DEFAULT SETTINGS – WHAT MODELS DO FOR TRAINEES

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In a recent article the British artist Bridget Riley was complaining about the treatment which she and her fellow students received at the Royal College of Art. Interviewed in the British publication 'Guardian Weekend' she said:
'We were abandoned, when what we needed, and what we hoped for, was help towards independence rather than having independence thrust down our throats.'[1]
and it made me wonder, as I read it, how trainees at the beginning of their career should be treated when faced with the perplexing business of teaching. Should trainers give their students clear models, should they be 'prescriptive', or should they encourage trainees to work things out for themselves?

This is not a sterile debate. Indeed the controversy was dramatically demonstrated when Craig Thaine wrote an article in The Teacher Trainer describing how he got pre-service trainees to plan a sequence of classes, and how this helped them not only to plan but also to understand more about teaching (Thaine 1996a). In the very next issue of the same journal Mario Rinvolucri lambasted this approach. In an open letter to Craig Thaine he wrote:
"The assumption behind your article seems to be that a teacher on Sunday evening should know what she will be doing with her class on Friday morning, five lessons on. The assumption fills me with a mixture of amazement and hilarity …
I know nothing, absolutely nothing about the group of language learners I will meet next Monday morning. My work with them will be responsive in the same way that a doctor is responsive with her patients …
Craig, why do you consciously teach your trainees to elaborate mental structures that ignore the flesh-and-blood here-and-now learners? Why does the UCLES / RSA scheme of things often do the same?' (Rinvolucri 1996:3)

What, then is the role of the trainer? To help trainees become diagnosticians in the way that Mario claims he himself is, or to help them 'elaborate mental structures'? Should we equip our trainees with teaching models and help them to use them to plan classes or should we let them pick and choose from a range of ideas and techniques? Should we equip them with a cookbook or offer them a buffet?[2]

Default settings
When you first load up a new programme on your computer it has already decided on certain settings. The word processing package offers you a window / page with pre-determined margins, print settings and font types and sizes, etc. For the panicking first-time user this window allows them to type something straight away and print it. Later, as we become more familiar with the package experimentation starts: the letters can be bigger or smaller, bold or italic. We can use different fonts. Paragraphs can be indented, put into columns, boxed, inserted in tabular form, and so on. In other words the package offers the user clear defaults from which to develop and grow.

I believe that default settings are a good metaphor for the role of the trainer in pre-service training where trainees are offered a clear model or models to hang onto and from which they can develop and grow.[3] I do not share Mario Rinvolucri's 'amazement' or 'hilarity' at the elaboration of mental structures (though I might agree about a danger of over-rigid planning). I believe firmly that beginner teachers need models and procedures to survive with. Remember, a large number of trainees start teaching after only four weeks in training.[4]

As Craig Thaine said in his reply to Mario Rinvolucri's criticism:
'I have no doubt that you (Mario) are responsive to your learners … But how many years have you been teaching? And yes, your medical metaphor is interesting. In New Zealand, doctors spend six years at university and a further two following up on internship … I think a lot of recently trained teachers would be able to respond to their learners as well as you after several years of education instead of one month or, at most, a year.' (Thaine 1996b)

What default settings?
The default setting that has most commonly been applied to pre-service training is, of course, PPP (presentation, practice and production). But this has come in for sustained criticism (e.g. Lewis 1993; Lewis 1996; Woodward 1993; Scrivener 1994a; etc.). While some of its perceived shortcomings seem

to be grotesquely exaggerated (see Harmer 1996) there is an obvious truth about its limitations, elegantly expressed here by Jim Scrivener:

'…(PPP) only describes one kind of lesson; it is inadequate as a general proposal concerning approaches to language in the classroom. It entirely fails to describe the many ways in which teachers can work when, for example, using coursebooks, or when adopting a task-based approach.' (Scrivener 1996: 79)

In place of PPP other models have been suggested such as Observe – Hypothesize – experiment (Lewis 1986, 1993, etc.), the Authentic – Restricted – Explanation language description (Scrivener 1994b and elsewhere – but see the critique in Thornbury 1996) and the Illustration – Interaction – Induction discovery approach of McCarthy & Carter (1995). Perhaps the one that should most command our attention is Task-Based learning (TBL) (see Willis 1996)[5] where tasks rather than language are the focus of classroom activities.

ESA

While Task-Based learning is a refreshing and attractive approach to teaching and learning I am not convinced that it is always necessarily the way to teach at all different levels and in all different situations. Nor am I convinced that there is something intrinsically wrong with PPP at certain levels and with certain (restricted) categories of language. There is value, too, in the kinds of discovery approaches advocated by Lewis (op. cit.) and Carter & McCarthy (op. cit.). But what I want, in Scrivener's words, is a 'general proposal' to offer my pre-service trainees, and that general proposal is ESA, which stands for ENGAGE – STUDY – ACTIVATE.[6]

ESA means that a teacher needs to engage students 'emotionally' if learning is to be effective. It means that in most if not all classes some study should take place – whether it is the present simple, the construction of a paragraph, sound training, or a discussion of the connotation of different words meaning 'beautiful', for example (even in skill-based lessons there should be at least some concentration on the construction of language, text or discourse, however small such a study session might be). It means that most if not all classes should have at least some stage where students are given a chance to 'activate' their language knowledge – not just discrete little chunks of it.

This ESA model is a macro default setting, almost (to extend the metaphor) a teaching programme. All three elements need to be present when it is in use. But what makes it useful as a macro default is that the order of these three elements is not fixed. Thus an E -->S-->A lesson (called 'Straight Arrows') is very much like a PPP lesson (get students engaged, present and practise the new language and then give students a chance for activation where activation means production). E-->A-->S, on the other hand is more like task-based learning in miniature. This 'Boomerang' micro default gets students to perform a task using all and/or any language they know and only then does the teacher go back to language study on the basis of what he or she has witnessed in the students' language performance.

Most classes are neither 'Straight Arrow' classes or 'Boomerang' classes, however. They tend to be more mixed up than this – a collection of teaching sequences mixing the various elements in many different ways. These 'Patchwork' lessons imply all of the three elements, but they do so more than once and in various orders. A sequence such as E--->A--->A--->S--->S--->E--->S--->A would be perfectly possible, in other words.

Conclusions

Trainees need clear models, just as computer users rely, initially, on default settings. I have suggested a macro default of ESA as a general proposal, which provides three micro default settings, Straight Arrow sequences, Boomerang sequences, and Patchwork sequences. I believe that these will be of use to a teacher preparing for a lifetime as a teacher and that sooner or later that teacher will be able to break away from them, emerging as diagnostically creative as anyone might want.

Notes
1. The Guardian weekend, March 15, 1997
2. I first heard this metaphor used by Mike Scott at the Guadalajara Mextesol convention in 1981. Plus ça change!
3. Scott Thornbury gives us omelette making and Japanese pots to make essentially the same points as I am making here (Thornbury 1996).

4. Sometimes it strikes me as sad that we no longer call it a 'preparatory' certificate because that is all it is!
5. 'A Framework for Task-based learning' won the first Ben Warren Memorial prize.
6. See Harmer (forthcoming) for a fuller treament of ESA.

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