

## Reflections on a Humanistic Approach to Teaching & Learning

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### Abstract

These reflections of an intensely personal nature contain some of the guiding principles of my day-to-day work and the manner in which they have helped me to get to grips with the challenges of teaching English in different cultural environments. These reflections are grounded in a humanistic tradition associated with Carl Rogers and Paulo Freire. Drawing from this theoretical framework, my own teaching practice continues to be rooted in the belief that the ultimate objective of learning is the empowerment of the learner. From that perspective, the ultimate objective for a teacher is to relinquish authority in order to become a facilitator for empowered learning - the flint to spark a fire.

### 1. "Give a man a fish and feed him for a day; teach him how to fish and you feed him all his life."

Overused as this Chinese proverb may be, it has guided me by the force of its conviction ever since I first saw a poster of it in one of my earliest classrooms in India in the seventies. It made me reflect on the "who" and "what" and "how" and "why" of what I chose or accidentally got led into as a career. The marvel is that the reflection has not stopped; on a daily basis, it expands and morphs as new perimeters are added to my understanding of teaching and learning. As I have realized it in practice, education is indeed a lifelong gift one gives to oneself; it is also a process facilitated by inspiring teachers who lead by example. In essence, mine is a very simple philosophy - one that has its roots in an early awareness of 'gurukula'<sup>1</sup> tradition, which flourished in India thousands of years ago - but also one that has subsequently been nourished by an openness to a global and eclectic classroom experience, by daily dances with fellow-teachers and by the sparks from my students. (When struck against steel, flint will produce sparks, which when directed onto tinder, can be used to start a fire - Wikipedia).

Here are some of the guiding principles of my day-to-day work and the manner in which they have helped me to get to grips with the challenges of teaching English. These reflections are grounded in a humanistic tradition more famously associated with Carl Rogers and Paulo Freire. Drawing from this theoretical framework, my own

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<sup>1</sup> *Guru* refers to "teacher" or "master"; *Kul* refers to the teacher's domain. The gurukula developed as an ancient schooling system in India. Together, students and the guru developed symbiotic relationships of learning and teaching based on a sense of respect and duty toward each other.

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## **2. Learning the Passive Voice: What's in it For You?**

In principle, familiarizing myself intentionally and consistently with the course goals, explaining them to students, and referring to them frequently has kept me "grounded". Within that vast and ambitious document called the curriculum, however, a creative flexibility has helped to pace the course work according to student needs and incorporate strategies to maximize learning. In the process, I have demolished many myths - the most common one being the myth of assumptions. "Never assume anything" has become a companion mantra. And I am still challenged by the thought that in a world where knowledge is exploding at quantum rates how do I pick and choose what is relevant to student needs? And more importantly, how do we translate educational goals into real outcomes for our immediate and larger communities?

"Our need to communicate is universal...The way we communicate is cultural".

I borrow this phrase from a friend because she phrases it so much better. Eclecticism and diversity are insatiable demands in the classroom. The options for either seem endless. (Does one use the direct method or, audio-lingual? Transformational grammar, or communicative? Formative evaluation or summative? Task-based or, (PPP) Present, Practice, Produce? My own strategy with respect to inclusivity has been to rely and build on other approaches while adding something of my own. (Shades of Eliot's Tradition & The Individual Talent?). For example, a motivator I have often used to challenge students in composition classes is to start with a reflective exchange of how essays are written in their own cultures. Once that acknowledgement is made, we can now move on to the demands of a "North American Academic Essay". Building bridges is easier than creating barriers. Let us take eclecticism further. How do we apply learning beyond the curriculum? How do we apply reading skills to small-group multi-disciplinary projects (Art, History, Housing Planning, Economics, Education) around a single unfamiliar theme (Native Americans), which involves research, organizational skills, presentation, word-processing, teamwork and the production of a classroom desktop publication? Having a voracious appetite for diversity and taking a cue from Mother Nature, I try to capitalize on as many of Bloom's Taxonomy of Objectives as possible. I have a commitment to my students to prepare them for a technological world, but not at the cost of de-emphasizing the affective and social domains, and my pre semester planning tends to reflect this belief. At a recent conference "Educating the Heart", Dalai Lama's response to today's educational challenges, I realized I had made quite innocently but fortuitously, early choices to educate the heart as well as the mind and the spirit. (Bring me ten different types of greens, feel them, draw their shapes, taste them, what is chlorophyll, which leaf do you like best, why, how can we make green mint sauce, what's the difference between parsley & coriander ... the quest ... it's endless).

### **3. When the student is better than you at PowerPoint!**

Bringing variety and creativity to the use of materials and activities used in class is the most facile and fun way of keeping the motivation level high in a language class. Another daily mantra borrowed from my cooking skills: Do not repeat a technique (read 'dish') for a whole year! You are only limited by what you don't think. The stuff is all around you ( I tell myself) - visually attractive handouts, worksheets, flip charts, realia, newspapers, audio-visual aids, the OHP, my son's interest in rock music (that provided me samples that demystified heavy metal music to a thirty-something Chinese mother-of-two in one class); yes, even a variety of lentils and spices from my kitchen. The consistent result of a creative approach is: Challenge meets challenge. I have been awed by student presentations and insights. Their feedback taught me to "hang on" to what I did well, more consciously than if I had not been open to what they made me "aware" of. I have to survive this amazing race. Creativity is key to self-preservation. (But I do not have to worry too much because the students would not be here if they knew more than I did).

### **4. Enthusiasm (Greek: "rapturous inspiration like that caused by a god")**

My teaching journey will stop the day I walk into class without a smile because I believe enthusiasm for the lesson is "catching" from the moment one walks into the classroom. There are days when your aching back does not let you do it, or the coffee machine gives you ditch water. Nevertheless, when as a teacher you shut the door of that classroom, you have left it all outside and begun the ritual of a sacred performance. (Yes, we teachers get to play many an exciting role - from that of a handwriting expert to a plagiarism detective). It helps the performance that instead of Aristotelian principles, you incorporate Acts 1-5 from the ISW model - the objective, the bridge-in, the pre-test, the content, and the post-test. (Oh, yes, Canada came to me before I came to Canada). A reminder to find balance between a mesmerizing expansion of "truth is beauty and beauty, truth" by a long-haired scholar of Keats and Yeats in my post graduate class, and the practicalities of the ISW model while teaching in Dubai was perhaps the most defining change in classroom delivery (from a predominantly chalk and talk approach). And then God created Cooperative Learning.

### **5. The bottom-line for us, teachers: self-centering or student-centered?**

Teaching is a perfect place. It smoothes out your twenty-something ego when a student writes "You ALWAYS come late to class" or "I cannot write about Daffodils because I have never seen any". I just know that no amount of knowledge or technology can replace caring, skilled and intelligent individuals, responding to the problems and changing needs of the student. I have been fortunate to have the opportunity to engage in the limitless dynamics of classroom interaction, the subtle, almost invisible, back and forth nuances. Where else can you have a hundred or forty or seventeen unique individuals to interact with and influence without letting yourself or a machine get in the way?

### **6. He who can, teaches. He who cannot is Bernard Shaw.**

As I look back on 37 years of teaching in three starkly different countries, it is clear that whatever my personal motivations might have been to start with, it was the sharing

of skills, experiences and knowledge among peers (and students) that has been a significantly favorable element to the richness of my experience. Whether in curriculum development or materials production, in classroom methods or classroom management, maintaining professional standing by attending workshops and seminars, establishing membership in professional organizations, and reading journals and new publications in the field have all kept me busy and contributed to a highly rewarding career. As I reflected in one of my mid-career pieces, "I could have been anything, but I could never not have been a teacher". I still hold that to be true.