

Beyond the silo: 10 things to learn from “The Dog Whisperer”

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“When you know it all it is time to quit because you are too dumb to know how dumb you are.” So commented a reader in response to the question, “Who’s learning?” posed by my brother in his woodworking blog (Porcaro, 2017, Feb 28).

He is an optometrist by trade and a master woodworker by avocation. In his award-winning blog he writes on topics that include techniques, tools, the shop, resources, and ideas. Though I am not a woodworker or handicraftsman of any kind, from time to time I read his blog to try to enter the mindset of the master craftsman in order to reap some insights that might apply to my own craft as a teacher of English as a foreign language.

That simple question he posed to his readers led me to ask, “What have I recently learned in my practice?” Frankly, I somewhat smugly thought, after 50 years of classroom teaching and having published more than seventy articles on the many diverse areas of English language instruction I have done over the past 33 years in Japan, I would have to dig deeply to answer that with any degree of personal satisfaction. Of course, we never “know it all” and perhaps, as with many lessons to learn in life, answers often lie right before us.

For one example, I recalled having learned early in this school year to recognize, appreciate, and adapt my instruction to the unexpected but palpable growth in the maturity of the students in my second year high school class after having taught them the previous year as incoming first year students. Their enhanced seriousness of purpose, more careful attention to assigned tasks, and deeper level of expression enabled me to present more challenging work for them without hesitation.

Some years ago, I read another of my brother’s blog postings (Porcaro, 2009, Sept. 6), in which he shared several of his shop work habits that he thought might be helpful to other woodworkers. I was struck immediately by a remarkable convergence of his habits and my own classroom teaching habits. After careful reflection, I related his ideas to my own instructional practice and experience and shared that with other teachers (Porcaro, 2010).

For example, he wrote, “A process in one wood may not work well in a different species or even a different board of the same species.” I responded, “Certainly it is true that in some ways every class is different from another, as individually and collectively students are unique. Instruction that works with one particular class may not work as well with another class. I have developed many variations of particular lessons in my repertoire to suit the different circumstances I have experienced in different classes. Whenever I deliver a lesson to a class for the first time, as I learn about those students, I learn further how to adapt the instruction to their specifications.”

This kind of reflective inquiry into our practice as teachers is a very important means for advancing our professional development. It leads us to make sense of our work and to define it, and to construct our professional and personal identity (Porcaro, 2015). Through such inquiry teachers can “uncover who they are, where they have come from, what they know and believe, and why they teach as they do” (Johnson & Golombek, 2002, p.5).

A very helpful part of that process, I am suggesting in this piece, can be to explore and consider what we can learn from the work of those in other professions, crafts, and occupations of all sorts. In this way, we give ourselves the opportunity to step outside the classroom box and the silo of the narrow teaching domain that may confine our thinking.

“The Dog Whisperer”

Over recent years I have watched many episodes of programs with Cesar Millan as “The Dog Whisperer” on the National Geographic channel on cable TV. Mr. Millan is an internationally renowned dog psychologist/behaviorist. The term “whisperer” refers to his deep sensitivity and understanding of a dog’s mind, feelings, and behavior; and his ability to communicate effectively and to establish patiently a beneficial relationship with the animal. However, most importantly, as Mr. Millan always makes explicitly clear, he educates and trains humans, the dog owners, and rehabilitates dogs with behavioral problems. He never refers to himself as a dog trainer.

Following are ten principles asserted by Mr. Millan as part of his professional philosophy related to his work with humans. I have stated the points as they would apply in a classroom setting and for each point I emphasize what we teachers can learn for our instructional practice, in our role as leaders, from the education and training of humans that Mr. Millan so successfully directs.

1. Always display calm and assertive energy.

For teachers this means that our demeanor sets the atmosphere for the classroom. Our positive, measured assertion of confidence and fervor, and our expectations of students, are essential for students to achieve successful outcomes in our lessons. Dornyei (2001) recognizes the influence of such an approach in his discussion of motivational strategies which promote classroom language learning. When class management problems may arise, whether small or serious, the teacher’s calm and assertive disposition in dealing with these matters will effectively resolve them and restore order.

2. Students must give 100% respect to the teacher.

The teacher is the adult in the room and we are to be respected for our position as the instructor. That should go without saying. When the teacher is speaking, for example, students listen attentively in a proper posture at their desks. They do not chat with one another or slouch over the desk, and they do not play with their smartphones. Teachers need to establish clear classroom rules and procedures, and explain their purpose, so that they are well understood and accepted by students. Lemov (2010) makes distinctly clear that it is utterly false to think that warmth and strictness in the classroom are opposites. The teacher must be both; indeed, often at exactly the same time. “When you are clear, consistent, firm, and unrelenting and at the same time positive, enthusiastic, caring, and thoughtful, you start to send the message to students that having high expectations is part of caring for and respecting someone. This is a very powerful message” (p. 213).

3. When the teacher is in charge, students can be calm, relaxed, and balanced.

Students expect the teacher to establish an efficient, productive, and orderly environment in the classroom. They will mirror the teacher’s demeanor and accept our direction, which will enable them to follow the lesson and engage successfully with us and each other.

4. Set rules, boundaries, and limitations.

This, again, is what students expect from the teacher, who understands from experience that the fair application of classroom policies will include both limits and leeways. Students are empowered when they can work within such a structure that promotes productive outcomes. They are not empowered when we teachers relinquish our leadership role.

5. In the classroom, be grounded in the now.

It is true that in Japan in most instructional circumstances almost all students have very little or no use for English outside of the classroom. But, so what? Focus on the very existential situation in the classroom wherein attention to the tasks and the working relationship between teacher and students, and among students, are most important. As Azar (2007) remarks forcefully about communicative language practice in that classroom environment, it takes account of the reality that students are in a classroom trying to learn English and it “means that real people are communicating in real time about real things in a real place for a real purpose.”

6. Exercise, discipline, affection – in that order.

I consider the application of this trilogy in the following way. Praise for students' work is earned. Teachers set instructional tasks and expect students to be on task and to achieve suitable outcomes. While students are making their best effort and upon successful completion of the task, appropriate encouragement, assistance, and praise are given by the teacher. Praise or reward for never having accomplished anything – the “everyone gets a trophy for simply showing up” mentality – is meaningless and students know it. In such a case, the teacher's message to students is actually that English study does not matter, which leads to the phenomenon of some students giving up on learning English, having made little or no effort. Reward for accomplishment drives effort and promotes success. This is a lesson for life.

7. Fear can become aggression.

The classroom environment, especially for students with lower language proficiency and those who simply dislike English lessons, should never be one in which students feel embarrassed, humiliated, or demoralized. Fear of being in such a setting commonly leads some students to display passive aggressive behavior, such as refusing to respond to a teacher's simple question or not even facing a pairwork partner. Our lessons must be carefully structured and suitable for all students, and presented in a safe, fair, and controlled learning environment; and at the same time be interesting, meaningful, and challenging. In this way, students will be motivated and involved in the English lessons and find them enjoyable.

8. Have a vision of the behavior or situation desired, then you will have it.

I always do this. As I am preparing a lesson at home, driving on my way to school, or just before going into the classroom, I visualize the flow of my lesson and the manner in which I expect the students' work to be carried out. Almost invariably that is what happens. But not always. Perhaps counterintuitively, rather than such visualization fixing a rigid mindset for the lesson, somehow it actually enables the teacher to be flexible in dealing with the class when things go otherwise, provided that it is not tunnel vision but rather one that takes in a wider panorama of outcomes.

9. Students do not listen to you if you do not mean it.

In such a case, they sense that you know too that you do not mean it.

10. If students sense that you do not trust them, they will not trust you.

Trust is the *sine qua non* of our relationship with students as their teacher. Their sense of our trust in them is based on their perception of our honesty, fairness, genuine caring, and respect for them. Their trust in us will be given in turn and earned further through our good teaching and professionalism.

Conclusion

We teachers learn to advance the practice of our craft in many ways – from reflective inquiry, feedback from students, teacher development conferences and seminars, mutual classroom observations with other teachers, reading the literature in our field, and so on. The aim of this discussion has been to add to the list our exploration and consideration of what practitioners outside the field of education do successfully and how they do it, like my brother, the wood craftsman, and Cesar Millan, the trainer of humans who own dogs. Teacher development is, indeed, a lifelong process, as new ideas, experiences, and challenges continually serve to enlighten us and inspire our work, and to confirm and refine the definition of our work and our identity as the teachers we are.

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Bio: James W. Porcaro is retired from his previous position as university professor and now teaches as a part-timer at a university, junior college, high school, and company. He has been teaching in Japan since 1985 and has published many articles on his work in a wide variety of areas including Japanese-to-English literary translation, English for Science and Technology (EST), teaching African Studies as CLIL, and teaching English in high school.