

Timothy Brockley

Assignment One:

'Taking Virtual Steps'

Anaheim Online University: Edu550

Prof. Martha Cummings

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People tend to be set in their ways and abrupt changes in beliefs don't come about every day. But I believe now, that while necessity is truly the mother of invention, it is also the parent of change in beliefs. It is this 'change in beliefs' that I'd like to place at the center of this story. The following narration will be offered in terms of 'classroom management' and a shift in practice that came about due to a crisis situation. Here is how the events transpired.

It is autumn, 2002... 5 a.m. With a large family of luggage, my wife and I are waiting on the steps of the 'onchon' or 'Hot Spring Park' as they call it in Dongnae, Busan. This is more than five years ago. We are in this rather odd time and place because we had run low on money. We had just spent a year in Chiang Mai, Thailand, where I was studying for an MA in TEFL (as a Foreign Language). Now, it is time to refill the coffers, and we have chosen my wife's native country, Korea, where we had first met and where I had begun teaching English for the first time, way back in 1994. 5:30 and the doors are open. Exhausted sighs of relief. We are officially, now, living in Busan again.

After an unsuccessful interview at Busan University (I had but half an MA degree and that was half an MA short...) I decide to pursue work on a freelance basis. In fact, it is common knowledge at this time that pay is relatively low at universities in Korea and that teachers can earn more if they go it alone, in the private sector. The following week, after reviewing and responding to a number of ads, the 'interviews' begin turning into work. In 2002, it usually happens like this: They meet you. They decide if they like you. You begin working (or not). It's something akin to meeting 'the parents' for the first time (of someone you are dating).

I walk into the English 'hogwon' (private academy) greeting and being greeted with bows and smiles. I sit down. I drink a cup of tea. I imagine their thoughts: 'Very polite. Are the shoes shined? Maybe not... Manners are good... seems OK.' "Can you start tomorrow?" They ask. I say, "Yes." My fate is

sealed. This particular position will be the catalyst that inspires a change in my beliefs. It will also be the employment that sets in motion thousands of hours of work in front of a computer.

A hot day in September, 2002... it's two o'clock in the afternoon. I 'consult' with the director (who speaks no English) and the Korean teachers, only one of whom can communicate effectively. But this is enough. Ms. Kim is kind in offering her support. She relates how the last teacher broke his arm, how he had no money for the medical bills, how they paid the hospital and how he didn't return to work for the subsequent lesson. "But the students liked him." This is her 'afterthought'. I'm not sure how to take it. "Oh, I see..." I say.

There are no books for this class. They've been using 'handouts'. This seems absurd as I do the math:  $35 \text{ students} \times 5 \text{ classes} = 195 \text{ copies}$  if each student has just one, single piece of paper. I ponder this, reach into my briefcase and pull out my all-purpose 'word-bingo' template. The vintage copy machine roars in readiness. Ms. Kim proceeds to run off 200 copies...

I walk into a classroom of around 35 restless students. The room is dark, theater-like. There are no windows. There is a monstrous, wrongly lit blackboard in the front. I feel the ambient tension. All eyes are on me. *My* eyes are on the chalk, the eraser... and then the room full of faces: there are hands cupped to ears and audible whispers and there seems to be a ritual pattern to their behavior as a whole, as if they have all been here before, not in terms of time and space, but in terms of context, as if they are waiting for something to happen... something that truly escapes me until I think more worried thoughts. It's not the first time that I'm in this particular situation, but it feels like the worst time.

The lesson begins. All is well and swell. The Korean teachers are lined on either side of the volatile audience, keeping order with an elaborate mix of body language, facial expressions, scolds, admonitions... and hard, worn, thin sticks.

It's truly a beginner class. We simply find objects in the room (shoe, poster) introduce objects that can be mimed (apple, shampoo) or gather objects offered by students (mother, elephant). I write them on the board. The students write them in the bingo template in the 25 different spaces and in 35 different ways. I gesticulate. I point. I mime. I prompt words from them... sometimes like reeling in a fish. Yes, I'm an entertainer. We play out the bingo 'game' (all 25 spaces). There are 10 or more 'winners'. Yes, it's exhausting. But I'm lucky. The game ends, just as the 50 minutes-- an unbelievably long, long time-- comes to an end.... I now have only four more classes to go.

This is a hard way to make a living. But it's what I need to do to move out of the business hotel (aka 'love hotel') and into an apartment and then begin to save, so we can move back to Chiang Mai, and I can finish my degree. Save for moving into an apartment, these events will never come to pass.

But back to the narration. By the end of those four interminable hours... sometime after 7 pm, I am elated at being finished but strangely disoriented... and I really can't properly speak. After five hours of concentrated verbosity, I have come to my communicative end. I have a shocking realization: either find a better way to do this or risk serious mental and physical illness...

I look up and see a projector stuck to the ceiling in the center of the dark room. I look to my left and spy the computer I have ignored throughout the day. I recall my first encounters with PowerPoint presentations in my classes at Payap University in Chiang Mai and I relive my wonder at their potential application. These images seem to be walking into the room. They float together in the

context of my exhaustion, my place in society (poor) and my prospects for the future (at turns hopeful and bleak) and also in the potential relationship with *these* students and *their* relationship with me and the weekly lessons... As the vision fades, I put together how these images can potentially translate into both I *and* my students' relationships with this thing called 'English'. Drowning in thought, I make my way home....

Until that moment in time, at the end of that exhausting day, I had believed that lessons had to be carried out interpersonally, that technology was simply a dead end in educational environments, that in order to learn English, it would have to be transmitted solely through human to human contact and in face to face communication. I had (wrongly) believed this to be the one and true way of developing second language competence (indeed, in developing any skill at all). I had dismissed technology as something unnatural. 'A cultural menace' I had named it, so despised had it been regarded in my previous thoughts and discussions.

But from that day on (in fact, beginning that very September night) I began to develop what has now become an 'Online Curriculum' for young learners. Lesson plans at the academy in the following weeks were supplemented with large images and relevant text that I had gathered from many and diverse sources across the web, organized into PowerPoint presentations, burned to CD and utilized thoroughly in each class. A whole world of learning opportunities and avenues of delivering language opened up and, simultaneously, the heavy physical and mental burden of facilitating large classes of young EFL learners slowly lifted. The screen and its contents gave me and the class a joint focus of attention. We were now three... I had space to breathe, to think, to engage in quality interaction and to allow the antics of humor a chance to join in. The software, computer, projector and screen merged into a single entity and became my classroom assistant: following my every command, delivering sensory splendor and organizing my lessons into accessible, coherent and variable forms.

I've taken to technology in all its complex forms and growing capacities and hold it in high regard for all the potential it has and *will* have. But it is we, the people employing it, that must maintain control over it. Technology is an educational tool. For, if used optimally, computer assisted lessons can offer learners more interesting, effective and diverse means to engage with their subject, not only in second language contexts, but in virtually any context one has the ability to imagine.