

Stirring the Imagination

Jennifer Yamin-Ali

In her recent 2-part column, Dr. Susan Herbert advocated the encouragement of dreaming in our students but laments that “it is ... unlikely that teachers will plan deliberately to address students’ dreams.”

I concur with her that unless it is written within a formal curriculum, it may be a challenge for many teachers to make the extra effort to carve in their students’ psyche those attitudes and skills that could very well make the biggest difference in their lives. The drive to “produce” good academic results has even killed the dreams of many a teacher. For example, there are those teachers whose love of literature has simmered down to the survival level—literature is now optional in more schools than before. Literature teachers are enviably poised to teach young people how to dream. Their subject matter is imagination itself. To not maximise this opportunity may be the downfall of an education system.

I have always maintained that in every genius there is a touch of madness. I believe this of great teachers also. Randy Pausch, in his bestseller *The Last Lecture*, reminisces about some of the things his students may always remember him for, as he describes his encounter with each set of new students: “The students would look at me and I could tell they were shocked, bewildered and slightly amused. It was exciting for them. They were thinking: “I don’t know who this guy is , but I’m definitely coming to class tomorrow to check out his next stunt.”” The “performances” of great teachers do not require effort but come naturally. From such performances, students are inspired, and develop a propensity to dream and, consequently, to hope. The humdrum has no place in any learning environment that seeks to create dreamers.

In my own professional work with secondary school teachers, I encounter the frequent cry of frustration when they are faced with the necessity to be creative in their delivery of the foreign language curriculum. One overarching necessity is that they (as for any other subject) contextualise their entire lesson within situations that are relevant to their students. This requirement is initially daunting to most of them until, eventually, they begin to naturally incorporate real-life scenarios into their lessons in an attempt to transport students to other possibilities, other realities, which require them to use language in specific ways and to engage their imagination.

There are generic classroom tasks or activities valuable to any classroom teacher if appropriately planned and implemented. I was fortunate to participate recently in one such type in a workshop conducted by Susanne Even of Indiana University. She proposes the use of some basic drama pedagogy techniques in foreign language education, which are applicable to many other areas in the curriculum. The session began with a still scene in which there were people in a particular setting. No background information was given but some “Empathy Questions” were asked, and participants shared their answers based on their individual interpretations of the scene. The questions served to change the perspective from the “outside” to the “inside.” They then read a short excerpt from the

story connected to the still picture and acted out the scene. In this “Tableau” technique, they are made to “freeze” at a particular point. A “frozen” person may be asked to make a variety of utterances like describing her feelings at the moment, or explaining the situation in which she finds herself. This drama capsule can include additional techniques such as “Running the Gauntlet” (coping with arguments), “Doubling” (stepping into the other’s shoes), “Teacher in Role” (instructor becomes part of the improvisation), and “Hotseating” (responding to participants’ questions in the role of one of the characters). A useful resource for such techniques is <http://scenario.ucc.ie>

The value of drama and the fuelling of the imagination is that a window is opened to the other self—perhaps a self waiting to be discovered. In literature classes, for example, when students “suspend their belief,” we succeed in doing what Spielberg or Rowling got millions of people around the globe to do. Randy Pausch at eight years old was “in awe of” Disneyland. At thirty-five years old, the awe had not diminished. As a university professor, he could not contain his excitement as he successfully argued his way into spending his sabbatical fulfilling his childhood dream. “Here I was, the grown-up version of that wide-eyed eight-year-old at Disneyland. I had finally arrived. I was an Imagineer.”

By creating dreamers and enabling them, teachers transform the full stop in students’ lives to commas.

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