

How did YOU learn to teach?

Darren Elliott, Japan.

I had been in teaching for a quite a few years before I first really understood what it was like to feel out of your depth. I started off in a private language institute in Japan with neither qualifications nor experience, and the first year after being pitched, blinking, into the classroom is a fog. I'd like to tell you it was really tough but everything was so structured for us, and the newness of it all was so exciting, that it actually wasn't. That doesn't mean I was a good teacher, it just means I didn't feel like a bad teacher....

After a year I took a break and ended up doing a CELTA. It was hard work, of course, but after teaching twenty-five class hours a week for a year, in what turned out to be a CELTA style, it was do-able.

Back to Japan and now a teacher trainer with the

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same company. A big cheese, a go-to guy, an expert, thank-you-very-much. In this very limited context, I was better qualified and more experienced than the majority of the teachers I worked with. I knew by then that teaching was what I wanted to do, and was starting to realize how little I really knew. I packed it all up, went back to England, started a Masters degree, and a DELTA, and teaching university EAP classes. That, my friends, is when I first really started to feel out of my depth!

And it is also when I first really started to understand what teacher development is, how each of us has to create our own pathways, to meet our own needs and preferences. When I started back in the UK, I had spent the previous few years observing other teachers... I had seen hundreds, perhaps even thousands of hours of class time. Every lesson I had seen, good or bad, had taught me something. So my first instinct, when faced with a totally new context, was to march up to my supervisor and ask if I could sit in on her lesson. To her credit, she invited me in with smiles, and after seeing what she did I had at least some idea of what was expected of me. This experience had an immense impact on me, and I ended up researching the process of how teachers adapt to new teaching contexts for my dissertation.

Fast forward five years, and I am back in Japan teaching at a Japanese University. I am still very interested in teacher development, especially online. The web offers tremendous opportunities for teachers to connect and collaborate. Anyone with access to an Internet connection can establish their own personal learning network and direct their own development. But recently, amid all the blogging and the tweeting, there's a little voice whispering in my ear... are we forgetting the 'old' ways?

I posed this question on my blog (yes, I realize the irony).

'Are our Personal Learning Network's becoming lopsided? Are we limiting ourselves by assuming all professional development needs to be technologically mediated? Are on-line networks better, worse, or just different to those we develop off-line?'

In the pre-internet world, which I know many of you remember, how did you learn to become a teacher? Which of the following off-line tools / techniques has been most important to you in your development as a teacher?'

- Observation OF other teachers or trainers
- Observation BY other teachers or trainers
- Attendance of professional workshops, lectures and conference
- Reading (books, journals, newsletters)
- Keeping a reflective journal
- Action Research
- Learner Feedback
- Informal collaboration / discussion in the workplace
- Other

The response to this poll has been tremendous, with close to eighty voters and a number of thoughtful and well-considered comments. With kind permission, I'll present some of them for you below.

Observation OF other teachers or trainers

At 18%, my personal choice was the second most popular...several respondents pointed out, though, that a theoretical background is necessary to really get the most out of an observation.

'Observing other teachers works up to a point – you need some background knowledge to be able to understand why he/she does or doesn't do certain things during a class. Without, what I

call, 'CELTA basics' you're going to end up sitting and focusing on activities you personally liked, the teacher's accents or the seating arrangement. That's what happened to me at least...'

Anita

'I picked 'Observation OF other teachers/trainers'. During my PGCE training, I always thought I could gain a lot by seeing what my mentor did in class and picking up tips and tactics to use for myself. I do agree with Anita, in that you need to be able to see how it fits into the larger context of the lesson/course otherwise it can become difficult to gain much from this observation.'

Mike

Observation BY other teachers or trainers

Given the terror associated with observation by supervisors, I wasn't surprised that this option only polled 6%. As Nick points out, the culture of observation within the industry is still associated with deficiency, assessment and negativity to some degree.

'It is quite rare to find a school that holds development, encourages it, or does observations (unless of course there is a complaint, then management swoops in a flurry of paper and ink). Why do so many teachers fear observations? Because at most schools they are never done for positive reasons.'

Nick

But not everyone dislikes it, as Anita explains:

'Being observed by a professional, on the other hand, can help you learn a great deal. During my CELTA course, after TPs (Teaching Practices) we would all gather in a classroom and everyone would write both positive and negative comments about the trainees teaching that particular day. I learned e.g. that my handwriting is not always clear for Turkish students, a problem I never had in Poland. Obviously all depends on the attitude of the trainer and your colleagues. I believe in positive feedback aimed at helping you improve and if you want to get better, you will.'

Attendance of professional workshops, lectures and conferences

This was the top answer, at 21%. To be honest, I was quite surprised – I'm inclined to agree with Nick....

'Conferences are great, but rare, hard to get to, and expensive for many teachers.'

Reading (books, journals, newsletters)

14% of respondents selected this as their top choice. It used to be that one was bound by physical access to a good library or a good bookshop, but Amazon, digital editions of academic journals and Google scholar have made information much more accessible over the last few years (although not much cheaper). I wonder if this has had a significant impact on how people are reading. I am also curious about what people are reading....

'How about 'doing what the teachers' books told me to' as an option. Not that I'm saying they were perfect (or even in some cases very good, though some do seem to have got very good lately). But the volume of hours / need to cover ground as that is what is prescribed by institutions can mean you try an awful lot of techniques over time and then you carry those techniques forward.'

Sally

Are teachers' guides and resource books, or applied linguistics and SLA research texts more useful for the average classroom practitioner?

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Keeping a reflective journal / Action Research

At 3% and 5% respectively, these were not well represented in the poll. That's not to say that no one has been using them, just that they were not deemed the MOST useful by many teachers. In fact, the majority of comments started like this...

'I would have preferred to select almost all options'

Bob

'I can say fairly confidently that I've learnt a lot from all the alternatives in your poll at one time or other.'

Mike

Which makes perfect sense – we should all be reliant on a full repertoire of developmental techniques. However....

'Now if I could have just gone through the list and ticked all the boxes, I wouldn't have spent the day wondering about this...'

Angela

Thanks Angela!

Learner Feedback

Despite the fact that it is common practice to present learners with questionnaires to rate teacher performance at regular intervals, only 8% of the teachers in this poll rate learner feedback highly. There are some misgivings about the way it is administered, and even the ability of students to judge accurately.

'For me feedback tends to make a big impact, especially from learners, though I think I have not always sought this feedback as frequently and carefully as I could have.'

Duncan

'The most development most teachers I've known were able to get is student feedback. Student feedback is nice, but students are not trained teachers. They usually don't know what to look for or how to give constructive criticism.'

Nick

'How I developed at the beginning is very different from how I'm developing now ...'

...we mustn't forget how empathetic we become when the shoe is on the other foot.

However, I think the sentiments expressed here would probably hit home for most of us. After all, it's all about the learners, right?

'If I had to choose one, I'd probably go with learner feedback. For me, it has often been quite an eye-opener to discover that students often don't view things in exactly the same way as I do. I would also add that for me it is usually the most gratifying form of development, especially when the feedback is positive.'

Peter

Informal collaboration / discussion in the workplace

Although it wasn't commented on specifically, I am not surprised that staffroom chat made a strong showing, with 14% of the vote. These days, I think I learn more standing at the photocopier than anywhere else!

Other

12% of people gave me other options. There were several interesting suggestions which I had neglected in making the initial list.

Just doing it is the best way to learn, according to Eric.

As the Bulgarian proverb goes, "many learn to walk by stumbling." Over time and after several awkward classes, they reflect upon their teaching.'

Eric

A good point. Whether my students got value for money in those early days, I can't be sure – but I do agree that putting in the hours at the whiteboard helped me hone my skills, by trial and error.

Angela makes a very valid observation about career stages....

'How I developed at the beginning (feedback on my teaching, reflection, books etc) is very different from how I'm developing now (e.g. right now I'm trying hard to improve with my use of the IAWB and the ways I'm finding the most helpful are watching others teach and by reading about it.) And since we're constantly trying to become better teachers, the emphasis can change all the time.'

Angela

'I like this idea too. My own practice has definitely benefited from writing. An option that is not included is presenting or writing about your teaching (and learning experiences); this can be amazingly helpful for reflection – more so in my case than a reflective diary (which I haven't really pursued, except when conducting a specific 'experiment' and I want notes on the processes).'

Bob

And we mustn't forget how empathetic we become when the shoe is on the other foot.

'Since I teach adults, the other thing that helped me reflect deeply on my daily practice was when I started my French studies. Then, I could see that I was expecting from my students things that I couldn't do myself.'

Carolina

Conclusions

First of all, thanks to everyone who took the time to vote and share their thoughts. The poll

is still open, and you are more than welcome to drop by and contribute, at

<http://www.livesofteachers.com/2010/02/26/poll-how-do-you-learn-to-teach/>.

This poll kicks off a series on my blog, over the coming weeks and months, in which I plan to write in more detail about each of these teacher development techniques... but a blog is a conversation, so please come and have your say!

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