

***Language Teaching Insights From Other Fields: Sports, Arts, Design and More.* Christopher Stillwell (Ed.). Alexandria, VA: TESOL International, 2013. iv + 189 pp.**

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In his book *Where Good Ideas Come From: The Natural History of Innovation*, Steve Johnson upheld the coffeehouse as the epitome of an environment conducive to the generation of new thought and creativity. He wrote, “Collisions do [lead to creativity]—the collisions that happen when different fields of expertise converge in some shared physical or intellectual space. That’s where the true sparks fly” (p. 163). *Language Teaching Insights From Other Fields* is just such a shared intellectual space. Indeed, editor Christopher Stillwell likens the work to a dinner party. Coffeehouse or dinner party, the sparks certainly fly.

Language Teaching Insights From Other Fields asks how language education can benefit by coming into contact with other fields. Put differently, the book explores what those with knowledge of or experience in other professions—bartender, architect, or ski instructor, to name three—can teach language educators. This sharing is not, however, limited to professionals; people from other walks of life are represented, too. White water canoeing is an exciting pastime for one author, Karen Blinder. Zen Buddhism is an area of philosophical inquiry for John Spiri. These walks of life are all mined for gems, which are set into the book so that they shimmer clearly into the field of language education. Stillwell writes, “At heart, this is a book about exploration, about seeking inspiration from beyond our routine contexts” (p. 8).

The book succeeds on three levels. First, the invitation extended in each chapter title quickens insight in the reader. Second, each chapter is rich in useful tips that language educators can bring into their teaching practice.

And third, the underlying concept of the book encourages the reader to continue exploring other fields even after setting the book down.

Considering a few of the chapter titles suggests the breadth covered by Stillwell and the other 16 authors. Andy Boone wrote “How Would a Bartender Create a Safe, Social, and Supportive Classroom Environment?,” Sylvia Whitman authored “How Would a Basketball Coach Get a Team to Talk the Talk?,” and Cynthia Quinn and Gregory Sholdt contributed “How Would a Researcher Conduct a Language Course Evaluation?” Note that the title of each chapter poses a question that activates the reader’s background knowledge and curiosity.

In fact, the chapter titles might themselves serve in the manner of *Oblique Strategies* (1978), a collection of cards developed by Brian Eno and Peter Schmidt aimed at helping artists move through creative blocks. Each card displays a pithy directive or a provocative question, such as

“Call your mother. Ask her what to do.”

“Pay attention to distractions.”

“Is there something missing?”

“What would your closest friend do?”

This last question resembles the formulation of the chapter titles in this volume. Chapter 10, for instance, by Tim Stewart, is titled “How Would an Architect Such as Frank Gehry Design Language Learning Tasks?” and presents a question that provokes thought and curiosity. As did the *Oblique Strategies* cards, the question about Gehry propels the reader away from the familiar, away from herself, and, possibly, out of a rut or over a blockage. Asking and answering questions like this comprise the essence of *Language Teaching Insights From Other Fields*. Appropriately, space is provided on page 5 for the reader to jot down—prior to reading the chapters—possible insights from each of the fields represented in the book.

Far from being only a collection of thought-provoking titles, the book also has substance. It is divided into four major sections: “Recontextualizing the Language Classroom,” “Dealing With Challenges,” “Teaching the Four Skills,” and “Developing as a Professional.” Each chapter adheres to a unified format. In the introduction, authors lead the reader into the new field under consideration, be it document design, acting, or activism. These set the tone and pique the interest. This is also where each author explains his or her relationship to the field. Following the introduction is a series of actionable tips. These are varied and valuable, with space here only for a sampling.

In Chapter 3 “What Can We Learn From Martial Arts Masters About Practice Techniques and Learning Environments?” author Anne Paonessa explains,

“Martial arts’ use of belts for rankings help [sic] students concentrate on their own progress and mastery of the skills as opposed to comparing themselves with others” (p. 23). In Chapter 5 “What Does It Mean to Be a Whitewater Language Teacher?” Karen Blinder advises, “Lean downstream, into the rock you are afraid to hit. . . . some of the best teaching comes when we take a few judicious chances” (p. 56). And in Chapter 8 “What Can We Learn From Certified Ski Instructors About Teaching Academic Speaking Skills?” Li-Shih Huang writes, “Supported by empirical research in social and educational psychology, the act of visualizing both relevant obstacles of present realities and the desired future can trigger strategic or creative solutions, leading to positive changes in a wide range of professional, academic, and life pursuits” (p. 81).

Although these tips might be common knowledge within the fields in which they originated, they feel fresh—even radical—in language education. They comprise the quantifiable takeaway for the reader, and it is quite a hefty haul. However, there is another payoff that is unquantifiable: The reader receives training in asking the *how would* questions that begin nearly all of the chapters in the book.

When planning a lesson or designing a curriculum, the focus often falls on the teacher: “What should *I* do?” or “How should *I* conduct my class?” Even when making students more central, questions might take a form like this: “What should *I* ask the students to do?” When things are going smoothly, these questions drive the planning process well. When one encounters roadblocks, however, these questions continue to return focus to the same seemingly dry well.

For Johnson, this was the image of the lone inventor, working in isolation until finally emerging with the miraculous discovery. In spite of the commonness of such characters in the collective imagination, they are actually quite rare—more of a caricature. In reality, the free flowing of ideas and perspectives catalyzed by the coffeehouse is far more likely to lead to breakthroughs. “The trick,” wrote Johnson, “is not to sit around in glorious isolation and try to think big thoughts. The trick is to get more parts on the table” (p. 26). For editor Stillwell, this is a dinner table, and it is laden with all manner of fascinating, useful parts waiting to be assembled into something new.

References

- Eno, B., & Schmidt, P. (1978). *Oblique strategies*. London: Opal.
- Johnson, S. (2010). *Where good ideas come from: The natural history of innovation*. London: Penguin.