

Back in the Classroom...

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“There is now considerable and incontrovertible international evidence that the major in-school influence on student achievement is the quality of the classroom teacher.”

(Dinham, 2008:7)

1 Background

In a post-graduate course in 1975 with Terry Quinn, he asked me to write an overview of linguistics and language teaching. In this paper, I concluded that: “because it concentrates on the neuro-physiological, biological, electro-chemical relationships which assimilate, store and create language, the area of greatest potential may prove to be the at present embryonic field of neurolinguistics, or its forebear, neurophysiology.” (Cunningham, 1975:16)

I have seen little to change my mind in this respect... but this is not to say that we have not advanced significantly...

As the wheel turns and my career evolves, I find myself back in the classroom (of Mater Christi College) confronted by the need to adapt to classroom reality of a new century, a new millennium, a new generation.

2 The Intervening Years

What I have seen – what we have all seen – is a progression of methods and approaches which focus less on the teacher and teaching, less on the language per se and more on the learner, how we learn languages – and assessment.

Let’s think about it for a moment!

In my experience, the direct method co-existed as a reference outside the classroom with the grammar-translation method in place, then in the debate of the 1960s, experimentation and studies centred on the panacea: the audiolingual method. Methods disappeared with the audiovisual method, replaced by ‘approaches’: situational, notional-functional, communicative,... - before a return to equilibrium with a variety of eclectic and/or interactive, approaches. At the same time, we witnessed alternative approaches –

immersion (or partial immersion), especially in primary language learning, Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), suggestopaedia, the Silent Way, Total Physical Response (TPR), Neurolinguistic Programming (NLP), Language Awareness (Candelier 2004), and, more recently, the entertainment immersion ‘method’, etc (See also Balboni, 2006:23ff, 49-50; Littlewood, 2004:107). In the 1980s and 1990s, we tinkered and traivailed, but the shift to learning was also apparent in preferred learning styles – Dinham (2008:14) makes the point that “catering to a particular perceived ‘learning style’ reinforces that style (ironically, learning styles are *learned*, not innate) at the expense of other approaches” - and, later, the multiple intelligences of Howard Gardner (Armstrong, 2000:2):

- linguistic intelligence
- logical-mathematical intelligence
- spatial intelligence
- bodily-kinesthetic intelligence
- musical intelligence
- interpersonal intelligence
- intrapersonal intelligence
- naturalist intelligence

as we await the ninth – existential intelligence (Silver, Strong & Perini, 2000:9) – and, perhaps, others.

Simultaneously, we saw emerge an emphasis on assessment, on learning targets (or graded levels of achievement, etc) and on profiling student progress against set criteria and descriptors. We also recognised the need for students to assume responsibility for learning autonomously beyond the confines of the classroom (Raya, Lamb & Vieira, 2007) and extend and augment the 15% of their student lives spent in school.

3 Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) and Information Communication Technology (ICT)

Ambushing society and education from the 1980s was the infusion of technology. Primitive computers (e.g., Acorn, BBC, Apple, etc) in the 1980s fostered the term and practice of Computer-Assisted Language Learning (and permutations) before the increasing use of technology for communication – in what we now know as ‘email’ – and information (after the creation of the web in 1991).

In 2000, 4 per cent could access the Internet. What is it now? Around one billion or 15 per cent.

We have also seen the evolution of technologies, as primitive desktops have spawned generations of laptops or netbooks and blackboards have been supplanted by interactive white boards (IWB's), a direct descendant of the Promethean prototype (Betcher & Lee, 2009:iii) of 1995.

In a 1984 paper, I reflected on the relevance of technology to the curriculum and postulated that if the teacher saw no relevance of technology to a curriculum area, the student would see this curriculum area as equally irrelevant (Cunningham, 1984:14) Around the same time, amid the many workshops on CALL I organised, I assisted in preparing a professional development day for my school on “computers across the curriculum”. I still recall the assertion of the geography co-ordinator who said: “You may use computers to help you teach languages, Denis, but we will never use them in geography...” Twenty-five years later, I find my students love Google Earth...

Where are we now?

We continue to be influenced by an evolving relationship of teaching and learning, assessment and ICT...

4 Research and Practice

Recalling that teachers are the most important in-school factor in student learning, what appears to work best?

For some of the answers, I would like to refer to some local research and studies, fine-tuned over twenty-five years under the banner of PEEL (Project for Enhancing Effective Learning). It is also a favourite of the curriculum co-ordinator of my school, Peter Kadar, whom I value considerably as a leader in the curriculum and classroom. It is not the only reference we could use, but it is a useful *point de partir* for our conversation on the topic. Alternatively, we could have gone to Finland – as have many others – after successive assessments of PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment). I look forward to having this conversation with colleagues of our neighbour to the east...

The PEEL study identifies the following as its current principles for teaching and quality learning:

- 1 Share intellectual control with students.
- 2 Look for occasions when students can work out part (or all) of the content or instructions.
- 3 Provide opportunities for choice and independent decision-making.
- 4 Provide diverse range of ways of experiencing success.

- 5 Promote talk which is exploratory, tentative and hypothetical.
- 6 Encourage students to learn from other students' questions and comments.
- 7 Build a classroom environment that supports risk-taking.
- 8 Use a wide variety of intellectually challenging teaching procedures.
- 9 Use teaching procedures that are designed to promote specific aspects of quality learning.
- 10 Develop students' awareness of the big picture: how the various activities fit together and link to the big ideas.
- 11 Regularly raise students' awareness of the nature of different aspects of quality learning.
- 12 Promote assessment as part of the learning process.

(Mitchell, 2009:193-194)

Marrying this with the focus of teaching – the learner – PEEL has proposed a List of Good Learning Behaviours (Table 4.1) (Baird & Northfield, 2008) as a template of what might characterise a successful learner (Appendix 1).

5 Information Communication Technology (ICT)

To this mix should be added the use of ICT. The precise configuration (of this) will be determined by a range of factors, not the least of which is what is available to the learning situation. It is probably accurate to surmise that our countries represent the happy side – is it happy? – of the digital divide.

In my school, desktops, netbooks and laptops are readily available, while most classrooms are equipped with Promethean interactive whiteboards (IWB's), so there is immediate access to the internet and what this provides in information and communication. From next year, girls may be asked to acquire netbooks as part of their materials list. Combined with this are the uses of the IWB programs, an advanced evolutionary step in the journey from stylus and tablet, chalk and blackboards to whatever the future reveals.

Are we afraid of this technology? Perhaps! But, we shouldn't be! I have been a longstanding advocate of using technology only where it can do the task better (Cunningham, 1984:15) and, where needed, also recommended the teacher and student reversing roles as the younger generation is likely to be more ICT savvy than us. While I witness individual plateaux in ICT skills of different students – they, too, will learn only what they deem useful (and proceed no further) – their expertise applies to a raft of technologies available at school or at home. These may include social networking (e.g., Facebook, Myspace, MSN, etc), other blogs (Camilleri, et al, 2007), podcasts, Skype, multimedia creations, wikis, etc. (Crystal 2006; Ingram et al, 2008:160). And we can be

confident that this trend will continue as future technological generations become smaller, more powerful, more robust and less expensive (after the initial introduction on the market).

6 Other Factors

There are other factors, some of them identified in studies of what makes an excellent teacher. These build upon the research referred to above, but also that of David Ingram (Commins, 1995) and others.

As indicated previously, my career has evolved; after being a principal for ten years I find myself teaching in a Catholic secondary girls' school. My passion for teaching was not eradicated by decades of teaching, management and 'administrivia' in the government sector. I welcome the return to the classroom.

However, I did not understand teenage girls when I was a teenager; I wonder if I understand them any better now? And, the younger generation – any younger generation – may find ways in which to live to baffle the previous generation(s). Our current crop of youngsters is very good at that. Just look at the language they use! They have made more contributions to and innovations in the English language since Shakespeare...

7 Personal Reflections

Influenced heavily by my colleague, Peter Kadar, the prevailing lesson for me is in the relationships and feedback shared by students – whether I request this or they feel comfortable offering it. As a result, ingredients of the successful personal mix include my:

- respecting, valuing and liking my students (cf. Dinham, 2008:9, 27, 35)
- maintaining and fostering a reciprocal appreciation of humour
- managing an atmosphere based on reward rather than punishment
- being passionate about teaching and student learning (cf. Dinham, 2008:9)
- creating a comfortable environment which encourages risk-taking in learning
- being relaxed with the students (cf. Dinham, 2008:28)
- asking them what they would like to do
- negotiating with them the sequence and nature of learning tasks
- listening to and acting upon their requests for more oral or written work and other learning activities (e.g., the preparation of Easter cards for family)
- smiling (rather than being an ogre for the first term)...
- not embarrassing the girls
- actively becoming the learner where their skills are (or not) superior

- empowering them to assume the role of educator in demonstrating the uses of ICT (i.e., the IWB, netbooks, webcams, etc)
- taking an interest in their extra-curricular activities (e.g., sport, part-time jobs) and their families (cf. Dinham, 2008:28) – the other element of the partnership
- facilitating and encouraging connections between the world of the students and the curricular content
- providing them with a model which is not one-dimensional but multi-faceted (e.g., teacher, consultant, presenter, waiter, caterer, events manager)
- involving them in other extra-curricular activities – such as catering work – which builds upon their hospitality studies and earns them money
- seeking their advice in such matters as the presentation of this paper
- being patient and calm (cf. Dinham, 2008:28) – despite some requesting that I “yell at them” when they chat
- being available and approachable in class and outside lessons (cf. Dinham, 2008:29)
- hopefully earning their respect and being a positive factor in their learning.

I composed the above by reflecting upon what I try to do. Upon reading Dinham (2008), I was comforted by the fact that several of these characteristics were identified as important qualities of the expert teacher (Dinham, 2008:8-9) and teaching (Dinham, 2008:25-35).

8 Concluding Remarks

Remember, we speak English - sort of... - in Australia, so we must add to the tyranny of distance (of the remote Antipodes) the fact that Anglophones do not always make the best language learners or polyglots. Remember also, languages are not at the top of the list of curricular choices (for students and community alike) in Australia, so it is helpful for students to like what they are taught, be responsive and positive; it is also useful to build upon this motivational element (Balboni, 2006:48; Chambers, 1999), to foster self-motivation and learner autonomy (Raya, Lamb & Vieira, 2007).

One of my sixteen year-old students, Melissa Rigby, had the following to add after reading this paper:

I believe that girls learn best when they're able to relate to the teacher and their (sic) style of teaching, also being approachable, helpful, understanding and genuinely nice. That makes a great teacher we all respect, love and aspire to please.

I don't know whether this is what she thinks I am or what I should be...

I don't have all the answers. I never will! But, I am a learner and keen to improve what I do and how I do it.

My students deserve that!...

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Table 4.1
A list of good learning behaviours.

1.	Tell teacher when they don't understand.	Seeks Assistance	
2.	Asks teacher why they went wrong.		
3.	Tells teacher what they don't understand.	Checks Personal Progress	
4.	Checks work against instruction, correcting errors and omissions.		
5.	When stuck, refers to earlier work before asking teacher.		
6.	Checks personal comprehension of instruction and material. Requests further information if needed.	Plans and Anticipates	
7.	Seeks reasons for aspects of the work at hand.		
8.	Anticipates and predicts possible outcomes.		
9.	Plans a general strategy before starting.	Reflects on the Work	
10.	Explains purposes and results.		
11.	Checks teacher's work for errors; offers corrections.		
12.	Seeks links between adjacent activities and ideas.	Links to Beliefs and Experiences	
13.	Seeks links between non-adjacent activities, ideas and between different topics.		
14.	Independently seeks further information, following up ideas raised in class.		
15.	Seeks links between different subjects.	CONSTRUCTING AND RECONSTRUCTING BEHAVIOURS	
16.	Asks inquisitive but general questions.		
17.	Offers personal examples which are generally relevant.		
18.	Seeks specific links between schoolwork and personal life.	Assumes a Position	
19.	Searches for weaknesses in their own understandings; checks the consistency of their explanations across different situations.		
20.	Suggests new activities and alternative procedures.		
21.	Expresses disagreement.	Assumes a Position	
22.	Offers ideas, new insights and alternative explanations.		
23.	Justifies opinions.		
24.	Reacts and refers to comments of other students.		
25.	Challenges the text or an answer the teacher sanctions as correct.		