

Repositioning Student Responsibility

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“Breakthrough moments” in someone’s career usually happen as a result of being at it for some time. After years of continually working away at challenges, the right circumstance will serendipitously arise in which a light bulb can suddenly flash on, shedding light on new approaches and understandings that lead to better outcomes. In my case, however, a breakthrough moment that showed me a far better way to approach the problems I was having teaching in Japanese universities had actually come way back in 2004, in Sydney, when I was doing my teacher training certificate to actually become an English language teacher in the first place. Remembering it at the right time, around a decade later, really helped me change an approach that was costing a lot of energy and making me a far less effective teacher.

In fact, my first four years of English language teaching took place in Sydney, teaching international students from around the globe who had committed a great deal of time and spent a great deal of money to go down under to immerse themselves in their target language. I didn’t know it at the time, but I was enjoying the privilege of working with some of the most motivated language learners in the world. In those days, I would never have believed that a lack of student motivation was a concern in the ELT field. In spectacular naiveté, I came to Japan expecting to find a whole nation of similarly-inspired students, keen and interested. Within Eikaiwa schools, expecting to meet such students is not entirely misguided, but once I started teaching part-time at a university, I was quickly disabused of the fantasy that my blue eyes and teaching experience would be welcomed by rooms full of keen and curious students.

I needn’t go into the motivation and interest problems that many teachers face in Japanese university English classrooms, especially those populated by students who

are there compulsorily. I also hope it needn’t be said more than once that despite the thrust of this article, I have enjoyed many classes full of interested, motivated, diligent, and hardworking students. The fact is, though, that over the first few years of working in that sector, I did find myself losing both sleep and hair over how to deal with an unexpected lack of student initiative, motivation, and responsibility. I was entirely unprepared and unequipped to deal with students who didn’t take their part in the educational process seriously, and I really suffered as I reacted to their poor ethic by foolishly exerting more and more of my own effort to make up the shortfall.

Without going too far into too many anecdotes, I can identify three broad descriptions of the problems I was facing regularly. I found that I was often dealing with students who

a) did not take instructions seriously, as evidenced by certain “relaxed attitudes” to attendance requirements or homework deadlines, or by an apparent disinclination to listen as explanations or instructions were given in class.
“...Okay? Does everyone understand? Good. Let’s start!”
 “[Blank stares, followed by the realisation that that person at the front of the room had been talking to them.]”

b) were not concerned with meeting even minimal standards of work. Instead, they might print out Wikipedia articles or paragraphs of Google-translated gibberish rather than attempt self-written essays. Others would approach a five-minute presentation assessment by coming up with something that lasted less than a fifth of that and included none of the required components. Others would flounder through entire terms of guessed-at wrong answers on weekly vocabulary tests rather than think to take out the dictionary.

c) displayed no concern with improvement, progress, or achievement. Many students seemed to be in no hurry to extract any greater benefit from their education than a certificate stating that their rear end had been positioned on a chair in a classroom on a requisite number of occasions. I was horrified to discover in those early years that students would write on their feedback surveys that my course had been fun and that I had been easy to understand, when every conceivable indication that I'd seen week after week had suggested that it had been a drudgery to them, and their test scores indicated that they had understood or paid attention to next to nothing I'd said. They truly didn't seem to care that their grasp of English was no firmer after our forty-five hours together than it had been prior; they apparently hadn't come into the classroom with any hope or expectation that it would be.

My instinctual response to these problems, and thus my own special way of mishandling them time and time again, was to do more. When the students didn't shoulder their responsibility, I would find myself doing it instead. When student absences started to edge towards their limit, I would create elaborate slide presentations explaining the attendance and assessment policies and illustrating where the students were headed if they didn't step up and attend an adequate number of classes henceforth. When I received translation-software-produced homework pages of word-salad gobbledegook after stating emphatically that such submissions would be thrown directly into the trash, I would instead scrawl long, detailed replies explaining just how bad the translations were, and why it was really a rather bad idea to approach writing tasks this way. I would stare for hours at my spreadsheets of their (very) slowly accumulating scores, and then produce and present them with graphs, and charts, and trend lines and predictions on what grades they were headed for if they didn't get their act together. And then I'd do it all again on an even grander scale when they didn't get their act together. I'd break down the calculations of what each person needed to do between now and week 15 in order to scrape through to a passing score of 60%. I would work across the weekends trying to find a way to communicate the gravity of their situation and trying to make them understand and change their behaviour. I took their lack of responsibility and effort to be my problem, and mine alone, and it really was, actually- it turned out that most of them were already well

and truly resigned to doing Sairishu (repeaters' class) in their third year, and were just attending, week after week, on the off chance that doing so might get them off that hook.

Ironically, not only was I bending over backwards, but I was also somewhat spineless. When students who had been absent for more than the maximum three classes would turn up suddenly and promise to *ganbaru* (try harder). I would fold, and turn a blind eye to their five absences, and come up with some kind of compromise if they promised to be good. When I would tell the students that sleeping through the class would constitute an absence, then have students sleep through the class giving them their fourth and failing absence, a muttered apology and promise to *ganbaru* would be enough to convince me to retreat from what I'd clearly stated and instead come up with some kind of compromise that they never intended to honour. When the student who had wasted my time by handing in a Wikipedia article asked if they could take even more of my time by attempting a re-submission, putting both me and themselves behind schedule, I would fold and come up with some compromise to make sure that they didn't lose too many points. When I would come across students who hadn't bothered to listen to my explanation of the current activity in a speaking class, I would explain it once again for them, and then the students next to them, and then the other students on the other side of the room, and then run around for twenty minutes explaining the thing again and again. And then I'd do the same the following week. Then I'd spend my evenings coming up with a slide presentation about why I really rather wished they'd listen to me when I'm giving instructions, please (to which they paid no attention).

When work was shoddy, or only Japanese was spoken through communicative activities, I would put on a dramatic display of exasperation and frustration, and try my absolute hardest to communicate to the students how disappointing it was to me, and how pained I was to see them wasting the opportunities that they had to improve their English. And nothing would change, so I'd need to come up with an even more dramatic display of exasperation and frustration next time (next week). Far too often, the only person who would be paying a price for the students' laziness, apathy, and recalcitrance was me. I was not a happy teacher, probably, most of all, because I was obviously not being an effective teacher.

It hurts to fold, and to compromise in the face of laziness and apathy. It hurts to drop your professional standards and accept shoddy work because it's the only way the students are going to be able to pass. It hurts to realise that you're not being taken seriously, and nor is your work, your effort, and your time, especially when you're giving just about as much of it as you have to give. It is liberating, though, to discover that the core of the problem actually lies in the stupid (ineffective?) approach that you yourself are taking, not in the behaviour of the students, over which you obviously have no control. As I was beginning to come to an understanding of how wrongly I was approaching these problems, I remembered that I'd had an experience of someone showing me an admirable, professional, and respectable way of effectively approaching such a situation - and I myself had been the problem student (if only momentarily, and not quite as egregiously)! Without knowing it or intending to, my own teacher had demonstrated and modelled exactly the approach I needed to take that would allow me to ethically reposition responsibility back where it belonged - on the shoulders of the students.

Anyone who's done the Cambridge University CELTA (Certificate of English Language Teaching to Adults) knows how arduous and demanding it can be. Doing it full-time gives new meaning to the term "full-time", to the tune of getting to bed at around 2am for four hours of sleep most nights for a month. It's a serious, professional, and thoroughly practical course that sets very high standards for its candidates. To this day, and even having gained a masters degree in Education (TESOL) in the meantime, I've always said that the CELTA is the best program of education I've ever taken part in. From the very first session of my 2004 course, I had an enormous admiration for our three trainers, whom I thought were exemplary models for the sort of teacher I'd like to be. They were truly and literally inspiring.

In the final week of the CELTA, we had two major assessments to undertake. These were teaching-practice sessions, with real students, as always, but of forty minutes duration rather than the shorter lessons we'd been doing up to that point. My first one was on the Tuesday afternoon, and after three days of preparation, in I went with all my self-produced supplementary materials, my almost word-for-word lesson plan printed up on two reams of paper, one for myself and one for my trainer Geoff (not his real name)

who was assessing me, and an awful lot on the line. These lessons would pretty much determine our final grades, and I had every intention of hitting the ball out of the park.

As I recall, the forty-minute lesson went perfectly well, and I sat down afterwards in a glow of relief and satisfaction. The hours and hours of preparation had paid off, my lesson plan had turned out to be coherent and well-timed, all my materials had been up to the task, and now I had only one more assessment to go. When everyone had left, though, my instructor, Geoff, came up to me and delivered a line that can poke a pin into anyone's bubble of self-satisfaction; "Steve, can I talk to you for a minute?"

We sat down, him very calm and me somewhat nervously curious. "So, how do you think it went?" he asked. Again, a curious question, as he'd seen it all, and must have known that it had gone smoothly and successfully. I answered as much. His reply was deadpan, calm, and direct: "Well, actually, it didn't go well at all, Steve. You pretty much blew it, from start to finish." He just calmly looked at me.

Geoff was a particularly good-looking guy, early-forties, in great shape, and had very warm and inviting eyes that seemed to give assurance that he saw the best in each of his trainees and was truly concerned with developing it. I'd quickly come to admire him for his outstanding, very natural teaching ability, his genuine kindness, and his very good-natured professionalism. He knew every trainee's name by heart before the first session of the course, and in fact had addressed me by name before I'd met him, "Ah, so you're Steve, right?", having gone to the trouble of memorising the names and profile photos on our application forms. He'd traveled, taught, and trained all around the world, and his vast experience and exciting anecdotes were inspiring in themselves, but especially in the way that he made it feel like he was inviting us all to step up into a career of meaningful and exciting work in education that could take us around the world. But here he was punching me in the gut? What did he mean I'd blown it? How could I possibly have blown it?

It turned out that I'd failed to grasp the distinction between the two types of lessons we were meant to be giving. One was a "language lesson", and the other was a "skills lesson", the former for teaching grammar forms or vocabulary, the latter for developing listening, reading, or

speaking skills. The two types of lessons were to comprise their own particular formats and components, the details of which elude me now, but I'd built my lesson plan according to the wrong one. I had misused the materials that the lesson was to be based on, effectively squeezing a square peg into a round hole, and produced the wrong sort of follow-up activities for the point of the lesson. When all of that dawned on me, I remember just sinking. Geoff, with his direct, calm, and friendly gaze, and casual, matter-of-fact tone explained that I'd gone the wrong way right off the bat, and for all the good I might have done in the lesson, I'd missed most, if not all, of the criteria he was to be assessing me on, and thus the score for my "skills lesson", or whichever I was meant to have just given, would be seriously low. "So all of the preparation, and the lesson itself, was all for nothing, then?" I asked, in some disbelief. "Yeah, pretty much." With only days left to go there would be no chance to make it up. Again, just a friendly gaze.

I was bowled over. Firstly - how did I screw this fundamental thing up so badly, and why hadn't I realised as I'd mangled the materials into the wrong shape in the hours of preparation I'd done? Secondly, what did this mean for my grade, or ability to even pass? Thirdly; was this some sort of a joke? Ah!, that must be it, I figured, momentarily relieved, as I observed Geoff just sitting with me, calmly watching me react to his news. 'He's pranking me', I thought. 'He's gauging my reaction, checking out how I deal with this sort of set-back, and any minute now he's going to break character and tell me it's all a bit of a joke and of course it was one of the best teaching sessions he's seen in his career as a trainer!' The friendly way he seemed to be observing me was exactly in the manner of someone about to slap me on the shoulder and say "Ha! Your face! You totally fell for it!"

But no such change in demeanour came. He'd delivered his message, made sure that I'd understood, answered my couple of blabbered questions about where to go from here, and ended by offering his hand and asking if we were still cool. We shook hands, I bumbled that of course we were still cool, and that was it, a truly deflating and devastating experience that had my head spinning for a very long time. As it turned out, whatever marks I lost on that Tuesday afternoon I must have made up elsewhere, as I passed the CELTA and the story ended happily, but the kick in the guts was something I wouldn't forget.

As he'd given me the bad news and sat with me watching my reaction, however, amid the rush of thoughts going through my mind there was a small voice at the back telling me to pay attention, because I had a front row seat to something really worth witnessing. The way Geoff handled the situation was, in a way, spectacular, and admirable, and thankfully I had the wherewithal to realise it even as it was happening. His delivery was impeccably professional. He'd had a bad blow to deliver, which can't have been fun, so he'd called me over, sat me down, delivered it, made sure it was understood, and then left having made sure we were on good terms and could move on. He had a job to do in line with the rules and requirements of the course, and he did it. The only outcome he'd needed to achieve was for me to understand the situation so that I could deal with it as I saw fit. He never made a misstep, he was neither timid nor overbearing, and - again, stepping out of my panic and witnessing the situation as an uninvolved observer - it was one of the most impressive teaching moments I'd seen.

Thus, years later, here in Japan, when I'd begun to realise how ridiculous it was to be spending bucketloads of energy on uncooperative, lazy, and disingenuous students who were crashing recklessly through the rules and requirements of the course, I had a true role model whose approach to a difficult situation I could really emulate. Geoff had a professional responsibility to conduct the CELTA course according to its rules and assessment criteria, and when I'd carelessly smashed through them, he needed to explain that that's what I'd done. Not to make up the damage himself on my behalf. It would have been wrong and inappropriate for him to have even suggested that the rules of the CELTA could perhaps be bent in my favour simply because I'd broken them so carelessly. Here was I, though, years later, bending over backwards like a contortionist to try my hardest to stretch or break the rules so as to allow uncooperative students to avoid having their feelings hurt by skirting too near the danger of failing a course they were putting little or no effort into. Geoff had delivered bad news directly, succinctly, and calmly. Here I was, staring at the scores in my spreadsheet tearing my hair out trying to figure out how I could avoid having to watch these apathetic students succumb to the consequences of their consistently unproductive attitudes and actions. Geoff had told me, truthfully and accurately, that there was nothing that could be done about my

mistake, and left me to deal with that. Here I was exhausting myself figuring out what I could do to help these uncooperative students possibly scrape by without a scratch so that they could progress onto their next semester to do the same all over again.

What are we teaching our students about personal and professional responsibility when we take it all upon our shoulders instead of letting them learn about the consequences of flouting it? What are we teaching about initiative and consequences when we accommodate slackness and change the rules of the game if it looks like the rules are going to get in the way of the students being unable to simply progress unhindered along a path of continued slackness? When it comes to rules, assessment, and scoring, as teachers- especially as teachers in a field as practical as English language education- we have a firm responsibility to explain comprehensibly to students what it is that they need to do, or the boundaries that they need to stay within, and to clearly lay out the consequences of their decisions regarding those requirements and rules. Then, when it comes time to assess, we will need to answer one or a number of simple yes or no questions: Were the instructions followed? Were the expectations met? If the answer is ‘no’, then it needs to be an unapologetic ‘no’ if we’re going to call this whole endeavour “education”.

I’m not advocating an unforgiving, dogmatic rigidity that’s impervious to reason. Being reasonable with regard to rules, though, does include knowing when to decline to abandon them. When I started to say “no” to students, when I really couldn’t see that I needed to take any responsibility for the student’s lack of attendance, for example, a weight of responsibility that I had been taking was placed back where it belonged, and where it would do the student the most good: onto their own shoulders.

How has this looked in practical terms? Well, for one thing, preparation of my assessment criteria and my teaching materials has become more sharply focused. Knowing that I will want to consult my own criteria later on and have them be amenable to yes or no answers, I’m getting better each semester at creating rules and rubrics that are crystal clear, and very nearly non-negotiable. When I inform my students in writing (in Japanese) that I will give a score of zero to any writing assignment that is either verifiably plagiarised or obviously produced using translation software, and then they then submit exactly

that, then I respond with a firm and very costly score of zero and enter into no further correspondence. When speaking activities are carried out nearly exclusively in Japanese, then I’ll tell the students very calmly and directly at the end of the lesson that they wasted their time and mine today, that their participation scores for the day will be a zero in accordance with the rubric, and that if they want to avoid failing the course on those grounds that they need to take the initiative and speak English rather than Japanese in future classes, in line with the stated requirements of their, ahem, “English speaking” course. When a student brings the first of her four required writing assignments to my office after the final class of the semester apologising for not having understood that any such homework was required, and I reflect upon how not only are the requirements stated on the syllabus, the week 1 handout, the class website and the student name card, but that I discussed said homework in every single lesson since week 2, effectively enough that the rest of her class and every member of four other similar classes I’m teaching was able to understand, then I can feel comfortable reasoning that she does not deserve the privilege of the same passing grade as her classmates who paid attention, put in the effort, and fulfilled the requirements. I get to sleep soundly, and the student learns something. All the rules, rubrics and requirements in the world mean nothing if they’re not firmly enforced, even in the face of puppy-dog eyes or mumbled apologies.

How fortunate it was for me to have begun my teaching career with the seed of a breakthrough moment already planted! A teacher can never know when some classroom moment is going to be remembered by a student for years to come. Such a memory might even contribute to a breakthrough in someone’s whole approach to their profession.

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