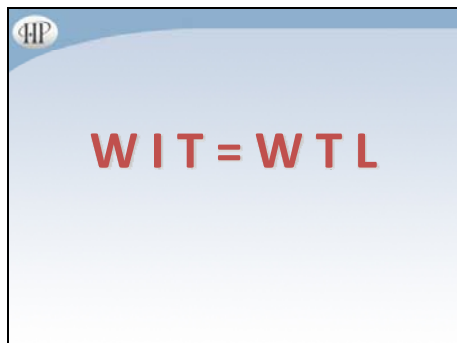


# Herbert Puchta

## IATEFL 2009 Cardiff

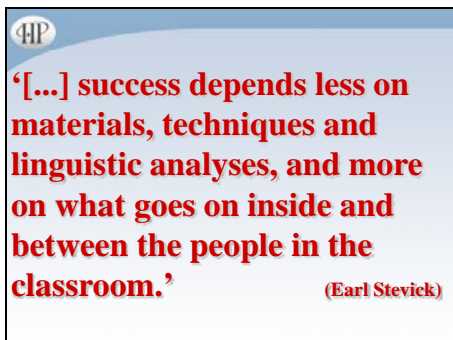


When I started to teach my concept of becoming a successful teacher was based on a simple equation: what I teach is what they learn. Consequently, I was mainly concerned with the subject matter of my lessons, language. When a few of my students failed, it had little to do with me, and it could easily be explained: lack of intelligence, or laziness.



I soon noticed that this kind of blame game helped me overcome my own insecurities as a novice teacher, but it wasn't humanly satisfying and not in line with why I had wanted to become a teacher in the first place. Gradually I began to understand that this simple equation is not enough of a basis for success in the foreign language class, and that there can be factors other than the ones included in this equation that are maybe equally or sometimes even more important than the mere content of our teaching.

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Earl Stevick says that success in the foreign language class depends less on techniques and linguistic analyses, and more on what goes on inside and between the people in the classroom. This doesn't mean that materials are unimportant, that language is unimportant, that the skills that teacher training generally tends to focus on are unimportant. But what Stevick stresses here is the even greater importance of human factors – the importance of our inter- and intrapersonal frames of mind, according to Howard Gardner.

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When I was a young teacher trainer Mario Rincoluceri invited me to teach with him and other colleagues at a college in the UK.

It was one of my first workshops at that college, and I was just coming out from my seminar room, and I saw Mario there, carrying a big pile of books under his arms.

Well, I decided to go for a bit of teacher training small talk, and I said, Hi Mario, how did your workshop go?

Well Mario, being Mario, just looked at me and said, “How should I know?” Can you imagine how flabbergasted I was?

But then he explained, and said to me, ‘There were 80 people in my workshop, so there were 80 different workshops.

And it's true, isn't it? We're all in the same talk here, but what we're going to take home from the talk might significantly differ from person to person. It depends on a number of factors: what kind of learner type we are, for example. More visual people will remember more from the slides, more auditory colleagues will maybe keep in mind what they are hearing and the kinaesthetic colleagues among us might take lots of notes, processing information in this way, and they may look at the slides, but visual input may mean nothing to them at all. But not only that. What we take home with us will depend on how motivated we are, how relevant the content of this session is for our own professional situation, what our level of experience is and so on and so forth.

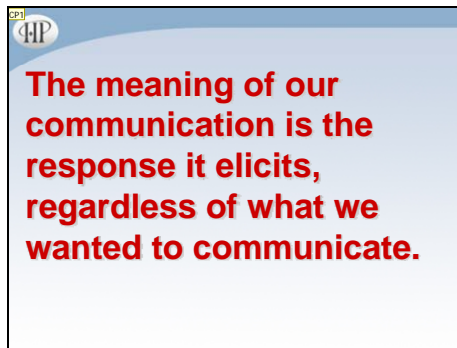
Likewise, there is no way each and every student in our classes could learn the same thing as everybody else in class.

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In a simple communication matrix, the sender encodes messages and sends them to the receiver through one or more media, such as email, or spoken language as, for example, in a phone call, a personal conversation etc. The receiver decodes the message, in other words understands the meaning of the communication as sent by the speaker, and then eventually becomes the speaker

themselves. In reality, however, things are not as easy, as this matrix shows. What happens a lot is that the message we intend to send is not necessarily the message that is received.

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In other words, intended message and received message might significantly differ from one another. In NLP there is a saying that stresses that the meaning of our communication is the response it elicits, regardless of what we wanted to communicate! The outcome of our teaching, we could say, is what our students learn, and not what we wanted them to learn.



When I was young I loved climbing mountains. One day I went climbing with a friend. We had decided to climb a pretty difficult mountain. It was so difficult because of one particular spot in the wall. In order to get past that you have to violate the basic rule of climbing, that's why it is so difficult. The basic rule of climbing is the 3-point contact. It means that of your 4 limbs 3 should always be in contact with the rock. Anyway, I was standing there in this vertical rock face, on a ledge, and my right hand was holding on to a crack in the wall, and there was this buttress, you know, this piece of rock that somehow sticks out from the vertical rock, and I had to get around it. But the tricky thing there is that in order to get around it, you have to let go of the grip, and your foothold, and you basically make a step into the middle of nowhere, because you cannot see that on the other side of the buttress there is a ledge where you can safely put your foot.

So it's all in your head. You have learnt that you should never let go with both hands, and now you are in a situation where you have to let go with both hands, and at the same time step into the unknown. A terrible feeling. So I was standing there and suddenly this nagging voice started saying to me: You'll never be able to do this. You're going to fall. And I was watching my hand, and my fingers became weaker and weaker, but there was no way I could have let go. So I called up to my friend who I couldn't see, but who I was connected to through the rope, that I was going to fall, and he should keep the rope tight (the looser the rope the more painful it is to fall). And I kept hearing the voice – and suddenly I fell, and like a pendulum I swung out, away from the rock face, and I looked down about 80 metres of vertical rock. And then I swung back in again. I landed about a metre underneath my initial position, and soon made it to up there again. My friend was amazing. He stayed very calm, and he described so well to me what I needed to do, referring to other climbs that we had done together, so I could visualise myself doing it successfully. And... I managed!

I think teaching is a bit like mountain climbing, the teacher has to be a leader, and leading is systemic. Like in a cartoon I recently saw. It shows two mountain climbers. The climber who is

the leader is looking down at his buddy, and realises that he is in serious trouble, as he is just about to fall. As the leader looks down he thinks to himself, “Oh, boy he sure is in trouble!” – ignoring the fact that a split second later he will be in trouble too as they are connected to one another by this rope.

This seems to me a very good metaphor of the teaching and learning situation. When our students ‘fall’, there is no way we can just look down at them to state that they are in trouble. In many ways, it’s us, the teachers, who are in trouble too. We are connected with our students through invisible ropes. There’s a network of dynamics going on, inside and between the people in the classroom – as Earl Stevick stresses.

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**Management:**

- getting **things** done through others

**Leadership:**

- getting **others** to do things

(Robert Dilts)

Undoubtedly, as teachers we need to be good managers. We need to manage classroom time, learning tasks, discipline, and social arrangements such as group work or pair work; we need to set homework and develop learning routines – all that requires a solid level of management skills. But that, I believe, is not enough. Think back to the days when you were a student, for a moment. Who were the teachers who inspired you? Were they the ones that that were good at time management, organising pair and group work, or creating discipline in the class. Wasn’t there more? Most probably there was – good teachers I believe are more than managers. They are leaders. And as Dilts stresses, leaders care about the people they work with, and not just about getting things done by them.

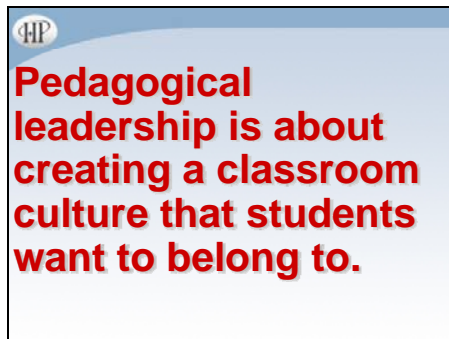
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One question hasn’t been addressed here, and that is what we understand by leadership. There are many different definitions, of course. The one that I find most insightful is a quotation I found in Robert Dilts’ book ‘Visionary Leadership Skills’. The dictum comes from Gilles Pajou, the leader of a global business enterprise. What he says is:

**Leadership is about creating a world that people want to belong to.**

(Gilles Pajou)

Well, if we transfer this to an educational context, we can say that Pedagogical leadership is about creating a classroom culture that our students want to belong to. Or, if anyone in here is a school principal, we are talking about creating a school culture that both your students and your teachers, but equally so everybody else who works at your school, want to belong to. The question now is what is it that makes the difference that makes the difference? In other words, what do we need as a teacher to be able to be leaders in the sense mentioned here?



When Carl Rogers talks about leadership, he postulates 3 characteristic features that make a leader.



The first one is empathy. It is about the ability to put ourselves in other people's shoes. The teacher who has that ability will be able to develop a sense of what it is like for his or her students to be in the teacher's class. The empathetic teacher cares for, interprets and responds to their students' emotions, and has the sensitivity needed to care for the atmosphere in the class, motivated by an interest in making the students want to feel 'at home'.

The second one is acceptance. It is about a non-judgemental positive attitude towards the students as human beings with both strength and weaknesses. It is not about approving of just anything our students do, in an unconditional way. To give one example, we may accept a student as a person without necessarily approving the student's behaviour in a certain situation,.

And the third one is congruence. It is about authenticity. Congruence is an important pre-condition for being accepted as a genuine human being by our students - not just because we are in the role of a teacher, or because we are the representative of the system called school. Being congruent means being honest with oneself and with one's students, to the extend of admitting when there are things we don't know or when we have doubts.

I don't know if you are familiar with a book called *The Freedom Writers' Diary*. It's the moving and true story of an idealistic young teacher, Erin Gruwell, who started her teaching career at a High School in Long Beach, California. One of the groups she taught was seen by the school administration as 'unteachable and at-risk' students. The class was a diverse mix of African-American, Latino, Cambodian, Vietnamese, and Caucasian students, many of whom had grown up in very difficult and violent neighbourhoods in Long Beach.

Many of these kids had had experiences with violence and drugs, and had been in extremely difficult and dangerous situations.

A dramatic scene from the film based on the book shows Hilary Swank as Erin Gruwell in one of her first few lessons with that difficult class. She finds it enormously difficult to stop aggression, racism and violence between her students, and she finds it even more difficult to be accepted by her students. She wants to create rapport with her students, and establish a constructive classroom atmosphere, but what she initially gets is aggression and strong negative reactions against her when her students tell her in a very rude way that they are not prepared to respect her just because she is a teacher!

Erwin Gruwell doesn't give up, and she puts an incredible amount of energy into changing the hostile atmosphere in her class to a culture that even her most difficult students want to belong to. It is her unusual teaching approach, but much more her leadership qualities that finally transform the atmosphere in her class.

It seems evident that the key transformational leadership qualities are all relational – they have to do with what goes on inside the people in the classroom, and between them.



In his research, Csikszentmihalyi shows that the teachers who really make a difference in the students' life are the enthusiastic ones, the ones who feel passionate about their subject and who show by their dedication and their passion that there is nothing else in the world they would rather be doing.

This attitude, it seems, is 'infectious' – it instils in students a similar willingness to pursue knowledge, in the same way - for example - as starting yawning when we are with someone who yawns all the time, or feeling inspired and motivated when we are with people who are full of positive energy.

HP **Leadership qualities**

- **Enthusiasm**
- **Empowering students**
  - use of pedagogical placebos

The second transformational quality has to do with believing in our students. It's all about creating positive self-fulfilling prophecies in our classroom, as ...

HP **Success comes in**  
**CANS**  
 not in  
**CAN'TS**




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 Here is a quotation from the Freedom Writers Diary, by a student who was dyslexic. Here he writes about how he got treated by his previous teacher:

*In the fifth grade, I had a teacher who always called me lazy in front of the whole class. She would always pick on me to read in front of the class. She knew I didn't know how to read or spell very well and when I did read, I had to do it very slow. Everyone would laugh at me and call me stupid. I hated school.*

And this is what he says about how his life changed when he met his new teacher, Erin Gruwell:

*On my first day of High School, I met Ms Gruwell. She's my English and reading teacher. I've learnt a lot from her. She doesn't call me lazy or stupid. I have learned that reading can be fun. It is still difficult at times, but I don't get that knot in my stomach when I read out loud. Ms Gruwell has also encouraged me in my one true love – sports. She told me that a lot of dyslexic people do really well in sports. Now I know if I work hard in school and in sports, I can succeed in both.*



We are not talking 'flower power' teaching here. I'm not claiming that all we need to do is think positively and everything will be all right. But there are mountains of evidence that positive beliefs and mental imagery work can significantly influence our students' performance. As Jere Brophy says ...



**To the extent that you treat students as if they already are eager learners, they will be more likely to become eager learners. Let them know that they are expected to be curious ...**

**(Jere Brophy)**


This is also about engaging students' imagination with the purpose of helping them develop a vision of being successful future users of the foreign language they are learning. You may not agree with Albert Einstein who claimed that imagination is more important than knowledge, but as research carried out by Zoltan Dörnyei shows, those students who have a positive self image of being successful future users of the language they are learning are far more likely to succeed than those who tell themselves that they are hopeless cases when it comes to language learning. Following on from this you may want to ... (see also Brown: 1991)



**Get your students to visualize themselves speaking the language fluently and interacting with people. Then when they are actually in such a situation, they will, in a sense, have been there before.**

The next point is about not accepting that we have some clever students and some who are a bit slower. It's about helping them to make more out of their brain potential, teaching for multiple intelligences and helping students to develop their thinking skills better.

As I have said there is empirical evidence that such practice is not 'flower power' teaching, but does actually bring better results!



**In experimental contexts it has been proven that by varying participants' mental images (of imagining themselves doing a task and being successful or failing), the connection with possible selves increases and this is reflected in their ability to do the task.**

**(Ruvolo and Markus)**

Etymologically speaking, the word gossip originates from god-sib, the godparent of one's child or parent of one's godchildren ("god-sibling"), referring to a relationship of close friendship. The word got its negative connotation much later – but it initially meant the kind of friendly conversation people have who are very close to one another. This is the kind of discourse that can create the rapport needed in classrooms to make everyone ‘feel at home’ - a friendly chat that signals to the other person or the other people ‘I like being with you. I accept you. I’m interested in you.’ As teachers we are often scared of wasting time – I think time spent on the development of this kind of ‘gossip’ is not time wasted – it’s time well invested!

In Kieran Egan’s words: *Anthropologists increasingly recognize in gossip one of the most important sources in human stability, and see it also perhaps as the arena for the first development of language. [...] This form of talk is usually the easiest for us, and the form that we (whether male or female) engage in most readily.*

HP

## Leadership qualities

- **Enthusiasm**
- **Empowering students**
  - use of pedagogical placebos
  - help develop positive L2 self images
  - developing students' thinking skills
- **Use of 'gossip'**

Last but not least, the teacher’s sense of humour. I recently read that an average 5-year-old laughs about 150 times a day, and average 45-year-old about 5 times a day. Laughter is not just about fun - it’s also a powerful learning tool. When we laugh, we relax, we get more oxygen into our brains, and our memory works better.

HP

## Leadership qualities

- **Enthusiasm**
- **Empowering students**
  - use of pedagogical placebos
  - help develop positive L2 self images
  - developing students' thinking skills
- **Use of 'gossip'**
- **Use of humour**

I’d like to conclude this session by mentioning another scene from the film *The Freedom Writers*. It’s the beginning of the 2nd year for the student with their teacher, Erin Gruwell. What’s behind her are incredibly tough times, but she has finally managed to turn the atmosphere in her class round. She has mainly done that through reading – not an easy task with students like hers who basically hated reading. The secret of her success is the choice of books she reads with her students. One of the books she gets them to read is Anne Frank’s diary. She shows them that the

students' racist behaviour against each other was precisely the sort of the thing that led to the holocaust. Their reading becomes a life-changing experience for the students as they see, more and more, the parallels in these books to their own lives. She also engages them in the writing of diaries, where they record their thoughts and feelings as they go through this process of change.

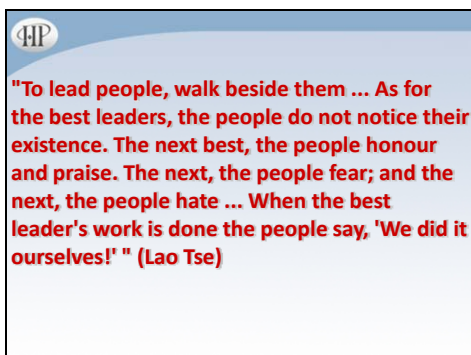
At the beginning of the 2nd year with their teacher, the students are coming to class, and they are surprised to see that Ms Gruwell has moved all the tables back against the wall of the classroom. On the tables they can see bags with books their teacher wants them to read in this coming school year, but they can also see plastic champagne glasses, and bottles of sparkling apple juice. She tells them that she wants them to give a toast, a toast for change, as a ritual through which they express how they see their future and for getting rid of their difficult past. The kids are a bit shy at first, but then two of the girls in that glass break the ice and express how they see their lives developing differently from how they had always thought it would develop.

And then finally the boy who I quoted previously, the one who doesn't want to read out aloud because he finds it so difficult, asks if he can read something from his diary. He reads about his holidays, and reports that his mum couldn't pay the rent any more, and they had to move out from the little flat where they had lived. In a very moving way, he says that this was the most difficult time in his life, and that he is glad to be back at school, in his class, with his teacher. Being with his English class again, he says, makes him feel as if all the problems in his life are not important any more, as in this class, he feels at home.

I think what Erin Gruwell manages to achieve with her students is a perfect example of that kind of leadership in action that creates a world that people want to belong to. There is another interesting aspect that we see in the scene that I have just described.

The leader is not a kind of guru who is in the centre of attention all the time. In the scene described it is of course the teacher who initiates the process, but then finally almost steps back, and the students become the heroes in a way. It's them who show leadership qualities, for example when they finally embrace the student who has read out from his diary.

I'd like to conclude with a dictum by the Chinese Philosopher Lao Tse. What he says is ...



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