

To Lucia [REDACTED] Resources/ Recanati/ Italy.

Dear Lucia,

I enclose an article on **Sparks in the Classroom**, that you might like to consider for the magazine.

Please let me know if you decide to use it.

Have your in-house discussions on launching a TRBook list got any further?

Where are you at with Jane as the out-of-house editor?

I could suggest other names if Jane ends up by deciding agst the job since she does not yet really know how much time heading the Dept will take.

Yours warmly,

Ps: I'll ask my colleague, Jim Wright, to get in touch with you about us getting an advert in **Resources**, as has happened in the past.

Mario.

Biodata: Mario works for Pilgrims in East Kent, UK as a teacher, trainer, writer and editor. His last Cdrom, **Mindgame**, came out with Clarity < www.clarity.com.hk > in 2000. His next book, **Humanise your Coursebook**, will be out with ETP-Delta 2002. Mario edits the free web'zine for teachers, **Humanising Language Teaching**, that you will find at < www.hltmag.co.uk >.

Sparks in the Classroom

by Mario Rinvoluceri, Pilgrims, UK

The idea of **Sparks** in the classroom came up in a teacher training group in Canterbury in the summer of 2000. **Sparks** were defined by the people in this group as sudden, unexpected successes in class that somehow take your breath way, that

lift you onto a new plane.

Let me give you an example of how I understand the idea, an example taken from my own teaching:

I am running a full-time, one month, language improvement course for a group of 18 Bangladeshi, Somali and Vietnamese immigrants, all adults, in Tower Hamlets, East London. Some of the techniques that I have used with other, middle class, European student groups do not work with these folk. Do I dare to try the flower exercise with them?

I come to class with a large bunch of daffodils (it's March) and three vases. I gather the group round a large table and ask the shy of the two Somali woman to arrange the flowers in the 3 vases. I then say:

“ Maybe you think these are flowers. They are not flowers. What are they?

There is what feels to me like a long silence and then some one says:

“ they people”.

And another student : *“dey are tree family “*

And now there is a rush of speech as students powerfully interrupt each other and build up the story of three households in the same street, one Bangladeshi, one black and one white. Each flower in each vase has its own family role as aunt, uncle, grandfather etc.

My fear that the activity will not take off is swept away in their enthusiasm and story building, as they project their own vision of reality onto the yellow daffodils.

In this situation the crucial moment, the **spark** moment was when that Bengali speaker came out with:

“ dey are tree family “.

Everything flowed from there.

The **spark** moments in your teaching are well worth reflecting on as they are not just times of pleasure and success from the past, they are a valuable psychological resource you can draw on in the future. If you know that such moments happen in your classroom and in other people's groups, too, then you have a powerful weapon to combat the feelings of downness and even despair that you can fall into in what may seem grim group or inter-personal situations.

Let me take you back to that Summer 200 Pilgrims teacher training group. Excited by the concept of the **spark in the classroom** they decided to document some of the **spark** situations they had experienced in primary and secondary classroom across Europe. What follows are some **spark** stories from that group:

Spark Story 1 (Spain)

This Fernando is such a kinaesthetic, inter-personal boy of 16, almost unable to make a correct English sentence not only in written but also completely Spanish pronunciation.

I thought of lending my students some Ladybird books with an accompanying tape. (They are just for native kids of primary age). Fernando got Chicken Licken. You could see him along the corridors asking everybody in English:

Good morning Rocio, (or whoever..) where are you going in such a hurry?

He told me later it was the first book he had ever read in English and the first sentence he had ever really been able to say without hesitating or bad pronunciation. (He gave me 6 out of 10 in his evaluation of the teachers. Before I had only got a 4 from him!)

Spark Story 2 (Portugal)

I had a **spark** experience when I was trying to make up for all the play and fun we had been having in a class of 14-15 year-olds. By the end of the second term a girl complained that we didn't seem to be learning anything: it was just play and fun. I was a bit shocked when I heard this because all the play and fun had been going on in English and I really thought they had been learning it!

So I prepared a lesson very carefully on "if" clauses . I started with a picture on an OHT from the film BIG which had just been shown on Portuguese TV and I proceeded to elicit sentences about the film, making the students use the structure. I had some sentences written on the OHT, which I gradually revealed: and it seemed like magic , the sentences they were telling me were the ones I had written at home, so that when they said one I was able to uncover just that same sentence!

After that I elicited the structure of the sentences by using a series of overlapping OHTs. It was all very neatly done, with nice handwriting and using different colours for different parts of the sentences and my reasoning and theirs seemed to be just one! I was very conscious of the girl's attention all through the lesson and I really could feel that for her, and many of the others , too, this was a "sparkling"(sic) moment. At the end of year, when I asked my students which lesson they had liked most, many of them mentioned this one. I now realise that this lesson catered for their logical-mathematical and linguistic intelligences.

Spark story 3 (Denmark)

My spark

It was in March when I got a six years old boy called Gustav to my class. The rest of the group tried to be friendly with helping him but his response was only to attack, hitting, punching, pushing everyone. When I tried to communicate, he acted out like one of those cartoon characters.

One day, when making order in the classroom, I found an old chess box in the cupboard. I became curious... will my children want to play chess? So I invited them to try. It became very clear immediately that Gustav loved playing chess and that he was amazing when planning his moves. At first he only chose me as a partner but after a while he started playing with the others who were interested. He became more and more open.

He still needs a lot of help and support but since the discovery of chess, he is able to communicate with his peers without conflict.

The main point of this article is to prepare you to share some **sparks** from your teaching experience with the other readers of **Resources**. Send the editor, Lucia Astuti, your success stories in class so we get a "successes dialogue" going in the pages of the magazine.

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