



KEEPING

THE

ESSENCE

IN

SIGHT

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From Teaching Practice to Reflection and Back Again

Copyright 2018 by Sharon Hartle

ISBN: 978-1-948492-08-9

Library of Congress Control Number: 2018933521

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Country of Manufacture Specified on the Last Page

First Printing 2018

Published by:
Alphabet Publishing
1204 Main Street #172
Branford, Connecticut 06405 USA

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www.alphabetpublishingbooks.com

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All images by Sharon Hartle.
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Introduction:

MY BELIEF IN REFLECTION FOR GROWTH

I am a great believer in reflection. As an English teacher, I find that teaching, and then reflecting on the process, learning from my learners as they learn from each other as well as from me and the many available resources that we work with, is one way to develop professionally. As Jack Richards and Lockhart wrote in 1996, “Reflective teaching goes hand in hand with critical self-examination and reflection as a basis for decision-making, planning, and action.”¹ It is also a process that gives rise to a whole series of observations and questions and it is a process that comes quite naturally to many teachers, as conversations in thousands of staterooms around the world show. To think about what just happened in the whirlwind experience of a lesson, where so much is going on at the same time and on so many different levels, is natural. What worked? What didn’t? Why was that activity a success with one group but not with another? How can I deal with a class where one student dominates the dynamics? What are we all so obsessed with exams? These are just some of the questions that swim round in our heads after class. In fact, actually finding the time to stop and ask them is often demanding, as we rush from one lesson to the next. Stopping, however, and simply considering one thing that has happened in class can help us to make changes. Reflection, in fact, is what can transform normal teaching into great teaching. Just take it one step at a time.

1 Richards & Lockhart, *Reflective Teaching in Second Language Classrooms*, ix



The blog that this book is based on, *English Learning in Our World* (<https://hartlelearning.wordpress.com/>), is the natural evolution of the reflection journals that I used to write for myself, in an attempt to answer my own questions about my lessons. Journals were useful, but often quite a solitary undertaking, and although reading my own writings did help, being your own audience can be a lonely business. Technology changed all that by giving us the chance to blog, and share our thoughts with each other. The myriad teaching blogs accessible nowadays show that to discuss teaching, ask questions of fellow teachers or simply let off steam together with others, is something we often want to do. Our staffroom has, in fact, gone viral. My blog, like many others, gives me the chance to share my thoughts with others, and they also share their thoughts and comments with me. A reflection or thought often leads to other people's stories of practical experiences or suggestions for ways that this can be translated into classroom practice.

Technology has provided us with a wonderful platform to share reflection that is the essence of social learning and communication. I see the blog as a springboard for growth, and hope that by sharing my ideas with other educators and by reading and replying to their comments, we can all learn from each other.

THE AIM OF THIS BOOK

This book is based on a series of blog posts posted over a seven-year period between May 2010 and June 2017. Although much of the material is available on the blog, it seemed to me to be the right time, since I have gathered quite a lot of material together over these years, to organise it into a more digestible format for busy teachers, whether they are experienced or trainees, who are looking at certain specific issues in English Language Teaching (ELT), or have questions about their learners, or the learning process. The original blog posts have been adapted and 'tidied up' to print in this book format. Some parts have been extended and one or two have been written specially for the book, such as the post on ELTchats. This material has then been divided the material into four main sections: learning, teaching, testing,



and professional development, although there is inevitably considerable overlap between these categories.

The thread that weaves its way through this book is provided by some of the typical questions teachers ask themselves and each other, so each section begins with a question. This is followed by a blog post that deals with it and further questions are then provided either for individual teachers to reflect upon themselves, or to be used in teacher training sessions as a basis for discussion.

The problem is not the whole story, however. It is simply a starting point for all those who are interested in the experience of other teachers. I hope you will be motivated by reading the reflections and practical descriptions of classroom strategies and interactions, and the magical carpet ride through my world of teaching and learning.

MY FIRST BLOG POST: WHERE IT ALL BEGAN

I originally began writing my blog on WordPress after the 2010 International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language International Conference in Harrogate where I saw an inspirational presentation on blogging by Karenne Sylvester. I decided that there was no better way to provide a feeling for what the writing was like there than to print part of the first ever post on this blog here². So, to give you an initial flavour for the style, the type of reflection, and learning descriptions you can find on my blog, read on.





Problem: How to avoid distraction or Keeping the Essence in Sight

... Today though I was thinking how easy it is to get side-tracked into all kinds of things like institutional politics, the fact that the air conditioning is on even though it's actually quite cold, books, gossip, the coffee machine, and just about anything ... Well, I want to make an effort to remember to focus on what is important, and that, I think, is the people, the individuals who go to make up my classes, wherever they are.

After quite a few years teaching, I know how easy it is to fall into a routine, and to not be surprised by the learning focus or by the magic that can be produced in a lesson. Recently though I was adapting an “awards” lesson (suggested by the extra materials in the Macmillan *Straightforward Advanced* book) where learners nominate each other for awards such as “The News of the World” Student, etc. We were doing this because there had recently been quite a few awards ceremonies like the Oscars or San Remo Italian Song festival, and this group of advanced learners had been looking at prize-giving speeches. So, we organised our own ceremony, complete with awards. As I couldn't find any Oscars, and Easter was approaching, I went for “Lindt Easter Bunnies” instead and we held the “Straightforward Rabbit Awards” Ceremony.

What started out as a bit of fun to round off some work we had been doing was transformed by the students themselves and the warm, funny things they said about each other, not to mention the photos they took, and which appeared on our wiki. The whole of the lesson took off into a dimension that nobody could ever have planned thanks to the interaction between those learners and the community they have built up together³.

The insight here, then, is this: don't lose sight of the



essence, and the essence is the communication between individuals as they travel together along the road of discovery (Oh, and the power of chocolate too). But that's another story.

Discussion questions

1. Can you think of a “magical moment”, where you felt that something particularly meaningful had taken or was taking place, that went beyond your original aims?
2. What led to it and what effect did it have?
3. In what ways do you focus on your learners as individuals?
How do you incorporate current events in your lessons?

PROBLEM FOUR: I WOULD LIKE TO USE TECHNOLOGY IN MY TEACHING. HOW CAN I INTEGRATE IT INTO MY NORMAL TEACHING WITHOUT WASTING TOO MUCH CLASS TIME?

Thoughts on blended teaching and learning

What is blended teaching

I would categorise most of my teaching as blended these days in that there is generally a traditional face-to-face (F2F) component taught in class and an added online component, which means that students can also work outside class at their own pace. In my case, the F2F component is usually taught in quite large university classrooms that can seat anything up to a hundred students and that are equipped with computers, projectors, and online access to the internet. This choice of projectors rather than interactive whiteboards makes sense when you work with large groups of young adults, as learners cannot easily come up to the board and interact.

My students are very happy with the idea of our courses having a central class blog¹². This blog has a page for each course that students can consult regularly, as well as an information wall, wikis, useful links, and various other resources. As a teacher I find it useful as I can do a whole range of things which help me to stay in touch with my students in ways that just a few years ago would have been impossible. I use the main wall to post messages, ideas, and reminders, as well as encouraging notes to different classes. On the specific course pages, students can generally find an overview of the work



done in class week by week, with links to backup activities and further study. There is usually information about how they can prepare for their next lesson too. This is valuable for everyone but particularly for those who miss lessons or cannot remember the links we have looked at in class. I can also post links to spaces such as Google Docs for students to submit written or spoken work and that work is then private, visible only to me. When they have posted it, I can then correct and post their tracked work and include other comments and discussions publicly if the individual students agree to having their work available publicly online. This is all, then, kept in a handy place that we can always look at during lessons in the classroom. This has, over the past few years, meant that I've been able to develop relationships with students in these large classes that would have been unimaginable without the blended element.

Why blended teaching and not blended learning

You may be wondering why I am talking about *blended teaching* rather than *blended learning*, which is the more usual term. Well, this is because what I do is to teach in a blended format, but I recently wondered if my students see things in the same way.

This term, I was very enthusiastic about one course that I was going to do at the University of Bolzano. This course had actually been marketed to the students as a *blended learning course*, rather than me just doing it as blended learning. They had been told that they would be doing one F2F class a week all term and that they would be given access to online materials, as well as doing chats online, outside class. I therefore had very high expectations of this course and, perhaps, had slightly too high expectations of them at the beginning, thinking that they would be able to use online contexts like Twitter for educational purposes. They had certainly heard of and, in some cases used, social media tools, but needed more guidance to be able to use them for the purposes of our course. Some of them had not really understood the spirit of blended learning, or, I think, the discipline and planning skills required to take advantage of this type of course and did not do the preparation before coming to class. The lesson to be learned for me as a teacher was that it is essential to take things slowly, one



step at a time, and to be aware of the fact that time needs to be spent working in class, increasingly, on supporting students who are learning to work in online environments. Here is a summary of my approach.

One step at a time

1. The first step was to introduce learners to the class blog, making sure that they knew how to access it and what to do with it. They needed very clear instructions such as: *“Go to the home page and read the messages, and then go to your class page and read the overview of the lesson as well as the preparation work for your next lesson.”*

This was the starting point and as the course progressed new tools and spaces were introduced both in class, and on their page. The students quickly learned how to use the blog, which is the mainstay of this course, everything else radiating out from there. The students now go to the blog on Fridays and Saturdays to see the home page, which contains notices from me. They then go to their class pages to see what to prepare and download for the next week’s classes, or to do activities that have been posted there for them. They can also use their class pages, of course, to review work we have done previously or to catch up if they have missed lessons.

2. One of the biggest problems in a course like this is organising resources, especially if they are new for learners, so some kind of bookmarking system needs to be adopted. Symbaloo¹³ uses a very effective format visually. Each link is presented as a button for students to click on and I can make a webmix, a collection of those links in button form, for my students, which I can update and share with them. Students can also make their own webmixes to share with each other, and access ready-made mixes as well. For instance, someone may make a webmix with resources for Cambridge exams and choose to share it with others so that everyone can benefit. There is also the option, however, to keep your webmixes private for your own personal use. The advantage of this for learners is also that they can go directly to that page, or even set it as their homepage, and find



the link to the class blog, the other sites we are using and resources too. Although they could have done that from the blog, using Symbaloo is highly intuitive and appeals to some learners. (it's all about providing tools for differing learning strategies).



3. These learners were given access to the Macmillan English Campus (MEC)¹⁴ which provided them with a whole range of materials that they could use online throughout the course, mirroring the coursebook we used in class. Once again, however, we used quite a lot of F2F time learning how to find our way round the resource and what we could do with it. When using a new resource it is a good idea to start with the mechanics of signing up for the site, followed by an overview of the different sections available and how to navigate the various pages. Learners can work in groups or pairs to do site quests, where they are asked to provide specific materials or exercises, to find their own gradebooks and marks, and other resources. This can even be organised as a competition to see which group is the first one to find all the various resources you ask them to. Prizes, of course, can be awarded to the first group and even consolation prizes can be given to those who have difficulty. This gives the teacher the chance to monitor what is happening and to help those who are having problems immediately.

The students used it to do remedial grammar work and to read news articles. Some of them explored the exams practice resources available there too. This meant that they could work

