

The A to Zen of teaching: attitudes of a non-teacher

by Chris Hunt

*Words, words, words, fill up my head
Some are blue and some are red
Shaping self and others too
Filtering life and all I do...*

Zen Comics is a small book of cartoons about Zen. In one of my favourite episodes a lady reporter asks the old Zen master if he travels much any more. The master comments, "When the snow is on the ground the tree sleeps". Surprised she comments, "Master, I don't think you understood my question". The Master replies, "My dear lady, I don't think you understood my answer".

When I'm asked to give a presentation I'm also usually asked about my attitudes towards teaching. How can I answer so as to be understood?

I am a non-teacher. I do my best not to teach English. I believe that the less a teacher teaches the more children will learn. Teaching destroys a child's capacity to learn spontaneously.

What is a teacher? I have a picture in my mind. But is it the same as yours? I know what I mean, but can you know what I mean? Let me show you my picture and you can see for yourself.

One teacher I had hit us when we had been too noisy. Another teacher made us copy our textbooks while he went into a back room to smoke. An English teacher would force students who had done badly in spelling tests to stand in front of the class while he ridiculed them. A history teacher made us study 19th century British Political history simply because she liked it. We thought it was boring, though not as boring as French where it seemed we spent whole lessons listening to a tape recorder and repeating, repeating, repeating.

These are my memories of secondary school but my earliest memory of school is little better. I remember my mother taking me into a room where I saw clearly a child playing with bricks. It looked interesting and I agreed to go to school (what ever that was) because I wanted to play with the bricks, too. But while I was there I never got to use them. I don't even remember seeing the bricks after that. So for me, from the very beginning, school was a place of deceit. It was the place adults made children go to do things adults thought important, but children found largely irrelevant. Some things were interesting, some were tiresome and some unpleasant, but we had to be there. School was never a place I wanted to be and teachers were the wardens, they were on the other side, the side with the keys and they weren't letting us out.

I approach teaching in this context. I prefer teaching in

situations where children can choose to come to lessons voluntarily. This is a minimum requirement, otherwise the real lesson, and the lasting lesson from compulsory education, is subservience.

How many children do you teach who feel forced to attend your classes? Why are you teaching them? What are they learning? How many children do you teach who feel they have to study to learn, who feel learning is studying and that playing is something else. How do you know? How many children do you meet who you feel secretly, deep down, can learn nothing? What do you do with them, and how do they respond? And finally, how many one-year-old children attend walking classes?

Children will learn without being taught. Encouragement, attention and love stimulate children to learn more quickly, but a child learns through his or her own actions, how could it be otherwise?

Of course, it can be argued that learning a foreign language is more complex than learning to walk. But as William Hull said, "If we taught children to speak, they'd never learn." Children learn by doing. Children learn by making discoveries. Children learn by exploring. They do not learn by being told what to do. Or rather the lesson they do learn may be different from the one we intend.

When we constantly tell children what to do and what not to do we teach them dependency. We teach them to defer to authority. We dull their minds. We harness their spirits and confine their vitality. We teach them to be passive.

Children learn from experience or perhaps a child absorbs experience. I do agree with Vygotsky that children can learn more by being in contact with adults than being by themselves but this does not imply the adults must formally teach. Rather an adult's responsibility is to provide a safe, nurturing environment. Ideally the environment should be both relaxing and exciting. It should be one where the children find it natural and fun to speak the target language. The adult can provide challenges for the children, ideally on an individual basis. The children can be encouraged to make their own learning challenges. The children can be encouraged to teach each other. After all, the best way to truly learn something is to teach it.

There is a real difference between children playing at teachers and teaching each other and an adult teaching children. The children are playing. The teacher is serious. With the children the hierarchy of the situation is illusionary. With the teacher, the hierarchy is real. I'm very suspicious of hierarchies. They create dependency. So I do what I can to keep them out of my classroom.

The words and ideas that follow will hopefully show the

shape of what I am saying. The less we learn to teach the more the children will learn. Our job is to give, but not too much. Sometimes it is what we leave out that truly inspires. We create opportunity. We create space. We occasionally pull but we hardly ever push. Here are some words for non-teachers – are these the words you expect?

A

ASK – show children how they can express their opinion and then ask them for it. Avoid activities they don't like. Ask them what they want to do and do your best to accommodate them.

B

BE – do your best and encourage children to do the same. This is very different from believing in victory and defeat. Be an expression of the values and ideas you would like to teach. You want to teach English? Be English!

C

CHANCE – offer children choice about what activities to do. If you need control over the content choose games where the content can be varied. When you are not giving children the choice of what to do, use chance. For example I sometimes list possible activities on the board and we roll a dice to decide what gets done

D

DON'T – don't use don't, use do! Learn to think in positives.

E

ENVELOPES – are great for adding mystery and excitement. "Shall we open the red envelope or the blue envelope?" "What's in this envelope?" etc.

F

FOCUS – is the key. Children can easily learn from what they focus on. A chaotic class where all the children are fully focused for 5-10 minutes is worth much more than one in which the children sit domesticated, quietly for a full hour, with their attention elsewhere.

G

GORILLAS – are big and popular! Use gorillas when you can.

H

HUMOUR – make it funny, make it silly. When we are emotionally involved we will remember more. It's healthier to remember something positive than dwell on something negative, so let humour be the helper.

I

INTENTION – imagine that every action has a positive intention. Find the intention behind an action and discover the need it fulfils. This can inspire you to find new and better ways to handle interruptions and disruption.

J

JIGSAW – too often teachers tie themselves to teaching whole phrases. Children may learn some patterns but often lose the ability to manipulate them. An alternative is to present information at the concept level using very few words. Children can then learn how to put these jigsaw pieces together to make their own meanings. This is real language.

K

KALEIDOSCOPE – your classes. Make interlocking patterns from tiny parts. Show new ways to approach, review and extend material. And remember that children are generally more kinaesthetic than adults are. When everything is stuck – shake things up!

L

LIVE – look, listen, love, learn.

M

MISTAKES – make them! Show children that it is OK to get things wrong. Show them how to handle an error. Give them the chance to tell you and show you how to get it right. Children can gain confidence and competence when they get to correct an adult.

N

NAME CARDS – have several sets! Choose roles, team members, demonstrators and the like using name cards. You can mix them up each time or use two envelopes and make one 'live' and the other 'dormant'. Names chosen from the live envelope go into the dormant envelope until everyone has had a turn.

O

OPEN – open mind, open heart, closed mouth.

P

PARROT FLAG – when I want children to repeat something I turn it into a game by using a parrot flag. I play with my voice and the children will follow suite. Sometimes we take it in turns to use the parrot flag. I even have some Parrot Parade music we occasionally use. But the real point is that the Parrot Flag is an anchor (a physical symbol) for repetition – so children understand that when I talk to them without the flag I expect communication.

Q

QUESTIONS – are a useful benchmark for a class. The more questions children spontaneously ask the more focus they will have. Conversely, avoid asking questions unless they are genuine. Children generally view teachers' questions as traps.

R

RESPECT – Aretha Franklin sang about it. Children deserve it. Just remember, you do too...which means if something makes you feel uncomfortable – do something else.

S

SPACE – too often we get carried away with speed. We use it to control. We fear silence and rush to fill it, but it's important to relax and give space for reflection.

T

TIMER – don't (!) leave home without one. This is the most useful piece of equipment you have.

U

UPSIDEDOWN – many elementary-aged students like to tell me that I'm holding the flashcards upside down. Try putting a few things upside down and discover what language it stimulates.

V

VARIETY – as Tim Murphey said his friend said: try something new and if it doesn't work try something new. Ah! But if it does work – how precious! How sweet! How about trying something new, anyway.

W

WORKSHEETS – can be very popular, perhaps because they are safe. They are familiar. A sense of accomplishment comes with the completion of each one. Ideally children should be able to choose the sheets they do and work at them at their own pace. Sheets should be self-verifying so that children can confirm the answers for themselves. Non-teaching does not mean abandoning ordinary teaching materials. It's more a question of how they are used.

X

EXPERIMENT – when we take the attitude that each lesson is an experiment, then we can learn to observe the results without being trapped by them.

Y

YOYO – what goes up will come down. What works today may not work tomorrow. What fails today may work next week. Similarly, there are times when a group will soak up learning like a sponge and other times when the same group's learning capacity is a shrivelled husk. Dwell on and extend the good times.

Z

ZEN – these words are meaningless, action is illusion, substance is shadow. Let it all hang out. Let it all go. Let it be. It is gone. It is done.

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Shaping self and others too

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For those who want to know!

Just in case you're wondering: William Hull was a colleague of John Holt. He's mentioned in Holt's book *How Children Fail* (first published in 1964, revised 1995, Perseus Publishing). Tim Murphey wrote *Language Hungry* (1998, Macmillan Languagehouse). There's an introduction to Vygotsky's ideas at http://personal-pages.lvc.edu/~b_rehm/Vygotskyindex.html.

Zen Comics was written by Joanna Salajan (1974, Charles E. Tuttle Co.).

You can find more writing by me by visiting Wise Hat at <http://www.wisehat.com>. ■

