The Good Teacher— The View from the Bridge

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As I was looking through some recent editions of the *English Teaching Forum*, my attention was caught by an article entitled: "Ten Characteristics of a good Teacher" (Miller, 1987). I periodically ask a class to write on this, and I was interested to see how closely my students' views coincided with those of Ms. Miller.

However, on reflection, I realised that there is another dimension to the good teacher configuration which both my students and Ms. Miller do not touch on, namely the teacher as seen from the administrator's point of view. My growing appreciation of the importance of this stems from my experience over the past year. Apart from my normal assignment teaching linguistics, I have been engaged in setting up a co-ordinated language skills programme. It is designed to provide remedial work in English for those students wishing to join the English Department at the University of Kuwait and also to cover freshman language courses and some subsequent writing-oriented courses. All these courses had already been offered by the department but each teacher was largely independent as far as deciding what to teach and examine. Since we are dealing with eight courses, each of which might be taught in five or more sections, each by a different teacher, it is easy to see that more stringent co-ordination was indeed called for and that implementing it was not going to be an easy task. It is gratifying to report that we have had a considerable measure of success but—perhaps somewhat predictably—earned with trauma. However, although it has been a somewhat harrowing experience at times for all concerned, it has also been a professionally rewarding one.

One of the many insights I personally have obtained has been a keener awareness of the teacher's role, not just in the classroom, but as part of the broader working canvas. This is what I would like to focus on in the following remarks. Although there is always the possibility that some of the perceptions and situations I touch on may be local, applying only to our operation here in Kuwait, I suspect, on looking back over my experience in other countries, that they may have a wider validity and may be of particular interest to EFL teachers about to embark on a career overseas.

With apologies to Ms. Miller for using her format, here then is one administrator's list of good-teacher characteristics:

1. **I want a teacher who can work just as efficiently abroad as he can at home.**

In teaching, as in any other profession, motivation is a strong factor in determing how effectively a person will function in the job and may, in fact, over-ride many negative qualities inherent either in the person or in the job. Many EFL teachers enter the profession with a high level of motivation, attracted by the idea of

working abroad and having contact with what seem to be exciting, exotic cultures. However, all too often the problems of coping with these exotic cultures on a day-to-day basis are beyond the adjustment capacities of many. In this case, a certain sourness creeps into the teacher's general persona, a negativeness that is not only unattractive and dispiriting to those around, but also interferes with that person's ability to work with a will.

As an old Middle East hand, I have seen this happen countless times. Newcomers arrive fresh from their training courses or their pleasant job teaching EFL on an American campus. They then experience culture shock in varying degrees and the result is generally the development of a protective feeling of superiority over the host establishment and the growth of an over-critical cynicism.

This is difficult enough to deal with on a simple person-to-person basis but unfortunately, from an administrator's point of view, the problem goes beyond this simple formula. In the face of what they see as muddle, inefficiency, corruption, etc. (and to be fair, it probably *is*) many people adopt the philosophy of "if you can't beat 'em, join 'em". We therefore get a double-sided disillusionment taking place between the foreigners and the locals, who had always thought that westerners were models of punctuality and conscientiousness.

On this point, I do not wish to condemn or excuse. It is easy to criticise such behavior, but it is difficut to adjust to the very real cultural differences encountered in foreign postings. The point I wish to make is that the difficulties thus encountered seem more personality-engulfing for some people than for others and that, in some cases, some strange kind of masochistic drive (or perhaps it is, after all, simply the fear of unemployment) leads them on to continuing in the same kind of job situation. The problem, therefore, is not necessarily confined to the young and inexperienced, but may also persist in teachers with many years of service behind them. While it may be difficult to extract some degree of discipline and co-operation from the culture-shocked individual in late twenties or early thirties, imagine how difficult it is for the supervisor where the teacher is in his forties or fifties.

2. I want a teacher who is professionally informed.

Perhaps I should begin by explaining that in our department, the term "language teacher" may have as much to do with academic rank as it has to do with job description. This means that among our language teachers are not only EFL-trained people, but also teachers holding a master's degree in literature or linguistics.

Good teachers seem to be distributed fairly evenly throughout all groups so that it may be simplistic to insist on TEFL training. However, as an administrator, I do not wish to have to re-invent the wheel every time I supervise or discuss the preparation of an exam, for example, and I would like to feel that the teachers and I share at least a common vocabulary. For instance, I was recently disconcerted to discover that one of our teachers did not understand the meaning of the term *distractor* in the context of multiple-choice exam format. It also helps if I do not have to argue from first principles the rightness or wrongness of widely-accepted

techniques. Such discussions may be challenging exercises in a course on LT methodology, but can be emotionally draining and unproductive at the work-face.

I do not mean that I am against professional debate, but I feel there is a world of difference between that and trying to convince teachers of the appropriateness of certain techniques which may almost be taken for granted by people acquainted with the field. On this basis, therefore, I feel more comfortable in dealing with the teacher who has had some formal training in TEFL. However, in recognition of the fact that many of my colleagues do not have this training and yet are excellent to work with, I was careful to put in my heading my preference for teachers who are professionally informed and not necessarily professionally trained. Indeed, training is not enough. It should ideally be accompanied by some kind of professional aptitude. For example, I have received test items from TEFL-trained teachers who have presumably taken courses in testing, which would serve as text book examples of how not to write test items. Perhaps this is an area which shows improvement through experience and I should include this as an important corollary. However, again it has to be properly directed experience. The teacher who did not know the term *distractor* had served as an English teacher for about twenty years.

3. I want a teacher who is happy to be a language teacher.

My remarks here could be prefaced by exactly the same opening sentences as in item number 1. Given the importance of motivation and positive work attitudes, it is sad to reflect that there are many people in the teaching profession who do not really have a strong inclination to teach. However, I feel that the problem of poor teacher morale may be peculiarly aggravated in TEFL where the EFL teacher is employed in an English department in a foreign university.

Such teachers find themselves in a curious position: on the one hand they provide an essential service to that department, so they *are* a part of the department, but on the other hand, they do not teach the academic material which is the *raison d'etre* of the department, so in a sense they are *not* really a part of the department. Often highly intelligent, articulate, creative, conscientious, they find themselves in a working framework where not only are they paid less than their faculty colleagues, but they feel, unfortunately, less highly esteemed. In this sense, their position is somewhat different from that of a research or teaching assistant who may be occupying a temporary position while, or prior to, completing a Ph.D.

The situation is compounded by the fact that many EFL teachers find, after the initial enthusiasm for the job wears off, that there is a certain lack of intellectual challenge and dead end-ness in the teaching of EFL skills.

It would, perhaps, be of interest to have some concrete statistics on the drop-out rate from the profession. Speaking on a purely impressionistic basis, my feeling is that it may be sizeable. Many people I have worked with as language teachers in an English department or a language skills unit within a university have expressed dissatisfaction with their status. If we are

honest, I think we will admit that there may be some justification for this since, unless the individual goes into administration, there is no actual career structure involving promotion and concomitant salary increases. Thus, the situation of such a language teacher may be quite different from that of a teacher in a secondary school (I write from the British experience) who has a clearly-defined salary and career structure with regular increments throughout his period of service, along with prospects for promotion to posts within the same school system involving more responsibility. Once a language teacher reaches the maximum salary offered by the particular university he works for (and in my admittedly limited experience the maximum is usually reached within a fairly short space of time in terms of the over-all length of a career), then his only course of action if he wants to earn more money and still remain a teacher may be to move to work in another country.

For one reason or another, there would seem to be a fairly high degree of dissatisfaction in the profession and I often feel that TEFL is full of people who want to get out of TEFL. Whether you regard such unhappy colleagues as having a justifiable grievance or a chip on their shoulder, the outward manifestations of their plight show a certain sameness: low morale, restlessness and lack of commitment.

All of these present problems for the administrator, however much he or she might sympathize with the root cause. This may not be such a problem in, say, a language school where there is no daily rubbing of shoulders with a faculty 'elite' and where all the colleagues are of comparable status. It would be most interesting to hear from directors or supervisors in such establishments to know their experience.

4. I want a teacher who is conscientious and who will carry on the task even when not directly supervised.

One of the most unpleasant aspects of administration must be the 'policing' side of the job. In an ideal world of dedicated and paragon-like colleagues, perhaps this would not arise, but I for one do not live in this ideal world. Let me give an example. One of the attractions of teaching is the relative degree of freedom it allows the teacher in conducting the daily routine. However, this freedom may be interpreted quite widely by different individuals.

I feel that occasionally it may be more sensible to let a class leave early, say, when the material comes to a natural break five minutes before the normal finishing time rather than to try to start a new unit in the few remaining minutes. It's a matter of judgement.

However, what I am against are the teaching 'criminals' who steal time from their students on a fairly regular basis, sometimes wrapping it up with plausible-sounding rationalisations. For example, where a class is supposed to be taught on a daily basis throughout the working week for one hour at a time, these miscreants gain immediate popularity amongst their students by announcing they will hold class on only four days a week but that each class will last fifteen minutes longer. On the one hand, they overlook the fact that a class of

one hour may certainly be long enough for a skills course and that to stretch it like that may be unproductive in terms of students' concentration and attention span. On the other hand, after the first few sessions, these extra fifteen minutes have a way of being gradually whittled down to ten, then five, then zero minutes.

Proctoring is another case in point. Students would be amazed to hear some of the ingenious reasons some teachers give the supervisor as to why they were late for/absent for/would be unavailable for a proctoring assignment. We sometimes have large-scale exams with two hundred-plus students, all in one examination hall. Cheating in such circumstances is a sport many students like to take a chance at, so that proctors need the proverbial eyes at the backs of their heads. Sometimes I wonder if I am becoming paranoid about this because I have arrived at an examination hall to find only two proctors casually surveying the scene while their co-proctors were outside, having all developed a simultaneous, irresistible urge to smoke a cigarette at the same time. Other proctors, I have discovered, take advantage of the peace and quiet prevailing during an examination to read a newspaper. The *London Times* is useful on these occasions since, by holding it up full-spread in front of you, you can blot out the whole room and almost imagine yourself at the breakfast table at home.

5. I want a teacher who is well-organised and who thinks ahead.

Over the past year, I have expended considerable time and energy in sending out memos and making phone calls to teachers reminding them of the regular tasks to be done, and even more memos and phone calls drawing attention to deadlines past.

I am not objecting to this on the whole since it is perhaps a duty inherent in any supervisory system. What I do find disappointing is that teachers who have been working for a number of years in the same semester plan, where each semester follows a time-honoured course measured out by landmarks like mid-semester and end-of-semester exams, should still need reminding of dates for having exam material prepared, should still only start thinking about textbooks to be ordered for the next semester when the textbook order form is distributed. Before we initiated our present policy of co-ordinated courses and common exams, there were some instructors who gave their mid-semester exams only two or three weeks before the finals. It does not seem unreasonable to me to expect that teachers would have some sense of the structure of a semester and plan their work accordingly. If it is known that several major tasks all fall due around the same time, why not complete some of them ahead of schedule in the less busy period? Why wait until the co-ordinator or supervisor sends a reminder that the deadline is two days away, or was yesterday?

6. I want a teacher who is sympathetic but not too sympathetic.

This may be one of our 'local' problems, so I should perhaps give some details as to exactly what I mean. Since becoming involved in teacher supervision, I have been surprised at the fiercely protective attitude shown by some teachers towards

their students. I do not wish to be misunderstood on this. I am certainly in favour of being fair to students and of defending their case when they have one.

However, what I have discovered is that some teachers go to inordinate lengths to 'protect' those they teach, trying to make an exam less challenging, or pleading on behalf of a student that a paper has been too stringently marked (when two independent markers have already agreed on the grade), or being over-ready to give a student the benefit of the doubt. Facilely calling this the 'mother-hen syndrome' overlooks the fact that (a) it is not confined to women and (b) it seems to strike both motherly and non-motherly types. One misleading accompaniment to the trait often seems to be the public expression by these selfsame teachers of the need to uphold standards, to be firm, to be impartial, etc.

7. I want a teacher who is cheerfully obliging.

It is in the nature of the supervisor/teacher relationship that the former will ask the latter to perform certain tasks. These have to be done and, sooner or later, do actually get done.

How much more pleasant it would be if teachers would recognise this fact and comply with good grace. It is wearing to have to insist on something when both parties do really know that the job has to be done. As a corollary to this, I could put in a plea to have teachers who are mature enough to realise that the administrator is not everyone's enemy and that deadlines are not the product of sadistic malevolence on his or her part, but simply a necessary feature of normal working life. To be reminded of them should be looked on as a helpful service rather than simply an attempt to make their life a misery.

8. I want a teacher who shows involvement.

By this, I really mean that I want a teacher who realises that, if the job is to be worthwhile, you have to do more than the basic minimum. It is difficult not to sound priggish on this, but after many years of teaching I have found that it is true that the more you put into your lessons and the more you try out new ways of putting the lesson over, the more fascinating the whole process of teaching becomes. One's role as a teacher becomes less routine and mechanistic, and more creative and dynamic. One looks forward to going to class to see how the new idea will work out.

Of course, it's not easy to maintain this level of dynamism at a constant rate but, it seems to me that some teachers rarely experience the 'highs' that teaching can bring. They deprive themselves of much of the creative appeal of their profession by being too text-book oriented and rigidly fixed in their teaching approach. Generally this is because they want to get by on the minimum amount of preparation, but it is sad to reflect that by practising this kind of economy they may actually be short-changing themselves.

There is another aspect to job-involvement. Many teachers do not grudge their time and efforts as aimed directly at the student in the classroom, but are miserly when it comes to fulfilling tasks outside the classroom. This may be a very local grouse on my part since we are plagued by a shortage of secretarial

help so that getting examination scripts physically prepared, for example, may often cause problems. Collating and stapling of a multi-paged exam is a task which usually gives rise to considerable friction in our unit since some teachers simply refuse to do it. This means, of course, that the willing hands, as usual, end up doing the bulk of the work in a chore which would take very little time if everyone participated. A committed and involved teacher, I feel, could not simply walk away from such a task, however much he or she might resent the circumstances which give rise to it.

9. I want a teacher who can work with colleagues.

I have observed that some teachers may be excellent in the classroom, are hard-working, creative and conscientious, but are somewhat 'cagey' when it comes to sharing their ideas and material with colleagues, perhaps for fear that others will win the credit for their inspirational approach. Some teachers may feel that they are not excellent, and avoid professional contact with colleagues perhaps for fear of exposing their weaknesses.

I feel that these two attitudes are both natural and may be experienced at various times by any one teacher in the course of his career. However, where this professional isolationism is an on-going feature of a teacher's conduct, then we may expect problems. Whatever the underlying cause, whether it be professional insecurity, or the impatience of confident experience, or perhaps simply a dislike of one's colleagues, some teachers resent working in a group and cling grimly to their independence. The latter term is, of course, one which usually carries a strong positive connotation but, where an effort is being made to encourage a team approach, the fiercely independent teacher can actually—whether intentionally or unintentionally—sabotage attempts at co-ordination. Directives are ignored, meetings are missed, and the exasperation felt by others in the group is both morale-lowering and counter-productive.

However, even when they faithfully attend meetings, etc., some teachers still show an inability to work with colleagues. Teachers are nothing if not articulate and this verbal fluency can sometimes be a vehicle for extreme inflexibility. I am sure we must have all experienced the verbal steamroller who flattens a meeting through an undeviating, unyielding insistence on particularities deemed unacceptable or unimportant by the rest of the group.

Successful classroom teachers become adept at 'reading' their students and perceiving the minute signs of restlessness, boredom, interest , etc. that necessitate a change of pace or a shift of topic and it always surprises me that some teachers seem unable to transfer these skills and achieve a sensitive interaction with their colleagues. They hammer away at a point far beyond the level of reasonable discussion and may lose their case more through the resentment they incur from their colleagues than through any intrinsic flaw in their idea. However, to make matters worse, it is often the case that these steamrollers are right in what they are trying to put across but, simply because the point is being raised by *them*, the rest of the group—conditioned by previous bitter experience—falls automatically into the mode of maximum

resistance. I have indeed found that sometimes the majority *is* wrong and the rest of the group is simply trying to resist having to perform an unpalatable task. Therefore, there is a danger in simply attaching labels to people and thereby providing a means for neatly dismissing them. However, life would be so much easier if these individuals did not engage in the behaviour which earned them the labels in the first place!

My final thought on the matter of co-operating with colleagues concerns the question of criticism. Of course it would be wonderful if everyone at work could give and accept well-intentioned professional criticism on the ideal constructive plane advocated by all the best textbooks on successful group dynamics.

Unfortunately, reality is far from this utopia. Criticism is often handed out superfluously and unthinkingly among colleagues and with predictable results. Furthermore, even good professional criticism is not always gracefully accepted.

One area where this is likely to arise is in test construction, and I have known at least one very senior teacher refuse to entertain the suggestion that there was anything wrong with the items he submitted. Any discussion of his work was tantamount to a personal attack.

Being able to work well with colleagues implies that one has sufficient confidence both in them and in oneself to be able to learn from their criticism. Admittedly this is a two-sided matter, but in the absence of ideal standards of tactfulness, and assuming unfortunate thoughtlessness of expression rather than deliberate ill-will on the part of the critic, then we can all learn a great deal from colleagues and should try not to be over-sensitive.

Unfortunately, it seems that some teachers find this impossible. Perhaps feeling that teaching lacks a certain emotional excitement, they appear to compensate by injecting high drama into their working relationships. The chance word, the unpopular assignment, the inconvenient meeting time—anything can be the springboard to a major flare-up which may lead to an insidious cycle of attack and counter-attack between the individuals concerned. Another of my roles as administrator seems to be that of peace-maker or peace-restorer and it is all too easy to see from the outside how a little more patience and tolerance on the part of the protagonists would have prevented these feuds from ever getting started.

Having reached a total of nine characteristics, I'd like to see in a teacher, I seem to have reached a full stop and, from the point of view of my future working relationships, this is perhaps just as well. Other supervisors and co-ordinators may be able to add to my list and it would be interesting to read their contributions.

It has been very therapeutic for me to write down these thoughts and observations but, of course, the *raison d'etre* of the article was not to allow a harassed administrator the chance to let off steam. Nor was it aimed at trying to present the said administrator in any way as some kind of superior being. As a teacher myself, I have been guilty of many of the faults I complain about here, but have been too absorbed in the day-to-day demands of my own teaching to have been

fully aware of my role in the broader scheme of things.

Rather my aim has been to underline the importance of the out-of-class considerations that affect teachers and which may interfere with their in-class effectiveness. I feel it is valuable for teachers to maintain an aware and balanced perspective on how they slot into their particular working niche since it serves as a reminder of the responsibilities of what I can only call professionalism. It now remains for the *TESL Reporter* to carry, in some future edition, an article by language teachers on the characteristics of a good supervisor!

Editor's note: Responses to this challenge would be welcomed.

Reference

Miller, P. (1987). Ten characteristics of a good teacher. *English Teaching Forum, 25* (1), 40-41.