

To Teach Is to Learn

Thomas Hardy

(Keio University)

One of the most enlightening teaching experiences I had in the classroom occurred early in my teaching career in Japan. In addition to my regular teaching duties, I had a few classes at a night high school for continuing education students. It was very different from my experiences up to that date in Japan.

The JTE and I entered class and we greeted the students. Then he handed me the textbook, and left, saying, Thomas, you can handle it.

In fact, I could not. I asked students to turn to the page the teacher had suggested. They were less than interested. The class soon degenerated into something like a free-for-all, with some students sleeping, others chattering in groups, and yet others working on various projects of their own, including manga and horseracing forms. I needed to do something different.

I needed something that would engage the interests of this diverse and recalcitrant group of students. I thought about what I had seen, about what students had chosen to do in class. Was there any way I could channel that energy into something closely akin to English? The energy of the manga readers caught my attention. Perhaps? Perhaps?

I checked with the JTE about the probable materials for the next class. Then I made a copy of the textbook and started to cut and paste. Literally. I spread a single page of text over some ten reproducible pages. With a half a page to each line. From these I made a little booklet of about five double-sided pages and copied it for the class.

The next time I met the students, they were ready for another chaotic class experience. They slowed down only briefly when I handed out the booklet. Slowly, in my halting Japanese, we went over it. We read a line. They translated it. I asked them to rewrite the line, using things and actions and objects and people from their own lives. They made the sentence their own. Then, I asked them to illustrate it. I asked them to take the skills they had at rendering manga-like

images and put the skills to use illustrating their own words, their own experiences, and the objects of their own lives. There was some resistance. The sleepers went back to sleep. A couple of the chatters persisted in chattering.

For most of the students, however, this exercise caught their attention. They focused on the work. They cared about putting their life into English. They cared very much about making it visually real. They took pride in their use of English. They took pride in their drawings. After some initial resistance (in part overcome by me showing my own poor drawings and my own poor Japanese writing), they took pride in sharing their work with other students and rendering their lives in English.

I took several lessons away from this experience. First, never underestimate students. They have skills and interests and abilities that you would never expect. Especially if, secondly, you engage them in their own terms. If you make the materials real and of interest and connected to them, in some way, the class will be much better for you, as a teacher, and for them as learners. Third, I learned the importance of moving beyond the text. It can take time, a rare commodity for busy teachers, I know, but if used wisely, the results can make the investment in time and energy and materials mutually worthwhile.

Finally, I made a number of discoveries about myself. I learned the importance of humility. The students made me fully aware of my own limits and, conversely, more appreciative of the successes those limits allowed. This contributes to the second discovery I made about myself: the importance of modesty. I learned that it is ok to have modest goals and to feel pride at achieving them. The students did this. I did this. And together, through this modesty, we achieved much more than either of us expected.

Truly, to teach is to learn: about the material at hand, about the students, and, perhaps most rewardingly, about yourself.