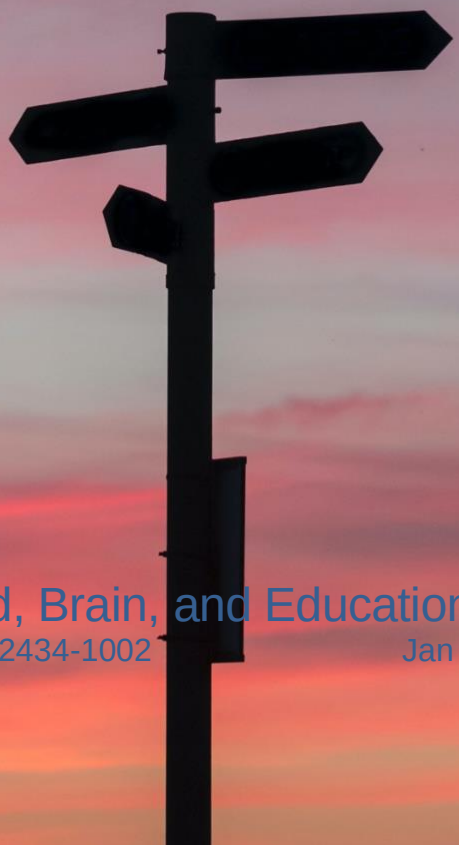
MindBrained Think Tank+

Experiences that Changed Us



Bulletin of the JALT Mind, Brain, and Education SIG
Volume 6, Issue 1 ISSN 2434-1002 Jan 1, 2020

MindBrained Think Tank+

Stories about Experiences that Changed Us as Language Teachers

START HERE! 日本語の字幕について

DEEP	The Power of a Teacher, Adam Saenz TED Talk
LITE	The Magical Science of Storytelling, David Phillips TED Talk

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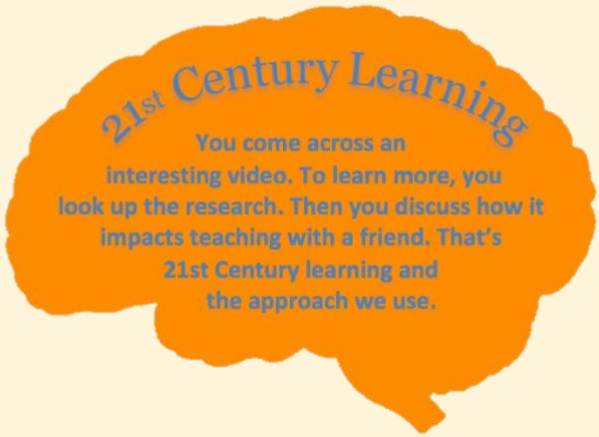

Adam Saenz's TED Talk is moving. It'll touch your heart, so don't skip it. And for some of the neuroscience behind stories, listen to **David Phillips's** TED Talk too. (Thank you so much, Chris Anderson for bringing us this bounty.)

This is our **January issue** and, though this is just the second, we have a tradition of doing something different with these anniversary issues. This month, we are giving you eleven stories by teachers about experiences that influenced their way of thinking and teaching. And here is some good news: we received sixteen stories, and we like all of them so much that we have decided to make a new feature in the Think Tanks, a monthly column of teacher stories!

Many of the stories here are about classroom experiences and what our contributors learned from them, but many others are on experiences our teachers had as learners themselves, and how their lives were changed as a result.

So, sit back, relax, and read these wonderful stories. With luck, we might get one from you as well.

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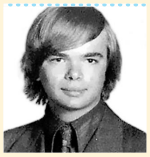

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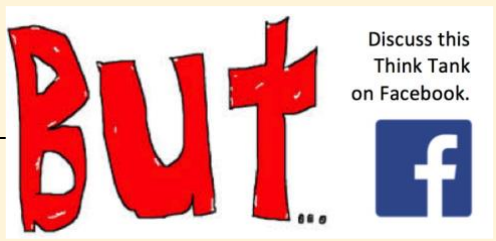


About this Issue
Teacher Stories

Curtis Kelly

How Teachers Learn

I was doing graduate work in my academic field when a certain fact stopped me cold in my tracks. I was reading about the principle sources of education in the twentieth century and the main one was not at all what I had expected. We did not use the Internet until the nineties, so it only became important at the very end. I expected the principle sources of education to be school, followed by books, followed by newspapers, with maybe parents mixed in as well. Isn't that what you'd think?

But it was none of these. It was television. Television! And as soon as I read that, I understood. Think about how much you have learned from television about other countries, political issues, history, famous people, space, and that is just the factual knowledge side. You've also learned processes from cooking shows, mysteries, fashion shows, crime prevention shows, and Marie Kondo. Then, don't forget how your values, human relations skills, and romantic moves were honed through dramas, soap operas, celeb gossips, movies, etc. My every hoped for career in my youth – being a cowboy, a doctor, or a pilot – were all inspired by popular TV shows in that time. Even now, the pile of classic John Wayne movies I've downloaded to my iPhone tempt me towards a career change,... partner.

So, what about how we learn as teachers? I am sure some TV dramas and documentaries on schooling have influenced us, but I think there is another source of teacher training just as great, maybe even greater: the stories we share. We tell each other stories about how certain books tumbled or triumphed, we talk about the things we did that students loved, we moan about how that "Student from Hell" gave us a bad day. Our episodes provide vision. Indeed, as E. O. Wilson wrote in *American Educator* (2002), "The stories we tell ourselves and others are our survival manuals." Survival manuals for teaching a language.

I always feel we do not make enough of this brain-friendly teaching resource, for either teaching our students or teaching each other. That is why we have made this special issue, marking our second anniversary, as one full of stories. Note that we will also start a new monthly column of stories. So, if you have a good one, for goodness sake, send it to us!

Oh, and one more thing. Be sure and listen to the introductory video, The Power of a Teacher, by Adam Saenz. It might stop *you* in your tracks.

Curtis Kelly *(EDD), the first coordinator of the JALT Mind, Brain, and Education SIG, is a Professor of English at Kansai University in Japan. He is the producer of the Think Tanks, has written over 30 books and 100 articles, and given over 400 presentations. His life mission, and what drew him to brain studies, is "to relieve the suffering of the classroom."*

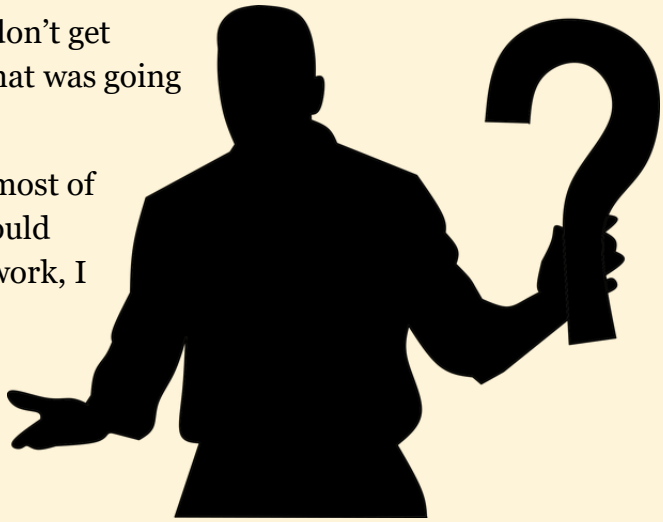
Think Tank: Teacher Stories

Stephen M. Ryan

They Cheated Again

They'd cheated again. Can you believe it? Homework was just a simple written exercise to reinforce a conversation lesson, and yet, most of the class had cheated. Again. Forty-two students in the class; Six distinctly original sets of answers. The others so similar to these answers that it showed they were clearly copied. What differences there were simply showed that the writer was not even good at copying. This wasn't the first time something like this had happened since I arrived in Japan.

OK, don't get mad; get even. Or, better: don't get mad; ask questions. I wanted to know what was going on.



"Right, class. I am not at all happy that most of you cheated on your homework. This should not be happening. For this week's homework, I want you each write for me three good reasons for copying your homework from a classmate and three reasons why it is not a good thing to do. And, this time, don't copy!"

Was I ever in for a surprise! In fact, a whole series of them.

Why is it bad to copy? "I deceive my teacher, my parents, myself, and my God" (it was a Christian school). "It stops me from learning" (aha!). So far, so expected; at least we were on the same page about why it was not a good thing.

Why is copying a good thing? "It saves my time," said more than half of the students. Then, the one that really hurt: "It saves my time for more important homework." I learned a lesson by reading this.

Lesson 1: I had never really treated the homework assignment as though it was an important part of the learning process, just as an added extra from the end of each unit. If I did not treat it as important, how could I expect the students to?

But then, a whole different slew of responses described the advantages of copying in terms of friendship. "It is a good way to make friends." "It can deepen our relationships." "It shows my friends I trust their answers." The first few times I read

such responses, I treated them with skepticism. But the more I read, the harder they were to ignore.

> *I was fairly naïve at the time and had assumed that all of us were there to engage in a common endeavor: to learn English.*

What was going on? Well, I was fairly naïve at the time and had assumed that all of us in the classroom were there to engage in a common endeavor: to learn English. I assumed that this goal was paramount and took precedence over most, if not all, other considerations. There had been some evidence to the contrary: "Why do we go to school?" I had once asked a class earlier. "To make memories," most students answered. I'd smiled at this and not really picked up on the hint that, for many of my students, coming to class was mainly about making and keeping friends. Anything they learnt in class tended to be secondary. Why else would a student who knew the answer to a question be reluctant to give it before she had gone through the motions of checking it with her friends?

Lesson 2: Don't assume that my students have the same priorities I do.

Then there was a whole bunch of students who wrote "I didn't copy." Well, this must have been true for some of them. There were six distinct answers, after all. But a longer answer gave me another light-bulb moment: "We didn't copy. We did the work together so we would all have the same answers."

Lesson 3: If you want individual answers to questions, make the questions personal.

And again: "I answered the questions but then I checked them with friends." I was not at all skeptical about this – I had seen students check answers with each other in class, and groupwork was one of the things I had encouraged.

I thought about this a lot, and in the end, I decided to remove the word "cheating" from my vocabulary. It was stopping me from seeing what was really going on[1]. I resolved always to resist the assumption that a student was cheating, but instead to ask myself if the learning goals of the activity were being met by what the student was doing. Using translation software in writing class? You know, that's probably a better preparation for real-world writing than not using the software.

Lesson 4: It's not cheating if they are still learning.

The biggest lesson for me, though: Don't get mad. Get inquisitive.

Stephen M. Ryan teaches at Sanyo Gakuen University in Okayama, Japan. After years of teaching English, he is still getting it wrong on a daily basis. On the good days, he learns from his students. The thrill never gets old.

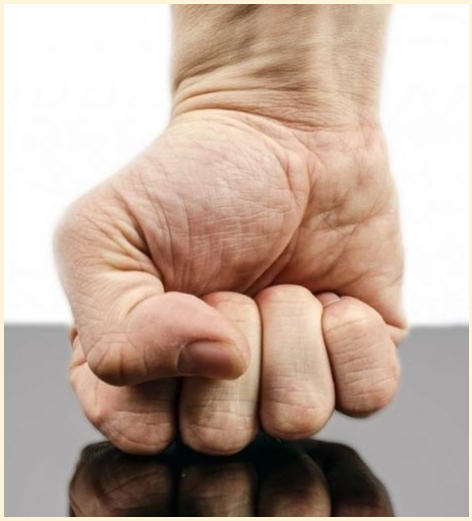
1 Readers wishing to explore further the effects of bias in the classroom will find the article here interesting. Those with a more general interest in bias and the brain should take a look at this model.

Think Tank: Teacher Stories

Bruno Jactat

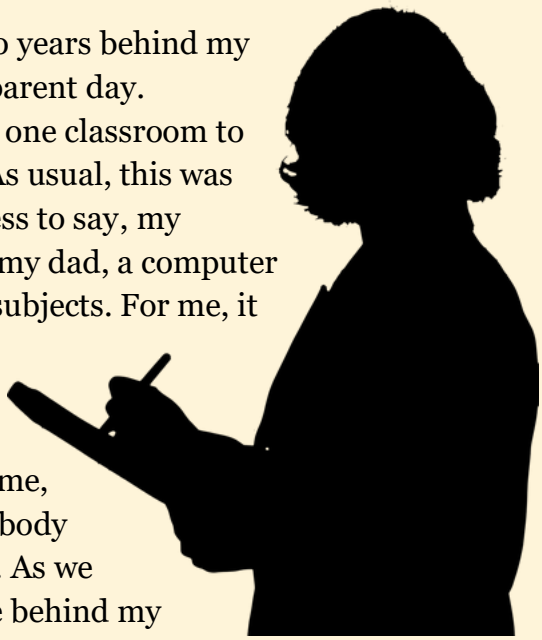
The Power of Words

"Students don't care how much you know until they know how much you care."
– John C. Maxwell



There was this boy in France, whose paternal upbringing was so crushing and humiliating that by his early teens he had lost every ounce of self-esteem and self-respect. He was ceaselessly reminded of his incapacity, stupidity, and no-goodness for anything. A slap in the face or a vicious pinch of the ear helped instill the idea. Brain-washed by his early teens, here was a kid who believed that something was limp in his head, that he had some defect that made him worthless. Everything gave proof of it. School grades plunged. Communication drowned. Social skills sank. At school or in front of "the Father," his voice would capsize. At the fear of punishment, his mouth would gasp for air. Because he'd stutter, he'd be punished. Because of punishment, he'd go under. An endless spiral of sinking into darkness. No redeeming light.

Until that one day.



I was the oldest in my senior high school class, two years behind my peers. My parents came to the mid-term teacher-parent day. Parents strolled with their sons or daughters from one classroom to another to meet the teachers for a brief checkup. As usual, this was going to be another serving of humiliation. Needless to say, my grades in all subjects were catastrophic. To top it, my dad, a computer engineer, held mathematics as the pinnacle of all subjects. For me, it was rock bottom. We were in the line leading to Madame Martin's desk, my math teacher. With her, classroom management was efficient, discipline strict, testing regular. When our turn came, she stood up and extended a hand to greet us. My body was braced. I was going to get a whipping for sure. As we were taking our seats, my father made this gesture behind my

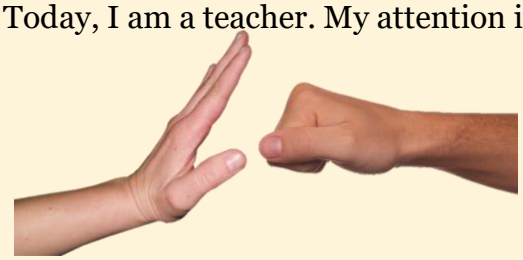
head as if shooing off a turd-fly: “This no-good son of mine has no brains for anything!”

To my surprise, Mme. Martin totally ignored my father and looked me square in the eye: “Bruno, you are struggling with this class. But I know you are capable of doing well. I believe you have the brains for this. Just work more at it. There is absolutely no doubt in me that you will get good at this.” Then she paused. I was holding my breath. And she measured her words: “You’re smart, I know it. So, get to work.” She must have noticed the flicker of light in my eyes. Something had been ignited. So, she stood up, didn’t even offer a glance to my parents, said “Thank you for coming, see you next class,” and turned to the waiting line: “Next, please!”

> ***For the first time in my life someone had actually stood up to my dad for my sake.***

That evening I brought home something to chew on. For the first time in my life someone had actually stood up to my dad for my sake, and to top it off said I was smart: if it came from Mme. Martin, that meant something. I opened my math textbook and started the slow ascension back toward the surface. My next math score was below average, the next above average, by the third test I had the best score of the class, and for the rest of both terms almost always hit full marks on every test. I had previously flunked the baccalaureate exam, but this year I got the overall best average score across all subjects, not only of my class, but of the whole district. I was sailing toward my future confidently, under the sun, blown forward by the winds of self-esteem.

Today, I am a teacher. My attention is highly tuned to difficult students and students with difficulties. I’ve learned to hold back judgment, to give learners the benefit of the doubt, and to show them I care. With timing and appropriate words. Words hold nuclear power: they can smother a struggling soul or ignite a fire of enthusiasm that will burn for a lifetime.



Mme. Martin, you are among the greatest. Thank you. I owe you my life.

Bruno Jactat *is a French teacher at the University of Tsukuba. He currently carries out research on auditory processing disorders and how they affect SLA.*

Further Reading

Find out how positive words or, conversely, hostile words affect the brain:

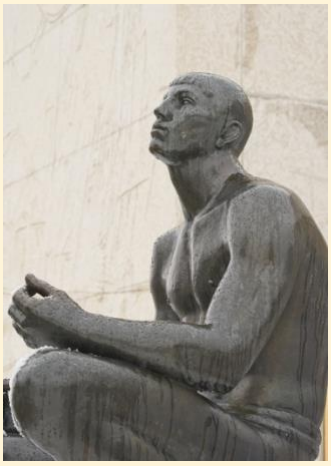
Newberg, A., & Waldman, M. R. (2013). *Words can change your brain*. Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin.

Think Tank: Teacher Stories

Skye Playsted

Learning to Dance

"Thank you so much for your interest in us and your respect for all."



Of all the sweet, heartfelt messages my students had written me on our final day of class together, this one, written by Lila[2] and her phone translation app, really took my breath away. Lila was very shy and rarely spoke out in class. Like most of the young adult women in my class of beginner, refugee-background learners, she'd only had a few years of formal schooling prior to coming to Australia. And like all the students in the class, she had been through deeply traumatizing experiences due to war and forced displacement from her beloved homeland. As much as providing her with English language skills, the government-funded English classes she was able to attend each day provided her with a safe, caring, predictable environment to help her settle and prepare for life in Australia. I was Lila's English teacher, but I didn't realize till I read her message that I had been teaching her something more important than new words. And she probably didn't realize that her message taught me as much as I had taught her.

Lila's message showed me something important that day: that relationships are powerful teachers in the classroom. My students were learning from me as a person, much more than from my words or lesson plans as a teacher. For that young woman in my class, something about my manner and my behavior had begun to show her that, while the respect and genuine interest of others may not have been part of her trauma-affected past, they could be part of her future.

The students in my class were in the very beginning stages of learning English, so we had little shared language to rely on in our classroom interactions. Although I made an effort to listen to students

[2] Students' names are pseudonyms.

carefully and allowed each one the time and space they needed to write or say something in English, I found that I also needed to think of other ways to communicate and connect with them. One of these ways was through learning their cultural dances in lunch breaks. Yes–I danced in front of my students. Dancing and song were deeply valued in my students' cultural heritage. Having my preliterate students with limited English vocabulary act as teachers and help me learn different dance steps was a wonderful confidence and relationship builder.

I have never felt confident dancing, and I genuinely wanted to get better at it. At first, I felt embarrassed because I didn't know what to do, and *I* found it so difficult when *they* made the dances look so easy. But my students, especially Lila, would take me aside from the rest of the group, slow down the steps and count slowly in English so that I could get it. Lila patiently repeated steps over and over with me till I was able to participate in the group dance. We all laughed at my mistakes, but I did gradually improve in some of the simpler dances (similar to this one).

"How is that relevant to English teaching?" I hear you ask. At first, my motives were purely selfish, I must admit. I just wanted to learn how to dance. But one day a

student said to me “You not know Kurdish dancing–difficult. Same me English.” She had connected her own language learning process to my process of learning to dance!

> ***People engage in brain-altering learning when they are face-to-face, mind-to-mind, and heart-to-heart.***

Do relationships really change how we learn? Yes. Psychological research into adult learning has found that “people…engage more effectively in brain-altering learning when they are face-to-face, mind-to-mind, and heart-to-heart” (Cozolino & Sprokay, 2006, p. 12). The same principles of therapy which enhance neural plasticity are also at work in the classroom. When our thinking as well as our feelings are activated, when we are motivated to learn and when we have “a safe and trusting relationship with an attuned other” (Cozolino & Sprokay, 2006, p. 12), the neural circuitry in our brains is activated and we are able to learn more easily. So, learning to dance with my students was building our relationships, and teaching us to learn from each other at the same time. “[Kids] don't remember what you try to teach them. They remember what you are” (Henson [creator of the Muppets], 2011).

Skye Playsted has taught in schools, vocational colleges, and in a university Academic English program in Australia. She loves to work with students from refugee backgrounds, and is particularly interested in working with preliterate adults who are learning English for the first time. She completed her M. Ed. (TESOL) through the University of Wollongong in Australia. Web: skyeplaystedtesol.wordpress.com

References

Cozolino, L., & Sprokay, S. (2006). Neuroscience and adult learning. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, 110*, 11-19.

Henson, J. (2011). *It’s not easy being green: And other things to consider*. New York, NY: Hyperion.

Neuroscientist Uri Hasson shows how our brains become “aligned” while listening to stories. Click here.

Think Tank: Teacher Stories

Meredith Stephens

The Twenty-minute Rule

I was starting to warm to my subject as I scanned the sea of student faces before me, when I was suddenly arrested at the sight of Jun-ichi[3]. Jun-ichi was my most enthusiastic student. He liked to tell me how he had come from a family of *mikan* orange growers on a small island in the Inland Sea, and had won a scholarship to the university. He was always present and punctual. Homework was always turned in. He always prepared thoroughly for his presentations. His attitude conveyed to me that he was not just taking my English class to fulfil his credit requirements; he showed genuine interest in the subject. Only now I noticed that Jun-ichi's eyes were beginning to glaze over. Then, with his head tilted to one side, he fell asleep. In all of my years of teaching in the U.K. and Australia, I had never had a student fall asleep in front of my eyes. I felt very uncomfortable. Was it because my English-language delivery made no sense to him? Was he exhausted from his part-time work in the evenings?

I tried to reflect on my own experience to identify my own struggles with paying attention to a speaker, but my response had always been restlessness rather than falling asleep. Our faculty meetings may continue for as long as four hours. This is because the democratic process encourages attendees to stay awake by voicing their agreement or disagreement with the speaker, and to ask questions. As much as I am grateful for the democratic process, I tend to feel uneasy sitting on a hard seat in the lecture theatre during the four-hour meetings. In my early years in the faculty, I couldn't wait to go and pick up my daughter from after-school care. Would she be the last child to be picked up

3 Jun-ichi is a pseudonym.

> *I had to make my exit for my daughter's sake and, I confess, mine.*

from the care centre? Would the carers be annoyed with me for being the last parent to pick up their child? Would my daughter be exhausted from the long school day and after-school care session? Most importantly, I felt that visceral tug parents feel when they want to be reunited with their young children at the end of the working day. I would watch the clock at the front of the room tick by, and wait for an opportunity to exit. It was hard to remain inconspicuous as I exited, being the only foreign-looking woman in a room of over a hundred faculty members, but I had to make my exit for my daughter's sake and, I confess, mine.

As the years went by, my daughters grew up, and I no longer had to cut short my attendance at faculty meetings. Nevertheless, sitting still in my seat in the lecture theatre remained difficult. If I was sitting directly under the air conditioner in winter, the dryness irritated me. As for summer, the management was very conscientious about saving energy, so the thermostat was set to 28 degrees. I would squirm in my seat as the perspiration trickled down my spine. One day as I was reflecting on why passivity was, counterintuitively, more tiring than activity, I recalled something my flight attendant sister-in-law had told me. I had been commiserating with her over how exhausting her job must be, when she responded that it was much harder being a passenger. Then it hit me. Simply being passive in the class had exhausted Jun-ichi. He had been sitting in classes all day, and now he was just sitting in mine. His sleepiness was a natural physical reaction, not a problem of attitude or interest.

Tracey Tokuhama-Espinosa (2010) shares many wonderful insights into how to engage students. She suggests introducing physical movement into the class to provide "brain breaks, refocusing attention, and oxygenation" (p. 94). As a response to learner boredom, she advises, "movement should be considered as a solution to such fatigue" (p. 94). Furthermore, she explains the limitations on attention spans, contrasting how the lecture format is more efficient for the speaker than the hearer.

She recommends implementing changes of "person (from teacher to student, for example), place (a change of seat, for example), or topic (a conceptual refocus, for example) at least every 20 minutes" (p. 118). Next, she advises following periods of intense concentration with time for reflection on the content.

In recent years I have been implementing Tokuhama-Espinosa's recommendations, keeping an eye on the students' expressions, to assess their engagement. When students have a change of person and place as they rotate their seating positions around the room for peer discussions, I notice that their expressions often change to intense engagement and they become more animated. I will try to keep Tokuhama-Espinosa's insights in mind to make sure students stay alert in my lessons and, although I am sure he has forgotten by now, if I ever have the chance to meet Jun-ichi again, I would like to thank him. Jun-ichi provided the impetus to reflect on and change my teaching.

Meredith Stephens is an applied linguist at Tokushima University. Most of her writing concerns second language pedagogy, and has appeared in *The ELT Journal*, *English Today*, *Reading in a Foreign Language*, *The Journal of Literature in Language Teaching*, *Raising Bilingual and Bicultural Children: Essays from the Inaka*, edited by Darren Lingley and Paul Daniels and The Font: A Literary Journal for Language Teachers .

Reference

Tokuhama-Espinosa, T. (2010). *The new science of teaching and learning: Using the best of mind, brain, and education science in the classroom*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Think Tank: Teacher Stories

Brian Cullen

The Wall of the Shamrock

Many years ago, I was playing music in a small Irish pub called The Shamrock, in Shinjuku. It was a rather strange structure with a wall going right down the middle of the room, dividing it into a bar and a lounge area. The stage where I sat and played was the only place in the room where it was possible to see both sides of The Shamrock.

Looking to my right, I saw the bar, crowded with foreigners shouting for drinks, interacting with strangers, and generally having a confused and jolly time. Looking to my left, on the other side of the wall, I saw the lounge, where the chairs were all filled by Japanese quietly talking or just listening to the music.

Once during the evening, a young Japanese woman crossed over in front of where I sat on the stage to the other side of the wall. She had a look of shock on her face as she saw the scene on the other side. The behavior of the people on the other side of the wall was so different that it seemed like a different world. I could almost see the neurons trying to realign in her brain as she considered whether to go up to the bar or to return to her seat and call over one of the serving staff. After almost a full verse of the song, she made her decision, took a deep breath, passed in front of me and made her way, through the people, up to the bar, where she ordered a drink. And this was a key moment for me in my development as a teacher.

> ***"Any person who wants to learn must leave the quiet and known world of order and take the brave step beyond the wall into chaos.***

For the first time, I realized that any person who wants to learn must leave the quiet and known world of order and take the brave step beyond the wall into chaos, fighting for drinks and words, dancing instead of sitting, and interacting rather than passively observing.

As teachers, we must remember that, for us, the world of English is familiar and comfortable, but the same is not true of our learners. It is a different world, separated from their usual world by a cultural and linguistic wall that is just as real as the wall of The Shamrock. The next time you enter a classroom full of waiting faces, consider how you can inspire the courage to cross the threshold and learn to enjoy the music from both sides.

Brian Cullen *is a professor at Nagoya Institute of Technology. He has also performed music in Japan for almost 30 years. His most recent album,* Bubbles, *was released with Sarah Mulvey in 2019.*
https://sites.google.com/view/bubblesalbum

What makes a good story? Two TED Talks answer that question, both of which we almost used as our lead-in videos.

Here, Pixar filmmaker Andrew Stanton, the writer behind the *Toy Story* movies and others, explains the secrets of a good story.
(Note: Contains graphic language.)

Here, Julian Friedman, a literary agent, tells us that 99% of the stories he receives fail, and why. While this is not as polished and moving as some of the other talks, he reveals the most important factor in writing a good story. It has to be about "you" rather than "me."

Think Tank: Teacher Stories

Marc Helgesen

Principal Stephens and the Gratitude Letter

(Note: Marc has told the first part of this story in many positive psychology workshops. If you've heard it, just skip down to the area just above the box on the last page. There is a new ending.)

It was near the end my first year of high school. I get a note: Marc Helgesen, report to Principal Stephens' office. Actually, Mr. Stephens was the assistant principal. Those of you who know American schools know "assistant principal" means the person in charge of discipline.

> ***"Oh, no. What did I do now?" I thought.***

"Oh, no. What did I do now?" I thought.

I must have looked nervous because Principal Stephens said, "Don't worry, Marc. You're not in trouble." "I'm not?" I said, maybe with a bit of disbelief. "I called you in because it is time to sign up for classes for next year. Marc, you should think about taking Child Development."

Fred Stephens, circa 1972

Child Development? Back in those days, there were "boys' classes" and "girls' classes." Boys took Wood Shop and Auto Mechanics. Girls took Home Economics and such. Child Development was a girls' class.

Marc in an earlier lifetime

Mr. Stephens went on. "I think you should take Child Development because you should think about becoming a teacher." A teacher? I was 15 years old. I wanted to be a disk jockey.

But I took Child Development–but for the wrong reason. It was a girls' class. Good odds.

It was fascinating. I'm the youngest in my family so I didn't have younger siblings to watch grow up. But in the class, I learned about how kids learn, Piaget and Erikson and so much more. It was fascinating. So, the year after that I volunteered as a teacher's aide in an elementary school every afternoon. I loved it. I went to university as an Elementary Education/Early Childhood Education major. I became a pre-school teacher. Then an Adult Basic Ed.–Reading Specialist. Then the place I was teaching started sending me the Hispanic students because they couldn't read English. So, I bought a book on teaching English as a Second Language.

Later I went to grad. school.

Sometime after that I became an EFL teacher here in Japan.

All because of Mr. Stephens's suggestion.

About ten years ago, I sent Principal Stephens a "gratitude letter." It explained what he had done and how it impacted my life. Most importantly, it thanked him for what he had done nearly four decades earlier. Gratitude letters, a common positive psychology activity, have been shown to have positive results for the writer for up to six months after writing them (Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005).

I found Mr. Stephens's address (I thought) on the internet. I sent off the letter. And heard…nothing. Oh, well. Maybe I sent it to the wrong Fred Stephens. Or maybe he had passed away. Who knows?

I've used the gratitude letter and the story in a textbook (Helgesen, Wiltshier, & Brown, 2018) and later in a teacher reference book (Helgesen, 2019). When that second book came out, I checked with a friend who still worked in education in the city I'm from. I asked him if Mr. Stephens was still around. He said yes and sent me his address. Excited that I had a chance to reconnect, I mailed off a copy of the new book.

Again, I heard nothing. Until a few weeks later when a Facebook friend (my former high school history teacher), posted this:

> *Every Tuesday morning a bunch of retired LHS teachers gather for coffee at a local Panera, including Fred Stephens. Fred brought the book you authored and showed us the letter, written personally to him, that you included in the book. Fred is 83-84 now with some unpleasant health issues. But his mind is very sharp. He was deeply touched by your thoughtfulness. Thanks for brightening his day and also those of us who remember so many of your classmates at Lincoln.*

I'm delighted to have brightened his day. He helped brighten my life. Also happy for the unexpected consequence of having reminded those other teachers – the ones he met for coffee – that some of us are thankful for them many years later.

We often forget how important our own teachers are in shaping our lives. Maybe take a moment to remember the folks who helped and shaped you. Maybe even send a letter.

Marc Helgesen, *Miyagi Gakuin, Sendai, is author of* English Teaching and the Science of Happiness *(ABAX), the English Firsthand series (Pearson) and many other books and articles. Websites: www.ELTandHappiness.com, www.HelgesenHandouts.weebly.com. His main interests are positive psychology in ELT, brain science in ELT and BBQ (not necessarily in ELT).*

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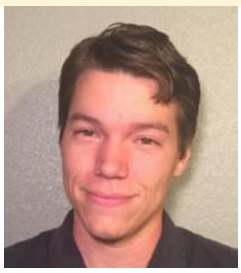
Think Tank:
Teacher Stories



Roger Blievernicht

Changing from Challenge to Opportunity

At the beginning of this year I had a particular class that was difficult to manage, the kind of junior high school class here in Japan that has issues with noise, participation, and even, at times, things thrown across the classroom. As a teacher I feel a sense of defeat when I see a classroom in such a chaotic state, where objects are being thrown and jeopardizing the safety of others. However, as the year gradually progressed, students started becoming more cooperative and I saw an increase in willingness to participate in English lessons; I realized, however, that there was one student in particular who was facing challenges. She was Japanese, but I will call her Mary.

Mary was a student from the special education class who had chosen to attend a mainstream English lesson in addition to her special education English lesson. She was wonderful, kind, and tried her best with English. As delightful a student as she was, the reality was that her English abilities were nowhere near the level of other students. As I used group work and tried maximizing conversations, this made it difficult for other students to work with her to complete tasks. Students working with Mary would often give up because of the lack of a response, leaving a look of disappointment on both their faces as they sat quietly.

This presented a challenge: how could I facilitate group work if there is such a great difference in language abilities? I didn't have any specialized knowledge about special education students and there were no extra supporters for Mary in the classroom. It didn't seem practical to me that Mary was in an English class that wasn't at her level and without support; it felt like she was being set up for failure which would ultimately slow down the progress of other students as well. Mary's presence in the classroom was a problem. Whether it was practical or not, this was the reality I had to face and so I reached out to other teachers for advice.

> ***As I reached out, I distinctly remember the advice I received from a fellow teacher, which changed my entire perspective.***

As I reached out, I distinctly remember the advice I received from a fellow teacher, which changed my entire perspective. I should look at this as an opportunity and work towards making Mary feel included in class. This entire time I was looking at Mary as a problem, a hurdle that I needed to get over in order to work towards *other* students' English fluency. Why wasn't I considering Mary's needs along with the rest of my students? Were her needs not as important as the other students' despite neurological conditions beyond her control? Mary was one of my learners too. And, as I said, it was her choice to join our class.

Before my next class, I conducted a pre-instruction meeting with the homeroom teacher and invited the students who would be paired with Mary. I asked these students if they were all right to work with Mary and told them about the lesson plan and activity. As I gave students printouts for the activity, the homeroom teacher described the activity and highlighted where Mary would need support. I asked them at the end if they would assist with making Mary's experience

in the classroom more useful to her and they agreed. When it was time for class, the students worked with Mary the way we had discussed earlier and supported her throughout the duration of the activity.

Then I noticed that something amazing was happening. Some of the students helping Mary originally had behavioral problems of their own, problems with socializing and participating. But, in helping her, these problems started to disappear. In fact, research has shown that when at-risk youths are provided with training in social-cognitive skills, it can reduce problem behavior and improve students' achievement and social effectiveness (Kochhar, West, & Taymans, 2000). By providing these students with prior instruction about the lesson and asking them to be empathetic about Mary's needs, I believe that they were able to build on their own social-cognitive abilities. Mary was their way to grow.

I was able to observe firsthand an increase in both the students' responsible behavior and in Mary's inclusion throughout the English activity. When class finished, I remember one comment that Mary made out loud that rewarded me for my effort and change in perspective: "That was fun!" The rest of the semester presented many opportunities, but I felt reassured that I had responsible students to help me make the classroom environment inclusive for everyone…yes, every single one of them, no matter what difficulties they came in with.

Roger Blievernicht is an assistant language teacher for the Himeji Board of Education. He has previous experience teaching ELLs at the Arizona Language Center and Vista College Preparatory. Roger is currently studying at American College of Education for his M.Ed. in English as a Second Language and Bilingual Education.

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Think Tank: Teacher Stories

Kazuyoshi Sato

Releasing Student Creativity

Soon after I started studying for my MA in applied linguistics (language teaching) at the University of Queensland in Australia in 1995, I began to teach Japanese as a part-time teacher at two universities. My trial and error style of teaching started that day and has continued in my Japanese and English classes ever since.

> ***I took a risk, which, as a new teacher, I had never done before.***

I remember one class for beginners which influenced me as a language teacher. I was supposed to teach how to tell time in that lesson. After students learned the basic expressions, I changed the exercise in the textbook. The existing exercise, which asked students to describe the daily routine of a Japanese office worker, seemed to be boring for my students. Instead, I took a risk, which, as a new teacher, I had never done before. I decided to deviate from the textbook and make my own task. I was not sure at all about doing that, but decided to try it. I said to them, "This is pairwork. You will be tour guides for a group of Japanese tourists who are visiting the Gold Coast. You have to plan a one-day bus tour to show the group around. I will give you 15 minutes to prepare for this activity. Then, I would like you to present your plan in front of the class." I showed them an example of how to say what to do at a certain time. They worked in pairs, enthusiastically.

The presentations were good. The students introduced their own insider information about the Gold Coast, such as good, little-known spots and special foods. There were

moments filled with surprise, laughter, and applause. I was impressed by their creativity and enthusiasm.

From that day on, I decided to make my own tasks to replace those in the textbook, and this became an important part of my teaching. Gradually, I gained confidence in developing tasks and using some original materials. It was a risk at first, but encouraging creativity in my classes has been a positive experience for me and for my students ever since.

Kazuyoshi Sato *teaches at Nagoya University of Foreign Studies. He holds an MA and a PhD in Applied Linguistics from the University of Queensland, Australia. He has written several papers on communicative language teaching and teacher development. His research interests include teacher development, second language acquisition, and curriculum development.*

What does the revelation of life change look like?

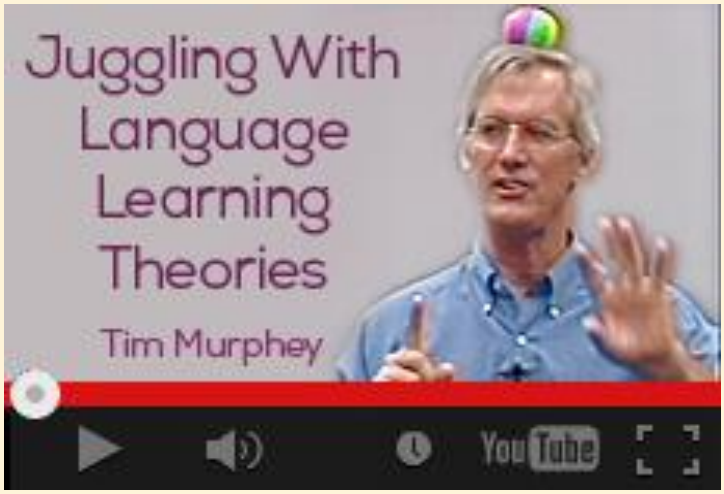
Watch this short, wonderfully cute video of Piper having such an experience.

That's what it looks like!

Think Tank: Teacher Stories

Glenn Magee

Mindsets



When I attended one of the first annual brain days in Kita-Kyushu I met a really interesting man named Tim Murphey. This was the first time I had met Tim and my attention was caught by his juggling balls. In fact, I liked his story so much that, on returning home, I ordered a set of balls straight away.

A few days later, as I was unboxing the balls, the person I was living with, Yuki, asked, "What did you buy?" So, I said to her, "Juggling balls." To which she replied in a rather irritated tone, "What did you buy those for?" Oh dear, she doesn't approve of my use of money, I thought, as I said in a subdued voice, "I'm going to teach myself how to juggle. Pretty cool, right." – "You're a bit soft in the head aren't you," she retorted. "You just wasted your money. You won't be able to juggle. How are you going to even learn?" As I began to reply, "By watching YouTube videos," I already knew what was coming next. "You really are stupid aren't you. Juggling takes ability and you don't have any of that."

Undeterred, but ego a little bruised, I took time to practice, along with some YouTube videos I found. I carefully practiced out of sight so as not to draw any more scathing remarks. Tim had said that, even if you drop the balls, you just pick them up and try again–that's part of the fun. I was having fun. After a day, I got the hang of two balls; so, off I went to show Yuki. The response wasn't what I expected, "Is that all? See, what a waste of time" she said mockingly as she laughed at my mediocre attempts.

By the end of the third day. I had cracked it. I could juggle three balls for a few seconds. Back I went, ready to show my fiercest critic that I had succeeded. "Hey, watch this…" I said, as the balls went up into the air

and then crashed onto the floor. “Hah, what’s that? That’s all you can do after three days?” she laughed. “No, wait. I was nervous. Let me try again.” Tim had also said that it was very difficult to juggle when you are nervous, so I tried to put all my negativity away and to focus. I kept the balls going for about 30 seconds this time. “See, I did it. Isn’t that cool?” I smiled. “Huh, that’s not interesting” she replied.

Well, I thought it was interesting. So, interesting that I use this story in class with students at the beginning of each year[4]. I explain that Yuki is not a mean, nor evil person, because it would be easy to get that impression from my story. The more important thing was that Yuki had a fixed belief about my abilities. She believed that naturally I am not a person who can do well at physical things, including juggling. I, on the other hand, hold the belief that my abilities can change and that, even if I can’t make it to become a master juggler, I could experience some success and have fun along the way.

> ***“Well either you got it, or you don’t.” This is a good example of fixed thinking.***

Carol Dweck (2000), in her research on Mindsets explains this as the difference between a fixed mindset, where ability and intelligence are seen as static, and a growth mindset, where ability and intelligence are seen as changeable. How many times have you heard people say, “Well either you got it, or you don’t”? This is a good example of fixed thinking. Carol’s research mostly focuses on why some people give up, while others embrace challenge, in the areas of intelligence and ability. I learned from Carol and Tim, and a whole host of discussions in the BRAIN SIG that our brains, intelligence, and abilities are a lot more flexible than we might believe.

What does this have to do with learning English? Well, surprisingly, a lot in fact. You see, Yuki's way of thinking was also manifest in my English learners. Some of them also really believe they are stuck in a band of English, be that B1, A2 (CEFR) or a TOEIC score like 550 and that they will never improve past that point. They have become defined by a test and decided to stay at that point. What I am really interested in right now is how to help students break that deadlock in thinking. How can I develop students' study and problem solving skills as a way to direct attention away from "I can't do that" thinking toward "I can't do that yet.”

Glenn Magee is a lecturer at Gifu Shotoku Gakuen University. He is researching metacognition and student beliefs about their learning, with a specific focus on reading comprehension and study skills.

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Murphey, T. (2006). *Language hungry: An introduction to language learning fun and self-esteem*. London, U.K.: Helbling Languages.

4 For a less personal view, take a look at Tim’s explanation in *Language Hungry* (2006).

Think Tank: Teacher Stories

Masda Yuka

Scissors and English Teachers

I never meant to be a teacher, yet here I am, and here's how.

According to the French writer and existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre, humans are born with no purposes to serve. We all know why scissors exist but we don't know why we exist, and that allows us to create our own worth.

It's a vivid memory from school. I'm thinking to myself as I watch our teacher. *Learning all the details of grammar to manage a class full of children who just want to fool around? This isn't for me.*

The first time I seriously thought about my career was when I was 16. While most of my friends chose to work, I chose to apply for universities, but what to study? The world was going multi-cultural and English skills were in demand as never before. I did OK at English. In fact, I was a star student. I also liked reading. Studying English literature was the logical choice.

Fast forward a few years, one thing happened after another and I started teaching English. It gave me independence and I was qualified to do it. Another logical choice. I applied methods I saw my own teachers use, in my awkward way at first, developing some tricks along the way, but doubt was always there. Is there concrete evidence to support my teaching practice? Surely there's something better out there?

That was the time when my then partner suggested, and then supported, my teacher training in London. At the time we lived in the U.K., which was, and still is, the world leader in TEFL–Teaching English as a Foreign Language. The training, with published authors and skilled teacher trainers, was as much an intellectual adventure as it was exhaustingly competitive. However, all the trainees were friendly and supportive of each other. That was my first turning point as a teacher. Now I knew which teaching skill to apply to what situation. How to teach pronunciation. How to present vocabulary effectively, and why.

> ***Throw away the idea of each student fumbling through a dictionary for one-to-one translations only to acquire often shallow and biased knowledge.***

Do you know, for example, learning occurs more effectively when the teacher, not the student, presents new vocabulary as a package of sound and concept, in an appropriate context? I didn't. This is because the first exposure holds the key to accurate vocabulary learning. Many of us know this, from the experience of learning a word with a wrong sound or meaning the first time and having difficulty correcting it afterwards. Throw away the idea of each student fumbling through a dictionary for one-to-one translations only to acquire often shallow and biased knowledge, which, as far as I know, is still widely practiced in Japanese mainstream education.

My second turning point came thanks to my grandfather, when I thought I had lost everything, including my health. Actually, his help came long after he had passed away, which was even before I was born. He was known to have been bright enough to be a scholar had he received more than the minimum education he actually got. It made me admire the idea of being a scholar, especially in science, since that was my favourite subject. I decided to go back to university, but this time, following my heart rather than logic, and do what I was barely fit to do: To study for a PhD. What fun years it turned out to be, studying all day, with pocket money of ¥500 a month! I studied linguistics and experimental psychology. Finally, the door opened to the evidence-based theories behind language learning.

Do you know, for example, why people good at learning telephone numbers are generally good language learners? I didn't. Individual differences in verbal short-term memory (STM) explain this phenomenon[5]. A large STM capacity helps you learn both digits and vocabulary. Imagine students with a digit span of 3 trying to catch up with their peers with 7. Are they "not trying hard enough"? Learning about these individual differences hidden away in the brain, not turning a blind eye to them, will help a teacher help learners.

Scissors aren't allowed to exist once they stop being scissors. *We* are allowed changes and choices. They say those who *can*, do; those who *can't*, teach. When I was a teacher by accident, I was definitely one who *couldn't*, and it made me a by-stander in life. Only with the scientific knowledge to logically back up and propel my teaching, and the skills to accompany it, I became one who *can*. And so can you.

Masda Yuka (PhD) *is an Associate Professor at Tokyo University of Pharmacy and Life Sciences. She studied the psychology of language at Hiroshima University and has taught languages in Japan and overseas for more years than she would admit.*

5 Recommended reading to learn more about this would be a series of studies done by Prof. Susan Gathercole and her colleagues, many of which are available online. Look especially for those with focus on the relationship between verbal short-term memory and vocabulary learning.

Think Tank: Teacher Stories

Curtis Kelly

This is the sample we used in our Call for Stories, so you might already have seen it.

The Boy Who Always Left Class

Many years ago, I was a speaker on the JALT Four Corners Tour through Kyushu. My presentation topic was one of my favorites: "Dealing with Difficult Students." (The ultimate message is that it is we, as teachers, who have to deal with ourselves. We are the ones who need to change.)

In the discussion period after one of the talks, a Japanese English teacher, Ms. Maekawa, told us about how one of her students kept leaving class. Every single class, about halfway through, this student asked if he could go to the bathroom. Naturally, she said "yes." How could she refuse a request like that? I know teachers who do, saying "You should have gone before class!" but Maekawa-san was not so demanding. She let him go and he would disappear for a while.

> ***"Yep," we all thought, "I have had students like that. They use the bathroom ploy to get out of class."***

There we were, hearing this familiar story. "Yep," we all thought, "I have had students like that. They use the bathroom ploy to get out of class, maybe taking their cell phone and having a smoke." I and everyone else listening to the story frowned and shook our heads.

However, this wonderful teacher did not come to the same negative conclusion we did. Instead, she wondered if the student had some health issue and, going to the Student Health Center to look at his profile, she found out that he did. It turned out the boy suffered from severe hemorrhoids. He was too embarrassed to bring a donut pillow, so sitting on a hard seat for 90 minutes was just plain painful. That is why he went to the restroom: so that he could stand up!

As soon as we heard that, all our expressions changed. We went from frowns to glowing smiles of compassion. "Oh, poor boy," we thought, "he is not a bad student. What can we do to help students like this?" How our outlook changed with that little bit of information.

But then it hit me. We bend over backwards to help someone with an external physical disability, or even a neurological one, but when it comes to an internal, psychological disability–such as fear of looking stupid in English, a lack of motivation to keep doing something that continually results in failure, or just the inability to sit for hours in a boring class–we become self-righteous and indignant. Yet, how can we say that psychological pain is less debilitating than physical pain?

In fact, from the perspective of the brain, fMRI research shows the same areas of brain are activated for both types of pain. Research shows that social pain, such as rejection, and even a broken heart, activates the same part of the brain that makes us feel physical pain, even though the stimulus originates in different places [article source] [podcast source]. Lost love also activates the areas of addiction. In short, emotional pain and physical pain have evolved to share the same neural pathways to alert us to either kind of danger.

So then, why, as teachers, do we downplay the pain our students suffer from rejection, failure, and shame, attributing their avoidance to a lack of moral fortitude or "not trying hard enough," while at the same time, we take a completely different stance for a student in physical pain? After all, learners do not really choose their psychological dispositions any more than their physical ones, nor do they have much control over them. A child who had been screamed at for years by a parent who did not think they were studying hard enough develops a mental model of study as being unpleasant, painful, and something to avoid. Indeed, a psychological problem can be just as disabling as a physical one.

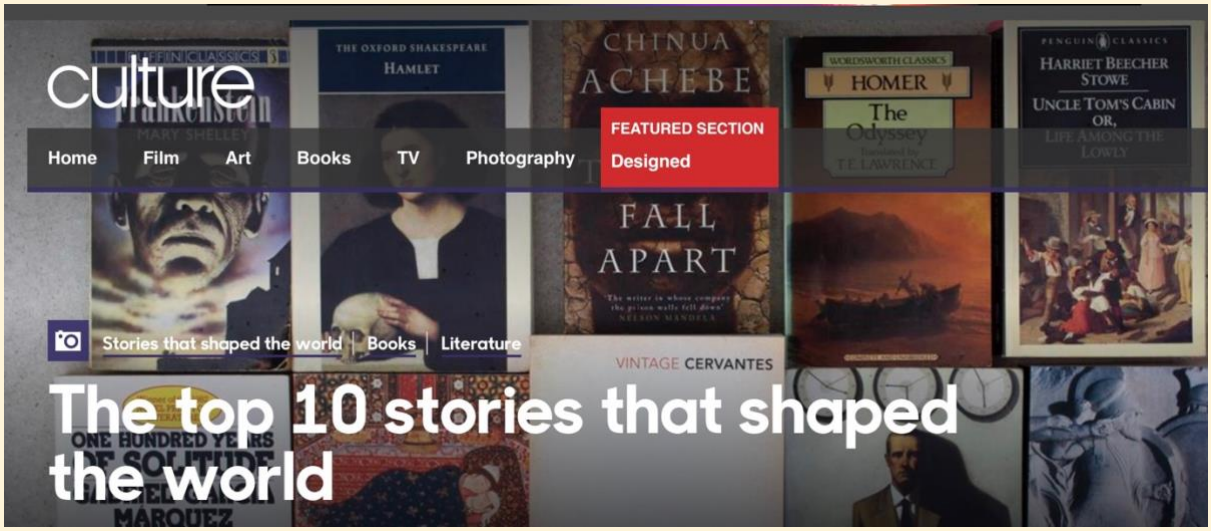
Let us start the new year by thinking about this problem. Maybe we need to develop the same compassion that we had for the boy who left class because of hemorrhoids

for students who leave for other reasons, such as to escape boredom or have a smoke. Maybe those psychological frailties need the same understanding that we would offer a student in physical pain. Let us "deal with ourselves," making our oft-stated but rarely-used, principle of giving the same loving care to every learner, a reality.

Curtis Kelly *(EDD), the first coordinator of the JALT Mind, Brain, and Education SIG, is a Professor of English at Kansai University in Japan. He is the producer of the Think Tanks, has written over 30 books and 100 articles, and given over 400 presentations. His life mission, and what drew him to brain studies, is "to relieve the suffering of the classroom."*

From the BBC

Writers, critics and academics voted these as the most influential and enduring works of fiction (editor's note: well, in the Western world). Here they explain why.



Plus: Future Issues

Think Tank Staff

Call for Contributions: Ideas & Articles

Here are some of the future issue topics we are thinking about. Would you, or anyone you know, like to write about any of these? Or is there another topic you'd like to recommend? Do you have any suggestions for lead-in, or just plain interesting, videos? How about writing a book review? Contact us.

We want stories, like those in this January issue, for our new column.

The best stories are moving, show language education, and touch on brain science

In regard to writing regular articles, keep in mind that what we want most is:

Engaging writing, not dense academic prose
Some information from brain sciences
Expanding on or reacting to the intro video

Future Think Tanks – note the lead ins are still* very *tentative

Self-Efficacy	lead in?
Evidence-based Techniques (Interleaving, Hattie, etc)	lead in?
Stress	lead in?
Drama	looking
Embodiment	looking
Problems with Research	lead in?
Positive Psychology	lead in?
Predictive Processing	lead in?
Brain Waves	lead in?
Motivation	looking
Storytelling	lead in?
Study Habits, Self-control	lead in?
Movement	looking
Mindsets	looking
Social Brain	lead in?
Children	looking
Learning theories	looking
UDL	looking
Depression	lead in?
Plasticity	lead in?
Food and Gut	looking

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is produced by the Japan Association for Language Teaching (JALT)
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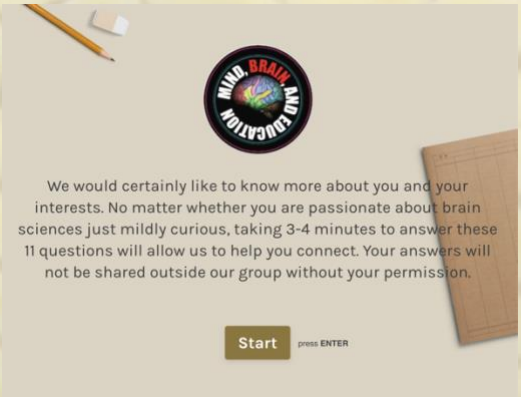

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