

# CONTENTS

## Keynote

- 7 Intercultural competence in English language education *Martin Hyde*

## About Language

- 13 Through a glass darkly *Roger Gower*  
17 Letter to the Editor *Jonathan Marks*  
18 Let me tell you a funny story... *George Woolard*  
20 Watch out for the Language Police! *Richard MacAndrew*  
24 The proverbial crossword *David Maule*

## Classroom Ideas

- 27 Incorporating small talk into the classroom – taking the party line *Nigel Cundale*  
30 Expressive phonetics *Edwin Salter*  
35 Music and songs in the classroom: making choices *Paul Sanderson*  
40 Oral exams in the classroom *Lorena Parretti*  
42 Using TV 'soaps' for listening comprehension *Thomas Farrell*

## Current Issues

- 47 Feedback: Who owns classroom research? *John Field*

## It Made Me Think

- 52 Food for thought: workshops *Nadezhda Bykova*

## A Problem Shared...teaching teenagers

- 54 Give them the choice *Valeria Dande*  
55 Teenagers: heaven and hell *Jean Rüdiger-Harper*  
57 Interest is the best teacher *Wenying Jiang*

## Tips and Hints

- 59 How do you spell 'embarrassed'? Two r's, two s's *Joseph Cronin*  
60 Test your own spelling! *Thérèse Tobin*

## Kaleidoscope

- 61 The sport of kings *Steve Brent*  
63 Factfile: horse racing  
63 Mad about gardening *Gill Sturtridge*

## Reviews

### Survey review

- 68 Quality sites on the World Wide Web *David Eastment*

### A book I've used

- 79 Reward Upper Intermediate *George Kershaw*  
82 First Certificate Pass Key *Ellie Boyadzhieva & Svetla Tashevska*  
84 Sociolinguistics and Language Teaching *James Kell*

### A book I like

- 86 Teaching as a Subversive Activity *Bryan Robinson*

- 88 Books received

- 90 Guidelines to contributors

## Reviews: A Book I Like

### ■ **Teaching as a Subversive Activity**

Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner

Penguin 1971 (currently out of print)

ISBN 0140806067

This year two events have coincided to remind me vividly of *Teaching as a Subversive Activity*, a book I'd never read from end to end, but which I've always kept within easy reach.

The first event was my ten-year-old's change of teacher. He's had 'progressive-minded' teachers for the two-year cycles which began his Spanish primary schooling. We've been pleased with his progress, and with the inquisitive attitude to learning these teachers have helped foster in him. Perhaps we should have expected a significant change one day or another. It came with Don Manuel. In him, Nicholas came face to face with a teacher defended by his colleagues as 'one of the old school'. We're into the second term now, but Nicholas and most of his classmates are still disconcerted by a teacher who can claim 'I know my writing's difficult to read. That's because you'll have to read all kinds of writing when you get older, so the sooner you get used to it the better' – and then criticise anyone whose handwriting is in the slightest way untidy.

The second event came in the guise of a Doonesbury cartoon, sent by a friend who'd attended TESOL Korea. It depicted an all-too-familiar scene of students, heads down, scribble, scribble, scribbling. The teacher confidently asks, 'Any discussion of what I've said so far?' Scribble, scribble comes the reply. He provokes: 'I believe the Bill of Rights to be a silly inconsequential ... any comment?' Still no response. 'Democracy is fascism!', he rages, raising the stakes. Finally he despairs: 'Teaching is dead.' The students, without looking up speak for the first time: 'Boy,' one says, 'this course is really getting interesting.' 'You said it,' replies his companion, 'I didn't know half this stuff.'

Food for thought? The TESOL workshop leader had posed a number of questions, and I began thinking about my answers.

- *What is your immediate reaction to this cartoon?* It's so familiar!
- *Have you had an experience in the classroom like this?* Yes, it has happened to me. More times than I care to think.
- *If so, why? If not, lucky you, and why not?* Why? I sometimes ask my learners the same question. 'Why are you,' I ask, 'always writing down what I say, and not thinking about what I mean?' 'Why does it seem you can't think without copying everything down verbatim?'

I know there are bound to be some in every class who are so strongly kinesthetic in their learning style that the physical act of writing does help them understand. But surely that can't be true of all sixty of them! And asking them to put down their pens and listen without writing doesn't help either.

That's me responding as an all-powerful teacher, but how can I as a parent handle the Don Manuels of this world? That's when I reached for the book. Written in the late sixties by two 'simple romantics', *Teaching as a Subversive Activity* viewed the teacher as the principal agent of subversion, and the school system as the fastest means of bringing about real social change in a world they believed was soon going to face the 'future shock' that comes with the awareness

that 'the world you were educated to believe in doesn't exist' (p 26). They started from their belief 'in the improbability of the human condition through education'. That's a belief I share, but what if my colleagues don't? What if I were sharing a staff room with lots of Don Manuels?

*Teaching as a Subversive Activity* is thoroughly documented in an accessible way, though without a detailed bibliography. Chapter 7 'Languaging' ends with thirty-two quotations from Shakespeare to Sapir, from Lewis Carroll to George Orwell. But much of the underlying theory comes from Marshall McLuhan. It was from McLuhan that Postman and Weingartner drew on the statement that the 'medium is the message'. This they extended to place a huge question mark over the validity of schooling. Concepts such as 'the holy grail of the illusion of uncertainty' (p 198) and their belief that 'many influential people ... depend heavily on the continuing irrelevance of most school curricula' (p 63) lead the reader to the inevitable conclusion that they did, and perhaps still do, have a point. Yet how do you or I go about overcoming the weighted system? Well, 'Crap Detecting' (p 15-35) is what it's all about. Crap detecting means teaching learners in such a way that they know when you're bullshitting them. Dangerous ground, eh?

Postman and Weingartner proposed adopting 'The Inquiry Method' of teaching, a method which they affirmed owes little to them personally, but rather is drawn from years of educational experience. The Inquiry Method is all about 'Making Meaning'. It's about a learner-centred syllabus in which the learner and his or her needs are central, and in which the content of the learner's head is where the teacher starts to work. It's a syllabus designed to promote problem-solving strategies and to develop learning processes; a syllabus based around asking questions about questions. But, wait a minute, doesn't all this sound familiar? Isn't this what the Communicative Language Learning/Teaching revolution has been all about? In fact, isn't that what we're now having a kind of group reaction against? Writing about the US of the late sixties, primary schooling and graduate school were cited by Postman and Weingartner as the two periods of formal education in which the learner was central to the process: in the fifteen or so years of schooling that separate these, they said, something went wrong. Has that position changed today?

Well, I can only speak for myself. Pre-school education in Spain is the best bit of the whole educational system. Learners really are central to the processes they are going through, and some of the most creative teachers I've met dedicate their lives to building the foundations of awareness and intelligent inquiry. But primary education is still rather mixed. And as for the university, well ... in the last year, in the faculty where I teach, most of the flip-top chairs have been removed to make way for benches bolted to the floor – 'the medium is the message' – so that tells you a lot about sardines, doesn't it?

Fortunately my learners don't all look and act like those in the cartoon. Last week I ran a feedback session along the lines of a 'Questioning' activity described in the book (pp 163-171). One of the questions I tried to answer was: 'If we've spent almost all of our class hours in groupwork, how can you justify giving us individual exams to assess the course?' In my embarrassment, I had to smile. I can't give myself a satisfactory answer to that question so how could I satisfy them? I am morally obliged to take groupwork during the course into account, I assured them, perhaps less than convincingly.

But, at least I could share the joke with them: they have learned something about crap detecting, and about asking difficult questions. They let me off the hook, though, and I'm not sure I deserve it.

||| Bryan Robinson (Received May 1997)

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