

# The LLL SIG Newsletter

## **When an Approach Made for One Kind of Student Fits Others: Part 1 - Recycling a Gender-Based Pedagogy**

*Curtis Kelly (EdD)*

When writers steal from one domain to complement another, are they wicked or worthy? When Chuck Sandy and I were working on a Cengage speaking textbook series, he converted a number of non-ELT activities that were made for L1 elementary school children – to be precise they were being used with his son – to teach English to older students. These children’s activities, such as making personal posters, writing songs, etc., worked wonderfully in our college ELT classes. I learned that it is sometimes good to translate ideas from one arena to another, even though the fit might seem doubtful.

In a similar vein, I have had two times in my life when I have found educational approaches developed for one kind of student work well with a completely different kind. The first approach is a pedagogy for women learners, which I will write about in this issue. The second is andragogy, a pedagogy for adults which I will write about in the next.

### **A Pedagogy for Women**

For 25 years, I taught English in Japanese women’s junior colleges and universities. Fifteen of those years were at a women’s college that accepted virtually anyone, and the students were hard to teach. Few ever did homework and attendance averaged at around 50%. More than once that I was the only person to show up in class before the bell rang. I call these disinterested students “3Ls,” meaning they are caught in this self-reinforcing cycle of low ability, low confidence, and low motivation. They tend to be skittish, searching, and elsewhere. When disciplining women students like these, I could see the same defenses they used against their fathers rise up. Scolding one of them meant that she and her block of friends disliked you for the rest of the year.

Teachers in this school were caught between two choices that did not work. They could either 1) provide more discipline, which meant shouting and failing students in an attempt to get compliance, which they rarely got, or 2) just kind of give up and go with the flow. This meant gentle nudges to get them to attend to the lesson, a gentleness most took advantage of in order to do something else, like sharing photos, texting, or sleeping.

To find a way out of this morass, I read as much as I could on motivation, women's studies, and developmental theory. This led me to develop a personal pedagogy for women. The pedagogy was oriented towards establishing relationships, nurturing instead of confronting, and giving them voice (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1986; Gilligan, 1982). For example, rather than have the class party at the end of the semester, as is traditionally done, we had it the first class. In that way, the learners could bond with each other, and to some degree with me, from the very beginning. For a Japanese female college student, "having a friend" in the class was extremely important and getting them to connect at the start of the semester removed a huge amount of anxiety and dispersal of energy towards social needs. Students that know each other are more likely to orient themselves towards the study.

I also used stories related to moral development to deliver language. These are the kinds of heart-warming stories about adversity, love, and self-understanding similar to those found in the popular *Chicken Soup and the Soul* series. For students with moral development at the center of their lives (Kohlberg, 1968) as a prerequisite for independence, they tended to zone back in anytime I started one of these stories. It was maybe the only time the class was totally quiet and a deeper kind of learning was probably taking place.

Other techniques involved using "I" rather than "you" statements to discipline, offering opportunities for the learners to thank and praise each other, personalizing activities that resulting in sharing, and giving unconditional positive regard (Rogers, 1969). Unconditional positive regard, meaning the acceptance of learners no matter what they say or how they act, worked wonders with those most distant students. They did not really "start studying" per se, but they often got engaged, a step in the right direction,

probably because, finally, there was a teacher who accepted them just as they were, even with the super tans, Gal hairdos or pierces.

This pedagogy might not have turned my reluctant learners into studious ones, but it built the kind of social net that made them less miserable from just being there and it gave them room to grow in whatever way they were ready to grow. Once in a while that growth occurred in English study, but usually not. Still, who is to say that gaining skills in interacting, empathizing, working together, believing in yourself, or self-discovery are any less valuable?

Had Lakoff (2001) analyzed this pedagogy, he might have said that it belonged to the “nurturant mother moral model” as opposed to the “strict father model,” metaphors he uses to describe liberal and conservative political positions. Indeed, I felt I was the nurturing mother at that school, but it was not long after that I went to another school where I had to become the strict father.

### **Translation to Other Learners**

My next university was both the same and different. This one also accepted anyone who applied and was also full of students who had problems with study, attendance, and behavior, but instead of women, these students were almost all men. The common approach with male college students is to follow the strict father metaphor. That means using a tough love approach like a sports coach, coming down hard on talkers and slackers, giving everyone the same basic opportunity with no allowances for differences, and drawing a line with concrete rules. This approach works moderately with male students, but I was curious as to whether the more nurturing women’s pedagogy of building relationships and giving voice might work too. Would men respond the same way the women did? And so, I experimented by using the pedagogy I made for women at this men’s school.

Interestingly, it worked, and quite well. The martial approach still seemed necessary for some of the male students in the sports clubs who chose this school because of its strong teams. However, for the many other men, the more tolerant, nurturing, accepting approach seemed to be just what they needed. In some ways, they responded

to it with more appreciation than the women, probably because no one had ever treated them this way before. This result might seem counterintuitive, but maybe it is a need of all young people at this time of life to be given enough room to develop independence and autonomy. So giving them voice, giving them a chance to reflect on their moral code and helping them discover themselves might be just what they need, regardless of gender.

## **Conclusion**

Therefore, one wonders what other counterintuitive approaches might work better than expected? I can think of a few other examples from our field: In the days when we believed that organizing the target language into a clear grammatical or notional-functional syllabus was necessary for it to be learned, task-based approaches showed us otherwise. At a time we believed input was the only way language could be internalized, the communicative approach showed us otherwise as well. And then, we were taught that students should be given new language at the edge of their ability, “i+1” as described by Krashen (1982), research is showing that in some cases, such as in extensive reading, getting language way below their level might be optimal. Atsuko Takase, doing classroom research on extensive reading told me her results show that students reading not just a little above or a little below, but far below their level, at least at the beginning, show the greatest language gains (personal communication, May, 2012). That makes sense if you consider that training the brain in fast interpretation, or automaticity, might be the most important skills for reading ability. Then too, what we found out about sleep was surprising. Since sleep is critically important for long-term memory, contrary to the notion that students who stay up all hours studying get into the best schools, we found that students who get a good night’s sleep do.

What other surprises might come from experimenting with the counterintuitive, or by crossing borders? I can hardly wait to find out what my colleagues might be discovering. To make these discoveries, however, let us be wicked and worthy.

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