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Personality Types, or Why I Teach Composition the Way I Do

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How do teachers decide which theories and practices to adopt? Why do most of us continue to search for the best theories throughout our careers? After graduating from the University of Essex with an MA in applied linguistics in 1971, I was brimming over with theory. But I still wasn't sure of how to apply the theory to classroom practice. I had just been appointed coordinator of courses at the Colchester English Study Centre in England and I needed some answers to my questions in a hurry.

One of my problems was that very few professionals with real ESL expertise had observed my teaching. (I had slipped through without ever taking a methods course.) One of my professors from the University of Essex used to visit the Study Centre very often as his wife worked there. So, I invited him to observe one of my lessons.

He was not very enthusiastic about the lesson and commented, "There isn't enough tension in the class. The students are enjoying themselves too much." I understood the comment to be a criticism but found that I couldn't change my teaching style. For me, a classroom needs to be as relaxed as possible for good learning to take place.

For years my professor's comments bothered me. The word *tension* is ambiguous, and I never found out whether he meant *stress* or *dramatic tension*. But I did know that I wanted my classroom to be a happy, relaxed place. That professor went on to become one of our leading experts on classroom management, and every time someone mentions Dick Allwright, the past president of TESOL, I feel guilty because I could not take his advice.

At last I am beginning to understand why teachers such as Dick Allwright and I differ so much and why what works for one teacher doesn't work for another. The decisions language teachers make are complex, and we are only beginning to understand how many factors are involved (Spolsky, 1988; Strevens, 1988). At least two important psychological factors appear to affect a teacher's decisions: the way that the teacher believes that people learn, and the personality of

the teacher. These factors affect what procedures we choose to use in the classroom.

I finally came across a description of a psychological theory that helps explain the procedures I choose—humanistic psychology. Humanistic psychology emphasizes free will—the human ability to make choices. Humanists recognize the importance of the psychological need for love, self-esteem, belonging, self-expression, and creativity. Abraham Maslow, one of the leading exponents of humanism, identifies the human need to develop one's potential fully, to lead a rich and meaningful life, and to become the best person possible. Humanists believe that everyone has this potential, and they seek ways to allow it to emerge.

Humanism in language teaching has come to mean "concern for affect, for the dignity of the individual, for fully developing the potential of the individual" (Stevick, 1984, p. 106). This psychological theory puts into words what I instinctively believe about the conditions my students need in order to succeed in their studies. If there is to be tension in the classroom, it can only be dramatic tension. The kind of nervous panic that affects most language learners, particularly adult students, should be avoided if possible.

Not all teachers believe in a humanistic approach and prefer to encourage their students to perform in other ways. Realizing that there are other reasons for my decisions about methodology, I was more than enthusiastic when a colleague introduced me to the idea of personality types.

In the 1940s, Isabel Myers and her mother, Katherine Briggs, began to develop a personality test based on Carl Jung's theory of personality type. This test divides people into 16 different categories. People are either Extroverts or Introverts. They may be Sensing or Intuitive. Some people are Thinking and others are Feeling. People can also be divided into Judging or Perceptive types. Naturally these divisions are on a continuum but, fundamentally, you are either one or the other. The test, which has been extensively researched, is becoming increasingly popular among educators. At a recent Conference of College Composition and Communication, for example, a full day workshop and several papers dealt with the Myers Briggs Type Indicator Test.

After taking the test, I discovered that I was classified as an ENFJ (Extrovert-Intuitive-Feeling-Judging). This did not mean much to me until I read *Please Understand Me: Character and Temperament Types* by David Keirsey and Marilyn Bates (1984). After reading the section about NF (Intuitive-Feeling) teachers I had an "Aha!" reaction. Keirsey and Bates describe the kind of teacher that I am far better than I ever could.

Only 5% of the general population are ENFJs, but 30% of teachers are. According to the authors, NF teachers are marked by personal charisma and commitment to students. NF teachers are genuinely

concerned about all aspects of the welfare of their students and try to individualize instruction. "Under the NF's leadership, students often find that they have talents previously unrecognized" (p. 163). NF teachers conduct a democratic classroom. They are more willing than other types of teachers to allow student-to-student interaction and do not see themselves as the source of all wisdom. "They can be unconventional in their teaching and can handle the unconventional in students. They reluctantly use workbooks and manufactured tasks and projects, preferring to create their own curriculum materials" (p. 164). This is the story of my career as a teacher.

Not everything about NF teachers is so positive, and I must admit to the negative aspects as well. I agree that "It is difficult, sometimes, for NFs to be as accepting of superiors in general as the NFs are of students and fellow teachers . . . (which) can be destructive to working relationships" (p. 165). As a young teacher I had to deal with the problem of sometimes "Discussing inappropriate details concerning students . . . in the teachers' faculty room" (p. 165). There is no doubt that I recognize myself in this description.

Discovering humanistic psychology and the Myers-Briggs personality types has been empowering. Having a theoretical framework to explain what I do as a teacher in the classroom allows me to make sense of what has always seemed natural to me. It also makes it quite clear that there will never be an ideal way for everyone to teach. Decisions on teaching methods will depend on what kind of person the teacher is and what she believes and understands about people and learning.

Application

With that in mind, I would like to describe how I teach composition as an ENFJ humanist. Like many other teachers I find that I am eclectic—anything that works is grist to my mill. Realizing that most of us expose ourselves more when writing a composition than in many other situations, I use methodology that takes the emotional as well as the cognitive needs of the students into consideration. The discovery and acknowledgment of the role of character types has led me to reduce or eliminate the need for absolute judgment about what is right or essential for teachers or students.

This brings me to the methodology I use in the composition classroom. Like many other ESL teachers I turn for help to Earl Stevick (1984). Stevick has always maintained that there is no one way for teachers and/or students. He describes his search for better methods and admits that he has become interested in such nonconventional methods as Suggestopedia, The Silent Way, and Counseling-Learning (C-L) because they may provide answers to the difference between success and failure for a highly variable student population. Stevick is convinced that the fact that these methods deal with affective aspects of teaching makes a real difference.

Jack Richards (1984) seems to agree that such methodologies as Total Physical Response, the Natural Approach, and C-L result from "individual instructional philosophies and personal theories concerning factors that promote successful learning" (p. 11). They deal with the way an "individual's learning potential can be maximized." These methods operate without explicit syllabus models but they all emphasize learning experiences that reduce stress and anxiety.

In particular, Curran's C-L aims at the whole person model of learning. It applies group counseling methods to language teaching in an attempt to remove emotional and affective barriers created by learners. Curran believes that learning is a social phenomenon that best takes place within the supportive environment of one's fellow learners. Richards believes that C-L is a teacher dependent approach in which procedure, rather than content, is specified. This particular approach fits in very well with my teaching style.

I have never attended any of the workshops offered by Gattegno in *The Silent Way* or those of any of the other proponents of these unconventional methods. I have, however, read articles in journals and attended presentations at conferences in addition to reading everything Earl Stevick has to say in *Memory, Meaning, and Method* (1976) and *A Way and Ways* (1980). The strongest message that I get from all these methods is: teacher, get out of the way of learning! The techniques I have adopted and adapted focus on the learners and help them to develop as writers in efficient and beneficial ways.

One of the strategies I use is that I mostly adopt a process approach to writing that "... is intended to create a humanistic, nonevaluative classroom atmosphere" (Casanave, 1988, p. 29). Unfortunately, there are times when students must be tested and tension in the classroom is inevitable. Apart from such instances, the process approach is the one I choose since it fits so well with my teaching style.

Most students enter the composition class convinced that the teacher is going to be prescriptive. (From discussions with students, I gather that they perceive most English teachers to be totally prescriptive.) As a result, I set out to be as descriptive as possible. I don't want students to leave my class remembering only such comments as: "never use *I* or *you* in your composition"; "you can't begin a sentence with *and* or *but*."

To help to free them, I recommend a handbook with a descriptive approach such as *Writing With Style* by John Trimble (1975) which I use for intermediate and advanced students. His approach is sensible, practical, and appealing to most students. Quite often students actually thank me for introducing them to the book.

In line with my humanistic approach to teaching composition, I choose topics that are both controversial and topical. One of the best composition teachers I had says that if you give students simplistic topics, they will write simplistic essays. Consequently, I look for subjects that will prove challenging for the class. Very often we begin

by reading a newspaper or magazine article or editorial. Editorials work particularly well as they are written in the kind of academic style we want our students to acquire. Topics that have worked well with more advanced mixed ESL/native speaker classes are: Joseph Biden and plagiarism, the controversy over hiring a deaf president at Gallaudet University, the integration of new immigrants, the English-only movement, and sexist language.

My latest plan includes the class reading Neil Postman's (1987) *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. After reading the book and watching Postman being interviewed on television, students write a research paper about some aspect of television. Their task is either to agree with Postman, who is very suspicious of television, or to defend the medium. Either way, their task is to carry out research about some aspect of television that interests them. The research papers they write are among the best my students have ever written.

When we start a new topic, we discuss it either in groups or as a whole class. I encourage students to take notes during the discussion; then they go home to think about the topic. About a week later, they either bring a thesis statement or an outline to class to discuss with another student. After they have made any necessary changes, they show it to me. I usually make a few suggestions, which they may accept or not. They then write the essay. Before the whole essay is submitted to me, it is reviewed by their peers. (One way to motivate the reviewers is to give them a grade for the review.) Students really appreciate this step for two reasons. First, they enjoy seeing what the other students in the class write; second, a peer-edited paper usually gets a higher grade as most of the mechanical errors have been caught by the time I see the essay. In order to direct the students' reviews, I supply them with an editing or peer review sheet in which I suggest what they should be looking for.

The next step in the process is to discuss the criteria used for grading. They need to know what is expected of them in order to improve their grade. The students are presented with three or four essays written by class members and they are asked to grade them holistically. We write up the range of grades on the chalkboard and students are asked to defend the grades they give if they differ from the majority. The purpose of this exercise is to teach them to evaluate writing so they can judge and improve their own writing.

After the communal grading session, we examine the papers in detail. Obviously all the papers are anonymous and most students seem to accept the process. In fact, their peers' comments seem to have more effect than the teacher's. As a result, it doesn't take long for them to finally recognize the difference between such words as *its* and *it's* and *there*, *their*, and *they're*.

When I return the essays, I always write at least one paragraph as well as a grade. I always address the student by name and try to be honest. It is important to find something positive to say, which helps

many students to accept critical comments. They know that I can't teach them how to write, but I can provide them with optimum conditions for learning to write.

To reach this point in the composition process, we have been through the following steps:

- I choose a controversial, current topic;
- the topic is discussed in class either in groups or as a whole class;
- students go away to think about the issue;
- students bring either thesis statements or outlines to class;
- students discuss and edit these;
- I edit and approve the student's work;
- students write their essays;
- essays are reviewed and edited by peers;
- final versions of the essays are submitted for grades;
- sample essays are graded by the whole class;
- criteria for the grades are discussed; and
- error analyses of the sample essays are carried out orally by the whole class.

These are some of the procedures that work for me. Perhaps other teachers who have similar teaching styles may find my ideas helpful. Probably SF (Sensing-Feeling) and ST (Sensing-Thinking) teachers will reject these ideas as being unsuitable for them. If we accept that everybody is different, we can learn to accept each other and stop trying to make others like us. We must learn to appreciate each other's special talents.

I found it helpful to find out about my personality type as well as the affective aspects of teaching composition. This knowledge has made me a better teacher, and although grading a pile of compositions will never be my favorite activity, I am rarely disappointed with the results. In fact, I am often delighted by the insights and perceptions of many of my students. ■

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