side to this “adventure”, the dark side of being away from home and loved ones.

Career EFL teachers are in a constant state of divorce from their own family and friends. We feel guilty for being away as our parents get old (at least I do), for missing family gatherings, from being estranged from “our self”. We feel like a leaf adrift on a big lake. This is the downside of being a long distance teacher.

It isn’t talked about much but remains there behind the scenes as we go about our lives in foreign countries.

I’m leaving Korea today, in a few hours. Been here for 5 years and truly, all things being equal, I’d stay here the rest of my life, if not for my family. Lots of negatives to life in Korea but that’s par for any course. I had a great job, lots of freedom to develop as I wanted professionally, was / am well respected. Why not stay? Well, finally I had to do the right thing and “be home”. My parents are still healthy and well but I owe it to them to spend time in their later years, to be there. I’m not saying that is a call everyone need nor should make. But it is my own call. Still, my point remains. Us EFL itinerant teachers traveling the world have to deal with this kind of personal backdrop. The pay can never compensate for this.

You don’t read too many bloggers writing about this “thing” we all feel. This estrangement and displacement we feel. I’ve felt it and on this afternoon, pushed by the divided emotions of departure, declare it. It is a lot easier with technology, the internet, skype etc…. but still it doesn’t dent this iron strong feeling.

I guess that is life, bittersweet. There is sadness and happiness in all experiences. The sadness of leaving and the happiness of arriving. It is for us teachers to manage it all, the best we can. Let us struggle towards paradise, each in our own way, as “long distance teachers”.

photo courtesy Allan1952 on flickr.com
Who Says Who Is A Bad Teacher?

I wanted to name this post – “We need bad teachers” but thought that would get me off track. So I decided to voice it about those who might think they have “the authority” to decide who is or isn’t a bad teacher.

It’s cold here in Canada. I’m snowed in. Seems like the world is going to end. The good thing is that I live right next to an amazing library. Also, have begun collecting all my own thousands of books in various homes and storage lockers. Further, got all kinds of channels and “English” content.

I mention this by way of introducing the fact that I’ve been bombarded by media here in Canada and the U.S. declaring the need to “get rid of bad teachers” and “passing blame” on teaching for all kinds of societal failures. So I got to asking myself – “Who has the right to say another teacher is bad?” — besides gross negligence, what is a “bad” teacher?

I was watching Oprah and this angelic lady comes on representing some budding organization called, “Students First”. Oh yeah, just what we need – the tea party for education. Now, I knew nothing about this group but could smell a rat a mile away as she kept saying that study after study said that if America only eliminated their worst 5% of teachers, they’d become 30% more “achieving” and enter into the world elites in education. Malarky! (read her wish for “excellent teaching” - which I’m not against only that it will turn into a witch hunt). I was tearing my hair out and almost threw my new big screen out the bloody window! Oh, yeah, this group shouldn’t be called “Student’s first” but rather, “Teaching last”.

All these bureaucrats and those without an iota of actually getting in the mud – calling for the heads of “bad teachers”!

The next day, I finally got to see the documentary, "Since when do we divorce the right answer from an honest answer?" – the story of Professor Norman Cornett. (borrowed from the library, the headquarters of civilization and that’s why I mentioned it). Please view the trailer and see it when possible. If any case addresses the need to have “bad” teachers, this is it.
The Itinerant English Language Teacher

I’m feeling in a very “sanguine” mood – must be the sweltering heat and humidity! I go from sweating profusely to cold chills when I turn on the AC (and suffer too the guilt).

I wrote the poem below the other day – about my inner feelings and present “mind”. I think it might speak to other teachers too. We travel so far from home and indeed make “many homes”. So what is home?

Robert Frost wrote that home is, “the place where, when you have to go there, / They have to take you in.”

Maybe so – I’ll have to think on that…..

It isn’t easy to be a traveling teacher, trading our talents in different places around the globe. It is a two edged sword. The excitement and freedom of being “elsewhere” (and this reminds me of Kundera’s first and most perfect of novels – “Life is Elsewhere”). And on the other hand, the estrangement and incompleteness of being separated from “the womb” which is home.

How do you feel about “home”? How do you survive and bear those times when the melancholy descends?

Here’s my poem – I’ll also suggest Roger Cohen’s recent column ”Modern Odysseys” – a nice rumination on this topic, from one of the best journalists around.

**What I learned from the Chinese poets**

More than 40 years

have spun by me like

a drunk hurricane.

I have spent my life

going here, doing there

a homeless mind.

Now, I ache for
my land,
the unswum lakes and
fields of pine.
Two oceans away
gray hairs sprout on
my inflated head,
the travels only kept
me dizzy, busy.
I skipped between continents,
got As and gave As.
Spoke to applauding audiences
and slept in Hyatts, on satin sheets.
What for?
Better I stayed home
and chopped wood.
Swiftian Common Sense

Fire All English Teachers!

The following really is “common sense” but it might shock you. So be forewarned. What follows might tug at your very nature and deep ingrained notions of who you are and what you do / teach.

I propose that the best way to get students to learn English is to fire all teachers.

Yeah, you heard me right – fire all English (as a language) teachers. Or, in order to make the transition easier, phase in the layoffs and shift those with usable talents elsewhere. Soften the blow with a nice desk job for a period of time while they get used to the fact that they are NOT needed for students to “learn” to speak English.

Now first let me say that as a teacher trainer, a teacher cheerleader, a person who helps teachers “teach” – you might have a point if you think I’ve lost it and am off my rocker. I’ll accept that but I assure you that this is not the case. I am fully sane and it is only these experiences that has made me realize the absurdity of my efforts and the futility of my job. It is only by going deep into what and why I do (teach) that I’ve come upon this common sense. You don’t need a teacher to learn English and in fact, most teachers contribute significantly to their students “not” learning English very well or quickly. So please – I’m alive serious about all this. This is my confession.

Why is it better to have no teachers?

Well, this would require a book or a lot of time. Or if time isn’t available, money and a book contract. However, since I’ve started, I’ll try and shed some dim light on the common sense of not having a teacher around and letting our students learn language as it should be learned – by, in and of their own volition, need and talents.

Language you see – is not a traditional bricks and mortar subject. It is “of us” and not something we build on nor a kind of knowledge. We “think” with language, so it is pretty hard to “think of” language. As the old Hasidic saying goes, “the eye cannot see itself”. It is something we do, it is something we practice, it is something we experience but it is NOT something of which any qualitative and “knowing” terms can be applied. If you know English, you are not a great English speaker but rather a grammarian, a lexicographer, a linguist or even may I say, a poet. Not a teacher!
In traditional teaching, a teacher “knows” and shares with those that don’t know. Helps them, leads them, organizes them toward the knowing goal. However, language is not about “knowing” (though with tests, certificates, scales we’ve tried to make this round peg fit. What the heck are we doing? A teacher might be “better” at English, true. But this doesn’t give them any right to teach. I might be a better painter than another but would that make me a better teacher — most likely not. No native speaker ever studied his/her subject and they have no entitlement to be a “knower” nor a “teacher”. There is a pretense about their actions, a baby sitting sense about what they do. Let’s get through the day and get on with the charade, they say. It is all Sysiphian, a boulder that goes no where – a perpetual motion machine that only spins in one place.

Next point. Motivation.

We learn a language from need. Now I agree that need can be false and could be simply the need to get a passing mark. However, marks could be given without a teacher. It isn’t that difficult. Once a semester, student take a test and are assessed. If they’ve made progress – they get an appropriate grade. Hire a few pencil pushers – you don’t need teachers. Further, without teachers, the students would have no fall back plan, no one to blame but themselves. Built in motivation! Further, further, language is learned in the REAL WORLD — so let’s get real and allow students to stop wasting their time in our classes and get outside (or in language labs or on the computer) and learn where they can really acquire language – on the street of functional language use.

So I hope you are following my argument. I promise you I will stop soon and you can then pause from grinding your teeth and save on your dentist bills…..

Let’s talk money!!!! Yes, teachers cost exorbitant amounts of money (and let me say here – this “common sense” is only directed at teachers in the public sphere – if students want to agree with Barnum, they are welcome to go spend their $$$ on a teacher). Teachers are a horrible drain on the public purse. Let’s give that money to students who could travel to foreign lands and order pizza in REAL English, talk at the pub in REAL English and learn English as it is meant to be learned – by practicing it with real people and not in some fantasy setting. And yes, if they don’t want to spend it on that – their perogative. Maybe by buying an ipad they’ll also learn some English?

I haven’t yet begun to address all the negative effects of teachers in the classroom – I’ll leave that for another post. I’m sure you are upset enough already.

So let me conclude. Let’s fire teachers, let’s layoff the riff raff that pretends to have some kind of “secret knowledge”. The ruse is up. Let the students teach themselves. Give ‘em a mark + or − and that be that. We’d save a lot of pencils and a lot of boring, repetitive, going through the motions, dehumanizing experiences……

Even better if teachers do the honorable thing and quit. You first.
The Alive and The Online

This evening, I went out to the local symphony’s Christmas Concert. A wonderful gathering of many in this small city. They played the score for the Christmas film – The Snowman by Peter Briggs. Plus lots of carols and they had the whole audience singing joyously.

As I enjoyed the orchestra and the “event” – it got me thinking about education and how we (yes, me too), do oversell the online teaching thing. Meaning in a nutshell – we tend to paint in black and white and don’t for a moment stop and consider that there will always be people meeting face to face. No matter how powerful the technology. We need to gather “live” and in the flesh and blood – there is something in this, that can’t be substituted for.

Yes, you can learn a language or almost anything, alone. But there are valuable reasons to learn “together”. Like the very valuable reason I went to the concert and braved the cold rather than sit at home and listen to it (and probably much better quality, acoustically speaking). It will always be necessary to be “alive”. There is something special about people meeting – the smells, the eye contact, the looks, the tingle in the air. This can’t be copied. And by my mere attendance, the orchestra too – “lived” and would never walk through that same door again. The mere fact that we were together – created a moral force that stretches out into tomorrow….

So too us teachers whether in a class or meeting our students. We will always need that face to face, that humanity and a meeting place that is “alive” rather than just online…. Let’s remember this.
TEFL Non-stick Teaching

There is so many professing to know what a “bad” teacher is. It seems you can’t open the newspaper without someone rallying against teachers who don’t do this or don’t do that.

I’d rather focus on the positive. How about a list of the ways a teacher can become good?

IMHO, teaching is a great art with many pretenders and charlatans. There are many who teach but few who really accomplish “learning”. Learning here defined as not just “knowing” but also “questioning” and coming to new realizations. Praxis. Teachers promoting the act of thinking and communicating, not just the banking of ideas. Here, I also tell a lot of what “teaching is…”

So how to be a “non-stick” teacher? A teacher that cooks up a storm but leaves no mess? Here, is my list.

1. **Get to know your students!** Make it personal, connect the curriculum to their lives.

2. **Engage the “ego”**. Promote pride. Give ALL students success. Meaning….

3. **Keep it simple!** It’s about what they do afterwards, not in the classroom moment, that is important.

4. **Practice don’t preach**. Show and model. You, reading a book during break teaches “reading” more than any lesson. Meaning….

5. **Share yourself**. Teaching is personal. If you don’t share some of your life, they won’t. **CARE** and show you care.

6. **Make students think!** It doesn’t have to be Jeopardy but get them learning other things besides language.

7. **Give students responsibility**. Good teachers have students doing most of the prep and work.

8. **Go slow**. “Slow teaching” will be the new “in” thing in the future, believe it or not! Why? It works! Education is no longer about content but about digestion….

9. **Provide structure**. Students need to know what you will do during each part of the lesson. Systems are good!
10. **Use hooks!** Engage students at the beginning of lessons. Great teachers teach inductively. Whole to the parts.

11. **Have an open door policy.** Teach openly and share openly with colleagues. We are all learning and developing.

12. **Use the whole classroom.** It is your home, use all parts. Get students out of their seats using the space, the board …

13. **Pow wow.** Make it a point to have a conference with a student. They need that one on one.

14. **Color things up.** Use pictures/photos! Use real props. Context is everything and video/photos provide it in spades.

15. **Promote community.** You are a family and support each other. Nurture that with a name, an identity. Meaning…

16. **Use student names** as much as possible when talking to them. Names light up the brain and foster learning. It’s true!

17. **Teaching is acting.** Don’t be yourself but be whoever it takes to get students motivated and learning….

18. **Give students control.** Let them be the teacher! For example, why shouldn’t students lead the class in TPR exercises? Why not make your classroom more like a sandbox than an assembly line?

19. **Don’t be afraid to “talk teaching” in the staff room.** Share what you are doing with other teachers. This will transfer into the classroom.

20. **Record student achievement/work.** Make portfolios, keep records and examples, display their work. You have to know A to get to Z.

21. **Get “off the beaten path”.** Take detours. Look for teachable moments. Connect the content to reality at every opportunity.

22. **Teach students, not the subject!** Learn more about differentiation and treat each student as “special”. Study up on how special educators approach learning.

23. **Be holistic.** Teach language – don’t teach “writing” or “reading” etc… The whole English language is the true curriculum.

24. **Have style.** Each teacher must find their own “way” and “manner”. It takes time but discover and nurture this and make it your core.
25. **Have a philosophy.** You need a “why” to bear the inevitable almost any “how” of a classroom. Read books, talk to others, write out a journal. Great teachers are reflective about their job.

Now I know that this might seem a tall order. We can’t do all these things. However we can try. It is this trying that makes all of this possible. A teacher who believes, believes in their own ability change, believes in his or her student’s abilities – they indeed are already great teachers.

Watch these “great” teachers in action – proving all and more of that above.
Teachers Selling Knowledge – A parable

There is a discussion within the online teaching community world wide because of THIS recent N.Y. Times article about teachers selling their lesson plans/materials and making $$$.
May the Best Teacher Win is a great response and correctly suggests we are asking the wrong questions. If interested further – read all the varying viewpoints on The Teacher’s Leader Network.

Today, I’d only like to share a story to illustrate my stance. Find the meaning yourself from this parable.

Once upon a time, very recently, in the sub Sahara, there was a Tuareg tribesman of ambitious character.

He had been to the city and seen the shiny lights of Bamako. He’d spent lazy days along the banks of the mighty Niger.

In the city, this place of splendid future – he’d found on the banks of the river, the most miraculous of things – something called “a Playboy magazine”. Ah! What far away angels of beauty in that book! Women like honey! A piece of heaven on earth!

Soon his time in the city had run out. Alas, he was a trader, he had to keep moving.

So as he traveled, he’d approach the men in other caravans to share his wonderful “goods”. The first man he showed the pictures to asked him, “How much?” “What”, he replied. “What do you mean, how much?”
The man retorted, “I’ll give you 5 francs for that one – that page!”. The man couldn’t believe his good fortune – people would actually pay for this!

The man traveled and sold his pages but as his book got smaller, he demanded a higher and higher price. Soon, he was selling quarter pictures of women, an arm or even just a leg sometimes for 10 francs! Of course faces were more, sometimes 40 francs.

One day, his book was empty. There were no more pictures to sell. He had to go back to Bamako to get another. So he did. And this time he learned of the photocopier and digital images. Also, the internet and password access. He set about creating an empire. Today, he has the largest house, on the highest and most prominent bank of the river Niger.

And in the evenings, far out in the desert, the dogs bark and the caravans pass. The men pour tea and laugh around their fires.
I’ve been, like I’m sure many other have, watching the ongoing events in the Middle East with sheer fascination. The power of normal people to say – “we aren’t going to take it anymore”. The invigorating energy given by technology to inform and empower the powerless. Havel would be so proud these days – something he always talked about.

But what about ELT – English Language Teaching? Has technology, crowd sharing, social media, the internet and connective technologies been liberating?

I’d say that it has but with a caution. There is so much more that could happen (and I believe will). There are still too many “landlords” and “fiefdoms” in our part of education. Still the propertied class that doesn’t pay its share and is concerned with feeding itself and not learning. Let me talk about one small piece of the pie – textbooks.

I’ve been bantering and chirping to myself on Jason Renshaw’s always stimulating and thoughtful blog. I recently stated something there that I’ve always wondered and really grind my teeth over – the fact that we teachers/students, the underclass, purchase materials in the billions of dollars. Paying for yachts and planes (and yes, there are a few in the ELT business that can afford their own planes and boats). We pay but we have zero control.

I ask point blank - why can’t we use technology to edit the materials we have paid for?

Imagine a publisher that would give you a textbook all ready for you to edit and change, as you will. You could do so much;

* put in students names and photos
* record students and have their voices as listening material
* delete the stuff that you don’t want and will never do!
* substitute and replace material
* throw in links that would send students to websites where they can do self directed learning and get more input.
* add photos that are culturally relevant to the students.
* allow innovation and teachers / students into the creative process
* add your own idea... I could go on forever.
Here is Richard Baraniuk describing how this is very possible. See his [Connexions](#) for what he’s built for the university / academic world.
Teachers and Endurance

I get asked a lot, “how do you do so much?” Or am labeled, “the hardest working ELT teacher”. I’m always somewhat lost as to how to respond. Baffled really. I guess I’m a fish that knows nothing about the water I swim in!

You see, I just do. I don’t think much but rather when an idea comes, I jump in and get it done. For example, see this great music video below. I was sent it and immediately saw its potential as content for language learning. So I got busy and “just did it”, subtitled it. I didn’t think how nice it would be to have it subtitled. And in a nutshell, that’s how I get things done – and it all is a question of endurance.

The photo is with one of my heroes, Ed Whitlock. Ed spends his latter years, every day, running for 3 hours around his local cemetery. Same pace, same direction, every day. He’s “being there”. That’s how he’s set amazing world records (the oldest man to run a sub. 3 hour marathon. 2:54 min. at the age of 74 – I cheered him the whole way!). That’s how he gets things done.

And now to my point, the point of this personal post.

It is all about being constant, enduring. Great teachers endure. They do the same things over and over again. They learn to do them well. Yes, we hear a lot about innovation, creativity etc…. but this should be on top of the base – that everyday, grunting and getting the work done – “bringing home the bacon that is learning”. And so too with language learning and our students – it is all about “endurance”.

It isn’t easy to “endure” but it is easier if you can find a way to “just do it”. Flow and “be there”. Not anywhere else. Keep doing, day in and day out and you’ll soon have accomplished so much. If as Nietzsche said, “genius is a question of endurance”, so to is teaching.
What Teaching Gave / Gives Me

So often in teaching, we get caught up in ourselves. What we do and what we contribute. Me, me, me, us, us, us. However, it is often the case that once we get some distance, we see how much our students have given us. How much they’ve made us grow and learn. It is this oft neglected theme I’d like to comment on today.

I had the pleasure to be a LINC teacher in Canada for a number of years. LINC is short for “Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada” and it is a program funded by Immigration Canada to help new immigrants to Canada get their English “up to scratch” and also with life skills training.

I can’t say enough how indebted I am to my former students. I had the honor of in most cases, being the first Canadian they formed a relationship with. I was like a father figure and it changed me.

Often, my students had just come off the plane the very same day! (the sooner they were in class, the sooner they got a “pay check”). So many memories. I got bags of pistachios from the Iranians, bags of dumplings from the Chinese, so many flowers from the Serb/Croatians! We’d have a pot luck every month and it was a buffet of United Nations proportions.

My students taught me so much about the world! They got me to see through different eyes and know there are so many ways to live and be. Most importantly, they made me see my own country for what it is – its good and bad but mostly as a place of refuge and hope. A place where people are for the most part, “decent”.

We used to go on many excursions – my fav. was the free tour bus to the Casino, on the Indian reservation! It was my brainstorm and I was proud of it. Why not take the casino up on the free trip if we booked a bus full of 30 people? An hour free bus ride there and back plus a free buffet. Not a student gambled (they were all very conscious of saving each penny) but they loved walking outside among the pines and gazing out the window during the trip. Too often they remain locked in the big concrete jungle. We’d sing on the bus and teach each other folk songs from our respective countries as we drove along. We always has a ball. The casino sure lost money on us freeloaders!
My classes would have 10-12 adult students and it was such an experience to see the Tibetan guy chatting it up with the Chinese grandma. Or the Iranian student sharing tea with the Iraqi. Or the Tamil and Hindi dancing and laughing together to Abba. These things happened every day!!!!!! When I think of them, I’m ashamed of the world we live in, twisted as we are by politics, armies and “good intentions”.

I remember so well one day teaching 5 floors up, Bay and Bloor downtown office building. Suddenly two women get up and start screaming. And I mean, SCREAMING! Everyone was bewildered. What were they screaming about? Well, it had begun to snow. And there they were dancing in front of the big glass windows. All I could do was say, “Welcome to Canada” and then trash my lesson plan as we talked about big, “firsts”.

So this one, this blog goes out to all my former LINC students wherever you are. I hope you have found success and I thank you for all you made me be.

I’ll leave you the most amazing video I know about new refugees to Canada. A must watch! You might even use this with higher level students….
What Makes A Good Teacher Great?

The inestimable Jeremy Harmer has been recently reviewing this immortal topic as he travels the world and collects his paycheck for all the years of hard work he’s put in. [Here](#) is a very much younger Jeremy Harmer discussing the same subject, nice dialogue. Also, I love his answers [here](#). [Here too](#) is a common sense approach.

But back to business. These few words are not about Jeremy Harmer, however chalk full of insight he may be. These are about WHAT MAKE A GOOD TEACHER. I subscribe to the “calling” view of teaching. That many want but few are “called”…. But I really disagree with anyone saying exactly what makes a good teacher. There are many roads to the land of learning. Many roads because the destinations are so multiple – there is just such a diversity of learner(s) out there!

So how do you become “good”? Is it just a question of time? I doubt it. Time does get you there but as human’s we can transcend time, we can compact time, we can work around time — we can be teachers from day one. How?
Well, I espouse the view that anyone who truly grasps and digests and believes in themselves and their calling as teacher IS a teacher. This is the key. Belief. If you don’t know you can’t, you CAN do a lot!!!!

I could go all through the details outlined above. Mein Gott! So much to think over, to absorb, to do naturally and intuitively! So much! But it really won’t happen unless you feel/sense/believe in yourself as a teacher. Take pride in that and let it be your soul. Your soul in the sense that you are helping others through your openness and humanity. Help others in the sense that you share and walk on that same learning journey.

So what makes a good teacher? Mr. Harmer — I think you would agree (despite all the false paths), it is a desire to be a good teacher. What you once called, “caring”. But which I say in an ego driven way, WANTING YOURSELF to care…

That’s it, straight from the heart.
The Top Five Warning Signs

The Teacher Isn’t Yet A Teacher

I know I’ll take a lot of flack for this and I know it isn’t the standard way to go when talking about “teaching” (the standard approach being to talk about what is “good” teaching), however, during my years of helping teachers, I’ve come upon some warning signs that set off alarm bells and signal A) the teacher really isn’t fit for teaching B) the teacher has potential but really needs some “basic training”.

Our profession is unusual. We are experts (us native speakers), we all have scored 100% on our final thesis and have a PhD in English. We are curriculum masters and know our subjects better than any professor of engineering, math, better than any medical specialist. All this without studying a thing!!! BUT, this does not make us a good teacher. It is a start but the proof is not in the pudding but the eating.

The Top 5 Warning Signs of “bad” teaching”.

#1 The photocopier is overheating!!!

Many insecure and weak teachers fill their classrooms with pieces of paper. Instead of “teaching” and communication, they substitute a “thing” — thinking this will represent teaching and learning and students will have confidence they’ve learned because they have “paper”.

English language acquisition is not about acquiring words on paper! It is about acquiring the tools to convey meaning in said language. Do not think that books/paper/things = language learning. In fact, after class, most of this paper goes in the bin, the dustbin of history…..

#2 Playing “word” games

Word games (scrabble, hangman, word searches, matching exercises, bingo) can supplement the language teaching but are not a means of acquiring language. If a teacher is using these for their lesson, they are ineffectively using class time and haven’t yet acquired any idea of the what/how of communicative teaching methodology. If you ask a teacher for an activity or teaching idea and they give you something that is about “playing with words” – tell them that you’ll save it for Sunday morning and your coffee
and morning newspaper. Language does not = words! Language is much more than words and fully is about conveying meaning between two or more principles….Let this be the engine of your classroom, not guessing words.

#3 No preclass chatting or post class chatting

Teachers that know how to form a solid and functional classroom environment, come to class early and engage in student casual conversation. This is a great time to get to know your students more (for designing lessons, assessment) and for creating a supportive social atmosphere in class. Same with those 10 min right after class. Teachers who think a lesson is X o’clock to Y o’clock are not taking their work seriously nor comfortable with it.

#4 Too much teacher focus / directing.

Alarm bells should be roaring if a teacher is spending too much time talking, especially in front of the class. Students do need input, in the form of speech but they also need a variety of speech input (video, audio, other classmates). Also, Comprehensible Output, is much needed especially in the EFL classroom and it is crucial teachers give the students a lot of time to practice speaking. Teachers who spend a lot of time chatting up the class, who are not pacing the lesson properly and never directing the lesson towards the lesson objective — need some “basic training”. Too much time by the teacher at the front of the class, waving a piece of chalk is another warning sign. Teachers need to monitor and move around the classroom. Anxious, skittish, nervous behavior by the teacher in the form of focusing attention on themselves, is a no no. The best teacher is often an invisible teacher….

#5 Too friendly

From my years of teaching, a big warning sign goes off if a teacher is too friendly. How can that be, you say? Well, it is a fine line and a balancing act but good teaching is about sticking to the objective of that day. It is about professionalism and organization. Teachers that are constantly chatting with students, going off on tangents during class etc….. have really crossed a line. A line that should be outside of class. There is plenty of time for that outside of the classroom and I applaud it. But inside, it is our job to teach an objective and use skilled means for the students to acquire and practice that.
The Worst Habits Of EFL Teachers

I just spent a long day watching over 30 demo lessons of aspiring English teachers. As I was evaluating, I kept thinking of a list I’ve had stashed away for writing up an article one rainy day…..the teaching skills that new teachers need to develop / enact from Day 1. These essential skills have been researched and form “good teaching” practice. You can get away without doing them but you’d have to be a master teacher. Even many experienced teachers fail to do these small but crucial things in their classrooms. Here’s the top 5 from my list. Do you do these?

1. Failure to provide the lesson framework / State Objectives explicitly.

Learning is highly linked to not only memory but to expectation. If our minds can envision the pathway, we can walk that path much better and will succeed more often.

Teachers often fail to put an agenda on the board/screen for their students prior to starting their lesson. I don’t know why but it takes only minutes and further, helps the teacher themselves, summarize the lesson delivery prior to the class. Students really need to know what will be coming up — lots of classroom management problems arise from this one feature not being present. Teachers need a simple 1,2,3 agenda on the board, every lesson! Even better if you erase the items as you go along – it gives students a real sense of “going places”. Even with kindie students!

Further, one thing that I consistently see teachers not doing is explicitly listing or stating the objectives of the lesson for students. And I don’t mean the typical…”Okay class, today we will learn about colors” Rather, state what the students will be / should be able to do after the lesson. As in, “Okay class, after today’s lesson you will know all the basic colors”.

2. No Sign Language. No signals.

Teaching is done as much with the body as with the mouth. Teachers need a good repertoire of signals for communicating with the class. A wave of the hand means – repeat. A hand held up means – tell me the answer. A T with the hands means time out and I’ll use L1 etc…. This “sign language” is a basic component of good teaching and students
need to be taught and conditioned to react to these in a consistent fashion. It enhances teaching tremendously and is a very powerful piece of the “good teaching” puzzle. Get your own and make your students aware of them…

3. No pictures! No visual supports!

Especially nowadays, our students are “digital natives” and need visuals. Language teachers, whatever the level, need pictures to support learning/meaning and also to engage students in the lesson content. Without pictures, there is much less “stickiness” to the learning that can happen. Visual supports are a basic item in the EFL teaching repertoire and each lesson should have a set of visuals for prompting and supporting learning. A picture does speak a thousand words!

4. Little Personalization

Good teachers link the content to the personal. Teachers should always link the lesson objective to the student’s own life and also share their own. Of the 30 teachers who did demo lessons on teaching the past tense, ONLY 1, introduced the lesson by telling what she did yesterday. All the rest used some bland reference that was impersonal. We all are interested in people, people we know. Our brains light up and are ready for learning when talking/interacting with and about others. So center your lessons with examples of the student’s and your own lives.

This reminds me of one lesson I observed a few years ago. Perfect lesson about time. Everything well organized, fun, interactive BUT not once did the teacher ask the students what the real time was!

5. Too much parroting – Listen and Repeat.

I’ll get heck for listing this one but I really think there is very little effectiveness to this. If it can be done as a chant and is a dialogue, okay fine — it works in two parts. But if it is just, “Okay class, repeat after me…. Skip it! Students need to learn words in use and context. Which also means they must learn the pronunciation from real use and context. Sometimes to me, it feels like many teachers do the “Listen and repeat” just to feel like they are “really teaching” – meaning, they feel in control and an authority figure. Good teachers don’t use Listen and Repeat unless it is the first time students would be encountering that language and even then, it can be done inventively, with whole sentences – NOT some bland parroting….

Those our my top 5 worst habits. I’m sure we all more or less have some of these failures and they aren’t meant to be taken “carte blanche”. Teaching is an art and there are times/places when some of these can be broken. That’s what makes the puzzle of teaching so fun and challenging…….
What Makes What You Teach, Stick?

I’m putting together an online presentation for some Brazilian teachers and I’ll be talking about “Stickiness”. I thought it would be worthwhile to air my own thoughts specifically about what makes our teaching “stick”. In other words, how to make what we do transfer into the heads and the production/fluency of the learner (now or over time).

I think at bottom, this metaphor is what drives most teachers. It drives a lot of schools and administrators that’s for sure. Progress, success, results….. I also think it is something students desperately want. However, the pickle is that both time and the differing needs of students make it very hard to make things sticky for everyone of your students.

Here though, are my top 5 things teachers can do to make language stick (and let’s be clear, sometimes you can do all these and still fail through no fault of your own).

1. A Warm, Comforting, Social Environment

Krashen’s concept of an “affective filter” gave this a name but teachers at all times and places have always been aware about how important it is to “relax” students. Anxiety, tension really does inhibit unconscious acquisition of language – the best way to learn English long term. A great teacher can relate personally to his/her students, relax them and make them willing to take risks. Risk taking is the most important characteristic we should promote and form in students – research supports this. The only way to do this is to create a safe, nurturing environment.

2. Local and Culturally relevant content

Context is queen with language teaching (content – the words/language are still king). You can’t teach a student what a rutabaga is unless you can provide context, words won’t suffice. The BEST context is the student’s own world and neighborhood – their life. Use local maps, celebrities, songs and issues. It works! Here’s a talk where I expound on CST (Culturally Specific Content) for the Korean context.
3. Consistent Monitoring and Feedback of Student Achievement

Motivation is the pink elephant in any classroom. We have to deal with it and one way is to give students lots of success and especially feedback. They need to be monitored and self-monitor their learning through structured feedback and testing. No, I’m not advocating those big standard tests – rather more authentic assessments (quizzes, reflection, repetition, journals, projects). We have to realize that small but consistent feedback in the way of quizzes, really motivates but also helps students learn language. See this NYTs article for an interesting take on this.

4. Purpose: Linking class activity to real goals and actions

The classroom is a test tube of sorts. It is where we test our language. But it is only half of what makes a fluent speaker. The real test is the real world. Nowadays, it is much easier for teachers to link the trials of the classroom to the big test of the real world. Multi-media, web 2.0 tools, bringing in people from the community, projects etc… – any way to make what the students do in the classroom “meaningful” and “real” is crucial. Students will get motivated and learn better if they know what they are doing is more than just “killing time” or “getting a mark”. Language is a skill, let our students know it isn’t just a video car game and put them in the real car!

5. Differentiation and flexibility through an enacted curriculum

When I teach curriculum development courses – I drill into my students the importance of having an “enacted curriculum”. Not one set in stone as the textbook pretends. One with a plan but a plan that you can alter and shift. It has to be so. If your students don’t know many basic verbs – you can’t march on through a unit on modals! But teachers do, believe me, they do….. Let’s be honest and try to make the classroom an organic place where the teacher is constantly assessing student’s needs and adjusting for their levels and differing learning styles. One size won’t fit all. These issues are in part why I’m such a big fan of SDL, self-directed learning.

One additional thing I would mention is the need to focus on “verbs”. Verbs are the fly paper of language. Get your students mastering many verbs and all the other functional and concrete vocabulary will “stick”.

I’m sure you have your own thoughts – please leave a comment and tell us what you’d put on the list.
Insights Into Learning A Second Language

I’ve recently been updating articles and resources on the TESOL Teacher Training page/course. One article that I read several years ago has always stood out for me. *What do we know about learning and teaching second language – Implications for teaching.* Written by Francis Mangubhai.

It is somewhat technical but still can be read by teachers and gleamed for its intelligence. He sets out some things that he can be pretty sure of, after 25 or more years in the field.

I’ve listed his “insights” below but read the whole article for his own elaboration. Here’s my own take on his first assertion.

1. Adults and adolescents can “acquire” a second language

This suggests the most valuable of all knowledge for teachers – that we don’t “learn” a language but rather “acquire” a language. It is through exposure, an environment of meaningful communication that we “get” language – not by memorization or conscious, ABC building.

Take the learning to drive metaphor. Yes, you can learn to drive in the sense that you can read a book about it, attend a lecture, memorize all the parts of the car and the rules of the road, pass a test. But can you just with that alone drive a car? Not a chance. You must observe (we call this input – and see Stephen Krashen’s work for more elaboration) for many hours, drivers in action. Further, you then must actually drive a car (see Swain’s notion of Comprehensible Output). You can’t actually drive a car through just conscious learning. It has to come in the backdoor through productive practice. Same with language – language learning always comes in the back door and not the front door.

Why do students in foreign countries take so much longer to acquire English, despite all their hours of English classes? Mostly because unlike in an ESL setting, these EFL students don’t get the necessary amount of input. They don’t encounter English enough in the public realm, in the real, non-artificial, non-classroom world. They don’t have the opportunity to “acquire” English through unconscious learning. Of course they learn something, but never enough to actually say they can “drive a car” / “speak “X” language.
But with a proper environment, both adults and adolescents can acquire a second language, especially if given sufficient input (and children do actually need less exposure to language to acquire it). Extensive reading has been shown as one method to foster language input, social media (videos, radio, TV) is another. We as teachers have to learn to “speak” to the student’s need to learn language “implicitly” and realize our “subject” is not like so many others but one which involves “tacit” and personal knowledge and knowing — not facts, blocks and unmovable knowledge.

We might also think about how this might challenge the more “nativistic” views of language acquisition in L1 – such as Chomsky’s own notion of a “language acquisition device”. This LAD according to Chomsky, is hard wired in our brain and with input, we can sort it out and “acquire” language. But do we really need a part of our brain geared to language? Isn’t our brain already powerful enough? (and new “connectivist” theorists would say it is). Chomsky says that the “poverty of input” that a child gets suggests that we do have an LAD. I’m not so sure. We can’t just define language as words or what is spoken, but it is also very non verbal and most children don’t need a lot of verbal input to still start to create connections and organize language in their heads. I’m not so convinced that in our evolutionarily short span of time as “language makers”, we would have developed this “LAD”. So I’m going to sit on the fence.

But what I suggest this “insight” really says to every day teachers is that we should teach language through inductive and playful means. There should be an effort to “hide” the instruction and for students to be unaware they are really learning English. I’m still a big cheerleader of the “keep them talking” notion. The best teachers can step away and be the guide at the side, not the sage on a stage!

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**Insights into Language acquisition and learning.**

1. Adults and adolescents can “acquire” a second language

2. Learners need to focus on form also in order to develop a more complete grammatical repertoire in the second language.

3. The learner’s developing grammatical system, the interlanguage, is often characterized by the same systematic errors as made by a child learning that language as a first language.

4. There is a predictable sequence in second lang. acquisition; learners have to acquire certain structures first before they can acquire others as their interlanguage develops.

5. To become fluent in a language – one must practice it! (and get extensive input)
6. Knowing a language rule and being able to use it in communication or writing are two different things.

7. Isolated, explicit error correction is usually ineffective in SL learning.

8. In meaningful contexts, learners are able to comprehend much more than can be judged by their ability to produce accurately language of comparable complexity.

9. The different rate of learning observed in our students arises out of individual differences.

10. The “pour” into a vessel view of knowledge doesn’t work.

11. Teachers’ practical theories guide their behaviour in classrooms.
In The Classroom
Using Video In The Classroom

I love and use often, any kind of video in the classroom. Here is a presentation outlining some tips and also detailing the MANY kinds of videos that can be used – ranging from How To videos to Mr. Bean to classic instructional videos…so many types.

Also, so many ways. Too many to describe, you just have to be creative! Break it up and most importantly, give the students a task to do while watching (unless the goal is just/only to enjoy!) A task can be some questions or it can be as simple as – “When you hear the word “X”, do this “action””. Students, just like for oral reading, need a task, so they are attentive. Just being attentive will allow input and at least a modicum of learning to take place.

First, some tips for using Video in the classroom.

1. **Keep it short!** Attention span drops off after 3-5 min. So if you have a longer video Break it up into short chunks. I have used the movie “Big” in my classes (get the full
resources here in our resource share area). But it can take 5X the length of the movie and many lessons to complete. So involved we get with the language and activities.

2. Turn off the sound! Video, like pictures, is a great prompt for language production (Comprehensible Output). Add subtitles if possible or provide a transcript! I use Mr. Bean a lot (see our own player/page with all the classics HERE). I use it precisely because without the dialogue, STUDENTS are not passive but active, describing the action. They can state what Mr. Bean is doing. The best way is “backdoor”. One student watches and describes to others. Stop and change as you go…. This is a great production oriented activity! And you’ll laugh to boot!

3. Make it available! Video should be reviewable by the students. Post it up on your on or the school’s website. Don’t have one? Make a wiki! ( www.wikispaces.com). I use EFL Classroom and students can come here afterwards (they can all use the same ID/PW) and review, practice, enjoy again.

4. Make your own! Students will produce more language and be much more excited about learning English if you produce your own class videos. Please think about making a Project Peace video with your students (see some examples in our video section.) The Lemon Tree and Love Story videos there are classic examples of a creative teacher using student made videos to great effect!

5. Always preview the video beforehand!!! In it’s entirety. You never know what surprise might be there. A friend of mine, teaching middle school in Montreal found this out the hard way. He watched 5 minutes of a 20 min. National Geographic video. He was teaching Geography and thought this was great stuff and safe. However at about 16 minutes, they started killing baby seals! He spent many days smoothing over this gaffe with students/parents and staff….

Here are a couple nice reference documents with more info. about using video in the classroom.

Using Multimedia in your classroom Media – David.doc
Using Video in the Classroom.doc
Using Silent Videos in the Classroom

This video is the BOMB!

It is captivating, absorbing, a story par excellence but also SILENT! Yes, silent films are great for getting students to produce language — and after all is said and done, that most often is the hardest thing to do, getting the students speaking and learning language by just communicating. That is our job, to get the students so absorbed in the communicative act that they forget they are learning. When we forget and are not consciously fixated on the language – we learn so much more! And silent, great silent movies do that so well.

So here are a few suggestions on how to use these with students. Also, a quick list of my absolute favorites in this regard….

Ways to use a silent video clip…. 

1. BACKDOOR — In pairs or small groups, one or more students view and describe to the other students who have their backs to the screen. Alternate every few minutes and circulate to give help with vocab (or just write it on the board as needed, students will see you and use to describe the action.

2. PREDICTION – Watch a small part and stop the video. Have students predict what will happen next.

3. VOCABULARY – depending on the theme of the video (for example in The Flat Life you can use action words and / or furniture) have students make lists of words and then use them to 4. RETELL the story/narrative up to that point.

4. DIALOGUE — Students watch and then re-enact the dialogue in the story. Add in a narrator if necessary. This is a great speaking/writing combined lesson. Get them even to use speech bubbles and draw cartoons of the story.
5. WRITING – Have students retell the story, rewrite the story – but with a different ending. First retell and use this as an engagement activity for some really creative writing! Make sure to do the most important part of the writing process – SHARING!

*My favorite silent short videos.*

1. **The Big Snit** — Without a doubt, it has it all! Find it on our NFB video page!

2. **Mr. Bean videos.** I love the Mr. Bean at the swimming pool! Perfect length and works like a charm. Stop at the end and get students to predict what will happen. Get them all in our Mr. Bean player! or more Mr. Bean resources [here](#).

3. **Neighbors.** – this Academy award winner has a special message. Be careful, it isn’t for young kids! Get this in our NFB video section also. The main NFB page has many other great “silent” animations I didn’t list – try [Sainte Barbe](#) and [the Apprentice](#) for example.

*What’s your favorite “silent” video for teaching languages?*

A Short Love Story by Carlos Lascano

The Bottle by Kirsten Lapore
I am writing today about something I STRONGLY feel. Not stepping on anyone’s toes in particular but forgive my own passion in advance. Today, I’d like to publicly advocate my detest with textbooks and in particular, the gross deficit of thought, creativity, respect for learners, price gouging, addiction and lack of reality that most, if not all, are stamped with.

I’ve been around the block.

I’ll say it again, I’ve been around the block. I’ve used most kinds of textbooks and I’ve even participated in the making of my fair share. I teach curriculum development courses and know a thing or two about learners and language, syllabi and silly byes. With this experience I think comes a certain need for leadership and especially cheerleading teachers to wean themselves away from bad practices (like the use of a textbook) if at all possible.

I’m not against a book.

I’ll say it again. I’m not against a book. Books are wonderful things. You can take ‘em anywhere almost, you can get them wet, drop them down a rabbit hole, read them in the toilet or tram. They are a revelation and all teachers should use books in abundance. Teach a love of books and you’ve done more than just teach English. You’ve touched eternity.

No, I’m not against books – just textbooks. I don’t care which way you rub it, how you rub against it — at the end of the day, no teacher or learner salivates in remembrance of fond passages or fascinating facts from “their old textbook”. The textbook is forgotten. Why? Because no matter how you sugar coat it – they aren’t REAL, they aren’t created by “authors” in love with their work (I’m ready for the debate on this – let’s go!!!). They are mere pay as you go, proverbial pin points on a map to nowhere….. They don’t touch the soul, they don’t shine nor may I say – get to the heart of what language learning is, “connecting like to like”.

I’ll skip over the fact that they horribly de-train teachers and create dependence (not to mention the dependence of learners too). That’s another subject.
So where to now?

Well, in my courses I always emphasize how curriculum should be build upon reality. The student’s reality. Best if it comes from the student – their choice of books, interests etc…. I also mention how if I had my druthers, *I’d teach any level of learner* by using and designing materials around “*The Guinness Book of World Records*”. As wonderful a text as they come. See the attached article below for a nice description of how it can be used as a teaching material. Despite the price, it could be used for the whole of a student’s English learning and is also available FREE online. Also, maybe send students to URDB to do activities and set their own world record!

*Kieran Egan’s recent plenary* got me again thinking about this “amazing ” book. He mentions it and the puzzling fact that so little attention in TESOL is devoted to the passion of young learners to “collect” and piece together the world through an interest in the esoteric and extreme. Why hasn’t this book — so well known and with such intrinsic motivation, been used as an authentic text “book”? *I’m putting out a call to arms and hoping against hope that someone will step up and help me get a leveled syllabus created.* It would sell like hotcakes, I’m more than sure.

Not only could you teach every possible language element and function – you could also get students participating in their own dreams and passions. You could inspire – which is the end of all teaching and all books (and which our English textbooks NEVER do). I know its power. You see, I set several Guinness World records and had the privilege of visiting schools and speaking with students about my record. I even made a worksheet from one of the magazine articles, which I used with students! I saw how student’s eyes lit up, how engaged they were – all by this magical notion of “the possible”. Why would we ever let our students sleep in a textbook’s soft keep – knowing the dreams and revelry possible in the magical Guinness Book of World Records??????

Think about all I’ve said. I’m not asking for any textbook burning parties nor making any fantastic “dogme” / nazi nor manifesto like statements. But I’d just like earnest, hard working, passionate educators to think more, think more about how we might be subversive and upend the use of the textbook in our schools – quietly, like the best of all revolutions. Let’s set a record! Click the logo below to see an inspirational slide show of many more records!

*Guinness World records as curriculum.pdf*
Top 5 Pieces Of Advice

On Using Technology in Education

I’ve just finished my usual technology workshop “pell mell”. Many hours meeting hundreds of teachers at their orientation to teaching in public schools here in Korea.

I love it but it is exhausting. Yet it energizes me too. During the workshops, as usual, I go with “the group” and get off topic and take sidebars / untrodden paths. That’s my style. But I always hit (for the most part) the core ideas and examples. (and send them to my tech wiki ELT and TECH)

I always urge teachers to “muck about” and that it really isn’t as hard as we think. Yes, it takes time but it pays off big time. It is more about the paradigm shift that needs to occur in each of us – as the above video highlights so well.

Here are my top 5 pieces of advice for language teachers using technology. Also, see my 2 Prezis on the subject too! Here and here.

#1 Use technology only if it meets the lesson’s language objective and enhances learning.

This may seem self evident but too often I think, teachers do bring in technology just for the buzz and thrill. They don’t ask hard enough questions like, “is it the best way to help students acquire “x” language point?” “how long will it take?” “What’s the cost/benefit compared to something else? ” Engagement is great but it really isn’t the point of education. Stay focused on the language objectives and make sure any technology you use – really, truly helps that objective be reached.

#2 Download what you will use in class.

Even here in Korea, streaming can’t be counted on. Also, the internet though usually a stable platform, just can’t be counted on. Download swf files by right clicking and “save as”. Save videos by using http://keepvid.com or audio by using http://vidtomp3.com . At a minimum, play a video all the way through before the lesson, that way it will be in your computer’s cache and stream better.
#3 Don't get lost in the forest. Find what works for you and stick with it!

Every day, hundreds of new applications, tools come online. I once tried to keep up and try everything. Nothing worse for a teacher! Just find a few tools or sites that you find suitable and match your own teaching style and also your student’s needs. Master them as much as you can and then use. Use a lot, your students will get used to them and benefit through that. Don’t get lost in the forest of logos! (get The Best that I do recommend)

#4 Give students control. Get them using technology and make it interactive.

Technology works because it isn’t static like a page of a book. It is dynamic and a teacher should treat it so. Students should be encouraged to use the classroom computer responsibly. Trust me, they can click and advance things just as well as you! If possible, use your school’s library computers or computer lab. Get students using sites as homework or making games (like Fling the Teacher) which you can use for review in class.

#5 Make friends with the “tech” guy at school or a competent colleague.

Your best friend at school should be the person in charge of the computers (of course the librarian is also important!). Buy them a gift and get them working on your computer and making it purr. No technology guru around? Make friends with colleagues who have good technology skills and share something you do well in return. Teachers helping teachers.

So get out there and start preparing for Web 3.0 – the future is already here and it is in the form of our students!
The “Draw” of Drawing

As a language teacher, I often use drawing as a way for students to “learn” language. Students love drawing and it is a very motivating tool that almost every student enjoys. Even those students who have difficulty drawing can have fun given a teacher that shows their own inept drawing ability and keeps things “light”.

I wrote “learn” because the real purpose of getting students drawing is not so they “learn” language but rather unconsciously acquire language. The distinction between L1 language acquisition and L2 learning of a language – where, how, when etc… has long been a contentious and debated issue. Please read more here, clicking the links to some valuable ELT history/discussion on this issue. What I’d like to add here though is my belief that “drawing” is one way (music, drama, tpr, laughter, even alcohol are others) in which 2nd language teachers can tap into the unconscious mind and get students “acquiring” a language and not “learning” a language.

When we “draw”, we reach into some primitive and automatic process. We concentrate and relax at the same time. The mind opens up and language can “pour” in. It really can. So much of what we call, “good teaching practice” is only the teacher’s skill in relaxing students, even distracting students so that they can tap into the unconscious processes that allow language to be acquired. I do not believe that there is a “language window”. We can at all times/ages, open that window. It just gets more difficult as we age.

Still, I don’t like the word – “acquire”. I prefer the Chomskyian term “grow”. We grow a language. Yes, at first we consciously and explicitly plant a seed (memorize structures/vocabulary) – but that is only a small part of the whole process. The most important aspect is the care, the watering, the nurturing, the “time” of living and experiencing that allows growth. This is the teacher’s job, to set those conditions so that growth of language happens. Drawing is a great way – it is sunlight to the seed of language. Drawing also make a steel connection to the “ego” of the learner. It is highly personal and provides titanium like context – something invaluable for teaching and language acquisition.

But enough theory! Let’s get practical!

Here are some of the ways I’ve used “drawing” with my students. They work and I highly urge all teachers to use them when possible. And please note *** drawing is not just a “kids” thing!
1. **Describe and Draw**: One student describes a picture and the other draws it. A basic two-way task. See my description with resources [HERE](#). Another option is to just give students an A4 piece of paper. At the top, write a common title. Then ask students what they see. As they describe, draw together (the teacher draws large on the board). Label too, as you go along. A very informal but beneficial lesson….

2. **Draw and Describe**: Put on “mood” music. Give students a theme – let’s say, “At the ………”. Then let them draw for 5 min. Afterwards, in groups, they label and describe their drawings.

3. **Vocabulary “solidifying”**: It is difficult to acquire “words”. However, when we draw those words while learning, we activate a powerful part of our brain. I have students draw pictures in their notebooks beside newly acquired vocabulary. I also have them do so on worksheets, word searches etc ….. One concrete example would be a 2 way task where a student tells their partner the vocabulary to draw in “X” box. See the example below.

4. **Storybook Making / Cartoons**: Students make story/picture books to help them acquire language. They first draw the pictures for the story using a storyboard (very easy to make, just fold an A4 piece of paper into as many boxes as you need to detail the story). Then, the students write the story for the pictures. The teacher or peers correct and then they make a final product / book. Susan Kapuscinski is an amazing resource and teacher whose [Making Storybooks](#), I highly recommend. Use her videos (on ehow or youtube) showing how each book is made too!

5. **Doodle Songs**: much like making a storybook only this time, students “tell” the song by creating pictures to contextualize the lyrics. Do a song the students like. Give students parts/lines of the song (make sure they number their picture so you can put it in order afterwards!). The students draw a picture for their line of the lyrics. We have a full player of doodle songs on EFL Classroom. See the wonderful example below, a teacher on EFL Classroom made. More in our videos!

6. **Pictionary**: Yes, the obvious standard. Students are given a vocabulary picture they must draw. The other students guess and the first person guessing correctly wins a point. There are many variations. Here are two online options. A) [Odopod sketch slideshow](#). Students watch and describe/guess. They will be WOWED. B) [Draw My Thing](#) – my game of 2009. Students can play at home or it can be used as a filler in class. Just like pictionary but in real time and online. You draw with your mouse and you compete for points!

7. **Online tools**: If you just want a handy way to draw on the computer or big screen – Go [HERE](#) or [HERE](#). [Scribble Maps](#) is also a great way to draw with maps. [Sketcast](#) is also a big winner!

8. **Other ways!** Drawing can be brought into almost any lesson plan. Too many ways to elaborate but think about how you might incorporate drawing into each of your lesson plans if possible!
I Got A Feeling
By.. The Black Eyed Peas

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Person B:

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Making A Doodle Video with Students

Doodle songs/videos are a great activity you can do with your class! They really promote contextualized learning and motivate students because you have a final product and of course – there is music! They are the perfect example of SCC or Student Created Content.

I was asked by a member for some info. about creating one – so in the name of education, here is my simple guide. A few short steps and tips.

First, what is a doodle video? Well, it is simply drawings that support the lyrics of the song. Students make the drawings and then they are each photographed and put together with the music to make a video. See all the doodle videos we have HERE. I also recommend the doodle video folder in our A/V player – some great songs there. Project Peace actually is a doodle video of a sort too, see examples there.
So, how to make one?

1. Choose a song.

This isn’t such an easy thing! Find out what your students like/want and balance that with a song that has repetition (for learning) and also isn’t so fast. A fast song doesn’t work too well because the images/words flash by so so fast. “I gotta feeling” works because it follows these few simple selection rules.

2. Learn the Song.

Also important, don’t get ahead of yourself! Students should learn the song with a song sheet or if you are ambitious, make a karaoke or find a “subbed” version on youtube. The students should be familiar with the song. Then, show them a doodle video and tell your class, you are going to turn the song into a doodle!

3. Get organized – Get drawing!

A good tip here is to pair students up. Number each line of the song and put the number and the lyric line, on the back of each piece of A4 paper (so you can keep track- Very Important!). Give each pair or student, a line of the song and ask them to draw a picture to help show the meaning of the line.

Another tip. Get the students to fold the bottom of the piece of paper and write their lyric line there, nice and big, in clear print. The picture goes above. This will save you from having to put subtitles on when you make the video. It will save you time – BIG time and also make a more attractive video.

Monitor, encourage and get the doodle pictures done!

4. Camera and Production time!

After you have all the pictures finished in order (and note, lines that repeat mean the picture could have on the back and represent line 6,7,8 – for example) – take out your camera and take a photo of each. Put the doodle on a nice clear background and make sure the lighting is good. Even get a student to do this for you! I’m a clutz with a camera and my students do a much better job. Even get them making the video if possible!

Yes, now that you have the photos – upload them to your computer. Now, it is time to make the video.

a) Open up Windows Movie Maker – a free program on every PC computer. Click START and then select this little icon. If you have Windows 7, WMM won’t automatically be on your computer – you’ll have to download and install it yourself. Go HERE. Microsoft has a great tutorial site for using WMM and also visit the WMM forum for tips.
b) Now you will have to put the photos into WMM, add the mp3 file of the song and then “sync” or “time” them both together. Finally, “Produce” as a movie. Produce as an mp4 or Avi, these are the better quality and most sharable formats. This process isn’t as hard as you think. In the name of brevity – watch this tutorial video on how to do this in WMM or get a colleague to help. As mentioned, get your students making the video if possible! It is their creation and they probably have skills way beyond the teacher (many do).

5. Watch, Share, Enjoy!

Put it up here on EFL Classroom 2.0 and your school’s website. Get many students watching it. They will learn English as they enjoy it.

To end – here is probably the video that started the whole “doodle” craze. If you haven’t seen it previously, enjoy!
Story / Picture Book Making

Writing storybooks or making picture books is a great way to reinforce grammar and vocabulary. It also gives students confidence and pride in “producing” something visible and tangible to measure their English language learning experience.

There are several steps to making a storybook and I’ll use my own Mr. X’s incredible Day/Yesterday as an example. Get the ppt/video here for use with students.

1. **Tell the story with students.** Play a video / use a storybook / use a ppt but pictures are essential! Go slow and exaggerate and use your voice/gestures to communicate vocabulary and content/context. Draw out their schema / background knowledge. You might get inspiration on the incredible Tarheel Reader where you can also download the books as powerpoints.

2. **Students re-tell the story.** Note the vocabulary for the story on the board and students use this to make sentences to retell the story. Or, just show pictures and use them as a prompt to retell the story. See how I used Voicethread to retell the Mr. X story. But you can just take the words off the ppt and use a picture only ppt.

3. **Writing.** Students are now more comfortable with the story and vocabulary. Get them to write 6-10 sentences to outline the story. For each sentence, provide a prompt on the board for lower level students. Higher level students can add more information for that sentence number. The teacher monitors and helps correct/edit. I use this worksheet for Mr. X.

4. **Bookmaking.** Give students some sheets of A4. They fold in half and staple to make the book. Or fold again and cut the folds to make a mini book (students usually like this smaller book more!). Students cut and paste their pictures into the book and also write their text from the worksheet. Color, make a title page, borders and personalize.

There are many types of books you can make by folding/cutting paper. The most incredible resource for printable pdfs and videos showing bookmaking is Susan Kapusinsky’s “Making Books”. Here she describes how to make an accordion book. But look at all her pdf instruction sheets for many types. Also – this kid makes an amazing mini book from one sheet of paper! Learn more about instant books here.
IDEAS

5. Present/Publish. Students can read their books to the class or in small groups. Sharing is a must! Make a library for your student produced books!

Here are just some ideas for picture / story books:

1. Stories - Retell a traditional or just read story!

2. habits - My Day

3. routines - Trips/Holidays/Weekends

4. letters / words - alphabet books / word books

5. favorites – All about me books

6. comics – Adventure books of heroes/comedy

7. vocabulary – dictionary books describing the vocab category (ie. Sports)
Someone once quipped that genius was “seeing the obvious”. Or as William James added, “the ability to overlook the irrelevant”. Well, by that criteria, I think I’m up there with Einstein and Hawkings because not a day goes by without me being astounded by the power of the written word.

I am reminded of it and think of it continually. Looking at the signs I automatically obey as I walk down the street. While reading a memo or watching the computer screen. How do I become these words I read? What magic!

Reading isn’t easy. Yet, we miraculously acquire that capacity and use it for enormous benefit. The wealth and magnificence of our times owes most of its debt to this great “learned” skill. We learn it with our parents and teachers and in doing so, somehow share a deep, deep bond. Almost, if I may say the word, “sacred” and “holy” bond. The door to some of the answers we as humans are oblivious to – is inched open a crack. We see some light beyond.

This documentary below, really tells it much better than I ever can. It tells of a project to connect incarcerated women with their children on the outside through reading. It also highlights those “good” people that make “great” things happen. I won’t drone on anymore, just watch and really see what the magic of reading is about….. Amazing and inspiring …..
The other day while doing some reading of others blogs, I came across a teacher’s blog post with poetry.

I really love it when I find some poetry on a blog, even a blog about teaching! Poetry is a great way to “think” about ourselves, our relationships, our classrooms, our jobs – it makes a better teacher, I’m convinced. Not to mention, so many fine poets were teachers – the two go together like coffee and donuts.

You don’t have to write it (but that’s even better), just savor it. Suck on it like a cough drop. It heals and brings a higher understanding.

Here are a couple of my own suggestions regarding poetry and “being a teacher”. Do you have any to share?

1. Charles Bukowski. When he gets it right, he gets it right. Here is him reading a great poem on “Style” – something everyone can related to. Also, my favorite poem of his and one that I hold dear to heart – “I met a genius”. Every teacher should ponder this poem while thinking of our own students…..
I MET A GENIUS

I met a genius on the train
today
about 6 years old,
he sat beside me
and as the train
ran down along the coast
we came to the ocean
and then he looked at me
and said,
it’s not pretty.

it was the first time I’d
realized
that.

2. Richard Brautigan. His poem – is an amazing meditation on what school is and how we might go about to fix it.

The Memoirs of Jesse James

*I remember all those thousands of hours that I spent in grade school watching the clock, waiting for recess or lunch or to go home.
Waiting: for anything but school.
My teachers could easily have ridden with Jesse James for all the time they stole from me.*

3. Irving Layton. He taught school for decades and that seeped into his poetry from time to time. As irreverent and passionate a poet as there can be. Canada’s gift to the world.

The Lesson.
This is a finger
This is an eye
Even a small cut causes pain, afterwards soreness;
the terror comes when a bone-shattering bullet enters the neck, the groin or the blood rushes after the retreating knife The thought of death of being suddenly reduced to nothing, make the lips go white You must say to yourself this is not a film, this is real and it’s happening to a man who was once an infant and cried in the dark Those are real intestines spilling out into his hand; the pain and terror are real Let’s begin the lesson again This is a finger This is an eye

4. Spoken Verse collection on Youtube. This collection, voice overs by one person of thousands of great poems, is a must. A work of love and lots of gems for everyone. Also, PBS’s poetry page is a pretty good garden of words. I have been writing poetry for many years. Finally began putting it online and you can find it at A Poem A Day if interested. Not specifically about teaching but about LIFE and all things within.

“A poem is a little lens through which we can examine at close range some of the details of the universe.”

LUCI SHAW
I would like to share one of the ideas that most invigorates and informs me as a teacher. The idea of “Student Created Content” or SCC. I borrow the term from UGC or UCC, “user generated/created content” that is the motor of Web 2.0 and the internet.

**What is SCC?**

It is an approach that tries to simplify the teaching/learning process and equalize the power relationship that exists between teacher/learner (much like CLL – community language learning does with its focus on the teacher as a language “knower”). It also is a way of instruction that completely focuses on the student’s world/context. That all language learning must start from that focal point, no where else. The teacher models and then the students create the content and re-practice based on the teacher’s modeling as an “expert”.

I believe we focus too much on “teaching” without giving due attention to “learning”. We need to turn things upside down and get out of our tired and worn delivery methods. SCC as an approach does that. Those interested might listen to this podcast – an excellent summary of the teaching/learning divide.

It is an approach. There is no “one way” but rather some basic tenants to be followed. These are:

1. **The students create the content** (worksheets, words, sentences, topics, dialogues that will be used for instructional purposes). It is a complete “Personal” approach to language instruction.

2. **It is REAL**. Not about anything artificial or from a textbook. It is about the lives and times of the student and teacher. The classroom situation is no longer treated as an artificial “studio” but rather as a meeting place for real events, for real talk about real things that interest the students.

3. **The teacher is also a learner and does what the students do.** In this fashion, the teacher is not all knowing but a participant. In this “low level” way, the power barrier that exists is diminished and better learning occurs and better modeling of the language.
4. **It is an inductive approach. It is a wholistic approach.** The students are first engaged and prior knowledge elicited on the topic. Only then, are the students asked to create the content and practice the language first modeled and encountered holistically and in context.

5. **It is simple in design.** There is not a lot of planning for the teacher. The focus is on instruction, the art of “how” and not “what”. Teachers using an SCC approach don’t have to spend time planning, making materials, preparing. Their energy and reflection goes into developing their teaching skills as they happen, during instruction. The students create the text and textbook.

I now have 60 strong lessons I’ll be sharing in the near future in an ebook where I’ll also expand my thoughts on the SCC approach. Get some of them [HERE](#) and start mucking about with your students. But let’s look at one example. Also, search on [EFL Classroom 2.0](#) using “scc” to see many other examples.

**Travel Talk Lesson**

**The lesson delivery is always the same.**

1. **The teacher uses a photo/picture to elicit student response.** Student prior knowledge is primed as they try to communicate with the teacher. The students talk about “the teacher’s world/life”. *In the example below – Travel Talk, the students ask the teacher about his/her last vacation. It is always about “reality”.*

2. **The students are asked to create the content.** This can be in the form of words, questions, brainstorming, drawing etc….. *In this example, they choose items of a dream vacation.* The materials are created simply so that the student can easily add the content based on their life experience and knowledge.

3. **Using this content the students in small groups or pairs, practice with it.** The teacher sets up the target language but from the nature and simplicity of the materials, this is usually self evident. *In this example, the students ask about each others dream vacation using the question prompts.* The teacher monitors and even participates with students.

4. **A student or students become the teacher.** Step 1 / activity 1 is repeated but this time a student is the teacher. *In this example, a student is asked about their last vacation just like the teacher was to begin the lesson.* The teacher is off the stage and to the side as the language is reviewed and used purposefully.
Culturally Specific Content

I am of late, a very big fan of culturally specific content. What I mean is English teaching material that uses the student’s own culture and environment as the backdrop and “content”.

In an EFL context, I think we need to emphasize more the local culture/world and less so the “English” world. For a few reasons. 1. The media already does a good job of this. 2. Respect. Why should we be cultural imperialists? 3. The development of world “Englishes” and the spread of English around the world means that there is a devolution in terms of “English culture” – this should be reflected in our classrooms and approach.

In an ESL context (when teaching English in an “English” country – this is sometimes done but most often not. Most schools and governments deliver all the content through a “cultural” prism – teaching the students about the new foreign culture. In some respects this is necessary but I really think that if you want students to acquire language quickly and most importantly “deeply” [for language grows and it is up to us teachers to get the roots to set deeply] — you have to teach through the two most important doorways a student has > their ego and their culture/world.

See my presentation Korea specific and also a lot of background reading.

Why use CSC?

1. **The students have context!** Context is one of the most important aspects of language teaching. It provides students with the backdrop and ability to understand and link their own language/culture and that of English. When students talk about their own club / community / city country/ culture (my own concept of the 5 ever widening circles of “world”), they have a lot of prior knowledge upon which they can speak. In a nutshell – **CSC LEADS TO MUCH MORE SPEAKING AND COMPREHENSIBLE OUTPUT.** Also, there is less “interference” and culture that has to be translated – this leads to better teaching. Further, there is a necessity and compulsion to speak – which is the most important thing for a language learner.

2. **It’s interesting.** We are all more interested in our own world (celebrities / economics / people / events) than that elsewhere, all things being equal. You will see an increase in student interest if you use CSC.

3. **It teaches more than English.** Let’s face it. Our students overseas will most likely be living in their own country for the rest of their lives. It is encumbent on us teachers to teach not just English but to prepare them for their own future lives.

4. **The teacher learns!** Yes, it is much better when two learn instead of one. The teacher as an involved participant and learner can only help the learning/classroom culture. Also, it will make the teacher’s life in the foreign culture, just that much less daunting and trying…..
Using Culturally Specific Music to Teach English

Too often me thinks, too often we unintentionally push our cultural view onto those learning English. No more subtle way than music and film. We use so many “western” songs in our teaching that we almost become immune from even a thought of all the fine music by second language singers in English out there.

Whatever culture or country you teach in, I’m sure there are singers who are singing in English. They are great role models for your students and no matter the quality of their “English” singing, they should be used instead of English pop song culture if possible (not all the time, but from time to time).

Take a look at our International Music in English discussion for lots of inspiration! Also, this general presentation about using music in teaching.

I teach in Korea and have made lots of karaoke songs for learning English, that feature Korean singers singing in English or with lyrics translated into Korean. Valuable for 3 reasons;

1. **Motivation.** Students get pumped to see their own idols in a lesson and also using English! If they can do it, so can “I”, your students will think.

2. **Culture.** It is a subtle but pervasive force in language teaching. When students sense intuitively that their culture is not respected or being “pushed at”, they automatically go on hold and language learning becomes very difficult. (there are many studies on this aspect of cultural imperialism/domination, go here where I have my presentation material of culturally specific teaching for many.)

3. **Noticing.** This is especially important for higher level students. Becoming aware of language and the differences their native tongue has with English is very important for good fluency and acquisition. By comparing in a song with a translation, they really see some significant differences.
Bi (Rain) is a huge star in Korea and also internationally. See the video above where he sings first in English (with lyrics) and then in Korean (with a better than whoever made his English lyrics) translation. *** his English singing is horrendous, bear with it if you are a native speaker!

You might also enjoy this interview with Bi – he was interviewed by Time magazine. I use this when teaching teachers about evaluation. I let them watch it, they are thoroughly engrossed! Then, I get them to discuss among themselves what kind of mark they’d give him for spoken fluency. Sometimes I ask them to give marks for different areas – word choice, intonation, pronunciation, grammar, composure etc….

Invariably they give him high marks. Then I have to tell them that he can’t speak much English at all! As the story goes, he was given the questions and memorized everything. And how good he was at it! Now, he speaks more English but still not lots. A good lesson in regards to evaluating fluency and also that money can’t buy you a language – you got to do the work and talk the walk!
Every Book Has It’s Cover
Every Lesson Has It’s Hook

Yes, every book does have its cover and for a reason. The cover is the most important part of the book. Why? Well not because it tells the story or has “content” or “stuff”. Rather, because it fires us up, it gets us motivated, it stirs our soul. It creates anticipation – that potent elixir that all students (and teachers) need to drink.

Our lessons are similar. We need a HOOK! Something to create energy and excitement about our time together. And I don’t just mean chit-chat and the usual start of class bantering. I mean something that creates a metaphor for the content and suggests how sweet and delicious the meal (lesson) will be.

I have many “hooks” I use. I’ve mentioned a few below. But first, here is an example I use often in teacher training to highlight the need of teachers to “bring the unknown into the known” – which is the basic principle of teaching. It is a picture and I ask teachers to turn to a partner and tell them what they see.

I then write “Cow” on the board or the power point. Do they see the cow? If needed, I then outline the cow with a pen or ppt highlight marker. (if you need help, it is on the left, face/snout facing you).
After this, the workshop goes well. Teachers get the point and are “hooked”. We then discuss basic teaching principles for contextualizing content and getting students to “see the cow”. Here are some more optical illusions that might work.

All our lessons should have a hook! And I’m not talking about the now ubiquitous, “put on a youtube video to get everyone engaged/excited, technique”. No. Videos are great but they seldom are a hook. A hook needs human conversation and exchange. A story, an experiment, a magic trick, a demonstration, a picture. It needs real shared surprise!

If you haven’t gotten the point yet, read on through a few of my favorite “hooks” and what they are good for teaching. You’ll soon understand

1. **The 3 cup magic trick.** This guy explains it completely, so watch the video. I do this in class and the students are amazed! I use it to teach sequences. First, first of all, the first thing / Next, then, after that / lastly, finally, last but not least.

2. **The birthday trick.** Great for introducing months or as a listening exercise for students. Read about it [HERE](#) on Teaching Recipes. I used this all year with my grade 4 class and they constantly were hunting about to find out how I knew their birthdays!
3. **The Full Bowl Science experiment.** Fill up a whole bowl with water, right to the brim. Make sure you have paper towel underneath. Then ask the students to predict how many coins you can drop in it, before it will overflow. Get them to write their predictions down. Then start counting (yes, this is for teaching numbers!). You will be amazed and too your students. It will hold lots of coins – bring many. Finally, with higher level students, discuss why it can hold so many (because the surface of water has tension and a “skin” that allows it to go over the rim – that’s why insects can walk on top of water!).

4. **The money trick.** I use this to teach about currencies of the world or for any lesson involving money. Bring a student to the front. Take out a nice, crisp bill. Put one of your elbows on a desk and place the money between a thumb and forefinger. Drop the bill and catch it between your fingers. Simple right? Well, it is easy for you because you know when it will be dropped. Do the same with the student and tell them if they catch it (they can’t lower their hand with the bill), they can keep it. You’ll have fun!

There are so many, many, many more hooks! I love magic tricks – [ehow](https://www.ehow.com) is a site with many. [Here’s one](https://www.ehow.com) that is simple but so many students get fooled.

**What is your favorite “hook”?**
What I know now but didn’t then

Teaching a language isn’t as easy as it sounds – to do it well. Just showing up to a class and speaking (we call this modeling language) is only half the job. And that other half is an artform that one acquires over the years.

My own growth as a teacher has been on many levels: my beliefs as a teacher, my own classroom management skills, my knowledge of resources, my ability to design materials, my knowledge of the subject, my understanding of the process of learning and in particular language learning and much more….

I remember being a “pup” just out of teacher’s college. I was thrown into classes with multiple levels, multiple age groups and just a piece of chalk. I had to learn as I went along. It was a sharp learning curve. I wish I had known then, what I know now. Fortunately, I had a reflectiveness, some creativity and a love of teaching that allowed me to swim and survive.

What do I know now that I didn’t know then? How have I grown as a language teacher? Here’s 10 nuggets of the things that I’ve learned along the way.

1. **Teach students not the subject.** Find the key to motivate/help each student when possible. Personalize all content and get the students to have a personal connection to the language point/material. Further, if a lesson isn’t going well, chuck it. The most important thing is student happiness and not the knowledge they acquire. Promote happiness, you’ll make a lifelong learner not a temporary one.
2. **Give students responsibility.** My mother puts it, “there is a big difference between holding a hand and chaining a soul”. Figure out that difference. Get students learning autonomously, discovering their own mistakes and taking responsibility for their own learning and the classroom.

3. **Disappearing.** The best teacher is an unnoticed teacher. Truly. Teachers organize the learning environment and then step away. Teaching isn’t a spectacle with the teacher in the spotlight.

4. **Reception before production.** When I first started teaching, I thought the aim (for all) was to get students yakking. I didn’t realize the power of comprehensible input and extensive reading/listening – for preparing students to communicate and be ready for fluency.

5. **It’s not “My Way” but “Our Way”.** Listen to your students. They should have a say and voice in the curriculum. Same with colleagues and staff. Listen to them, learn from them. The classroom door may shut but you are not alone.

6. **Slow down.** Pause often and allow students to process the language you uttered. Be deliberate. I used to teach at a hundred miles an hour and never finish anything. Now I teach at 10 mph, we finish everything and we learn much more.

7. **We teach for those who need help.** I always used to teach to the top 5% and damn the rest. They’d have to be satisfied with the morsels that fell off our table. Usually those top 5% were in the front row. Now, I use the whole classroom and am there for the bottom students – the other ones will learn in any case. Not the ones that really need help.

8. **Learning words is not learning language.** Words are only one piece of the puzzle. There are many more pieces. I used to think I was a good teacher if my students remembered words. Now I think I’m successful if my students can use those words in
real situations, to communicate real needs. Word play, word searches are sometimes useful but more often than not, just for a breather in the classroom.

9. Find your place. There aren’t really any bad teachers out there. Just teachers that haven’t yet found “their place”. I think anyone can teach. But what’s crucial is that the teacher put themselves in an environment that makes “good teaching” happen – one that suits their own personality and teaching style and belief set. I realize many teachers don’t have the choice but we should try if we can – to really figure out what is the best teaching “place” for our own talents. I just went through this – leaving probably the best teaching job in the country. Money, top school, brilliant students, low hours, status. However, I knew it wasn’t for me, for the benefit of my own teaching talents. Be true to thy own teaching self.

10. There is a difference between “busy work” and “busy working”. Years ago, I just wanted the students to be busy. I thought that was an indication they were learning. I didn’t understand something fundamental about learning – it must be a process of emotional engagement. Students can do things in class and not learn a drop – mostly because they don’t have an emotional commitment to that activity. Create and foster this through the provision of motivating content and context, giving students material / assignments where they can succeed and making the classroom a place they want to be.
Thanks for your support

It’s not about what happens on the board.

It’s about what happens because of what happens on the board.

_Hoping the use of this book does_