

Know Thyself (Inscription on the Temple of Apollo at Delphi)

As sources and purveyors of knowledge (albeit less mystical than that of the oracle at Delphi), we are obliged to follow this command. An essential element of teacher development, in my opinion, is becoming aware of who we are as individuals: becoming conscious of our unconscious motivations, learning how they influence us and our students, learning to accept ourselves for who we are and nurturing our process of personal growth.

Socrates, one of the greatest teachers of all time, admonished that “the unexamined life is not worth living” and urged everyone to follow the path of self-awareness and reflection.

Our students, regardless of their age or status, look up to us as models and willingly put us in a position of authority over them. We are an essential ingredient in what we teach, how we teach and the results of our teaching – how motivated our students are, how they feel about learning English and the quality of their learning experience. I am not proposing that we take over the entire responsibility for the success or failure of each of our students. On the contrary, if we take responsibility for our 50% of the interaction, then we are freer to allow our students to be responsible for their contribution to the learning process. Our students are, after all, learning for themselves and not as a favor to us. If we are able to take care of our own needs, then we needn't be dependent on our students for affection or ego-gratification. By accepting ourselves for *who we are*, we can accept our students for *who they are*. Then we can be more tolerant of what they do or don't do.

How often have we said or heard a colleague say something like: “He's a hopeless case” or “That's a dead class” or “She's so difficult?” If we have problems with a student or a class or they with us, it's instinctive but also facile to see the problem as lying entirely within the other party. There are two critical aspects I think we must consider:

What are my feelings and motivations and what is their source?

How do they affect my relationship to the students?

If I find a class or certain students difficult, it is very likely that I am being mirrored by them. The old adage which says that what we dislike most in others are characteristics we cannot accept in ourselves certainly applies here. Therefore, my search for the source of a problem in a relationship has to begin within myself. Ultimately, I cannot change the people around me. I can only change my own behavior and my attitude towards myself and others. I can begin by examining what it is in me that a “problem” student touches. Do I have a hidden expectation of my students – to affirm my self-worth, for example – which this student refuses to fulfill? Do I have a certain image of the “good” student that he or she doesn't fit? Am I somehow prejudiced against or toward people of his or her nationality, gender, social class, etc.? How do my attitudes or expectations contribute to the problem?

This dynamic of projection works with positive feelings as well. Perhaps there's a student I particularly favor because he or she embodies qualities I yearn for. My special attention may put pressure on that student or may motivate him or her. It will certainly also affect the dynamics of the class. Of course on the conscious

level I only want the best for my students, but other motivations may be playing a role on the unconscious level.

Although we are teachers of language, we all know very well that there is a great deal more to communication beyond the words. Gesture, facial expression, eye contact, body language, tone of voice and pitch all contribute to the expression of our attitudes, feelings and cultural perceptions. In spite of the enormous power of language, these nonverbal messages are generally stronger than words. In our authoritative role as teachers we must be aware that our attitudes towards and expectations of our students influence them. Many studies have demonstrated the so-called "Pygmalion Effect" in which students live up – or *down* – to the teacher's expectations.

Denying that we have certain feelings is even more dangerous. We cannot pretend to feel something that we *don't* – or that we *don't* feel something we *do*. Attempting to do so is a violation of ourselves and an affront to our students. When our words contradict what the rest of us is saying, we are likely to lose our credibility and the trust and respect of our students.

It is a psychological fact that whatever we refuse to face consciously remains unresolved but is present and gets communicated on an unconscious level. Paradoxically, the less willing we are to face problem issues, the more power they have over us. Thus, it is essential that we muster the courage to confront our feelings and question our motivations. What is called for here is absolute honesty.

This phenomenon of seeing both problems and ideals more easily in others than in ourselves is part of being human. It is not something which only happens to "bad" teachers or to which "good" teachers are immune. It is an instinctive process which, as Socrates pointed out, everyone must be aware of, even saints. Our past experiences, especially those from our childhood, greatly influence not only our behavior as adults, but also our values and how we see the world. We needn't turn ourselves into passive victims of our personal histories, however. We can free ourselves of these influences by becoming more conscious of who we are and why we do what we do.

Even if I haven't got any "problem" students or classes, I may be influenced by unconscious agendas. To become aware of these I must question the purpose of what I do – in planning and in the moment. Does it serve my higher goal of helping a person learn English if I interrupt him now to correct him or do I perhaps need to show that I know better? Are my students too inhibited to do roleplays or am I afraid of losing control of the class? Are my students unable to do an exercise because they haven't been paying attention or because I didn't prepare them adequately or give clear enough instructions?

What is my motivation for what I do? Am I serving my students or unconsciously meeting an unanswered need for love or attention within myself? Do I unconsciously make others small to make myself feel bigger? Do I treat my students equally? Do I respect that each of my students knows what's best for himself. Do I have trouble accepting inadequacies and flaws in others because I haven't come to terms with myself?

These are difficult questions, but questions which it is our responsibility to ask ourselves. We as teachers must also be willing to *learn*. Illumination is not an event, but a process, often a painful one, but one which I believe is worth engaging in.

Here is also an opportunity for us to help each other. As peers, we are in a position to give each other help and feedback and support of a quality that our students cannot provide. Observing each other teach can be a valuable learning experience for both parties if we approach it with an attitude of openness, acceptance and trust, knowing that our goal is to help each other. Discussing problem situations openly and objectively with peers and seeking constructive criticism and supervision can help us become more conscious.

If we have the courage to know ourselves, we will become not only more effective teachers but happier and more whole as individuals. If we work on finding out what our unconscious needs are and learn to take care of them ourselves, then we can more easily see our students for who they are and allow them to take care of their needs in ways that are appropriate for them. If we cultivate our inner resources of love and acceptance, we won't feel the urge to mold our students into our own image or feel personally threatened or injured by criticism. If we know that we can continue to learn and grow and believe in our potential, then we can believe in our students' potential and help them develop it. I believe that this process of self-knowledge is more powerful and valuable in improving the quality of our teaching than the best EFL methods and, what's more, we don't have to wait for someone else to come up with it. We can start living more consciously now.