

Turning Points

Mario Rinvoluceri, Pilgrims

A "seeding" Turning Point

I have to admit that I am a very gradual learner and not all the turning points in my professional life have been sudden illuminations or abrupt realisations. Useful change has often started from seeds planted without my knowing it.

Early on in my teaching career I had a student from Peru, called Oswaldo. He was an actor and theatre director. He told me that, of course he knew nothing about language teaching, but he did not see how students could usefully learn language from a book. He said that in his case, he could only learn by doing things with other people in English.

At the time he when he told me this I was unready to listen to his thoughts, unready to wonder if maybe he represented other learners, and totally unwilling to have my faith in my coursebook shaken. I had recently found Geoffroy Boughton's **Success with English** and I was in love with it as it made teaching language suddenly seem like a structured, rational enterprise in contrast to the scary chaos of my two first years teaching.

In my life I often start out by opposing what I later espouse, and I wish Oswaldo, whom I have lost contact with, knew that he was the first to lead me towards humanistic language teaching, to realising that what I did in class was totally secondary to what the students did, that a simple input-output model simply doesn't work in language learning and that the affective atmosphere of the classroom is central to most students' learning.

Oswaldo's message to me was not understood and did not bear fruit in terms of changes in my belief system until ten years later. But, Oswaldo, thank you all the more for persisting with your gentle message in the face of my teeth-gritted resistance at that time. The realisation of the years it can take to evolve into useful change makes me realise, as a teacher trainer, that my trainees will change at their own pace, and not before, and perhaps in some cases never.

A dramatic Turning Point

I was running a creative writing afternoon option back in 1979. One of my trainers, Carlos Maeztu, dropped in to see what I was up to.

I remember we did some pretty ingenious exercises in that group, which I was rather proud of.

At the tea-break Carlos smiled extremely gently, looked away in that special way he had, and said:

"Did you ever write letters to your students? Herbert Koll did this with his ten-year-olds in New York and it worked."

I have been writing individual and group letters to my students and to my trainees ever since. Those two sentences of Carlos were dramatic as they launched me into doing a good hour's writing work per day whenever I am teaching or training people. Not just this but the letters I have received back from students have altered my teaching day, as the letter writing precedes my preparation time and, over the years, has modified the way I focus on the class and come to foreseeing what we are going to be doing.

On language courses I use letters to the whole group to do any and all of the following things:

- revise work we have done
- preview grammar and vocabulary that will be coming up over the next few days
- react personally to things that have happened in class
- share with the students something that concerns me, of a personal, political or whatever nature. Sometimes I will recommend a book I am reading. Sometimes I will introduce an article I guess some of them will want to read.
- to deal with group dynamic problems (discipline, withdrawal... etc)

Thank you Carlos, despite the way you helped me increase my workload!

A Turning Point I can't remember

For the past ten years I have regularly had supervision for any course I do and I must have worked with at least 20 different supervisors.

Often we agree to do mutual supervision (because working with another person does help you clarify, focus and sharpen the way you see things) and we alternate between the role of supervisor/listener and teller-of-the-tale of a teaching day or a teaching week.

The supervision is a time when you let go within a frame of confidentiality and feel free to say what is on your heart about your current teaching. You expect your supervisor to listen with stereophonic attention but not to come up with solutions to your problems. If she starts giving you advice then something is probably going wrong in her head.

Supervision is a safety rail against burn-out, especially for dedicated teachers, and I am very grateful to my past supervisors. It is something that could so easily improve the working day of teachers in every kind of situation, and not just language teachers. (For more on this see **Waving Not Drowning**, ETp, Issue 10, Jan 1999)

Who influenced me in this direction, who suggested I needed supervision , what impelled me to try it out the first time.... I really have no idea. Yet there must have been a turning point, there must have been a cusp. Delve as I can in my memory, I can't find it.

Perhaps the diffuse turning points, the ones without a clear author, without a fixed time-point are the most interesting ones.

It would be really interesting if ETp were to set up a chat space on the website for people to compare turning points in their teaching lives.
How about it, Helena?

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