

SOME THOUGHTS ON ORGANIZING A WORKSHOP, OR "AN ART CAN ONLY BE  
LEARNED IN THE WORKSHOP OF THOSE WHO ARE WINNING THEIR BREAD  
BY IT" \*

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Many long moons ago, before the Albanian text workshop had twinkled into existence, I was involved in helping to plan a workshop, in which participants read a text in a language they did not know. (In this case the text was in German, the participants members of Mextesol, the Mexican sister organization to Tesol.) For a number of reasons, the workshop was a success; participants not only learned from it but also enjoyed the task. Afterwards one of the participants asked for a re-run of the same workshop in her home town. The workshop and its organizers were the same, the number of participants about the same, the room and facilities equally good or better, and again the workshop was for Mextesol. The second time, though, the workshop was a failure.

The purpose of this paper is, first, to set out some steps necessary to the planning of a good workshop, and second, to consider factors which may affect whether a workshop succeeds or fails.

But first let us place the workshop in its context of professional development.

Presumably, the main seeds of professional growth are

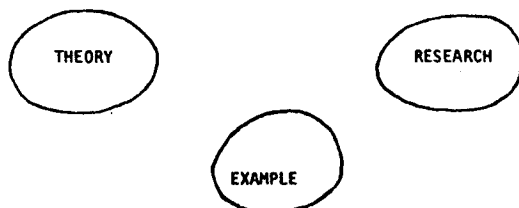


Fig. 1. Elements of Professional Development : Eggs

To clarify by example: as teachers of English we must decide whether and how to teach, say, the passive voice, summary-writing skills, skimming strategies, or the rhetorical function 'classification'. To make such decisions, we can look at theory : linguistic descriptions of the passive construction, or what cognitive psychology has to say about the components of summarization, etc. Without theory, we would be in the dark.

\*quote from Samuel Butler, 'Erewhom', Chapter 20)

Next, research. Research can tell us whether the passive voice is a problem for text comprehension. (Actually, the little research that has been done on this suggests that for Latin American students most passive voice constructions are not a problem.) Of course we do not usually have enough research evidence. Our art, though it has been called the second oldest profession, is still living in caves.

By example, I mean looking to see what others have done. We can examine textbooks to find out how the passive construction, or summary-writing skills, are taught.

However, Figure 1 is not really complete. These three elements provide the seeds of much useful guidance, but coldly, rationally: they speak to the head, as it were, not to the heart. What is needed is a fourth element, linking the others:

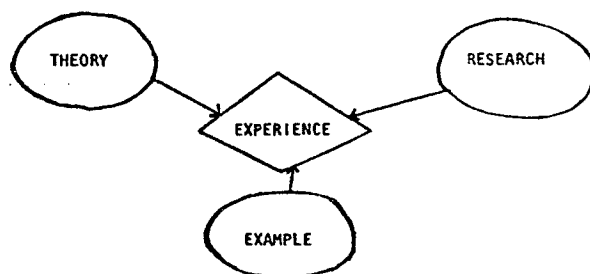


Fig. 2. Figure 1 Revisited: Caterpillar\*

Experience does not cover only our own experience as teachers in classrooms, or the reports of the experiences of others. It refers also to experiencing a given teaching point, as if we were students. Having the experience, not just watching others have it.

And in a non-atomistic world, experiencing something gives rise to discussion, and subsequently to changes in theory, research and example.

So even Figure 2 is not fully developed. Further metamorphosis is under way, and the result is something like Figure 3 (overleaf).

This view suggests that the role of workshops and similar experiences can be crucial: the workshop complements information from theory, research and example (all of which can be got from books or lectures), uniting them in practical personal experience, and feeding this into

discussion, where the different individual reactions can be considered and further insights obtained. This then feeds right back, as a kind of informal research, into our knowledge, the original seeds as displayed in Figure 1.

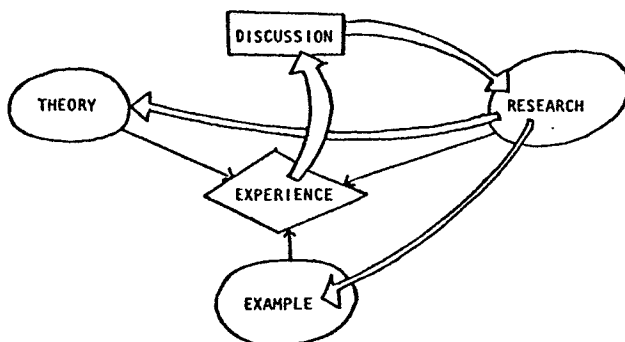


Figure 3. Butterfly

To summarize so far, then, a workshop is a kind of informal research activity carried out to promote an experience which should be relevant to general teaching aims, as informed by theory, previous research findings, and example.

The great advantage of a workshop is that it goes to the heart as well as the head, and in so doing should lead to fruitful discussion and improved teaching in practice.

For all of this to work, though, the workshop has to be carefully planned, in both of its main components : the experiencing section and the discussion.

#### Planning the Task

There is good evidence that learning involves operating on material, not just 'decerebra'. Frank Smith puts it like this :

It is only through organization that information can become established in long-term memory, and it is only through organization that it can be retrieved again. (1978:44)

Smith reports on several experiments which have established this. The implication for the present purposes is that a workshop will need as its central element some kind of task, presumably involving problem-solving.

Now in the context of professional development (teacher-training, teacher education, or simple professional encounters and seminars as in the case of our National Project), it seems reasonable to argue that our workshop task (other things being equal) should resemble the sorts of task we ask our students to engage in. If so, the experience will relate to the classroom and should illuminate teachers' attitudes, theories, and practice.

That is why reading in an unknown language, the example given at the beginning of this paper, can be a worth-while task. Teachers of English cannot easily re-experience the problems of learning English, but we can benefit enormously from tackling semi-unknown material, just as our students do.

What other tasks can one imagine, in the context of our Project? Here are some preliminary ideas to illustrate the present notion of 'task' :

**A. Text-Element Tasks**

- relating texts to diagrams or to headings
- inferring vocabulary meanings
- inferring grammatical or rhetorical structure
- cognate recognition
- typography analysis

**B. Text-Modification Tasks**

- summary writing
- rewriting badly-written texts
- translation
- reorganizing jumbled paragraphs
- information transfer (text to diagram or vice-versa)

**C. Teaching-Activity Tasks**

- lesson or course planning
- exercise production
- test writing
- designing games

Table 1. Some Possible Workshop Task Types

The task types under A and B are similar to those our students may do in class: texts could be similar to those used in class (a good

way of testing our texts) or for certain purposes, as already suggested, might be wholly or partly in an unknown language, or else incomplete. In any case, the activity of trying to solve the workshop problem should produce valuable insights into how the competent model (the teacher) carries out the task. Results can be surprising ! The proof of the pudding is in the eating ...

Tasks under C in Table 1 are not similar to student tasks, usually, but may be useful in a different way: they may produce something of direct applicability, though usually the major benefit is not the product of the task, but the experience and insights gained while carrying it out.

With all these task types, under A, B or C, it is possible (and generally desirable) to adopt a 'protocol analysis' approach. Protocol analysis, the research technique which attempts to get 'protocols' (ie records) of what people are thinking as they carry out a task, is very useful and productive, not only in reading research and the psychology laboratory, where it originated, but also in teachers' workshops as in our present concern. In protocol analysis one tries to get participants to think aloud as they perform the task.

Another personal account (sorry !) will illustrate the point. In one recent seminar, in Piauí, I asked participants to work on a task in pairs. One member of the pair was the 'Observer' and the other the 'Performer'. The Observer's role was to note down as much as possible of what the Performer was doing or thinking as the Performer carried out the task. Afterwards, they reversed roles on a similar task. The activity gave rise to quite a lot of useful insights for all of us.

#### The Other Sections of the Workshop

The task is at the centre of the workshop. But for success, it seems that there are three other elements (plus a further dimension, feelings, which will be discussed in the next section). The four elements are :

1. Explanations
2. Task
3. Report-Back Stage
4. Conclusions and Feedback

Once you have decided what sort of task you would like to ask participants to perform (with or without protocol analysis to observe the task more directly), it is essential to plan carefully how you will explain clearly what the participants are to do. And when they've finished that, what they're to do next. It is very easy to think everything is obvious, only to find your participants sitting in groups uncertain of what to do, or worse, doing the wrong things !

From experience, I believe it is usually best to explain both orally and in writing (on a blackboard, transparency or handout). The secret is to anticipate. Rehearse every step of the task when planning the workshop, so that you can explain clearly and confidently.

Remember Murphy's Law (anything which can go wrong, will). Will there be enough time ? How big should groups be ? How will they decide who is to lead each group or act as reporter ? Will they need pens and paper, transparencies, alcohol, cotton buds ?

With regard to these points, a few general comments :

- Workshops always take twice as long as you would expect. Groups take time to form, to settle individual roles. The phone, the toilet, or other pressing business is bound to take its toll on your participants. Participants need coffee to lubricate their mental machinery and this puts further strain on the bladder. Talking time increases in proportion to group size. Writing transparencies takes ages. (For some reason, teachers love to produce scripts worthy of a medieval monk.)
- In general, (there are obvious exceptions) pairs or groups of three are best. In a larger group some participants will stop deserving that name. On the other hand, individual work can be daunting, to people who may feel their professional prestige is on the line.
- It is usually best to suggest that participants choose roles (eg spokesperson, secretary) first. This helps the group to sort its leadership naturally.
- Ensure that the back-up materials (pens, paper, blank transparencies) are available before you start. This may mean sending handouts or texts off a week or so in advance.

The Workshop Organizers' role during the task phase is to circulate from group to group, giving advice where necessary, but mostly letting participants get on with the task. It is important to be available (not to go off making phone calls oneself!).

### The Discussion Stages

The second major component of the workshop is discussion. In some cases the task is mingled with discussion but often the two are kept separate. After participants have carried out the task, they will usually still need time to discuss in their mini-groups all the implications and insights, before reporting back to the whole set of participants. This is important also, inasmuch as there is a tendency for people to be reluctant to disagree with each other: if they have already reached a small-group decision they will be more prepared to express an opinion which diverges from that of other groups, and it is often from this disagreement that useful insight emerges.

Discussion is as important as the task, for the task is usually product-centred (trying to get a solution to the problem, the solution being a product) while the discussion is process-centred, in that seeing how the solution was or was not reached, and why, are essentially process-oriented questions.

Typical discussion questions will therefore be:

- What mental processes went on as we did the task?
- What made it hard and what easy?
- What group processes went on? Who helped? How did those who received help feel about that?
- What did we feel about the task? (see next section)
- Were the solutions and feelings typical of what students would feel or do in a similar situation?

This naturally feeds into report-back. Here a few more comments may be in order:

- There is always a danger that reports may not be listened to. This frequently happens when 'secretaries' in other groups are still writing their conclusions, especially if on transparencies for the overhead projector. (On the other hand, the OHP is an excellent tool for making reports more visual, and does command attention more readily.)

- 'Spokespersons' often produce their reports in a low voice. Solution : stand at the other side of the room, so that they will naturally speak up. They usually address the organizers, so if the organizers are distant everybody will be more likely to hear. Ask them to stand if that does not seem too challenging. Better still, use the OHP.
- Using the OHP can be quite tricky at first. Try to train spokespersons to face the audience, not the screen.

I have separated report-back from conclusions, because the latter stage is where it is possible to try to draw general conclusions on the basis of small-group reports. This phase can be impromptu, but is still important.

Finally, it is often useful to get feedback on the workshop itself: either by questionnaire or orally. The best question is usually not : Did you enjoy the workshop ? but How could we improve the workshop on a subsequent occasion ?

#### The Affective Side

By now you may be wondering when I was going to explain the failure of the Mextesol workshop I mentioned several pages back.

I think the problem was affective. There is a lot of evidence that people perform to some extent in accordance with their expectations: expecting to fail they will fail, and expecting success they will succeed. For examples of this in EFL, see Gardner and Lambert's work, in reading, Frank Smith (op. cit) or Downing and Leong, Chapter 11.

When people feel threatened, their standard response is usually either 'fight or flee'. In a workshop among English teachers I have never actually seen a fight break out, admittedly, though fleeing responses are not unusual: witness the increased use of telephones or toilets in some workshops. The fight response is of course transmuted into reactions of the kind : 'I think this is a waste of time.', 'This is childish/stupid/obvious'.

The participants in the second Mextesol workshop were far too polite to say any of these things to the organizers, of course. But it became quite apparent that they felt reading German was obviously impossible, since they had never studied any German before, and that therefore the workshop was a waste of time. Which



was a self-fulfilling prophecy : it soon became indeed a waste of everyone's time.

There is no easy solution. Precisely because teachers are mature adults, they expect to have difficulty learning, and because they are professionally qualified, they have more 'face' to lose. The answer would have been for us as organizers to have taken more time over the explanation phase, making it clear that detailed comprehension was neither possible nor our goal, but that interesting insights would emerge from the tussle with the German text.

As with any ordinary class, of course, part of the trick of success is to appear confident yourself. If the organizers of a workshop look confident, speak up clearly, have some signs of having prepared carefully and conduct the proceedings at a businesslike brisk pace, the participants will be busy tackling the task before they have had time to realize that it might seem threatening.

The present paper is offered in the hope that readers will find some advice which may make their future workshops confident and successful.

#### Notes & References

\* Apologies to John Holmes for belabouring his metaphor.

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