

Mojca TD SIG

**The teacher's person as the main classroom resource No 1**  
Mario Rinvoluceri, Pilgrims, UK

I am delighted that Mojca Belak, the IATEFL Teacher Development SIG organizer, has asked me to write a series of three articles under the above title.

This first piece will deal with the teacher's conscious and unconscious needs and desires.

The second article will look at practical ways of empowering students

The third article will deal with the influence the teacher's biography has on her work in class.

The three articles are intended to appear in three successive issues of the Newsletter.

### **I The teacher's conscious and unconscious needs and desires**

I would like to open this discussion with a longish quote from an article by the psychodramatist, therapist, language teacher and developer of "language psychodramaturgy, Bernard Dufeu.

#### ***Teaching as gentle violence***

*It is with varying degrees of gentle violence that, as a teacher, I impose not just my method, my progression, my rhythm, my contents, my style of relating to others, my way of thinking about language and communication, but my own way of being and becoming as well.*

*These expectations of the other often go beyond what I am as a teacher. They include what I would like to be: the student must not just correspond to what I think I am, to the idealized image I have of myself, (good at the language I teach, flexible, creative, witty....etc..) he must also correspond with what I would like to be. The other becomes an idealized construct: I make him carry my hopes of going beyond myself.....*

*.....*  
*My disappointment as a teacher is, in part, cut to the cloth of my illusions. Because I too often identify with what I want to get across ('I am the subject I teach') and the way I get it across ('I am my teaching'), I find it hard to accept that my message should be transformed or deformed, because then the students are transforming or deforming me, not just what I say.*

*My disappointment rests on a confusion between doing and being, a confusion that reduces the individual to his acts, exactly like a child who is not loved for who he is but for what he does.*

[ taken from **Britta and Rolf or the unfaithful mirror**, Bernard Dufeu, University of Mainz, which you can read in full at <http://www.tttjournal.co.uk>]

Let us unpack Bernard's complex, (originally) French prose into the more oxygenated form of a questionnaire which I would ask you to take the time to mentally work through giving your own answers to the questions.

1. How do you relate to thinking of your own teaching as "gentle violence" that you do to your students?
  2. Can you think of two students who have given you clear feedback on your teaching as "gentle violence", bearing in mind questions of rhythm, method, focus, progression and ways of thinking about language and communication?
  3. Is there any pattern you can see that links people you feel to be "good students" and is there a discernable pattern among people you come to internally label "bad students"?
  4. Bernard speaks of the teacher as having an idealized view of himself:  
*"I think I am good at the language I teach, flexible, creative, witty....."*  
What is your idealized vision of yourself in the classroom?  
Do you have doubts about this construct?
  5. What sort of teacher would you like to become, beyond what you already are?
  6. To what degree do you "become" the subject content you are teaching?  
How intensely do you identify with your content?
  7. How do you cope internally with students who refuse your "gentle violence"?
- 

I wonder how, gentle reader, you felt when I asked you to change your mode of reading and start mentally answering questions. Maybe you experienced this as the writer's "gentle violence"? I know that, as a reader, I object to writer's tricks of the above sort. I internally shout out "*Get on with what you have to tell me.....*" I ignore the instruction and keep on reading in exactly the way I want.

To help you carry in reading I am going to answer the first question above from within my own teaching life. I will leave the other six to you.

1. How do I relate to thinking of my own teaching as "gentle violence" that I do to my students?

I certainly do not normally think of my teaching that way. I think of most of my teaching as a time of pleasure, of fulfilment and of fun. I nearly always go to class propelled by a powerful "towards" motivation. This is something I want to do, and I cannot imagine not doing it.

But who chooses **the method** I use and who makes the lesson plans for the hours I spend with these people I call students? The answer is that I do, just as I choose the menu and

do the cooking for a supper party to which I have invited people. How do I know that my “class menu” is OK for each person in the group? Thinking of the range of students in a given class I may be in good harmony with some, doing “gentle violence” to others and to some ( I hope a few) I may be doing “not so gentle violence”.

As a story-teller you can do “gentle violence” to members of your audience as they are listening to your tale and your narration takes a path that clashes with what they are imagining in their heads. Last week I told a tale to a large group in Lisbon and one woman said:

*“ I was enjoying your telling and then suddenly you said something that simply did not fit in with what I was imagining. Why did you go wrong? It is this candid , innocent participant self-assuredness that give a storyteller an indication of how her “violence “ sometimes works. No, I am not recounting this anecdote as joke: I did do this listener violence.*

Is my teaching **rhythm** the right one for a given group? Do I go too fast or too slow? Do my explanations go on too long and bore some people? Am I too glancing and quick for others? Do I manage to vary my teaching pace to cope with the students who speak, think and read fast and then also be in step with the slower, more meditative people in the group, let alone the people who need more time because they have less English?

Is there a “gentle violence” inherent to the situation that leaves me as an absolute monarch in my classroom, a place traditionally ( outside Scandinavia) devoid of any glimmerings of democratic thinking?

Does the **lesson content** I bring to class suit, stimulate and interest the participants?

Do the person-related exercises I tend to find useful in building a powerful group atmosphere, do they stick in the craw of some of the logically-mathematically minded students whose approach to language is a form of systems thinking? Do these students experience a **content violence** in my class? ( Would they feel the same in Bernard Dufeu’s classes?)

Is there “gentle and not so gentle violence” in my **style of relating to others**? There are many aspects of the way I relate to others. Let us look at some of them:

- I relate to others as a male primate. With other males I may have feelings of competition, of being threatened, of wish for dominance. In this I am not that far from a male bonobo or chimp. In relating to females I will certainly have both aware and unaware currents of wish, desire and “if only”, as well as aversive feelings within me.
- I relate to others as a person of 67 years of age. In family terms this means that I may have a fatherly or grandfatherly way of relating to some students. I have noticed that some students are happy with this focus and respond congruently and happily while others have no need of a surrogate Dad or Grandad.
- ( let me remind you I mostly teach multi-national classes)I relate to people I meet in my classes as an Italo-Englishman. I carry with me the expectations of my own bizarre, exotic culture/s. For example I tend to think of the person I meet as first and foremost an individual. I tend to think of their individuality as their guiding characteristic which is an absurd state of mind when I am talking to some one from culture where group-belonging is the dominant characteristic of the person. I fear I have done some of my students “ unbelievable cultural violence” through my mammoth ignorance of how they tick. Let me give you an example that

happened two nights ago. I asked my class to prepare to tell “success stories” about their work or school life. I modelled this by telling one of my own.

An Estonian student gently protested: “Isn’t it much easier to tell the story of a success that happened to some one else”? Instead of saying “Yes, you do that” I had to go into a foolish spiel about how some cultures have strong “modesty” rules. The foolishness lay in devaluing this man’s deep belief by suggesting that it was merely a quirk of his culture. There was plenty of violence in this thoughtless intervention.

- I relate to my students as a person very prone project his own feelings onto others. Though I know it is primitive, I am often convinced I know what the other person is going to be feeling in a given situation. I assume they will be feeling as I would be. I suppose you could call this a form of mild autism.

So far we have looked at the classroom from highly self-critical slant that Bernard Dufeu takes, thinking about himself as a teacher, but how can this same classroom situation look from the students end? Here are a few lines from Sheelagh Deller’s powerful introduction to **Lessons from the Learner**:

*There are a number of situations that haunt me; namely waiting at airports, being in prison, being in a traffic jam on the M 25, and being a learner in a classroom situation. Being, being, being. All in the present and extremely continuous. The common factor that affects me in these situations is my total lack of control or choice. I feel helpless and frustrated, so much so that I temporarily lose my sense of identity and responsibility.*

Everything thing that both Bernard and Sheelagh are saying has to do with the classroom being an absolute monarchy. Once the classroom door is shut the teacher has the cultural right to do as she sees fit. She has massive authority and her authority is much less contested than that of a judge in court, whose decisions are constantly questioned by fellow professionals and may well be overturned by a higher court. It is this absolutism that must keep many of us happily in teaching despite the lousy pay.

In the second article of this series, in the next issue of the Newsletter, I will deal with a number of practical ways in which the absolute monarchy of the language classroom can be modified, subverted and usefully democratized. Sheelagh’s aim and Bernard’s aim is to empower students though their ways of going about this are very different.

---

Mojca TD Sig

Piece 2

**Ways of empowering students**  
Mario Rinvoluceri, Pilgrims, UK

You may remember that my last article was largely about what Bernard Dufeu calls the “gentle violence” that teachers do to their classes. I suggested that this violence goes largely unchecked because the political model for the classroom is, for the most part, absolute monarchy. This is also the case in the therapy room. In this article I want to deal with a variety of ways that teachers have tried to tackle this situation and democratize it..

**1. Feedback built into the fibre of teaching.**

Some private sector teachers think of feedback as something that their employer collects at the end of a course to evaluate their teaching. This sort of “dead” feedback is normally collected by giving the students a bizarrely constructed questionnaire.

Useful feedback is not an end-of-course phenomenon. It is something built into the teaching on a regular basis. When teaching multinational classes of beginners in New York, Caleb Gattegno asked them to give him oral feedback on the lessons each day and in their mother tongues. He reckoned he had much to learn from the music and the gestuality of such feedback even if the language was one he did not know.

After three days on an intensive course I will give the students sheets of A 3 paper and coloured pens. I ask them to draw a graph with a vertical and horizontal axis. Along the horizontal axis they mark the hours we have been working together. The vertical axis represents the degree or intensity of the variables I give them.

I ask them to draw one line across the page to represent their **energy level**  
another to represent their **learning**  
a third to represent their **language tiredness**

I also asked them to choose two more variables of their own and the graph these. Often their own variables are the most significant ones.

The next stage is the socialization of the graphs, often in small groups. I then take the graphs in and use the information they contain to modify the rhythm, progression and content of the course I am teaching.

Sheelagh Deller, author of **Lessons from the learner**, asks students to give her future-paced feedback to allow her to plan her lessons more democratically.

It goes something like this:

You, the teacher, **stop doing**.....

You, the teacher, **continue doing**.....

You, the teacher, **start doing**.....

I, the student, **stop doing**.....

I, the student, **continue doing**.....

I, the student, **start doing**.....

Another Pilgrims colleague of mine, Penelope Williams, feels that genuine feedback is part of the life blood of a course. She has told me that she feels that feedback between the participants is as vital as feedback to her.

To this end she may pair participants and ask them each to give their feedback to each other.

Each person then brings their partner's feedback to the group, and the partner of course has a right to intervene should the person speaking on her behalf get it "wrong".

What is central to the Gattegno feedback, my graphing activity, the Deller and Williams feedback techniques is that they alter the way the class moves forward. The feedback creates these changes through the reactions of the participants and of the teacher/leader. We are here not talking about summative or judgmental feedback, but rather about creative, in-process feedback.

Though such feedback systems do not turn the classroom monarchy into a democracy, they do ensure that the "monarch" becomes responsive to expressed subject needs.

## 2. Learning through teaching ( Lernen durch lehren)

A French teacher in the university of Eichstaett, East Germany, has developed a system that divests the teacher her role as presenter of new material, as explainer of grammar, as chief actor in the classroom and gives all these tasks to the students themselves. In Jean Pol Martin's **Lernen durch lehren** all the teaching is done by the students and the teacher's role is that of a behind-the-scenes kind of theatre director.

The students work in pairs and take their classmates through the units in the coursebook, each team being responsible for 10 to 15 minutes segments of work from the book.

Turning your class into a kind of theatre company puts the students in protagonist role and enormously empowers them. I have been told by German secondary teachers who have used LdL that no way do their students want to go back to the old teacher-doing-everything situation. This is what Joachim Grzega has to say about LdL in his major article in Humanising Language Teaching, [www.hltmag.co.uk](http://www.hltmag.co.uk) Year 8 Issue 5, September 06 :

*Jean Pol Martin shows that human beings strive for (systematically) increasing their competence being in mental control of various walks of life and fields of study (control competence). The achievement of this control, according to Martin, leads to flow effects, ie great intrinsic satisfaction and feelings of happiness. This also means that the results should give pleasure even if the route to achieving them is arduous. This also means that the results should give pleasure even if the route to achieving them is arduous.*

Though LdL makes the students into class leaders and reduces the teacher's role to a behind-the-scenes one, it is interesting that Jean Pol Martin does not speak of democracy or student control:

*Martin runs his classes like a company and sees himself in the role of an executive manager. Another metaphor that Martin uses is the mind metaphor, in which the members of the class are seen as neurons with their different responsibilities and competences.*

A theatre director or executive manager is not usually a very democratic figure and yet this system is one that offers a primacy to the learners that a traditional, absolutely monarchic system does not.

### 3. The Scandinavian Case

In the Nordic countries there is a long tradition of student autonomy, so that within a given classroom different students or small groups of students may be doing quite different things within the time frame of the hour allotted to English. The tradition is so rooted in a place like Denmark that it is commercially viable for a publisher to produce a *Student's Resource book* full of activities for students to do on their own or in small groups. The book is carefully written so that the activity instructions are easy for a lower intermediate learner to read. The book I am referring to is **Toolbox**, published by Alinea, for the Danish market. I asked the lead author, Poul Otto Mortensen, how exactly he used the book in an average Danish class of 15 year olds. "I give the book to the strongest third of the class and tell them to organize themselves as they like, using the book, while I teach the weaker ones a traditional lesson"

The Scandinavian practice of student autonomy grows out of the soil of an intensely, individualistic, Protestant and ultra democratic state of mind. In a Scandinavian company like Ikea the managing director queues up for his lunch in the canteen like everybody else and the company has a very flat management structure. Is Scandinavian style student autonomy of the type proposed by Leni Damm transplantable to any and every other culture?

#### **4. Handing over executive group power to the students**

This was a system that Sue Leather and I developed in the 90's when we shared classes in a private EFL school in Cambridge, UK, (The Cambridge Academy of English). These students were mostly late teenagers and young adults and more came from Europe than from the Middle East or East Asia.

This is what we did:

We taught as we thought best for the first four days of the course (intensive three hour mornings). On the fourth day we explained to the students that we did not intend to carry on this way as we did not think people learn best when they have no hand in the executive decision making. We asked them to come to class on Friday morning ready to decide how they wanted the following week's programme structured, in terms of language content, human content and types of exercises. We told them that we had tried to show them what we felt capable of doing with them over the first four days of the course and that now we wanted them to get in the driving seat as a group.

In the last hour of Friday morning we stopped teaching, re-explained that we hoped they would come to executive decisions about the shape of the following week. We told them that we would leave them to discuss the programme that they wanted but that they could call us in at any time during the discussion should they need information. If we were not called earlier we would come back 15 minutes before the beginning of the lunch break to be told in detail how they wanted the following week to be run.

The first time we tried this Sue and I spent 45 minutes in state of mild trepidation.

When we went back into the classroom we both took notes of what the group spokesperson told us. We did not express any verbal opinions but did ask plenty of clarificatory questions, especially as to how they wanted us to fit in everything they wanted into the 15 hours available the following week. (I cannot claim that the students failed to read our bodily feedback to their decisions.)

Both Sue and I tried to implement the programme they had decided on as honestly and realistically as we could, even when we did not agree what we had been told to do. I think we genuinely managed to resist the temptation to sabotage things we disliked by implementing them badly.

Was the experiment with democracy in the classroom a 100% success? I wonder. Sometimes the executive meetings seemed to have been dominated by one strong-willed person, sometimes by a minority who were better at pushing their point of view. I sometimes suspected that the group had got tired of disagreeing and had reached a fatigued, insincere compromise, as so often happens in the meeting of any committee. I am pretty sure that some students (eg ones from the Middle East) came from communities where the country was ruled by an oil despot, the family by a patriarch, and the class by the teacher; these folk couldn't for the life of them see the point of all this talking ..... After all what is the teacher there for anyway?



In some groups the negative aspects outlined in the last paragraph did not seem to be present and the exercise in democracy did have the effect of freeing up a lot of energy. I think that for some students the executive discussion itself was a startling and very positive new experience. Some were really gratified to see the teacher obeying the class committee in the week done the following week. There was certainly plenty of disbelief in the week following the first meeting. It is natural to be shocked when absolute monarchy seems to be moving towards democracy.

I have retained this model on my two week intensive teacher training courses at Pilgrims. On the first Friday people are asked how they want week two to go and I will normally leave them alone for this discussion and then loyally implement what the majority has decided on.

Back in the 90's I was dazzled by the feeling of abdicating monarchic power and becoming the executor of the group's will. I now think of this as a flawed but useful way of offering the people the chance of fuller participation, a way of relieving the sort of excruciating powerlessness that Sheelagh Deller mentioned in the first article in this series.

Sue Leather and I are not the only teachers to have experimented with classroom political systems and to have done it quietly in our shoebox of the time ( that little school in Cambridge)

I wonder what experiments in democratization readers of the TD SIG Newsletter have tried? How do you feel about the students gain in power and the ambiguity of your loss of power, or is it really a loss of power? Can power be willingly handed over or must the handover be forced on the tyrant, the parent, the teacher?

## **The Teacher's Biography and Mutual Supervision**

Mario Rinvoluceri, Pilgrims, UK

I want to start out by sharing with you some of the ways that I know that my life story has influenced me as a teacher. The point of doing this is not a monstrous ego-centric urge but hopefully to stimulate similar thinking in you. Central to this article is the idea that certain events in your past and certain aspects of your past will have made you into the complex bundle of emotions, beliefs and attitudes that you are today as you stand in your classroom.

**Childhood feature 1** I was an only child until the age of seven, when my brother was born. I was educated at home until the age of 13 and so socialized late. My two parents taught me the primary syllabus. Late socialization has repercussions in subsequent years.

### **Result in my teaching 1**

I spontaneously seek a one-to-one contact with my students and do this in tutorials with individuals. I also find great joy in one-to-one letter or email correspondences with students. While this focus on the individual is a plus, I feel I am often weak at perceiving the students as a group, at intuiting what is going on in the life of the group in which I take a leading part.

### **Childhood feature 2**

My father was a man who rarely praised. He felt that if I did something right there was nothing to say. Words were only necessary when I got things wrong. My mother, who was a teacher, praised lavishly and rather automatically.

### **Result in my Teaching 2**

This parenting prepared me to deeply understand Caleb Gattegno's dictum that praise is theft. When a teacher praises a student for doing something well the teacher is nicking the student's triumph, myopically depriving him of it.

This has led me to attempt a Gattegno type of neutrality in working on language with students. I consciously avoid praising especially using those hollow EFLese phrases like "Well done", "Very Good", "Excellent". I also try to keep my mind technically focused and neutral, hoping my face will follow suit!

However I feel free to express wonderment when a student comes up with something that genuinely surprises me in a positive way. I have a right to my own feelings- what is negative, I feel, is to lean over the garden wall and carefully pat the student on the head. My neutrality policy is excellent for some students and probably wrong for others who have a need for praise, derived from their own childhoods.

### **Childhood feature 3**

When my father taught me Latin and Maths he used to fly into rages when I did not understand things or got things wrong. He seemed to expect me to have an adult

understanding of the matter in hand. He screamed at me, threw things at me and made me feel that that I was WRONG at identity level. My mother would try and intervene on my behalf but to little avail.

### **Result in my teaching 3**

When I began teaching I took my father as an “anti-model”- I did not want to behave like him with my students. I was wide open to the work of Carl Rogers when I came upon it in my late 20ies. His concept of “unconditional positive regard “ to be offered to all students, whatever their behaviour, was in chasmic contrast to my father’s identity-threatening cognitive demands.

I rapidly discovered the rewards inherent in working within a framework of unconditional positive regard however weakly or inadequately achieved.

I need to thank the “binomio fantastico”of Giuseppe, my Dad, and Carl Rogers for this basic attitude towards students, and sometimes, though here it is harder, towards colleagues.

### **Childhood feature 4**

From the age of 6-7 I have a clear memory of my mother and her friend Agnes taking me across the River Mersey on the ferry to Birkenhead. They intended that I should enjoy the huge cityscapes of Liverpool and Birkenhead and the sight of the great ships using the waterway.

My attention fixed on a small, muddy dredger and the barge moored next to it. I was fascinated by the mud-buckets dumping sludge from the river bed into the barge.

In the background I still hear the two women discussing their disappointment at my, to them, bizarre and irritating focus of interest.

### **Result in my teaching 4**

This story from my own early experience is a cautionary tale should I ever believe that what I think I am teaching is actually what is being learnt by the students.

While I passionately want the students to learn the content I am offering them I am fully aware that they each of them has their own dredger and barge. The story reinforces the belief that the transmission theory of knowledge is inadequate while the constructivist theory is nearer the mark. Each student has to make his or her own sense of what I present.

So the pondered and respectful response to a person who kindly asks “ how did your class go?” has to be “ Well, who knows.....the twenty students went to twenty different lessons, you’d better ask them”

This makes the target-setting in some modern classrooms look surrealistic.

### **Childhood feature 5**

Partly because isolation and lack of playmates, at age 7 I was an avid reader. I also had a powerful urge to communicate and expound what I had learnt and through. Some time in the Spring of 1947 I remember asking my parents to sit down after dinner and listen to me as I stood up and gave them a “precocious brat” lecture on the theme that

understanding of military history depends on a good grasp of geography. I still remember the glow of that performance.

#### **Result in my teaching 5**

As a novice teacher I over-talked in class like a gushing fountain. With passing years came a realization that this was non-functional. However I still feel the joy of that seven year-old when I tell language students a story.... Within this narrative frame it feels legitimate to hold the floor and have all eyes on you and the thrill of performance is with me again, the thrill of monologue and uninterruptedness.

#### **Childhood feature 6**

Between the ages of 10 and 12 I somehow learnt a solid base of elementary French from my mother. It was this skill/knowledge that secured me an ML exhibition to a boarding school where I went at 13.

I have no memory of how she taught me or what we did together. What I do know is that I had massive rapport with her and she with me. Perhaps I use the word "rapport" here to avoid using the more accurate word: love.

#### **Result in my teaching 6**

A fierce professional belief of mine today is that my main task is to achieve rapport with my students. If I manage to do this with most of my students I feel we are 50% of the way to creating a successful class in which fast and deep learning can take place. Of course I have difficulty getting into a good relationship with some of my students, as I am maybe just the wrong teacher for them, in terms of both personality and way of being. Each year of my career there are less students I am unable to touch, to reach. Still a few, though.

I would make no claim that the aspects of childhood evoked above and their influence on my teaching are the sum total of those influences. These are a few areas that I am able to get a conscious grip on, which I have the awareness to put into words. There is a huge acreage of childhood experience that will be informing my teaching without my knowing and this inexpressible and ungraspable area is much more important than the landscape I can gaze across clear-sightedly.

The effort to understand the complex web of how I teach sometimes feels to me to be a lonely and overwhelming task. To make it easier I have found it useful to invoke the help of others. When I teach an intensive two week course I always involve myself in mutual supervision and in the rest of this article I will give you some idea of how this works.'

### **Mutual Supervision**

The first step is to find a colleague who also wants to have the chance to tell the story of their teaching.

Agreement is reached on the confidentiality of what is said during the supervisions.

A place to meet is chosen where neither person is likely to be disturbed.

The partners agree how often to meet and how long for.

For the first half of the session Colleague A takes on the supervisor or listening role, while Colleague B tells the story of his recent teaching, reports a particularly good lesson, lays a worry he has on the table etc.....

The supervisor's role is to actively listen and only ask questions to clarify stuff that is unclear. The supervisor is not there to assume the supervisee's problems or to give avuncular advice. If the supervisor catches himself using modal verbs ( ought/should etc) something is going wrong. If the supervisee dries for a long time then it may be useful for the supervisor to mirror back to him what he has just been saying.

In the second half of the session the colleagues swap roles and the person who was listening now has a chance to speak and by really listened to.

I have regularly been in mutual supervision over the past 14 years and have found it mostly very beneficial. Here are some of its benefits, as I see them:

- it is a relief to get things off my chest
- once I have told my "teaching story" I get some distance from it and see it in better perspective, what NLP calls "third position"
- the supervision curiously changes my thinking about the class I am taking. When I prepare my lessons I no longer feel alone....it is as if my supervisor were looking over my shoulder..... a kind of guardian angel.
- sometimes what comes up in supervision helps me realise links, cause and effect, between earlier times in my life and what is going on in the classroom.
- occasionally supervisors I have had will make a brief comment that makes me see what I have been telling them in a new light.
- This kind of work together has allowed me to get to know colleagues more deeply and interestingly that would normally happen in the hurly-burly of the staffroom.
- I love sharing the pleasures of teaching, and I teach mainly for the joy and pleasure it brings me.
- I enjoy the role switch between the privileged position of the supervisee to the very responsible one of the supervisor.

I know that Mojca Belak, the SIG newsletter editor, would be delighted if you were to react to this article or to the previous two. The newsletter should be a forum, not a place of one-way communication.

Mario, May 2007, Canterbury, UK