

Julian Edge takes us from problem to plan of action, and beyond.

Collegial self-development

In addition to what we learn from our teacher education courses, from articles or books that we read and from our colleagues, I believe that most of us would claim that we also learn from experience. As years go by, however, while I certainly continue to *have* experience, I sometimes wonder just how much I actually *learn* from it. I am interested in this question because I am strongly attracted by the idea of improving my teaching via an approach that draws on my experience, as well as on my knowledge, awareness and personal strengths. My related aspiration is to continue developing into the best teacher that I can be for my students – a teacher in some ways inevitably different from the best teacher that another person can be. Such ideas have gained increased currency in recent developments in the field of ELT/TESOL, and the practical side of how to facilitate such growth continues to intrigue and motivate me.

A framework for cooperative development

For the last dozen or so years, I have been designing and revising a framework for collegial work that aims to help teachers consciously self-develop their abilities in ways that build on their own experience, awareness and expertise. It is a framework for individual self-development, but one which involves collaboration with at least one colleague. Like any suggestion for professional action, it is not for everyone, but it works for me and I know it has worked for others. This is the style of professional development that I want to introduce in this article. I am going to begin directly with an authentic example of two teachers using the framework. I will add

comments as we go along and provide more general discussion afterwards.

The teacher working on his self-development (in this instance, a man) is referred to as the Speaker; the colleague helping him work in this way (in this instance, a woman) is the Understander. Both teach English in Greece, in private language institutions that their pupils attend after their regular school. As we join them (Extract 1), the Speaker is enlarging on a problem that he is having with giving instructions:

deepen the amount of trust that colleagues have in each other.

The Understander's responses stand out in part because of what she does *not* do. She does not agree that this is a real problem, offer any advice, or even express any fellow-feeling. She intervenes (07) to make sure that she has correctly identified the classes that the Speaker is referring to and then reflects back to him what she understands him to have said (09–10).

Here, we can see the effects of the principles underlying the approach. First, the Speaker is going to explore, through talk, an issue of importance to him. He will talk openly and non-defensively. A part of the agreement that he has with the Understander is that, for the period that they are using this framework, he will work to make his own discoveries and to base a plan for future action on them. For this period of time, he is not looking for ideas or suggestions from someone else. The Understander's side of the bargain is that she will put aside her own thoughts, ideas and evaluations in order to concentrate on understanding what the Speaker has to say. Using a variety

Extract 1

01	Speaker	OK, talking about feeling annoyed and frustrated, I face a problem lately with giving instructions in class. For some reason, the children just don't seem to take any notice. I try to carry out the lesson in English as much as possible, and then when it comes to the, let's say homework, comes to the point of telling them what to do for homework ...
02		
03		
04		
05		
06		
07	Understander	Just to get this straight, you mean the junior classes?
08	Speaker	Yes, the problem is worse with A Preliminary and B Preliminary, the first classes.
09		
09	Understander	The first classes, yes, and you've got a problem because they don't get the instructions ...
10		
11	Speaker	Yes, it seems that they don't understand what is said, or they don't listen to what is said – I can't decide what is what.
12		

Principles in action

We can tell from Extract 1 that the Speaker and Understander share a good working relationship, because the Speaker is prepared to talk about his frustration and annoyance (line 01), and to own up to having a problem that he doesn't know how to deal with (11–12). A relationship of trust is necessary. At the same time, people who learn to work in this way also say that it helps to

of non-judgmental moves, of which the type of reflection that we see here is the most central, she will try to structure a space for the Speaker to move into. In the space that she thus creates, she gives the Speaker the chance to hear again his versions and interpretations of his experience, honestly understood by a colleague who respects his desire to work out his own responses. The fundamental principle underlying this framework for cooperative development is that being

understood in this way can help a person devise their own way forward.

So, faced with the Speaker's, '*I can't decide what is what,*' (12), the Understander continues to refrain from drawing on her own experience to make a suggestion (difficult though this is at first!), and reflects again another aspect of what the Speaker has said (Extract 2).

relationship further. Also, the Speaker said, once he had made this admission, he felt that he had put the guilt of it away for the time being and could get on more effectively with working on a response to his problem. Almost simultaneously, he began to realise that issues of guilt and blame were exactly what had been getting in his way, as he

swung backwards and forwards trying to decide who to blame, the pupils or himself. These were the thoughts going through his mind as he was telling the story above (27–31). Then he paused.

Moving beyond the problem

At this point (Extract 3, 32–33), sensing that it is an appropriate moment, the Understander offers the Speaker a chance to shift from talking about the problem to thinking about a possible response. The Speaker might not be ready to make this shift yet, but in the event, he is.

A plan of action

Moving away now from the mood of frustration and annoyance in which he began, the Speaker starts to formulate a plan of action (34–41). In lines 41–42, however, he adds a new element to his analysis of the problem, one which the Understander also reflects back to him (43–44). In what follows (45–49), the thinking that the Speaker is doing is signalled by the repeated use of '*I think*' and '*Mmm.*' What the Speaker is discovering (a term he uses himself in line 49), is not simply an idea for a response to a specific problem, but something deeper about himself as a teacher. The concept of consistency is one that he introduces himself (47) and

Extract 2		
13	Understander	And you say that you speak English to them?
14 15 16 17 18	Speaker	Ah, yes, I try, as much as possible, I could say, to speak in English, though lately, to save time, I suppose, I explain their homework in Greek. But even in Greek, if I say, ' <i>Chapter 35,</i> ' as soon as I say that, someone says, ' <i>Chapter 34?</i> ' Or, ' <i>I didn't hear that, say again!</i> '
19	Understander	You mean there is a problem here with the class ...
20	Speaker	Yes, they just don't ... however clearly I say it.
21	Understander	You mean in Greek? Even in Greek?
22 23 24 25	Speaker	Yes, even in Greek they don't, they don't follow. There's something I'm not doing right here, I think. I find this such a waste of time and I end up shouting, ' <i>Can't you understand? Listen!</i> '
26	Understander	So, you think it is you who is to blame?
27 28 29 30 31	Speaker	Well, funnily enough, we have another teacher and I wanted to watch, to observe her, and at the end of the lesson she explained, in Greek, very clearly what the homework was, and from my position at the back of the class I saw the same thing. Immediately she said it, the children said, ' <i>What have we got?</i> '

Moving beyond guilt

From the Speaker's description of what happens (14–18), the Understander infers that the problem lies with the pupils (19), an implication that the Speaker confirms (20). Almost immediately afterwards, however, the Speaker suggests that he is himself at fault (22–23), a perception that the Understander also reflects back to him (26). In response, the Speaker tells a story that deflects blame from himself, suggesting that the problem is more widespread (27–31).

Beneath the surface, however, important changes were going on. The Speaker commented to me afterwards that he regards the behaviour he describes in lines 23–25 as unacceptable and unprofessional. It was difficult to admit this behaviour to the Understander, he said, but it was also one of those occasions where the extension of trust and the continuing respect offered by the Understander helped to develop their

Extract 3		
32 33	Understander	Did this give you any thoughts? I mean, did it make you think of any other ways to do that?
34 35 36 37 38 39 40 41 42	Speaker	Mmm, maybe it's a question of classroom management really, that we need to establish some rules, perhaps: ' <i>Right! Now we're going to give the homework instructions, everybody must pay attention!</i> ' Mmmm, or perhaps if I could write it on the board and say, ' <i>This is what you have to do.</i> ' And then, they could, they could follow, they could write it down, they could copy it down, yes, maybe that's a good idea, to stop the confusion caused by the oral explanation of the instructions.
43 44	Understander	So, you think the confusion is caused by the oral explanation of the instructions?
45 46 47 48 49	Speaker	Eh, it certainly is a part, a major part, yeah, I think it is. I think that's right. I need to try it. I do write on the board sometimes, but I'm not consistent. Mmm. Maybe that's the problem, then, I am not consistent about it and they don't know what to expect. Mmm, that could be a discovery there! (laughs)
50	Understander	Good! (laughs)



Collegial self-development

one that he uses to make the most fundamental developmental step of all – to take responsibility. His laughter (49) is one of genuine enjoyment and surprise at what has just happened. The Understander joins in the laughter (50), and it is important to emphasise that her 'Good!' is not an evaluation of what the Speaker has discovered, but expresses a shared pleasure in his making such a discovery for himself. It also signals her satisfaction that the process they are involved in is working for them.

Moving beyond the action plan

The Speaker restates the importance of consistency (51) and, when the Understander reflects this back to him (52), he turns the abstract principle into another part of his action plan (53–55). He then expands both the idea of consistency and his own professional thinking by reaching out into the larger social and educational context in which his pupils live (56–58).

trusting use of non-defensive speaking, can help each one of us find ways forward in the development of our own teaching.

I hope it is clear that this work is not meant to be a general argument against our giving advice, making suggestions or evaluating each other's ideas in professional discussion. We need all of this. My point is that we have all of this – the tutti-frutti of conversational interaction – already in our lives as things stand. Non-defensive, non-judgmental work interests me because, when we make this additional, disciplined way of talking and thinking available to ourselves, for agreed periods of time among people who understand the shared rules of exchange, it provides an extra resource for our personal and professional development.

The extract I have used as the basis for this article is drawn from an interaction based on a specific, practical problem of classroom management. Even here, and even in such a brief extract, however, we can see how issues of personal and cultural awareness can be engaged. This is the implication that I wanted to include: that the conscious use of non-defensive speaking and non-judgmental understanding can help us deal with classroom problems, and also take us *beyond* problem/solution thinking. It can help us raise our

have made the effort. In a bigger picture, I sometimes dare to hope that it might have something to offer as an augmentation of professional communication in two further ways. First, as we work to live according to the values that we value, while learning to respect the values of others (Johnston). Second, to facilitate sincere communication among the various educational, social and political groupings that must be reconciled if we are to make the kinds of educational change that we believe our societies need (Clarke).

Perhaps I hope for too much. Perhaps I am too attracted to seeing how far I can go. I certainly find the style of work that I have briefly introduced here facilitative of individual and collegial development, from problems to plans of action, and beyond. 

Thanks to John Bartrick and Despina Jagaraki-Vraka for letting me use their collaboration as an example here. My thanks also to my colleagues at Aston University in our WRAP group, where we read and critique each other's draft texts. The faults remaining in this attempt to introduce a lot of ideas in a short article are, of course, all mine.

Clarke, M A *A Place to Stand: Essays for Educators in Troubled Times*
University of Michigan Press 2003

Johnston, B *Values in English Language Teaching*
Erlbaum 2002



Julian Edge teaches at Aston University and his main interests are in professional development and action research in ELT. His latest publication is *Continuing cooperative development: A discourse framework for individuals as colleagues* (University of Michigan Press).

J.Edge@aston.ac.uk

Extract 4

51	Speaker	Yes, children of that age especially need consistency ...
52	Understander	You mean, every time, the same thing ...
53	Speaker	Yes. OK. So, five minutes before the end of each lesson, they know, 'Now the teacher is going to tell us the homework so I must pay careful attention.'
54		Maybe that's the way they see it. And maybe I could ask how they do it at their regular school, the Greek school, and see if there's anything I could learn from that situation.
55		
56		
57		
58		

Moving beyond this article

There is only a certain amount of discussion that I can present in this brief article. I hope that what we can see happening in these teachers' work together might motivate you to follow up on this framework for collegial self-development. At one level, these data talk to us about an issue of classroom management with young learners in Greece. At another level, they talk to us about how the careful and skilful use of non-judgmental understanding, in combination with the committed and

awareness of ourselves and our contexts, clarify our ideas, and truly learn from our experience as we reach out toward our aspirations.



As a fruitful way of working together, therefore, this framework of non-evaluative discourse has proved robust across differences of educational setting as well as of national culture. Rather like learning a new language, it takes some discipline to master, but has brought satisfying rewards to those who

Writing for
ENGLISH TEACHING
professional

Would you like to write for ETp?
We are always interested in new writers and fresh ideas. For guidelines and advice, write to us or email:

editor@etprofessional.com