

Milestones of a Life in Teaching

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I came from a family full of teachers, so I decided I did not want to be one myself. But then, in junior high school, I got the chance to teach an elementary school class on history, and later on astronomy. I was hooked.

My first experience teaching English was when I was a student at the University of Hawaii. The US was accepting Vietnamese immigrants from a collapsed country out of fear that the Communists would kill them. I volunteered to teach them English on arrival. Working with a number of families, I made friends, I tasted my first harumaki, and I was impressed by their determination to learn my language.

Still, becoming a teacher was not my goal. I wanted to work in a company, but there was another personal characteristic that drove me into teaching: my absolute inability to learn a foreign language. I studied Spanish in high school and college but was really bad at it. Studying a foreign language was a graduation requirement, so in a moment of poor thinking, or because I had a Japanese girlfriend, I switched to Japanese. That was even harder and I was hopeless. Even now I remember the first time I went to the language lab, which we were supposed to do daily. It only took a few minutes of listen-and-repeat - “Kore wa enpitsu desu” – before I bailed out. It all came at me too fast. You see, I did not know I was supposed to push the pause button. I fled the lab and never went back.

Nonetheless, I liked Japanese culture and wanted to work in a Japan-oriented company. So I decided to come to Japan for a year and learn Japanese that way. I would teach English to support myself. Well, that year became two, and then forty, and here I am still trying to master Japanese and master teaching. And what a great career teaching English has been.

In my early years, I just concentrated on the best students because they were the ones really trying. Now, I concentrate on the worst, because they are the ones who need us the most. Being such a bad language student myself and teaching similar hopeless language learners in colleges that accepted every applicant, led me to my life mission: *to relieve the suffering of the classroom*. Suffering happens. The saddest thing I ever saw was in a high school. The class was going quite well and everyone was active, except one boy. To escape, he put his head down on his arms on his desk the entire period.

As a result, most of the 40 or so books I have written follow one basic principle: to cause English learning but by pulling the student into study, rather than requiring the teacher to push them. How do we do so? By having learners keep personal diaries (to build fluency), having them solve information gap mysteries (to learn interactive English), having them write about life-changing events (to learn expository cause and effect) and telling them heart-warming stories (to make them love English). Relieve the suffering of the classroom.

My desire to understand those who suffer has also been the impetus behind my love of psychology and neuroscience. It is a search for the Holy Grail. Maybe by unraveling the mysteries of motivation and learning, I can find ways to raise theirs.

To conclude, I would like to pass on a few rules of thumb:

If you find yourself teaching harder and harder, but students don't learn more, then you are teaching the wrong thing.

Following a syllabus or completing the unit is not the goal. Engaging them and causing learning is.

The thing they need to learn the most at that moment is not always English. Follow their needs, not yours.

Forget yourself.

Every one of them is a human being seeking a way to grow. Bad behavior might be a sign that you are a barrier to that growth.

Get their feedback, every class if you can.

Get them involved. Authorship causes ownership. Ownership causes commitment.

Talk to your students like they are 50-year olds. If a student is 60 minutes late, instead of interrogating them, try thanking them for coming even though there are just 30 minutes of class time left.

Feelings leak through boundaries. When you rage at one student, you rage at them all. When you praise one student, you praise them all.

Students, especially the women, cannot learn if they are afraid. Your behavior is the main cause of fear.