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# Why Develop? It's Easier Not To.

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## **WHY DEVELOP? IT'S EASIER NOT TO.**

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Think back to when you decided to become a teacher. Were you a child? Were you in secondary school? Or did you fall into it? Did circumstances move you along and suddenly you found yourself in this career? I, myself, became an EFL teacher by chance: at the age of 18 I was invited to visit some relatives who were on a UNESCO contract in Colombia. When their contract finished I was too deeply fascinated by the Latin American culture to even consider leaving, so I got a job teaching English to support myself. (In those days it was enough to be a native speaker of English to get a job at some schools.) I liked teaching immediately, but it was still only a means of supporting my love of living in other cultures before I really decided to make it my career. I wonder if any of you found yourself in the teaching profession without having first chosen it.

Now think back to your first year as a teacher, when you were a novice. How much time outside of class did you spend preparing lessons? How did you feel about that? That first year was most likely full of hard work and little sleep. Depending on the first institution you worked for, you were probably either full of enthusiasm or fear. Or perhaps both. Yet many teachers look back on those years as the happiest times in their careers.

What happens to teachers as they gain in experience? We get married, have children, take on mortgages, worry about our ageing parents and our own futures. Maybe we have to work in more than one job, and spend time running from place to place. We are forced to learn to balance our daily lives and our social lives, exams, inspectors, courses, reading, administration, planning, the syllabus, new ideas, etc.!! As you see, we become super-human! But at what cost?

Certainly one potential cost is burnout:

**BURNOUT** is a syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation, and a reduced sense of personal accomplishment. It culminates in a build-up of negative feelings about our students, colleagues and administration. As motivation decreases and

frustration increases, we lose the desire and energy to be creative, developing teachers. Physical and emotional stress play on self-esteem and we lose the sense of being in charge of our lives.

Maslach, C. (1982). *Burnout – The Cost of Caring*, p. 3.

According to Maslach, studies have shown that most teachers – as well as those in the other helping professions such as nursing and counselling – will experience one or more periods of burnout during their careers.

When we get ‘stuck’ in one of these ruts, we feel stale and cynical. Our enthusiasm dwindles. That ‘high’ we once thrived on seems far behind us. What was once an adventure becomes a treadmill. We lose interest in our students and becoming unwilling to take risks.

There are advantages to remaining in this state! If all we’re concerned about is just surviving, we don’t have to think or worry so much about our teaching. We don’t have to update our lesson plans. If we keep re-using the same notes, we can go to school, do our jobs and leave them behind so that we don’t get so tired. We don’t have to stick our necks out in meetings, arguing for changes in administration. We don’t have to try new, risky things out in the classroom, nor jeopardize our safe standing in the staffroom (Claxton, G. 1989). The price, however, is the loss of satisfaction, real communication with our colleagues, idealism and self-respect.

I would like to suggest here that feeling good about yourself is your top professional responsibility. We teach who we are. We may think we are teaching grammar or literature or exam preparation, but studies have shown that the amount of success which students experience is less dependent upon the knowledge and experience of the teacher than it is on three factors or attitudes. The first of these is “congruence.” This means that whatever the teacher is on the inside is also what he or she is on the outside. Teaching is unlike some professions in that we cannot have one set of values at home and then successfully operate at work under another, for as teachers we are transparent to our students. Whether we will it or not, we are always in some degree of power over our students. We decide whether they pass

or fail. This makes it critical for them to be able to ‘read’ us, to discover how best to please us. When we try to withhold who we really are, we actually interfere with their learning, because what they receive is confusion. Carl Rogers, in *Freedom to Learn*, gave us this description of a congruent teacher:

He is engaged in real activities which are meaningful to him. When he gives a lecture, he does so because the topic is important to him. He doesn't do it to fill the hour or entertain the students. For him it is the real thing. In this sense he is a real and genuine person pursuing his own interests. He eschews trying to control the interest of the students, for this tends to confuse them by directing their attention toward the instructor's goals rather than their own.

Rogers, C. (1969). *Freedom to Learn*, p. 39.

The second attitude is something called “unconditional positive regard.” This means a non-judgmental caring of our students as people. When students feel confident that we will value and accept them for who they are rather than who we want them to be, then living up to their highest potential becomes a decision that they make for themselves, not just to please us. As belief central to Humanistic Psychology and backed up by extensive research is that each of us has a natural tendency to work towards the fulfillment of our potential, like a plant to grow towards the light, and to achieve our deepest satisfaction in doing so.

The third attitude is empathy, an ability to understand the inner world of the student, as the student perceives it, and an ability to express this understanding. If a student must study a language in a classroom setting, he needs to believe there exists a personal application of the experience, be it practical, intellectual or emotional.

... under the surface of the learning that is apparent to us in our classrooms may be not only the ‘questing’ of “Why am I learning this?” but also “Who am I” and “How does what I am learning relate to whom I am and where I am going in life?” This makes the teaching/learning relationship immeasurably more complex and challenging but, at the same time, more humanly satisfying.

Rardin, J. (1976). “A Counseling-Learning Model for Second Language Learning” in *TESOL Newsletter 10: 2*.

The teacher's empathy is known to be one of the most powerful elements in facilitating change.

In 1976 Aspy and Roebuck conducted a major research project to learn more about how these qualities actually affected learning. They recorded and assessed nearly 3,700 hours of classroom instruction from 550 elementary and secondary teachers. They found that students whose teachers were high in congruence, positive regard and empathy missed fewer days at school, had increased scores on measures of self-concept, made greater gains on academic achievement measures, presented fewer disciplinary problems, were more spontaneous and used higher levels of thinking than students with teachers low in these qualities. So if the focus is to be truly on the learner then it needs to be on us first.

I have no doubt that most of the teachers who belong to GELI are hardworking, caring teachers and that they inspire their students. Why would you take the trouble to belong to a professional organisation, read professional journals and go to conferences if you were not concerned with being the best teacher you could be? But we are in a difficult, demanding profession and it is not easy to juggle our personal lives with continuing to grow and develop professionally. With as much energy as we devote to helping our students learn, we need to focus on how to help ourselves, and the people who are best-qualified to provide job-related help and support are the people on the job: our fellow teachers. Studies show that turnover among teachers, even under the most incredibly difficult conditions, is remarkably lowered when successful peer support exists (Maslach, C. 1982). Peers can provide help, comfort, insight, comparison, rewards, humor and escape. A teacher development group can be any form of co-operative and ongoing arrangement between two or more teachers to work together on their own personal and professional development. A book which is a great resource on teacher development is *Readings in Teacher Development*, edited by Katie Head and Pauline Taylor, published in 1997 by Heinemann. The original idea for the

book was inspired by the Teacher Development movement which occurred in the 80s, out of which came the IATEFL Teacher Development Special Interest Group.

I'd like to close by saying that by forming your own teacher development groups you can work in a supportive climate not just on becoming better teachers technically, but on developing yourselves personally and then daring to let those personal changes influence who you are in the classroom. It's the most important risk you'll ever take.

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