

ELTA
Belgrad

Preparing lessons or maybe God willing.....

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Let me open this exploratory article with the thoughts of a Danish colleague who also worked for some years in Greenland:

Staffroom in Nuk, 5 minutes before the bell. Everybody relaxed:

" You done your preparation?"

" What preparation? How can I tell what the kids'll be ready to do until I get in there?"

Staffroom six months later in Copenhagen, five minutes before the bell: some people writing notes, others leafing through books, a queue at the photocopier, loads of bustle:

" Done your preparation"

" 'Course. Ready to roll!"

This article is an attempt to open up a discussion on what preparation is for different teachers and in different cultural traditions. I am at the beginning of this quest and do not have any definite answers. I very much hope readers of this piece will be motivated to contribute their own thoughts.

Can I kick off by asking you a series of questions about your own preparation? Couldn't this questionnaire be useful instrument to use in a teacher training group (led by a designated trainer) or a teacher development group (democratically run by the group members themselves)?

Preparation Questionnaire

When does your lesson preparation start and when does it finish?

In what place/s do you prepare?

**In your case, is preparation an unconscious,
semi-conscious
or fully conscious process?**

**Do your thoughts tend to focus on your students,
on materials and contents,
on what you will do in the lesson?**

**Is your preparation mainly visual
or is it a talking-to-yourself process
or do you tend to get a feeling of how the lesson may be?**

How does the coursebook come into your preparation,.....and its teacher's book?

Please now think of/write/two high quality questions of your own.

When you prepare your classes, do you write things down, and if so. what?

**Is what you prepare a fixed plan with timings
a branching programme
a constructive fantasy about the future
or something quite other?**

What preparation do you do when you have had no chance to prepare?

How has your way of preparing changed over time?

How do you see your preparation maybe changing in the future?

I wonder what answers you have given to the questions above? More important than your reaction to my questions will have been the two high quality questions you asked yourself.

Here, all the same, are my two questions for that slot:

How come my unconscious feeling will sometimes be at odds with my conscious, technical preparation and how has this conflict been resolved in the lesson?

After a lesson at what point does my mind turn from looking back over the last class and turn forward to thinking about the next one?

We all know that people do preparation very differently. There are teaching training colleagues at Pilgrims who spend two to three hours of an evening in the staffroom poring over books, jotting down notes and heating the photocopier to the point of despair! **These colleagues do outstanding work with their trainees.**

I once met a trainer, who when they had to do the same afternoon session over three days with three different groups, would spend an equally long time preparing each day. The training sessions were virtually identical. There was a process here that I did not begin to comprehend but this particular woman was an excellent trainer. But then I don't understand what drives the obsessive-compulsive mind which has to check that the gas is off twelve times over.

Karl Frank, a Pilgrims colleague, tells me that his way of preparing is what he calls: "door-handle didactics" Here is his process in roughly his own words:

"My mind is flooded with ideas, possibilities and things that could work..... half an hour before the lesson I try to narrow things down by thinking hard about what this particular bunch of students are like. Though narrowed down, things are still partly open in my mind until I go into the classroom: door-handle didactics!"

Chaz Pugliese, the Director of Studies of Pilgrims teacher training, tells me that he makes a clear distinction between

Preparation	and	Planning
<i>Checking in with myself</i>		<i>A musician's set list</i>
<i>Scanning my internal disk</i>		<i>What songs do I want to play tonight?</i>
<i>Checking for bugs</i>		<i>I need an action check list</i>
<i>Before thinking of a lesson I need to realise the state I am in</i>		<i>However flexible I am in class I want to have something I can check anytime</i>
<i>I think of the groups, draw them nearer or watch them from afar</i>		

[I guess the expression "musicians set list" comes from Chaz's passionate blues playing and singing.]

For some people the timing of preparation is important: Mojca Belak a Pilgrims trainer and a methodologist at the University of Ljubljana sees her fourth year class just once a week. Right after that lesson she writes a diary entry, there and then. She says this is very good to read back over. Psychologically she cannot prepare for her class until 48 hours before the lesson....so I guess two night-long sleep periods intervene between preparation and teaching.

Some people, like Bernard Dufeu, originator of language psychodramaturgy, work very hard mentally to decide on how a teaching period should begin. He feels that if his first exercise strikes the right note rich and unforeseeable things will flow from there.

A neighbour of mine teaches dyslexic secondary kids on a one-to-one basis. Whenever possible Janet Killian does her preparation for the next session in the room where she teaches the child. She finds it ten times easier to concentrate on the next lesson when she is there in the same physical, spatial reality. She finds preparing at home much clumsier.

In my own case I find it hard to get a complete and satisfactory conscious mapping of my preparation process. Of three things, though, I am sure:

1. Sleep plays a fundamental role in the sequence. Typically I will prepare my classes the night before. In my early morning bath, when I m really relaxed, an awareness of the student group/s come/s over me and once I have got dried I go to my study and often radically alter the lesson notes written the night before. Then I am sure I am on the right track.

Thank you Lethe, Goddess of Sleep, for your work which is so much more to the point than mine!

2. Having regular mutual supervision sessions * with a colleague alters the way I think about my classes and if there is good harmony between us I imagine that in an odd way I am team-teaching with her or him. Mentally I do my preparation with my supervisor somehow benignly present. This greatly reduces the sense of loneliness I can sometimes feel while preparing lessons while not in supervision.

3. I write short letters to my classes most days, and this on a regular basis. The letters are focused on the work we are doing together eg, a new verb tense..... vocabulary to be revised, my feelings about something that has cropped up in class.

The writing of the day's letter has become an integral and very helpful part of my "sitting- at-the-desk" preparation. It really helps me focus on the students as they are individually and not a sort of "group fiction" of my own making.

Enough of my stuff. It may be a million miles from you the way you organize your head between the last lesson and the next one. Why don't you write something about your own process and send it to the Association's Newsletter to share with others?

By the way, was there much discussion of how to organize preparation or what preparation was when you were doing your own initial training course?

* Mutual supervision is when two colleagues, who do NOT see each other's classes come together for half an hour to tell the story of their lessons. They speak to each other in confidence and they should be hierarchically equal. The "supervisor's" role is deep and attentive listening and repeating back what the other has said to check he had understood. Inquisitive questions, foolish advice and modals are shunned. If the session lasts half an hour the supervisor and supervisee swap roles after 15 minutes.

NB: In the 1350 word text above there are 19 interrogative sentences. How has your reading been affected by this bevy of questions? How is a rather interrogative text

different, for you , from a more declarative one? [With these last two, how many questions in all? !!!!]

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