

The Inspiring, Authentic ESL/EFL Teacher

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The world is not what I think, but what I live through.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty

In the years I have been a teacher I have become increasingly convinced that inspiration, more than any external reward, is the wellspring of most meaningful learning and doing. I have spent the past decade or so investigating the phenomenon of inspiration. Naturally, I began with honest reflection on my own educational career, and found that not one teacher in grammar school, high school, or undergraduate school had inspired me to go beyond the drudgery of rote or drill-and-kill learning. For example, I took a dim view of learning grammar rules. While dear, but deadly boring Sister St. Agnes diagrammed sentences on the board in the 4th grade of Blessed Sacrament School, I fixated on the red second hand of the clock, attempting to set new records for holding my breath. I got up to two minutes and fifty seconds by the time she finished that awful business of attempting to put rules to what I already knew before I entered school. I understood how to use the language; I simply didn't know what exactly it was I was doing. More importantly, neither the teacher nor the material fired my imagination to learn it.

Further, I began asking my students to reflect upon their educational background. Excellent, critically-thinking students most often could point to at least one teacher or instructor who'd fanned a fire in their belly to learn; poor students, those in special high schools, even jail, and dropouts, *stated emphatically that they'd never once been inspired during their school career*. Formal research I've conducted has corroborated those findings (Alibrandi 1998; Alibrandi 1999).

In terms of 1st language acquisition, it is widely accepted that how well we learn our native tongue is largely dependent upon our parents, siblings, and adults with whom we come into contact as infants and small children. Whether due to Chomsky's theory of a universal genetic syntactical imprint in each of us, or due to the massive amounts of phonemes, words, and sentences that an infant receives from her/his parents and other caregivers, a child more or less masters a language by the time she/he enters kindergarten. We educators then begin the process of badgering young people with grammar rules for what they already know: how to use the language.

Even beyond the realm of language acquisition, human consciousness and schemata are developed in relation to one's experience; how we relate to individuals with whom we come into contact, or what we read or learn, is based on how it fits into our experiential warehouse. That is to say that something within each of us connects with something or someone outside of us in a way that causes us to be extremely receptive to the idea of

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learning. I know that most of who I am and what I've learned has been the result of another person appearing in my life at the right time, at a point I was consciously or unconsciously open for change. Usually that person possesses virtues I admire and want for myself. Whether wittingly or not, he or she became the inspirer (the one doing the inspiring) and I became the aspirer (the one seeking changes).

Maybe it's time to break down the phenomenon of inspiration.

First, there is the teacher. Inspiration, an ontological event—what is real, usually derived through experience, research, or study—is made possible when the instructor or teacher shares honestly with her/his students from her/his experiential warehouse. Honesty and concern for the emotional and educational needs of one's students are essential ingredients in the makeup of the authentic, inspiring teacher. The instructor's cognitive reality, embodied in his/her subjective human experiences, when directed toward something other than him/herself, becomes like a magnet to which the student is attracted. The environment established is non-shaming, supportive, and creative. In other words, the inspirer/teacher generates a situation in which, as Stephan Strasser postulated, "a reciprocal relationship is not necessarily symmetrical" (Strasser 1969). The teacher is present for the student not in the same way the student is present for the teacher; *however, it is not a one-up/one-down or master/slave relationship*. The dialogical mode, set up by the teacher, is a dynamic interplay in which, despite differences in history, the aspirer and inspirer establish the possibility for a common ground. A creative tension is born in this common ground as both participants become attuned to and understand one another, for instance when the EFL/ESL instructor, through authentic teaching, causes the student to identify with him/her. Both instructor and student become empathic with one another, a byproduct of authenticity. This teaching style is in contrast to the autocratic method found among many teachers throughout Mexico and Central and South America. The Dialogical Mode gives birth to a creative, transcendent inbetweenness in which the worlds of both parties open up and action is initiated. Reciprocity, the dynamic of give and take, is created. Change is made possible. New perspectives are revealed.

The student thus is attracted to who the teacher is, how he/she presents the material, as well as the material itself. And when the student is in a state of openness, the material presented is integrated into that student's experiential warehouse or schema, and the student *relates* to the material presented rather than simply learning it. The classroom thus becomes a place of process. The teacher and student move into the transformative state of intentionality, that is being directed toward something other or bigger than oneself. As a result of the authentic dialogue between the two, the focus changes from what is mine to what is ours. The student/aspirer becomes part of the action; the teacher/inspirer is also changed by the event. It is much like Participatory Research, in which an authentic dialogical mode is established between researcher and subjects, and both parties are changed and transformed by producing and then reflecting upon the research dialogues.

According to James Kidd, there are three basic dynamics that make up inspiration (Kidd 1985:50-69). These are:

Aspiring—being available. This is a value-oriented dynamic, in which the student is open to change her/his belief system or preset opinion, or trustingly available to gain wanted knowledge.

Authentic Moments—turning points. An unseen, invisible instant when the field of inbetweenness between teacher and student crackles with transformative energy. It is the moment when the student is on fire to learn or to get something from the inspirer/teacher. It is the moment of “Aha.” It is when the student comes to believe that anything is possible.

Breaking Through Boundaries—a transcendent event. This is the moment in which the aspirer or student sees her/his resistance to change melt away, and that student’s consciousness is suddenly transformed. New information and new insights result. It is the moment when inspired action—an *intellectual thing*—becomes enacted action, the actual *doing*. Barriers fall away, new insight fuels one’s desire to achieve. There is the potential for *both* parties to go beyond where they are.

As I’ve stated, for inspiration to occur there must be an inspirer and an aspirer. Beyond that, certain conditions need be met for the establishment of the necessary creative, transcendent inbetweenness. These qualities seem to be:

- **Being Available.** The teacher and student must present themselves physically, emotionally, and intellectually for the process of inspiration to occur.

- **Being Included.** This is primarily the teacher’s responsibility. She/He must utilize inclusive and creative techniques to initiate the bringing of the student into the process. These techniques should be as student-driven as possible in order that the student may move from the inspirational moment to being an independent learner.

- **Being enlightened.** This is both a didactic and a calling-from-within process. What the teacher offers sparks some Hermeneutical action—how one relates to what one reads or learns—within the student. It is an interpretation and understanding by the student.

- **Being enlivened.** Both parties become energized from the experience. New horizons open. It is a synergistic encounter, exposing new worlds to both inspirer and aspirer.

- **Being attracted.** Initially, the aspirer is attracted to the inspirer; the student is drawn to the authentic, creative teacher. In short time it becomes

a mutual attraction, fueled by the imaginative tension of discovery and transcendence. As Kidd says, "A reciprocal mode of caring for the other extends without conscious thought of one's own boundaries. This is an existential risk which fosters and strengthens the interpersonal bond" (Kidd 1985:50).

• **Being Encouraged.** This is also a reciprocal event. At first, the student is encouraged by who and what the teacher is. The aspirer is given confidence by the inspirer, who in turn is encouraged by the field of energy between the two, and by the student's newfound enthusiasm for learning.

There are many tools and techniques available to the inspiring, authentic teacher. I've used drama, group process, class chronicles, student-generated performance contracts, journals and creative writing, and generative themes to establish that field of transcendent inbetweenness that is critical to the process of inspiration. I've witnessed students on whom parents, teachers, school districts, society, even themselves had given up become inspired by an authentic teacher and succeed—even excel—in school.

We can make a conscious choice: Inspire or smother ingenuity and meaningful learning in our students. It is time for us teachers to hang loose, have fun, be creative, and get real with our students. This authentic, inspirational style of teaching does not have to detract from the demands of a curriculum; rather it accelerates language acquisition in that it inspires the learner and lowers her/his affective filter.

Method must always be directed toward an object.

--Aristotle

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