



# Classroom dynamics:

*An interview with Jill Hadfield*

by Jim Kahny

**J**ill Hadfield has worked as a teacher and teacher trainer in Britain, France, China, Tibet, and Madagascar, and run short courses for teachers in many other parts of the world. She is the author of fifteen resource books for teachers, including the Communication Games series (Longman), five books in the new Oxford Basics series with Charles Hadfield, and *Classroom Dynamics* (Oxford). This interview was conducted by e-mail in September following a visit to Japan.

## Background

- *What is classroom dynamics?*

Group dynamics is the way in which people in a group interact and relate to one another. Classroom dynamics is one specialised area of this: group dynamics as applied to, or experienced with, one particular group - a group of learners in the classroom.

- *What do we know about classroom dynamics? What studies have been done and what have they taught us?*

A lot of studies have been done on group dynamics in the workplace. Recently these have tended to focus on people's behaviour in management teams. A useful collection of essays is Michael Argyle's *The Social Psychology of Work*. All these studies show that a positive group atmosphere has a beneficial effect on motivation and quality of work.

There have been fewer studies on classroom relationships. An important book is

Douglas's *Groups-Understanding People Together*. Other studies, such as *The Red Book of Groups* by Houston; and Arnold's collection of essays, *Affect in Language Learning* - particularly those by Malderez and Zoltan - emphasise the importance of harmonious group relations. In addition, studies by McLeish and Schmuck and Schmuck examine group psychology in the classroom.

- *What prompted your interest in the area of group dynamics?*

I started to write a book on a different area altogether - learner training - and sent out a questionnaire to do some background research. The replies surprised me! Teachers wrote very little about problems of study skills, but a lot about problems with groups. It struck me that this was a very interesting and challenging area to write about - so I changed the title of the book!

- *What are common causes of poor class atmosphere?*

Jill Hadfield delivers the opening plenary address on "Classroom Dynamics" at the 32nd LIOJ Summer Workshop.

There are many causes. Students may be poorly motivated. There may be an inharmonious mix of personalities in the class. There may be a conflict of interests and aims. If students cannot learn to compromise and co-operate, this can lead to factions and cliques developing. There may be a lot of passive students who are unwilling to participate. Or there may be some students who dominate the group at the expense of shyer members. Or there may be one dominant and prickly individual whose strong personality dominates the class and ruins the atmosphere for everyone - one teacher in her reply to my questionnaire called this type of student "the Indigestible Group Member"!

• *What are some basic do's and don'ts for a teacher interested in encouraging a positive group atmosphere?*

Try to develop an understanding of what a group means - a collection of very different people who, nevertheless, must work together towards one goal - and an appreciation of what this involves: an acceptance of each others' individuality and an ability to compromise. Try to get the group to agree on common aims and get a clear sense of direction. Try to agree to a set of clear class rules together.

Choose class activities which encourage

students to work together to solve a problem or finish a task - this encourages co-operation. Emphasise the positive. Get students to work with different partners to ensure they get to know each other and to prevent cliques forming.

• *If a teacher wanted to design a classroom activity with a group dynamic as well as a linguistic element, what should she consider?*

Let's say she wants to practise the simple past. An essay set for homework on "What I did last weekend" will practise the simple past, but won't improve group dynamics because it is done individually, in isolation. An activity such as "Rainy Sunday Shock Horror," where students find out about each others' weekends and write "newspaper articles" - "Tokyo Student Watched TV for Five Hours," "Kyoto Girl Read Three Books In One Weekend," "Rainy Sunday Shock Horror: Whole Class Stayed Home!" - which the teacher then pastes together to make a newspaper, will not only practise the past, but achieve other aims at the same time: getting students to talk to each other; getting them to co-operate; giving them a sense of themselves as a group; and, last but not least, injecting a bit of humour, that most essential ingredient in

any good relationship!

### About Classroom Dynamics

• *In Classroom Dynamics, you talk about "cognitive" and "affective" activities for building a positive group dynamic. What's the difference and why is one preferable to the other in certain situations?*

Cognitive activities make some aspect of the group process explicit. They are "awareness raising" activities where students actually have a discussion or fill in a questionnaire about some aspect of LL or of group processes.

Affective activities are language activities that have an underlying emotional effect as well - for example, making people feel more positive, or getting people to be more friendly. This aim is "tucked inside" the language learning aim so students are not actually consciously aware they are doing a group dynamics activity.

I think both are useful in conjunction, but some teachers and some groups may have an instinctive preference for one or the other.

• *In Classroom Dynamics, you suggest that pair- and groupwork can sometimes lead to a sense of fragmentation and conflict. Can you give an example of pairwork that does this and a pairwork that has a positive effect on group atmosphere?*

I certainly don't mean to attack pairwork! It plays a vital function in giving students speaking practice. I meant that pairwork itself splits up the class into small sub-groups and after this it's important to give the group a sense of wholeness by summarising what people have said or getting pairs to report back. This need only be brief, but it has the effect of bringing the sub-groups back to a unified whole.

Also many pairwork activities are based on discussion and argument, a conflict of opinions - the so-called opinion gap. Obviously debates and discussions are good for language practice. But sometimes I feel we could balance and supplement these with activities that invite people to find things they share or have in common - for example, find ten things that are the same about you.

• *In Classroom Dynamics, you talk about individual learning styles and group strategies. How can an understanding of different learning styles contribute to positive group atmosphere?*

There are students who learn by intellectualising and others who seem to learn more by instinct. For the first, knowing the rules of language is important and they can feel at sea if don't have these rules. For others, too much emphasis on grammar

rules fogs their minds - they learn best by imitation and "picking up" the language. Students sometimes feel that their way of learning is the only one and this can lead to conflict. It is important to realise that people learn in different ways and what is right for one doesn't necessarily work for another.

### About Japan

• *Japan is considered a "group-oriented" culture. Belonging to a group is considered very important. You have taught many classes of mixed nationalities. What observations have you made regarding Japanese students and group dynamics?*

I love having Japanese students in my classes! I have often found they take a very quiet, retiring role at first, but gradually their gentleness, care for others, and sensitivity permeates the group and makes it a nicer place to be!

• *In Japan, groups sometimes isolate individuals who are perceived as being different from the group. In some schools, physical or psychological bullying can result. What can a teacher do early on to prevent a group from isolating individual students?*

A teacher can try to make the group aware that individual differences are something to be not only accepted but celebrated. Individuality is what makes us human!

• *During your stay at in Japan at the LIOJ Workshop, what did hear from Japanese teachers regarding classroom dynamics?*

I was very impressed by the enthusiasm the teachers brought to their teaching, their care for their students and their dedication. I came away with the sense that in the group structure in Japan, there was a high degree of personal respect and care for others which is the basis for good group dynamics! ETJ

### References & further reading

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