

Thirteen Ways of Looking at Learning: Lessons from the SEEPALS Summer School
(with a nod to Wallace Stevens)

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1. Our university classrooms are becoming increasingly technologized: computers, beamers and smartboards have replaced overheads and transparencies, which in their day seemed such an advance over chalk and a blackboard. Good new technology is part of what SEEPALS aims to bring to the partner universities in the quest for improved and newly integrated language teaching. However, what the Summer school in Maribor proved to me was that technology is not always needed where the teaching is good.

I really appreciate the way Professor Marija Knežević did it – no reading from Power Point presentation, no numerous handouts, but still incredibly interesting¹.

Technology cannot be allowed to replace teaching excellence.

2. We tend to assume that students like the newest equipment, the bells and whistles that videos and multimedia bring to a lesson, and the student evaluations from the summer school do support this idea. But some students also spoke about Power Point fatigue, about the perception that lecturers hide behind their power point slides and fail to connect with the students.

They all use Power Point; they are not used to communicate with the students.

Students want to talk to their instructors; they want to be asked their opinions and to be encouraged to give them.

The one thing I would suggest is a more interactive teaching.

[Here]there is a lot of exchange between students and teachers; instead, I usually attend frontal lectures.

Students value interaction with the teacher above everything else.

3. The standard format for Power Points encourages the breakdown of ideas into bullet points. It pushes us to be organized, to categorize and sub-categorize, to reduce knowledge to small, dry pellets that can be quickly transcribed into notebooks. Some students undeniably want to “get the notes”. But the notes are not a substitute for the lesson. We mislead students if we suggest this.

Seepals summer school gave me the chance to stand back from myself and become more aware of different cultural values, beliefs and perceptions.

¹ All material in italics has been taken from student comments about their experience at the Summer School.

Teach to the space beyond the bullet point.

4. From Macedonia came a young teacher, Vladimir Martinovski, whose presentation linked the spoken and written words with the plastic arts and music. At precisely the point in a lesson where one might expect the instructor to take a deep breath before summing up and delivering weighty conclusions, Vladimir instead took out his musical instrument and began to play.

He uses the instrument as a metaphor for his country.

It was a magical moment. His performance brought interdisciplinarity to life; inter-everything was clearer after he had the courage to eschew the verbal and stake his point on music. Applause was spontaneous.

I would like mixing of literature with other arts (like music) again. I had never heard or noticed this relation until we had this class about poetry, visual arts and music . . . it is an open door.

End your lessons with open doors rather than closed barriers.

5. There were Italian lessons at the summer school. This was initially an accidental outgrowth of the planning process. Perugia offered us a teacher, and Anna Pedone joined the summer school to enliven the afternoons for those who wanted to acquire Italian or extend their knowledge of the language and culture. One afternoon, Anna taught about Italian gesture: she demonstrated, she had a video, she had a chart. The next morning, the students were still talking about the gestures. A few days later, even those who had NOT been taking Italian were making the gestures. A learning network had sprung up, outside of class, beyond the academy. “Perfetto! Scongiuro! Un momento!”

Teaching the meaning of the words like “pizza” or “pasta” without knowing their real meaning for the Italian’s everyday life, is like not teaching at all.

Empower them to teach themselves—and others.

6. At the summer school, students came from several different countries, many of which were formerly parts of Yugoslavia. Tension was potential.

Instead of being a meeting point, language in the countries of ex-Yugoslavia has grown into a strong generator of animosity.

Students came in pairs from institutions, and institutions came in pairs from countries. You could see these quartets forming every morning in the classroom. It’s natural to sit with your colleagues in a new place, another country. If cross-cultural learning is the point, however, the quartet-formation was not ideal. Professor Jehona Mustafa had a solution. She breezed in with a big smile, disarmed the students with her casual dress and winning manner. They she handed out chocolates. Each student took one. They were of different colours. Jehona announced that all holders of green chocolates were in one group, all the purple ones in another. The quartets broke up; students went to sit and work

with peers they hadn't met before. The new groups worked well, especially given Jehona's lesson on intercultural comparison of proverbs.

The one concerning proverbs and sayings . . . helped the students meet other cultures in a funny and interesting way.

Proverbs and sayings . . . is the greatest way to get familiar with other cultures.

They learned things about themselves while discovering things about others. They loved this lesson.

Break up patterns in order to break down barriers. Help students to un-learn the old patterns.

7. Advertisements are a global phenomenon; often one commercial is simply dubbed into other languages. In his lesson, Nick Ceramella showed examples of Italian and English versions of the same advertisements and encouraged students to work closely with the verbal and visual texts to spot the cultural booby-traps. They learned

how language is very important in advertising; how each word is craftily chosen to serve its purpose.

Nick's teaching technique was almost invisible; he put up the slides, he encouraged students to look, he took comments, he gently nudged the responses. In short, he gave a clinic on how to elicit new awareness from students, using skills they already possessed but perhaps never recognized or exercised.

Vacate the classroom spotlight; let the students in and they will rise to the occasion.

8. Some lessons at the summer school introduced new writers: Jhumpa Lahiri, Jeanette Winterson. Students were quick to perceive that Petar Penda and Branko Crnogorac demonstrated new methods to lead to new meanings. Both showed the implication of cultural identity in the process of interpretation.

Crnogorac called this complexity a cultural grammar, emphasising that it is impossible to have contact with someone without breaking the cultural rules. This seems to me like an important precondition in the process of learning a foreign language.

Interculturality resides in teaching methodology, not just in new choices of post-colonial literature.

9. "Once I was at a Cherokee pow-wow." So went one line in the lesson by Maria Knežević. This teacher knew that connections are forged by storytelling and that wisdom arises from shared stories. Marija then passed on a story told to her by the Chief, a brief, enigmatic story. She let it float on the air of the lecture-room; she asked the students what they thought. Teacher and students worked together on an act of creative, cross-cultural interpretation. "Every good story is a creation story," she continued. This made perfect sense; we were witnessing creation right then and there.

Trust the story--and the listener.

10. Students appreciated the lesson about motivation from Kate Hoerbe-Montgomery. She began by stating her intention of not talking AT them. And she never did. She began with a video of bored students watching a droning lecturer. This could have been a mirror experience, with one set of bored people watching another set snapping their binder rings and their chewing gum. Instead, it was a magic mirror; it registered sameness, it allowed distance, it asked for response. It worked.

For a teacher that would be the most important thing, to get your students interested, collaborating, commenting, participating becoming part of that event.

The students talked for Kate; they talked to each other in groups; they answered her questions; they conducted dialogues with their own preconceptions about teaching and learning.

It's definitely better if all students are included in the process of learning.

Discover new registers of talking—with, for and by everyone in the classroom.

11. You learn a language by speaking; you prove mastery by writing. You never really know what you think until you get it down in words, on screen or paper. The best lessons at the summer school tended to be those in which students were asked to do some writing, either in class or for homework. By asking for written work, teachers showed that they were serious about learning and that they trusted students to be serious, too. Teachers asked for stories (Marija) some even asked for poetry (Armela Panajoti) and got it. Why, I wondered, did students do this writing when nothing in the summer school compelled it? Once again the students themselves had the answer. During Marija's class, students had to create a story; Tomi's story, read aloud to the class, contained this line: "They knew they were in the story together." And there it was, the reason.

Write to and with your students; be in the story together.

12. When I have asked my own students what they are seeking in our lecture halls at the Faculty, their answers invariably include the word "knowledge," or more reductively, "the knowledge." Top-down, teacher-centered, whatever—as long as "the knowledge" is transferred from the teacher's grey matter to their notebooks, then the teaching/learning compact has been fulfilled. In our hurry to complete the curriculum, we often pander to this narrow quest. In her lesson at the summer school, Isidora Wattles brought us up short, using a taxonomy to redefine "the knowledge" and to replace it with the concept of "cognitive growth." Experience, understanding and judgment: these were the levels of cognition to which she drew our attention. Yes, these are difficult to measure, impossible to teach and absolutely crucial equipment for an educated person.

We were whole participants of that that event of storytelling [Marija's lecture].

Bring your whole self to the teaching process and expect reciprocity.

13. “Once told, a story cannot be untold.” So went a line from Marija’s lesson. This could be read ominously, but students chose to do otherwise. The 13th way is not my way but the students’ way of reading the story of the Maribor Summer School.

Let students have the last word.

I believe this programme has been very successful in breaking not only the language barrier between different cultures and nationalities, but first and foremost in getting rid of numerous stereotypes and prejudices people have about each other sometimes, even citizens of neighbouring countries.

You realize how different we all are, but still all equal with almost the same needs. It opens up your mind and bursts out your own world with all kinds of stereotypes and prejudice you might have had before.

I’ve made some lifetime friends and I’m sure that in the future we can do some work together, helping each other and bringing together our own little worlds, putting all the borders, suspicious and rejection aside.

“Story once told cannot be deleted,” said Professor Knezevic and she was completely right, this experience that we had chance to live will always be that story that we will tell others as long as we live.

Every story has an end, that is why our summer school will be closed soon but it will help us to make our best to meet each other somewhere else and to create another wonderful story.