

THE DANGERS OF EMPATHY WITH STUDENTS

By Mario Rinvoluceri

Empathy is to teaching as oxygen is to human survival. If a teacher does not have the wish to see and feel things somehow from the student's point of view, then maybe she can present information but she cannot teach. Interestingly, the verb 'teach' takes the topic / subject as direct object, e.g. "I teach micro-biology," but it also takes the receiver of the information as direct object, "I taught her physics." For the sentence, "Mary taught John ornithology" to be true, Mary needs to have some way of feeling close to the way she understands John to perceive birds, and she needs to have some empathy with him in this area.

When I start work with a new group of students, one of my main intentions is to quickly ascertain what rapport I can develop with each person and with the group as a whole. I use a gamut of exercises that seek to bring people in the group into empathetic rapport with each other and with me.

I cannot imagine not investing time, at the beginning of a class, in this sort of basic human engineering. When I work with a student on a one-to-one basis, I use the empathy-achieving techniques that I have learnt from counselling, psychodrama and NLP (Neuro-Linguistic Programming). So, for example, I match my breathing to that of the student so as to have some reliable access to what mood she or he is in, I tend to speak slowly to slow-speaking students to help them to perceive me as co-member of the sensible, reasonable 'slow-speaking club', etc.

All the above needs to be said so you realise where I am coming from in pointing out the dangers that can be inherent in empathy, at least, for some people. Let me explain the idea I have of this danger area by using Columbus' achievement as a sort of metaphor. In three little caravels, he reached right across the vast ocean to the other continent - he effectively bridged the gap between - he reached right over to the edge of 'the other'. This is just what happens when a person tries to achieve empathetic rapport with another. Columbus' mistakes were to arbitrarily decide that where he had got to was where he had intended to get to, and that the edge of the other **was** the other. When a person gets into good rapport with another they have achieved 'edge overlap' - they have not mapped the whole continent. And yet the achievement of the human closeness of rapport can make a person feel they understand the whole from the edge. An ability to get

rapport and to feel things a bit from inside the other's skin leads to the danger of thinking you can really see the world from their point of view - empathetic rapport can lull you into ignoring your own vast ignorance of the other and the world they inhabit.

Let me give you an example of this from an encounter I had with deaf teachers who taught sign language to hearing people. I was invited to tell them about new methodological ideas from ELT that could be of use in teaching sign language to hearers. There were thirty signers of UK English in the group and one person who also knew American sign language. I decided to introduce them to Charles Curran's Community Language Learning. It worked this way: when one of the UK signers wanted to say something to someone across the circle, they called over the bilingual signer and signed to him in English. He then signed the same message back to them in American, and finally they signed their message in American across the circle and this was videoed. The bilingual signer was called by anybody who wanted to make an utterance. He was the teacher but he acted purely reactively. At the end of the free 'conversation', the group viewed the video tape and each participant in the conversation signed what he saw himself signing in American on the screen back into English to check his comprehension of it.



While this was going on, I was completely out of the picture and thought I was watching a lot of people discovering Curran's marvellously democratic language learning method. I was really happy to see how well the session was going. Everybody seemed to be energetically enjoying themselves. I felt well in tune with what was going on.



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Then came the feedback. The first thing I felt was the wind generated by a lot of very fast and angry signing. My interpreter was almost overwhelmed by the welter of questions he had to cope with all at once:

- "Is the teacher's role in this kind of teaching passive?"
- "When does the teacher do his job?"
- "Do you expect us to let our hearing students take over the class?"
- "You mean they sign exactly what they want?"
- "The only time we feel superior to hearing people is when we are teaching them. Are you suggesting we give this up?"

Was I in tune with them? I clearly had not had a clue as to where I had been for the last forty-five minutes. The edge of the continent, as I had perceived it, had nothing to do with its interior. My ignorance was indeed vast and the feeling of in-moodness and in-tuneness with these people had given me a quite wrong sense of understanding when I understood absolutely nothing. You cross the ocean in your caravels, you reach the shore of the other and you think you know something ...

Here is a second example of this taken from *An Unquiet Mind*, by Kay Jamison, (1995, Borzoi). As an undergraduate the author helped a blind student with his studies:

"I was very affected by working with him, seeing how difficult it was for him to do things I so much took for granted. As the term went on I felt increasingly comfortable in asking him about what it was like to be blind; what it was like to be blind, young and an undergraduate at UCLA, and what it was like to have to be so dependent upon others to learn and survive. After several months I had deluded myself that I had at least some notion, however small, of what life was like for him."

She found the edge of the continent of the other. One day the blind man asked her to meet him in the blind reading room in the University library:

"I tracked down the reading room with some difficulty and then started to go in. I stopped suddenly when I realised with horror that the room was almost totally dark. It was dead silent, no lights were on, and yet there were half a dozen students bending over their books or listening intently to audio tapes of the professors' lectures they had recorded. A total chill went down my spine at the eeriness of the

classroom dynamics

scene. It was one of those still, clear moments when you realise you haven't understood anything at all, that you have had no real comprehension of the other person's world."

Exploring Continents

The image of exploring continents is one that I have found useful when thinking about meeting new students. Focus on empathy and rapport are important to get me across the sea to the new continent, but landing on that beach does not give me a map of the mountain ranges, plains, valleys, deserts, forests, plateaux and lakes that lie beyond. As I gradually get to know the student, it is like a trans-continental journey, with periods of tedium, with moments of danger, with amazing surprises, with a continual, thrilled awareness of the person's otherness. Empathy is absolutely necessary to get me to the shores of the new continent, but it becomes troublesome if it makes me seriously think I know where I am. It is just a starting point on a journey of wonder.

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