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The Psychological Atmosphere We Create in Our Classrooms

Adrian Underhill

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It has been said that "we teach what we are" or even that "we teach what is going on in us at the moment" (Postman & Weingartner, 1969). These provocative statements seem to suggest that the way we are in our classes, the way we feel, think and behave while teaching, can have an effect on our learners every bit as important as the materials and techniques we use and the syllabus that guides us.

Many teachers that I have worked with feel that this is possibly the case, yet that their training courses, practicums, and teaching literature have neither investigated these areas nor recognised that such areas could be investigated. This in turn makes it difficult for teachers to formulate or articulate their often strong subjective impressions that their own mood, attitudes and personal presence have a more profound effect on the quality of learning that takes place in their classes than the techniques and materials they use.

During pre- and in-service training courses I sometimes ask my trainees to reflect on the teachers they themselves had when they were at school, and especially to reflect on the

ones they had found to be either outstandingly good or outstandingly bad (from their own point of view). I ask them what they felt were the key characteristics of those teachers and how they had typically felt when working with them. The answers to these questions usually have as much to do with personal and interpersonal variables (such as warmth, respect, understanding, etc.) as with technical variables (such as teaching techniques, methodology, training background, knowledge of topic, etc.) Learners seem to know their teachers as much by the atmosphere they create as by their name, appearance, age, or topic.

These informal impressions are in broad agreement with my own classroom observations of hundreds of experienced and less experienced teachers. And similar conclusions seem to be reached by teacher trainer colleagues I talk to in almost any part of the world. The case can be summarised as follows: Two similar lesson plans, both competent and appropriate, at the same level and using the same materials, taught by two different teachers using the same kinds of techniques, can have a quite different

outcome. And the variable seems to be the psychological learning atmosphere that is created by that teacher, that also seems to be an extension of that teacher. It's as if the learning atmosphere created by a teacher is as unique as their own signature, and that whatever they do in the class the atmosphere is going to be broadly similar.

Perhaps what I have said so far is nothing new, but the tacit conclusion that the teaching profession arrives at is that all these variables are a matter of the "teacher's personality," that personality is fixed and unchangeable, and that there is little we can do about it except to offset its effects with "personality proof" materials, techniques and curricula. What perhaps is new, and there are many others saying this apart from myself, is that these personal and interpersonal factors are not fixed, that they can be brought to awareness, observed, talked about, reflected on, practised and improved significantly. These factors are not fixed, but capable of development throughout life. The only reason they appear to be fixed is that trainers do not see them as part of the training syllabus, that trainers themselves may lack these skills, or lack the confidence to help others develop them.

I suggest that warmth and genuineness can be practised as much as can dealing with errors, that empathy can be practised as much as can managing task-based activities, and that negotiating with classes can be developed as easily as can giving instructions. All these things are susceptible to change once illuminated by the light of awareness.

These are some of the areas that I work on when helping teachers to develop a more facilitative learning atmosphere in their classes: The quality of their own listening; the quality of their own speaking; their attitude to mistakes (both their own and their students'); their attitudes towards themselves and towards their learners; and the politics of their classrooms, that is their use of power and their willingness to share it where appropriate and possible.

Here are some powerful self-observation questions that I have found very helpful in my own development in this area.

People not pupils

Can I interact with class members as people rather than as pupils, and can I be more fully myself while also being a teacher? Can I listen not only to the language produced by a student but also to the person behind that language?

Faith in their ability

Am I willing to behave at least "as if" I have faith in their unbounded abilities to learn, create, retain, explore? Can I value, and show that I value, each person's effort as they make it, thereby encouraging them, not with praise, but with a genuine and interested attention? Instead of trying to please them, can I make the conditions in which they begin to please themselves?

Let go of "anxious helpfulness"

Can I be more concise and succinct in my speaking, reducing my torrential prattle, leaving slightly longer pauses, and letting go

of that anxious helpfulness that can characterise teaching? After all, how helpful is my help? The more I do what the learners could do for themselves, the more I rob them of what they need to do.

Sharing power

Am I willing to share power where appropriate by inviting learners to participate in discussion and decision-making about what is studied and how it is studied? In granting their right to make decisions about things that affect them can I also grant them the right to make wrong decisions? Or can I only allow them to make the decisions I favour?

The good climate for giving and receiving feedback

Am I willing to listen, without needing to defend myself, to what they say about their learning and what they think of the way I help them? Can I regularly ask questions like: "How are you getting on? What would you like to do differently? What could make our activities more memorable?" At first they may not offer much since they are not used to such questions, but can I show that I am willing to value whatever they do say, and demonstrate that I too am a learner who is willing to take feedback into account.

Raising self-esteem

Since we learn better when we are feeling OK about ourselves, can I try to create a relationship between myself and the group in which they feel more positive towards themselves, in which they feel recognised and secure, and in which they can enjoy getting to know themselves as learners? And

to facilitate this am I willing to undertake the lifelong project of learning to feel more OK with myself?

Relaxed alertness

Can I let go of unhelpful muscular and emotional tension in myself? Can I be less anxious about the outcome of the lesson and more able to be "with" what is happening right in front of me? Can I be less carried away by my expectations, and spend less energy wishing certain things to happen, (e.g., I wish you would hurry up, I hope you are going to be correct, etc).

Curiosity, playfulness, delight

Can I find it in me to respond to classroom events in a spontaneous rather than a routine way? Can I be intrigued and curious about what may happen, and then delighted by what does happen - whatever it is? Can I be a student of learning even as I am teaching?

Gentle healthy humour

I don't want to be funny, or to make jokes that cover unease and cheapen the atmosphere, but I do want to be open to the gentle, natural and helpful humour that seems to bubble up when engagement increases and anxieties drop away. Such humour may or may not be expressed by laughter, but it brings an unmistakable lightness and can transform a lesson into a living event. How can I relate to myself, and then to the class, in a way that will allow this?

In conclusion I simply say that I hope you find these questions are worth tasking, and I invite you to reflect on the differences

between developing the technical skills of teaching and developing the personal or human skills of teaching. And I encourage you to find and make your own questions, that reflect your own interest in your

development as a teacher, that give you a creative shock and help to wake you up to the vast human potential that you, like me, undoubtedly have.

The Author

Adrian Underhill works as a consultant to teachers and trainers in many countries on personal and professional development, humanistic education, management training, interpersonal skills and learning pronunciation. He is Training Consultant to Embassy CES, Hastings UK, which offers a wide range of short specialist courses to EFL teachers throughout the world. He is the founder of the IATEFL Teacher Development Group and author of *Sound Foundations: Living Phonology*. He is editor of the Heinemann Teacher Development Series. He is currently President of the International Association for Teachers of English as a Foreign Language (IATEFL).

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