

Some Reflections: on issues related to ...being a Real Teacher

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In September of last year, there was an article by Nat Bartels¹ on the Language Centre notice-board, about the lack of knowledge about teaching, (and it follows, about education) in the background of those who teach what the author called KAL, or Knowledge About Language. The writer was referring to those who teach teachers of language, and he was concerned about the narrowness and academic bias of their own professional background, and therefore of the premises underlying the courses they teach. This bias wouldn't matter so much in the training of teachers of linguistics in Linguistics programmes in a university, but to Bartels, it assumes major importance in the education of language teachers.

This article reminded me of my own reaction when I first entered the Language-Teaching field, from a general educational background. What amazed me wasn't so much that many of the teachers I found myself working with weren't originally teachers - many had taken degrees in Teaching English as a Foreign Language, Applied Linguistics - or even that some were actually into Teacher Training, without any academic / theoretical background about education. What really baffled me was the incredible and totally spurious level of self-confidence with which these people dismissed the kind of educational knowledge that any teacher learns in his/ her first year of even a B.Ed. Course, and the knowledge that accrues to the application of these ideas over a couple of decades. They seemed to think that a year in an Applied Linguistics or Tefling M.A. programme, was the equivalent of, or even, in the case of some of these carpetbaggers, far surpassing, three-or-four-years of general education about Education in one's twenties, followed by up to thirty years of educational practice in various kinds of educational background. Transfer the above scenario to any other profession, Medicine, say, or Law²: anyone coming in with that kind of background, would be treated as an apprentice, probably for several years. Not in English Language Teaching, at least not in the two or three situations (I hasten to add, not the Language Centre) the memory of which informs this article. These were the people who very quickly went after administrative preference: in my first ELT situations, it often seemed that qualifications on paper, however spurious, however lacking in the development of an educated outlook on the part of the holder, counted far above reflective experience, of whatever duration. This led to quite a horrible working atmosphere: with the conviction of parochialism, these people were quite sure of themselves, and of their knowing best. Any attempt at discussion of foundations was taken as dissent. 'Negative' was a very popular word back in the early days of the corporate take-over of academe, and any bias towards egalitarianism was taken as a manifestation of a subversive attitude. Even the need for a 'forum for discussion' was referred to dismissively as unnecessary, leading only to 'endless circular talk'. And yet these people endlessly circulated socially among themselves; they never seemed to see their own chosen topics as meaningless or without purposeful application. Any request for a discussion of serious professional issues was thrown back at one in the form of 'hold a workshop on it', or 'give a talk', or some other artificial format borrowed from the commercial world. I wasn't interested in teaching colleagues what I saw as self-awareness; besides, I don't think such things are teachable. Either you're interested in serious discussion or you're not. How about **just talking** about these things, in an informal atmosphere, as if they **really did matter** in our lives? It's a bit hard to take such stuff seriously if it's only ever done as a ploy to push up your promotional potential.

A careful reading of the above paragraph will make it clear that I am NOT saying that there's anything wrong with 'coming into teaching' from another background; or that there aren't major benefits to be got from the opening up of education to knowledge from other fields. However, THIS PROCESS IS RECIPROCAL, and many of the people I encountered at that time, did not respect the kind of knowledge(s) teachers have. Moreover, those who came into it from a commercial background, came in with attitudes and behaviours learnt in a highly competitive, product-oriented environment, completely at odds with the purposes of education. Yes, I know that the politics of education in the last twenty years have undermined all the idealism we wrinklies set out with in the sixties, etc, etc. I know Reagan and Thatcher destroyed the unions, and reintroduced instrumentalism with all its appalling concomitants of misapplied quantification, misinterpreted accountability and misbegotten Gradgrindisms. I know Socialism

didn't work; ideals of co-operation and interdependence too often turn out to be mere rhetoric; I know that education is neither therapy nor a blueprint for Utopia.

But does that mean that these **ideas** are wrong? They've been abused, misinterpreted; worst of all, applied without enough reflection. But who's going to dismiss the development of 'co-operativeness', 'caring' or 'respect' as an educational outcome? Not even the most devout instrumentalist would suggest that because you can't measure 'respect' quantitatively, you should dispense with it in the classroom--- although that's exactly what the misapplication of quantitative measures to education has actually brought about: it's not tested, so we won't bother with it, seems to be today's current educational philosophy, and beleaguered 'real' teachers. By using this politically-incorrect term, I am NOT, repeat NOT, referring to qualifications or even background: a **real** teacher is someone who cares more about values than about conventional wisdom; who knows the difference between a fad and a philosophy. Who doesn't misrepresent a casual remark as a policy statement. Who doesn't mess with the gossip-structure of his/her institution, out of either malice or naiveté. Who's clued in to the sociopsychological as well as the external complexities of his/ her environment. Who respects ideas, whether or not they're his/ her own cup of tea. Who prefers to make the world that little bit better, not worse, if given the opportunity and the choice. Who practises what s/he preaches - or at least tries to. All that, of course, comes **before** subject knowledge and awareness come into the picture at all.

One of the reasons that education is in a mess is³ the commodification referred to above: no-one would object to the inculcation of attitudes of 'respect' as an educational purpose, but no-one ever seems to take into account the fact that you have to know what you're talking about, and preferably practise it, before you teach it. If you reduce it to a skill, and put it in little boxes to be handed out like vitamin pills in measured quantities in the classroom, what you're doing is teaching the kids that this stuff isn't anything they have to take seriously. If you teach respect, for example, but practise the opposite, they'll catch onto what works, young empiricists that they are. That you're teaching them **to be**. And these qualities aren't selective: most teachers are all sweetness and light with their students, especially across cultures, but their attitudes to each other, and to the professional community they form with each other, are often highly disrespectful - often in the unaware way that racism, for example, was taken for granted until it became politically expedient not to accept it. And that your real attitudes are found in what you are actually teaching: the concept of the 'hidden curriculum' is personal as well as political.

It might be seen as a perfectly legitimate response to all this, to ask: do you regard yourself as a 'real teacher'? Well, in the first place, no 'real teacher' would be so narrowly sanctimonious as to answer yes to that question; the correct answer (forget pomo: some things are still **right** and **wrong**) is: I can but try. You wouldn't ask a survivor of war if s/he had any right to call him/herself a victim, or if you did, you'd be a mean-souled little gnome, who should never be a teacher. And anyone who's survived thirty years in the classroom wars, and is still talking about ideals, at least once had the makings of a 'real teacher'.

And in the second place, a 'real teacher' wouldn't ask that question in the first place, because s/he would know the answer.⁴

What do you think? Does any of this resonate with at least some readers? Get to the keyboard; answer back. Dialogue is the way forward, not muttering in corners.

1. Bartels, Nat.; TESOL Quarterly FORUM; 36 (1), 71-79.

2. Witness a true-life case: a friend of mine, a man in his fifties, recently returned to the practice of law after some ten years in EFL teaching. He had to take an extensive re-training programme, and when he was did get a job in a law office, he was taken on as a 'trainee', despite his high level of qualification and earlier experience. But in teaching, people coming straight out of their - sometimes initial--training course are regarded, well, they seem to regard themselves, as Those Who Know.

3. Go over to the library and read virtually any article in any adequate educational journal. Those who reflect are very worried about the future of education these days.

4. 'Know thyself', of course.

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