

Three Stages for Scaffolding a Culture of Agency & Autonomy “To Save the World”

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Below I take you through 3 stages of how my students in a 1st year Academic English Program (EAP) university class developed agency and autonomy through our activities to become more aware of problems in our world, and our impact upon them. This was done with a first year class, but I feel that it could be done with any class. Graves said it best:

“Understanding is best reached when power is shared. In most cases teachers are in the power position when working with their students. They have the power of assignments, corrections, and grades. The best teachers know how to share this power; indeed, they give it away” (Graves, 2002, p.11).

Thankfully (or not) the first year EAP class is left open to the teachers to organize as they wish. Many use a variety of text books but I decided that using students and their views of the world as my main materials would keep them and their growth at the center of the curriculum. The learning outcomes are more about building agency and autonomy in a world generally viewing people as simple

consumers from which a profit can be made.

Starting Stage #1: In The Beginning: LLHs & Action Logs – Passing Control Over

For several years now, I have started by asking my first year university students in the Academic English Program (AEP) to write their language learning histories (LLHs: Murphey, 1999; Murphey & Carpenter, 2008). LLHs are a great way to get to know your students and to become aware of some of their needs and aspirations. In addition, it is a way for students to express themselves early on, and to get to know their classmates better. I usually make a booklet out of the histories (with their permission), put their class picture on the front, and give copies to each student around midterm. I make extra copies for other JHS and HS teachers who are interested in knowing what university students are saying about JHS and HS and give them away at my talks.

Getting students to write their LLHs puts the ball in their court, it gives them agency and voice from the start and it can get them thinking about what really worked for them to learn and what didn't work, and how they might like to update their story in a few years. I also put their group picture on the front of the booklet, as below.

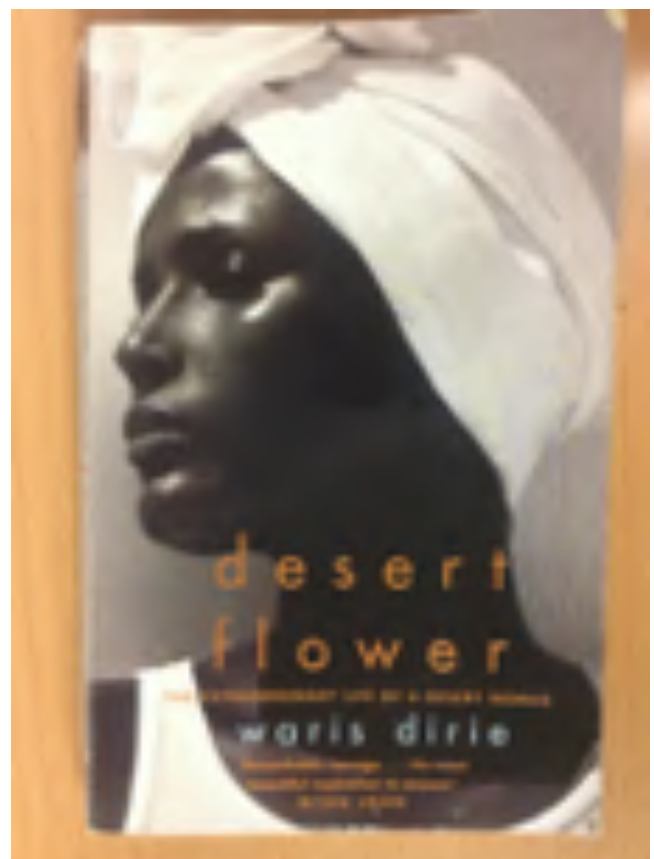


The other main way I offer agency at the beginning (and throughout the year) is with action logs (Murphey, 1993; Woo & Murphey, 1999; Kindt & Murphey, 2000; Hooper, under review) in which students comment about our activities and evaluate them on a Likert scale, giving lots of feedback to their teacher. They also report about interactive homework with others through a Call Report (calling their partner after class to review) and a Teaching Report (teaching something they learned in class to somebody out of class) with short paragraphs.

Extended Material Stage #2:

For the last two years, in addition to continuing with action logs for the fall semester, we used a wonderful book by John Spiri called Inspiring Solutions (Global Stories Press, 2014).

It has 15 chapters about problems in the world and I had my students pull a chapter number out of a hat to present in pairs in every class. In each presentation, presenters had to explain their chapter, guide the class through several activities and discussions and look on the web to find more information and a short video. While some topics were close to home, like house hermits (hikikomori), others were unfamiliar to them, like FGM (female genital mutilation) problems in other countries (the whole class was in tears after seeing the trailer to the movie Desert Flower.) So these were real students talking about real problems in the real world and trying to find solutions.





Individual Initiative with Autonomy Stage #3

Spiri's book took us through midterm and for the last 15 classes students were asked to find their own world/global problems (as a single presenter/teacher) and present them with a short article and a video when possible, along with vocabulary and discussion questions. Here, I admit I was pushing the envelope, and seeing how much they could actually do alone. I am happy to say that they really surprised me and we learned a lot from each other. In Table 1 you can see the diversity of the problems they chose. I was amazed myself at the sincerity and the agency with which they dove into the tasks and made astounding presentations.

Many students commented on how they came to enjoy giving presentations by the end of the year. One student wrote in her action log, "Today I did my presentation. I was very nervous, but I think I was able to do great presentation. It was a nice experience for me. I think it's fun to teach someone." Many others were

Table 1: *Student Topics for the last 15 classes*

- Poverty in Japan
- Gender Inequality
- Fake News
- Abusive Animal Testing
- Junk Food Effects
- North Korea Threat
- Endangered Species
- Human Trafficking
- Japanese Aging Problem
- Low Vote Turn-outs
- Effects of Tohoku Earthquake
- Graffiti on Historic Landmarks
- Extreme- InFo-growth
- LUSH – Stop Animal Testing
- Lack of Nursery Schools
- Global Warming
- Cell Phone Addiction
- Falling Birth Rates
- Native Americans in Need

shocked at a crazy world, with one commenting, "I was surprised that 40% of Americans have guns. I think it is really a high percentage. Too high." But they also seemed to bond socially while still becoming critical of the world, "After 2 weeks our class has to separate. We talked about our class. We love our class."

Conclusion

My only regret is that I did not have time to get students to write about these things more and put them together into another class publication, as I have done with many other courses (see the CLIL/CBI link at the end of the references). Next time!

The main thing that was confirmed once again for me is that the more I ask of my students the more they seem to do and learn (and teach me). Teachers need to expect great things from students, for they may indeed need to do great things in order to save this planet (cf: Pygmalion Effect; Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1992). The main message my students taught me: “Yes, we and our cultures are doing some pretty bad things to our planet and to each other. But we are not without hope, and we just need to learn ways to do the right things before it is too late.”

Finally, I would like to end with two quotes from James Baldwin that I found fit well with what my students were doing:

“Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.”

“The world is before you and you need not take it or leave it as it was when you came in.”

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To see CBI/CLIL – case studies publications with students, please go to: <https://sites.google.com/site/folkmusictherapy/home>

Author Bio

Tim Murphey semi-retired in 2019 and is working more than ever at 4 universities part time and thoroughly enjoying not going to faculty meetings anymore. He has a MA TESOL degree from the University of Florida and popular PhD on Music and Song from the University of Neuchatel, Switzerland which is freely accessed on the Web. He still mixes his English classes with singing and juggling and dialogic invitations to explore the unknown with constructivism in Vygotskian

Socio-Cultural Theory. He coauthored *Group Dynamics in the Classroom* with Zoltan Dornyei, an area of continual research, edited a series in professional development for TESOL International and is a series editor for *CandlinMynard*.

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