

CHAPTER 1



Enhancing Teaching With the Fruits of Distant Fields

Christopher Stillwell

We would not have to go very far to find current examples of insights from one field being used to inform another. Navy SEALs train Olympians, Disney experts mentor hospital managers, ballet professionals give football players pointers, and brain scientists advise everyone from architects to astronomers. Though it may seem that language teachers lack the resources for similar coaching, we must remember that all teachers have what Cosh (1999) has referred to as a valuable and free resource in their midst: other teachers. Many of these language teachers started out working in other fields and studying other subjects, and even when studying to become teachers, they have typically been required to enroll in courses outside their language teaching concentration. No matter how distinct these other areas of experience may be, chances are that these teachers regularly and naturally draw on this experience to address everyday challenges of teaching. We might wonder: What would language teachers discover if they could tap into this living library of their colleagues' knowledge and experience? Would a martial arts master be effective at maintaining an orderly, productive classroom atmosphere? Would a restaurant reviewer know the secrets of critiquing essays? And what insights might come from discussion of teachers' hobbies? Might role-playing game masters know a thing or two about making lessons exciting?

Though the diversity of language teachers' experience is something that should be trumpeted, it is sadly rarely discussed. Unless your school has been visited by a chatty substitute with a lifetime of fascinating stories to share, it is unlikely that anyone in your teachers' room has ever asked, "Did I ever tell you about the summer I spent with the carnival? Gives me a whole different perspective on the three-ring circus that is seventh-grade Spanish, Period 2." That is a shame, for just such a conversation could provide the foundation for our

continuing creativity and growth as teachers. As Csíkszentmihályi (1997) notes, one core component of creativity is crossing borders and making discoveries from the resulting mix of ideas. Brain scientists might add that this border crossing is likely to help us learn more and improve our practice, because the brain is built for exploration and learns best from information we find interesting (Medina, 2008). The more we explore foreign ideas in relation to language instruction, the more interesting discoveries we might make, and the more creative, informed, and exciting our teaching may become.

AN INVITATION TO A CONVERSATION

Many of us have sparked conversation in our classrooms with questions like “Who would you invite to your dream dinner party?” As language teachers looking for insights on teaching, what might our own answers be? If we broke bread with a panel of language teachers who also happen to have extensive experience in other fields, where would the conversation go? In a sense, the volume now in your hands represents a book-length conversation of that nature, a gathering of some of the more interesting dinner guests a language teacher might ever care to meet. In one corner, the social activist and the document designers exchange views on subtle aspects of texts that influence the way learners perceive what they read, while in another corner the martial arts master and the whitewater paddler reflect on their philosophies of language instruction. Meanwhile, numerous other such conversations take place in a unique space where language teachers can benefit from one another’s varied backgrounds.

It is worth remembering that the most important guest at this particular meal is you, dear reader, for only your engagement and insights will truly bring this gathering to life. Before we begin, you may find it useful to have a quick look at the guest list in the Prereading Brainstorming Exercise (Figure 1), asking yourself what you might expect to hear from each of these professionals. Whether your guesses are on target or not, chances are that you will come up with a number of additional ideas to bring to the conversation.

For instance, you might wonder, what would a bartender have to say about language teaching? Bars tend to have the lights rather low, you might think to yourself, at least until it is time for everyone to go home. At that point the lights come up brighter than the brightest day. Why is that? Do patrons feel more secure and comfortable chatting and spending time in the relative anonymity of the low light? Do the bright lights at the end of the night extinguish this comfort, making patrons feel exposed, vulnerable, and eager to scurry out the door? If so, how might this idea apply to the classroom? Might lowering or raising the classroom drapes have an impact on conversation activities? Through this exploration you may stumble on insights that are not even mentioned in the chapter, but that are no less worthwhile for the opportunities for creativity and insight that they afford. And whatever your guesses, each chapter will likely yield surprises that

Prereading Brainstorming Exercise

List three insights a language teacher might learn from each of the following professions.

Bartender
Martial arts master
Role-playing game designer
Whitewater paddler
Zen master
Restaurant reviewer
Ski instructor
Actor
Architect
Basketball coach
Social activist
Public speaker
Document designer
Researcher

Figure 1. Guest List

translate to new ways of thinking about your teaching and new ideas to try in your classroom. This breath of fresh professional air may even help keep burnout at bay.

A FOUR-COURSE MEAL

It can get a bit noisy with 14 people talking at once, so for this book the guests' perspectives have been separated into chapters that fall into four sections: Recontextualizing the Language Classroom, Dealing With Challenges, Teaching the Four Skills, and Developing as a Professional. However, just as these conversations crash the gates of disparate fields typically concealed from language teachers' view, the focus of each perspective often spills beyond the boundaries of its section. Thus, a chapter that is primarily focused on teaching advanced speaking skills may very well have useful comments to make on beginning classes well, or course planning, or professional development.

In Recontextualizing the Language Classroom, we begin with a visit to the local pub, as Andrew Boon reflects on his experience as a bartender and shares what that work taught him about creating a comfortable environment for language learning. Anne Paonessa draws from her experience as a martial arts master and owner of a martial arts school to demonstrate techniques for disguising repetition in practice activities, establishing an environment that fosters respect and learning, and getting families involved in students' education. And Roger Dupuy shows us that if a role-playing game master were in charge of a language class, the quest for learning could be enhanced by such game elements as a set-up to contextualize the learning, avatars to facilitate risk-taking, and character sheets to record and reward students' progress.

In the Dealing With Challenges section, Karen Blinder takes us to the river, asking us to consider how a whitewater paddler would approach the rapids of language instruction by finding ways of using the current to his or her advantage and remaining willing to adjust course at a moment's notice, among other things. Meanwhile, John Spiri enlightens us with principles of a Zen master, showing the usefulness of cultivating a kind of mindfulness without judgment, or "choiceless awareness," for interactions with students in class.

Chapters in the Teaching the Four Skills section bring us to an even broader range of contexts, as former restaurant reviewer Sylvia Whitman considers culinary approaches to critiquing student writing, and ski instructor Li-Shih Huang explores parallels between skiing black diamonds and developing advanced speaking skills. I draw from my previous experience in theater, looking into ways that actors' techniques for developing improvisational skills might be adapted to helping learners build fluency, and Tim Stewart notes intriguing overlaps between the work of language teachers and that of architects, exploring the power of visuals for enhancing teaching and learning. Sylvia Whitman returns to imagine expert

basketball coaches' drills for getting students to talk the talk, and social activist Rawia Hayik closes this section with a view on how educators can "transcend the mere teaching of language skills and address social issues in the language classroom" through the use of social justice picture books and participatory documentary photography.

In the final section, *Developing as a Professional*, public speaker John Schmidt identifies the tricks of the Toastmaster trade and shows how they can be applied to communicating lesson content effectively. Tammy Jones and Gabriela Kleckova look to the field of document design to find ways that language teachers can make materials that "communicate information not only through textual content but also through carefully crafted visual design elements that scaffold the overall meaning." Finally, Cynthia Quinn and Greg Sholdt take classroom surveys to a more rigorous level, showing what a language course evaluation might look like if it were conducted by a professional researcher.

METAPHORS, BRAINSTORMS, AND A CAVEAT OR TWO

It should by now be evident that many of these chapters provide new metaphors for language teaching. They encourage us to prepare for the whitewater rapids of our lessons, to provide novices with practice runs on the bunny slopes of language, and to critique writing as cooking instructors would provide insight to budding chefs, early enough to make a difference before the dish is burnt. In these metaphorical visits to distant fields, we can see our work through new lenses. As Jones and Kleckova recount in their experience of a course of study outside language teaching, "because of our backgrounds in TESL/TEFL, it was natural for us to focus on classroom contexts and materials," and this act of examining their language teaching work through a new lens provided "a minor professional epiphany." In addition to such epiphanies, identifying parallels between our work and that of these other artists may also help us better appreciate the artistry of our own craft.

A few words of caution. Although the insights shared in this volume should provide ample food for thought and can hint at useful directions for future exploration and research, they are best considered as complementary to the existing professional knowledge contained in our own field, with all the context-specific solutions that have been found in response to our particular context-specific challenges. And although great effort has been made to verify the accuracy of the professional knowledge from other fields here represented, it should be acknowledged that in some cases we may lack the training necessary to fully understand these strands of wisdom that are divorced from their original context.

Still, just as the most outlandish fable can teach us something about ourselves, reflection on even imperfect understandings of other fields can provide useful frames for understanding what we do as language teachers. At heart, this is a

book about exploration, about seeking inspiration from beyond our routine contexts. If you are intrigued by any of the possibilities you find, you have only to seek information by reading further, inviting other professionals to join the party, and generally continuing to fill your basket of teaching techniques with the fruits of distant fields.

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