

## Introduction #3

### Reflectively Recharge your Teaching

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Since we cannot change reality, let us change the eyes which see reality.

Nikos Kazantzakis

Only awareness is educable.

Caleb Gattegno

It's been said that our attitude is the only thing in life over which we have 100% control. Usually this fact is stated along with the direction to "look on the bright side" or "put on a happy face." Of course, a positive attitude is valuable, but will a simple positive attitude sustain us in the long term?

John Dewey identified several complex attitudes essential for the reflection that can sustain our teaching: wholeheartedness, directness, open-mindedness, and responsibility. Curiosity and the desire for growth were added by Carol Rodgers as attitudes that Dewey described although not necessarily in those terms.

What makes these attitudes reflective? They lead to thinking about our students, our subject, and our teaching in a different way. They help us to improve our teaching and they help to improve the learning experience for our students. We can reenergize our teaching by cultivating these reflective attitudes that Dewey (and Rodgers) identified.

Open-mindedness

Wholeheartedness

Responsibility

Directness

Desire for growth

Curiosity

What do curious teachers do?

Curious teachers find out about their students. They want to know what makes their students tick and what their interests are. They try to find ways to make connections between those interests and the subject matter.

Curious teachers want to find out about their students because they know that helping students make connections between what they are learning and what they already know and are interested in. They also know that they teach both their students and their subject matter. And they are interested in people and learning about others. And students are people.

When might we want to cultivate curiosity? When we've gotten caught up in the busyness of planning and teaching and our other duties. When we just want to "get through the day" and when we rush students and are not really paying attention to them in the way that we would like and have done in the past. In the way that they deserve and need.

What do responsible teachers do?

Responsible teachers keep things (their decisions) in perspective. They know that there are tests and standards that their students have to pass. They keep both elements in mind – the students and their abilities and interests and the subject matter and what their students have to master. They don't waste their students' time with activities and exercises that won't help them reach their goals.

When might we want to cultivate responsibility? When we're getting caught up in trying out new ideas and activities and into making changes for change sake. We need that reminder that our choices have implications and there are limits to what we can and should do in the classroom. Those limits are good – we develop our creativity when we are constrained in some way by circumstances and resources.

Responsibility helps us focus again on what we're there for – the learning of our students.

What do wholehearted teachers do?

Wholehearted teachers are enthusiastic about their subject matter. They love the subject that they're teaching but realize that not everyone does. They love to understand the learning process more deeply, both for motivated and unmotivated students. They understand that the question, "do you teach a subject or do you teach students?" is a false dichotomy because they teach both. Wholehearted teachers also know that their own teaching of their subject matter to their students is a subject for study and improvement.

When might we want to cultivate wholeheartedness?

Wholeheartedness is so powerful and has different aspects that can help us recharge. When we are feeling less than enthusiastic about our subject matter. Then we need to go back to why we loved that

subject in the first place. When we're feeling disconnected from our students, then looking at their learning process can help us recharge and reconnect with our students in a way that's not creepy or dumb. They are there to learn and it's our job to teach them. When we're feeling disconnected it might also be because our teaching practice has stagnated. We "know how to teach" and don't try anything new or different. It's all right to retire activities that you've always done even if they're still effective. There's no rule that you always have to use that cool song activity that you developed 10 years ago and can't change because you made it in ClarisWorks and you can't open it on your new computer. There have been a lot of cool songs since then. Let it go (J) and find something new.

What do teachers who have the desire to grow do?

Teachers who have the desire to grow realize that they will never be "perfect" teachers. Perfection is not their goal. They take every opportunity to learn about teaching. They attend workshops and read blogs and books and give workshops and write blogs and books about what they've learned about teaching. They learn and they share what they have learned.

When might we want to cultivate the desire to grow?

This is also connected to feeling stagnated and in a rut. But it's also connected to why we became teachers in the first place. We wanted to develop our talents and learn and improve and grow. It might not be the first thing that comes to mind, counter-intuitive? No, it seems so obvious when we state it, but how can we as teachers motivate our students and make them excited about learning when we aren't trying to learn and grow and become better teachers. When we studied and took courses to become a teacher, we were excited about what we were learning. That's the feeling and attitude that we want to get back to. And it isn't rooted in having wildly successful lessons every single day. It's rooted in learning from every lesson that we teach. Sometimes that learning is based on our successes and sometimes it's based on our flops. Our failures. The things that didn't work so well. Both types of experiences are useful for learning and growth. Sometimes the best learning comes out of failures. I chose the masters program that I did because I wanted to be a better teacher, like my colleagues who planned interesting lessons focused on student learning. It wasn't just to get a good qualification and a piece of paper for my wall. I still remember the first time I was observed by my masters' supervisor. I planned and planned and then taught one of the worst lessons of my life. So many things went wrong. But I learned so much about effective teaching and how to work with students. That lesson (and the week of observations that followed) was a pivotal moment in my learning about teaching. And I wouldn't have learned as much if I hadn't failed spectacularly in that first lesson.

What do directed” or “self-directed” teachers do?

Teachers who have directedness trust what they’ve learned and have confidence in their teaching abilities. This isn’t false confidence, but confidence that is based on their experience and in the realization that they can always improve and grow. These teachers look to their classrooms and students for answers to the puzzles that come out of the classrooms. The answers aren’t always found in books. There isn’t one “teacher personality” and there isn’t one valid way to teach any particular subject or topic or verb tense or group of vocabulary words or anything. That is directedness in a nutshell.

When might we want to cultivate directedness?

This reflective attitude is perhaps the least intuitive. It’s definitely one that needs defining since “directedness” isn’t a term that comes to mind when we’re thinking of reflection. But it’s a valuable and important attitude when we’re feeling that we don’t have the answers. Have you ever found an activity in a teachers’ resource book and thought it would be perfect for your class and then used it and it wasn’t? Have you ever wondered why those perfect activities don’t work in your lessons? Have you ever read a description of what students at the level that you teach are supposed to be able to do or are interested in and realized that that description doesn’t describe your students? That’s where directedness comes in. Because when there’s a disconnect between what is described in a book and what your students are doing (or can do), you can only say or think, “why are my students not like this?” in frustration, for so long before you have to switch to, “My students are not like this. I have to find something else.” It’s trust in the validity of your own experience and not worrying about the judgment of others.

This validity includes your teaching personality and persona. Teaching can be challenging, but it can also include great joy. One of the best compliments I ever received was when a quieter student of mine told me that being in my class showed her that she too could be a teacher. At the time in Japan (and probably elsewhere) the image of a “native English-speaking teacher” was of a high energy, sitcom actor type who was always making the students laugh and who played a lot of games in class. English lessons had to be fun, fun, FUN! My classes weren’t like that. Yet the students enjoyed their time in class and learned. Parker Palmer writes about how students can recognize when teachers teach in a way that’s disconnected to their personalities in *The Courage to Teach*. More and more I’m convinced that this courage, this confidence, to teach is rooted in the attitude that my own experience is just as valid as

others. If I choose to organize my classroom in a way that works for my students and me, but it's different than what the teacher in the next classroom is doing, that's fine.

What do open-minded teachers do?

Open-minded teachers are willing to entertain different perspectives. They are fine with saying that they might be wrong. When they see that they are wrong, they make changes. They acknowledge the limitations of their own perspective. The open-minded teacher holds their own teaching beliefs lightly (even as they underpin their teaching practice) because they acknowledge that these beliefs might change. They might find out that their belief is mistaken.

When might we want to cultivate open-mindedness?

When we realize that we might be holding on to our teaching beliefs too tightly. Question – are these teaching beliefs or teaching practices? But don't our practices reveal / illuminate / show our beliefs? Aren't our practices basically our beliefs made visible / come to life? In the same way that our actions show / reveal our attitudes. It's the "do as I say, not as I do" in reverse. Don't listen to someone, simply watch them to see what they really believe.

When we realize that the reason for a particular practice in our repertoire is, "because I've always done it this way" or "because I've always done it this way it's the right way." This way of thinking makes it difficult to make changes in one's practice. How can we give up a particular activity? Does giving it up mean that we weren't good teachers when we used it?

A useful way to approach this dilemma is to acknowledge that as teachers we are always trying to learn and improve. Instead of jumping from bandwagon to bandwagon, latest trend to latest trend, we can acknowledge that we did the best with what we knew and were able to do at the time, with the knowledge and skills that we had at the time. And our subsequent experience has led us to new insights and new ways of learning. We wouldn't have gotten here if we hadn't been there. (Make sense?) And we can be thankful that we were able to help our students learn before and be excited that we have new ideas and ways to help our students learn better.

Some pitfalls that we have to be wary of, the idea that "If I believe it, it must be true. My professor taught this and they knew what they were talking about. This expert in language teaching says it, so it must be true.

Caution – holding our beliefs lightly doesn't mean that we're ready to throw them out at any point. The interesting / notable / cool thing about teaching beliefs is that upon further examination our core beliefs become stronger while the beliefs that are less central to our practice disintegrate / fall apart. For example, one of my core beliefs is that student learning is the most important reason why we're in the classroom. If my students haven't learned anything, even if they "had fun" then it might be self-serving to say that the lesson was successful. The more that I think about and examine the centrality of student learning, the more reasons I come up with to support that premise. (Insert more reasons here) The core beliefs can handle robust examination. However, when less central teaching beliefs are examined, we might find that they aren't as central because we find reasons that support other ways of thinking.

A note about the approach to attitudes in this book

An attitude doesn't really serve any useful purpose unless it leads to an action that's rooted in that attitude and can only come about because of that attitude. Curiosity about your students and what their lives are like and why they're studying English (or whatever subject you teach) can only be described as "idle curiosity" if you don't follow up by asking your students about their lives and about their reasons for studying English.

An attitude is nothing unless there's an action that clearly comes out of that attitude. It's easier to see this in some attitudes. If we say that someone has a "confident" attitude we can see that in the way that they approach the work that they do.

The following activities were developed to help you improve your understanding of and ability to develop this attitude. Choose the activity or activities that speak to you. Trust that you will choose the activity that will help you the most.