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IN SEARCH OF LESSONS THAT MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Gunther Volk (gunther.volk@gmail.com)

1. No-one forgets a good teacher

Teaching, at the end of the day, is all about making a difference. An 84-year-old friend of mine, Doris Black, lives in a residential home in North London. During a recent conversation, she told me that she had been on an outing to the Victoria & Albert Museum when a woman, only seven years her junior, came up to her and said: "You were my French teacher at the Hasmonean School for Girls in Golders Green in 1949. You taught us a poem that I still remember to this day, and it is because of you that I developed a love of French and French culture."

This encounter between a former pupil telling her former teacher that she had made a difference in her life more than 60 years after the event, proves that there is truth in the saying that "no-one forgets a good teacher". Without a doubt this is an achievement worthy of mention in the *Guinness Book of Records*.

After Penny Ur invited me to give the plenary talk at the 2011 ETAI Winter Conference at Wizo Nahalal High School, I asked Doris to share the secret that had made her such a successful teacher.

"I don't really know," she said. "All I remember is that I loved my subject and my students and," she added, "as far as my teaching was concerned, I just taught the way I assumed French ought to be taught, since I did not have any training."

"Did you have to fill in any forms? Did you have to apply any HOTS or LOTS to your lessons," I asked somewhat cheekily. "No," she said, "no LOTS, no HOTS, no forms, no paperwork. I just concentrated on my teaching."

2. Prerequisites for teaching lessons that make a difference in the EFL classroom

Admittedly, the Hasmonean School for Girls in Golders Green of 1949 is a far cry from the schools where most of us teach today. In extreme cases, what we experience on a daily basis is more akin to the trials and tribulations Francis Gilbert describes so hauntingly in his book *I'm a Teacher, Get Me out of Here!*

As committed professionals, however, it is not in our character to walk away from challenges. Instead we reflect on what needs to be done in EFL lessons to make them as motivating, meaningful and memorable as possible – in short, for them to make a difference.

How can this be achieved? In his article *In Search of a Good Lesson* Luke Prodromou suggests an interesting 'staircase model' which he devised to assess the quality

of lessons. His concept divides the prerequisites for teaching a 'good lesson' into three steps: technique, craft and art.

The most basic level of 'technique' comprises teaching skills such as a good command of English, the ability to explain, present and practise grammatical structures as well as the aptitude to help students develop the four skills. At the intermediate level referred to as 'craft', teachers are expected to be "aware and responsive to learners' needs, adapt textbooks, produce materials, and apply a range of methods." For the third prerequisite, called "art", teachers take EFL to a new dimension – "teaching as education" – above and beyond dealing with technicalities such as vocabulary and grammar.

If foreign language teaching reaches the art level and is elevated to the provision of a humane education, our lessons will impact the way our students think and behave. Thus, if we are lucky, the youngsters we teach will not only learn English but will also be equipped to make a difference in the lives of others.

This 'educational' dimension of EFL teaching can best be realized with the help of texts that challenge our students' sense of justice and fairness by exploring issues involving injustice, controversial legal decisions or the behaviour of the bystander in the face of anti-social behaviour.

3. Making a difference with the help of carefully chosen texts

The two texts chosen for my plenary talk, the poem *Kinderscene* by the German poet Edwin Bormann and the short play *Little Old Lady* by the Anglo-Jewish playwright Arnold Wesker, both deal with an issue called 'the bystander phenomenon'.

I became sensitive to the phenomenon of the 'bystander effect' very early in my life. When I was eight years old my mother asked me what I had been doing during the afternoon. I told her that I had been out playing with friends on the banks of a stream, when suddenly one of the boys in the group fell into the water and looked a sorry sight. A couple of my playmates picked up empty cans that had been washed up on the bank, filled them with water and poured the murky liquid over the boy's head. There were peals of laughter at the sight of the little boy crying and looking increasingly bedraggled.

I assured my mother that I had not joined in, but that was not good enough for her. "Did you stop the others from what they were doing?" I had not, and my mother

expressed great disappointment in me. She explained that being a bystander was just as bad as actually taking part in the bullying. It's a lesson that has stayed with me to this very day.

Surprisingly, we are most susceptible to remaining silent or inactive when we are in a crowd. According to Mark Levine, a social psychologist at Lancaster University, crowds "have been blamed for antisocial behaviour through mechanisms that include peer pressure, mass hysteria and a diffusion of responsibility – the idea that 'someone else' will do something, so I don't have to." Hence the bystander effect, which he defines as a "phenomenon whereby people who would help a stranger in distress if they were alone, fail to do so in the presence of others."

4. Kinderscene – a poem for a lesson on Yom Hashoah

Kinderscene is a short poem by the German poet Edwin Bormann. It dates back to 1893, a time when Germany was gripped by one of its periodic spates of anti-Semitism. The poem has all the right ingredients for it to have a lasting impact on our students. Both the setting and the characters are familiar to youngsters, a planned birthday party, friends from school; a teacher and a mother.

The action centres around the birthday party to which Käthchen, the birthday girl, has invited all her little friends except one - Rebecca Silberstein. Käthchen is adamant that she does not want Rebecca to be present because she is Jewish. Käthchen has learned from her teacher at school that the Jews killed Jesus. The speaker's mother, on the other hand, counsels caution and reminds the speaker that Silbersteins did not have anything to do with the murder. In the final stanza the poet repeats the mother's warning and expresses the hope that it would be good for the world if people stopped blaming Jews for Jesus' murder.

The character constellation in the poem is such that it lends itself to being linked with a famous quotation by the renowned Hebrew University historian, Yehuda Bauer: "Thou shalt not be a perpetrator; thou shalt not be a victim; and thou shalt never, but never, be a bystander."

It is fairly clear-cut for students to apply the different terminologies in the quotation to the characters in the poem. Käthchen is identified as a perpetrator/collaborator who is under the influence of her teacher, who can also be labelled as a perpetrator/instigator. Obviously Rebecca is the victim while the speaker's mother distinguishes herself by not being a bystander. Like the poet's voice in the last stanza, she too can be described as a warning conscience.

Having analyzed the roles of the different characters in the poem the lesson can be directed to the level of 'education as art'. In this realm the lesson has an effect on our students' sense of justice and subsequently on their own ethical behaviour. A key question to set this evaluative phase in motion might be: "Is there any link between the poem and Edmund Burke's adage 'All that is necessary for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing?'"

Students have no difficulty expressing the concept that evil triumphs when a little girl called Rebecca is ostracized for being Jewish. They also observe that there are 'good men' who could have prevented this act of ostracism from happening by saying: "If Rebecca is not invited, we won't come either!" However, the little girls, with their sweet sounding diminutive names, are probably swayed by their teacher's bias and do not have the guts to boycott the birthday party. Being too young and immature may very well be an excuse to get the six girls off the hook. No such leniency, however, should be meted out to our students, who have learned that one can't escape culpability by being bystanders.

Lessons, as we all know, can make a difference for good or bad. The behaviour of the teacher in *Kinderscene*, for example, is to the detriment of his students. He poisons their minds by perpetuating century-old prejudices against Jews. Contrast him with a teacher called Mr. Whitson in that thought-provoking short story *Best Teacher I Ever Had*. He turns his students into questioning, inquisitive human beings who have the courage to speak their own minds and to contradict others if they think they are wrong. This is what "teaching lessons with a difference" is all about!

5. The short play Little Old Lady

Little Old Lady by the Anglo-Jewish playwright Arnold Wesker, also deals with the bystander phenomenon. The play is set in the carriage of a moving London underground train. Two youngsters called Sammy and Trish are keeping themselves entertained by playing a silly question and answer game. Trish asks the questions: "What's the capital of Spain? What's the capital of Denmark?" to which Sammy has only one answer: "Dunno."

Enter the little old lady. She sits down next to the youngsters and after a short while joins in and starts giving the names of the capital cities Sammy can't recall or has never even heard of. Surprised at Sammy's lack of knowledge she exclaims: "Don't they teach you these things at school?" to which Trish responds: "Got no time to teach us. Too busy getting us through exams."

After this short moment of comic relief the atmosphere changes dramatically when the train stops and a thuggish man enters and begins to smoke right next to a no-smoking sign. The little old lady challenges him to put out his cigarette. When he refuses she asks the others in the carriage to join in with her protest but each and every one of them has an excuse for not becoming involved. The tension increases further when the bully shows signs of lighting another cigarette. When the little old lady threatens to pull the chain to stop the train, the bully intimidates her and everyone in the carriage is on tenterhooks to see if she will carry out her threat.

However anti-social and threatening the bully's behaviour may be, in this instance it is open to debate whether the situation in the play really warrants an intervention by those who are looking on. Take the character Jason, for instance. Even though in the eyes of the little old lady he is "the only one here who's [the bully's] size", Jason warns the others not to become involved because he thinks the bully is "unpredictable and dangerous". There is also the "Harassed Woman", a mother, whose intricate arrangements for the day will go haywire if the train is delayed. She pleads with the little old lady not to pull the chain:

"Why are you making trouble? What's in a cigarette? One cigarette in a whole carriage. ... No one else is smoking and no one else is complaining. You frightened from the smoke of one cigarette? Open the windows ... – only don't pull that chain or you'll upset everyone's life. For one man! One anti-social man and a lousy cigarette."

In the light of this opposition, can a pulling of the chain by the little old lady really be justified? Since the answer is debatable this can be put to excellent use in class with the help of a so-called dilemma discussion. In this student-centred activity, the class is divided into small groups. Each group is asked to deal with a number of tasks that take the students from identifying the dilemma to offering a solution. Besides developing listening and verbal skills, the exchange of ideas also encourages reasoning and critical thinking, and if the ensuing plenary discussion gets heated, so much the better!

It is my hope to inspire others to make a difference by using our opportunity as educated elders to teach English to developing minds. Let's not be bystanders to education without meaning.

- i Gilbert, Francis (2004). *I'm a Teacher. Get Me out of Here!* London: Short Books.
- ii Prodromou Luke (2002), *In Search of a Good Lesson*. *English Teaching Professional*, Issue 22, January, 5 – 8.
- iii *ibid.* 8.
- iv Please see my article "Contemporary Holocaust Plays in Advanced EFL Classes", http://www.etni.org.il/etnirag/issue2/gunther_volk.htm
- v <http://www.etai.org.il/handouts.html> (Kinderscene and materials; Little Old Lady and materials)
- vi "The kindness of crowds", *The Economist*, 29 February 2009. <http://www.economist.com/node/13176759>
- vii *ibid.*
- viii See Elon, Amos (2002). *The Pity of It All. A Portrait of the German-Jewish Epoch 1743 – 1933*. New York: Picador. 212-220.
- ix From a speech by Professor Yehuda Bauer, Stockholm International Forum on the Holocaust, 26 January 2000.
- x Ratcliffe, Susan (1994). *The Little Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*. Oxford: OUP 1994.
"It is necessary only for the good man to do nothing for evil to triumph." Edmund Burke 1729 – 97: attributed (in a number of forms) to Burke, but not found in his writings." 144.
- xi Owen, David. "Best Teacher I Ever Had" in: Raz, Nancy (1992). *Inside Stories*. Ra'anana: Eric Cohen Books.
- xii Wesker, Arnold. "Little Old Lady" in: Terson, Peter (Ed.)(1988). *New Plays 1. Contemporary One-Act Plays For Young People*. Oxford: OUP.
- xiii Please see my ETAI conference handout for additional speaking and writing activities.

Gunther Volk is a teacher of English who has taught in the US, Germany and Israel. At present he works as a teacher trainer at Rottweil Teacher Training College in Southwestern Germany. A regular presenter at ETAI conferences, he has offered workshops and talks on a variety of topics such as "Boosting Speaking and Writing Skills through Moral Dilemmas", "Teaching the Holocaust through Anglo-Jewish Drama and Film" and "Countering Anti-Semitism and Holocaust Denial through Sir Ronald Harwood's Play The Handyman". Though he lives and works in Germany his heart is in Israel and he is back here whenever time permits.