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My Personal Context

Looking at the past must only be a means of understanding more clearly what and who they are so that they can more wisely build the future.

—Paulo Freire (2003, p. 84)

“Good morning!” I start enthusiastically. I am facilitating a professional development workshop on integrating technology for a large group of adult educators in a town of about 100,000 inhabitants in Texas, in the southwestern United States. My task at hand is not just to help the workshop participants develop new skills but to get to know them and to help them get to know one another. Some adult educators in Texas work in virtual isolation from their colleagues. I want to provide them with the opportunity to develop professional networks that will last after I leave.

I want the participants to enjoy themselves. It is, after all, a Saturday morning, when most people are not at work in this part of the world. All of us would probably prefer to be doing something besides discussing teaching theory and methods, but dedication and love for our students has brought us together.

I give the instructions for the first activity: “Let’s line up by the number of years of experience you have in adult education. Then, we’ll fold the line in half and introduce ourselves to each other in a line dance.”

A line dance is a style of dancing popular in the United States. People form one or more straight lines, either facing the same direction or facing another row, and go through the same series of motions at the same time. The line dance activity applies this concept of synchronized motion to let us talk in groups of two or four before shifting the line to talk with a new group of people. In the end, we all have the opportunity to personally interact with every other member of the group.

As I listen to each educator’s introduction, I become aware of the wide range of backgrounds and teaching experience in the room. There are a number of novice instructors as well as ones who have just as much experience as I do,

decades in the trenches of adult education. I wonder what I can share with them that will help them help their students in a different and significant way.

In my view, the bottom line of teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL) is helping people. I started out teaching literacy in the 1980s as a church volunteer in the East Coast state of Virginia, in the United States. Later, I worked for a refugee resettlement organization to tutor newcomers to the United States in emergency English, while I worked on my bachelor's degree in biology at Old Dominion University (ODU). The experience was so rewarding that I decided to make a career of it and changed my major to English with an emphasis in linguistics, a degree I completed in 1997.

Aside from a semester's practicum at ODU's Intensive English Program, my first classroom position was with the Norfolk Public School system as an ESL instructor. A typical class consisted of 30 students, 28 languages. Typically, the only people who spoke the same language were husbands and wives. As a novice classroom teacher working on my graduate certificate in TESOL and my master's degree in applied linguistics, I experimented with all kinds of teaching methods, techniques, and philosophies, including using computer-assisted language learning in the classroom.

By the time I had finished my master's in 2000, several parts of my teaching philosophy were firmly established. First, adults are at heart problem solvers. My students had survived war, disease, poverty, and moving to a new country. English was just one more problem for them to solve, and they were capable of doing so regardless of their first language, level of education, or age.

Second, adults have a wealth of experience that should be utilized. Not only do they know about languages (having learned one already), they have life experiences that they can use to develop communication skills in the target language. The purpose of language learning for an adult, especially an immigrant adult, is to communicate.

Third, adults need to know not just *what* they are learning but *why* they are learning it. If they do not see how it applies to their lives, they "vote with their feet" and leave the class.

Finally, computer literacy is just as important as language literacy. In the 1990s, computers and the Internet were not as ubiquitous as they are now, but the writing was on the wall: This new technology was going to change everything, including language learning. To be successful living in the United States, students would need to know how to use a computer.

In 2000, I left Virginia for Texas. For the first year, I continued my job as operations manager at a large furniture retailer while teaching English at night for Austin Independent School District. Then I applied and was accepted to the University of Texas at Austin's doctoral program in foreign language education.

In 2002, I left my retail job to start a nonprofit organization called English Now. I had noted that many students in the evening program had to miss classes or even drop out because of their work schedules. What's more, when they came

back to register the following semester, some found themselves on the waiting list and ended up missing 6 months or more of English lessons. I came up with the idea of having a “gym” for English where clients could come and go as they please. Clients decided when and how much time to invest in their language learning. They could start and stop as needed based on their work and family obligations.

English Now continued to operate until I graduated from my doctoral program in 2008. The program helped hundreds of individuals improve their English, secure employment, be promoted, obtain citizenship, and so much more. However, with the economic downturn, I was forced to find more lucrative employment. I closed English Now and started working for Austin Learning Academy (ALA) as an English language and civics instructor in 2008.

As ALA operated on state and federal grants, I soon became entrenched in the adult education system in Texas. As a consultant for the Central GREAT¹ Center at Texas State University, I began conducting professional development workshops, including ones on interactive online activities, integrating technology, social media, and managing multilevel classrooms. Meanwhile, I spearheaded Austin Learning Academy’s move to provide state-approved distance learning options.

In the summer of 2010, Central GREAT invited me to conduct a statewide research study on distance learning in the adult education system, the results of which were instrumental in revamping the state distance education professional development requirements by creating the Distance Learning Academy (Molilnari, Guckert, Rose, & Johnston, 2011).

In 2011, I began teaching on Facebook, tutoring, and teaching small groups for Livemocha. Suddenly, I was communicating with English language learners all over the world via web-conferencing platforms such as Skype, WebEx, and Blackboard Collaborate. Even better, they were communicating with each other and creating multinational personal learning networks.

By June 2013, I had become a full-time educational consultant. I also took a turn at the Texas Intensive English Program as a customized instruction instructor and as an instructor for McDonald’s English Under the Arches program, a work-based English program using a mix of traditional and distance learning formats. In addition, I consulted for companies such as Livemocha and Rosetta Stone in designing frameworks and creating materials for their online curricula. I also taught private lessons and group lessons for Livemocha for 3 years before it stopped offering those options in May 2014.

Nowadays, I am a professional development center specialist at Texas A&M University’s Texas Center for the Advancement of Literacy and Learning, where I continue to facilitate workshops for adult education instructors and create online professional development modules. I also actively take courses myself through MOOCs (massive open online courses) and online professional development

1. GREAT = Getting Results Educating Adults in Texas. These are regional professional development organizations for the adult education system.

seminars. Through my site GREAT English Online (www.greatenglishonline.com), I continue to offer private lessons, group lessons, lessons on Facebook, and also some free groups, courses, and resources for English language learners who are not in a position to pay for lessons.

I have come to see online technologies as a new digital world, a rich but completely foreign context for most of us as far as teaching language goes. As I share research, theory, and the experiences of myself, my colleagues, and students, I hope to paint a landscape that will help you explore the digital world with your students.