EXPLORING THE TEEN EFL CLASSROOM:
THE STUDENTS, THEIR TEACHERS, AND THE TANGLES OF DEALING WITH
DISCIPLINE AND MOTIVATION

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BY

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses specific elements of teaching teens in an EFL context, in particular the areas of teen motivation and discipline. This was a teacher’s development project involving six teachers (including the writer), and lasting for one semester in a Brazilian bi-national language institute. The project was built on videotaped class observations, readings, group meetings, and journal writings. The result was a deeper reflection into the developmental stage dubbed “teenhood”, followed by subsequent considerations of motivation and discipline of teen groups, the role of the teen teacher, the importance of knowing and connecting with the inner teacher, and practical implications for teen class dynamics.

ERIC Descriptors:

Student Teacher Relationship
Student Attitudes
Teacher Attitudes
Teacher Improvement
Language Teachers
Secondary School Teachers
Classroom Techniques
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INTRODUCTION

There are some moments in our lives we recall clearly: Small moments, moments of extreme bliss, or great fear, all breakthroughs of some sort. Though we may in our memories color these moments with different hues, and include details that better serve our feelings or overall message – the heart of the truth of the moment remains in our memory for years and years – getting stronger each time we remember it.

For me, these moments are usually moments of intense feeling, or of an inner click – an insight – a moment of clarity of meaning. The process of my IPP was triggered by such a moment. The springboard for my IPP was actually a combination of two memorable experiences – the first one embedded in the second. In the second experience, I remembered and relived a powerful, previous insightful experience. In this connection of meaning, my IPP was born.

It happened in a classroom. Twelve rowdy teenagers, led by three particularly willful kids, terrorized this teacher’s classroom. I was called in to observe and try to help the teacher. That was a big part of my job as a supervisor – to help teachers in trouble. And it seemed that this was the most common sort of trouble.

In an English institute of 1,200 students – 90% of whom were teens – the two most heard complaints were along the lines of: (1.) “I can’t stand these kids: They are rich, spoiled rotten, and no one has taught them respect. They don’t want to be here, and they do whatever they like.” or (2.) “They are bored out of their minds; nothing is good enough for them; nothing interests them; they don’t like anything. Anything you offer them, they will hate.”
So there I was again, observing a class where the complaint was of the first kind, but more along the lines of, “Those little monsters are driving me crazy. There is nothing you can do with them, really, nothing. Their parents just have not taught them respect. How am I supposed to do that?”

What I observed was scarily close to that description. The class wasn’t that big – twelve students – and no doubt the kids in the class were all members of the upper class, but certainly with different kinds of background and education. Yet they were at the command of three more outspoken kids, one boy in particular with a very powerful, deep voice, who insisted on using the their L1 (Portuguese) in spite of the teacher’s pleas for them to speak in English. These kids talked out of turn, talked to each other, made improper jokes, stood up and walked around in front of the teacher, ignored the teacher, threw small objects at each other, teased each other, poked each other, and downright refused to do the exercises the teacher proposed.

I stood there feeling sorry for the teacher as I watched her completely lose herself in the chaos that her class was becoming. This was a tough one. The chaos was so pervasive, it was hard to know what to look at first. While I was looking at the kids, my eyes wandered back to the loud, deep-voiced kid who for a moment was quietly looking at the teacher with a smirk on his face, decidedly pleased with himself.

Though I know that as teachers our fantasies sometimes fly to thoughts that students act like little sadists, and that they enjoy the pain they know they inflict, I had always rejected that line of thinking. I had too many other good reasons to explain teenage behavior in the classroom to consider “sadistic pleasure” as an option. I always blamed it on a large array of different variables: upbringing, the vulnerability of learning,
the vulnerability of being a teen, fear of being exposed in the class, fear of growing up, not knowing their place in the world, hormonal and physical changes, testing limits, having a lack of limits, and even their own perceived lack of love.

I was about to add another ingredient to the pot. In the millisecond of observing that boy’s smile in that classroom, I was taken back in memory-time to another classroom, one where I was a student – not as a teenager, but as an adult at the School for International Training (SIT). It was our first summer at SIT, and I was sitting in a circle with Shakti Gattegno. We were all enraptured in the feeling of discovery that moment brought.

We were talking about learning, and Shakti asked us why we thought babies learned how to speak. Impulsively, I offered an answer: “To communicate”. “No,” she tells us, “babies can communicate very well without needing to talk.”

She then told us about George Mallory and his answer to the reporter’s question of why he wanted to climb Mt. Everest. He simply answered: “Because it’s there.” The overpowering feeling behind it was clear: “Because I can.” It’s a basic feeling I think most understand instinctively as the power of challenge – of challenging the human spirit. It’s a basic human characteristic, and it’s with us every day of our lives.

It was there in the smile of that boy. It wasn’t simple cruelty. This boy was genuinely satisfied with his Mt. Everest in the classroom. Why was he doing this? Why challenge the teacher like that? “Because it’s there. Because I can.”

The connection of meaning in my mind was extremely strong. It was meaning and feeling. Sure it was only a hunch. I was not the boy and this was merely my observation, maybe my own projection of the teacher’s quest for control. I could be wrong. I could be
attributing a false meaning to this boy’s intentions. But still the itch of a new curiosity was there. I had to explore these thoughts further.

I had a very real problem on my hands – not only for that teacher, but for our school as a whole. We had teachers daily coming in feeling lost, frazzled, broken-hearted, losing themselves in the classroom. And since a teacher’s intrinsic intention is to help and build, why was there all this pain?

Teachers would come in early, prepare their classes with love, attend workshops and fill their bag of tricks with new games and activities for the classroom. They would bring all sorts of props to class, try different approaches, and at the end of the day it seemed they had been shot down again.

I owed it to them and to myself to explore all the possibilities that could lead to discovery and to our development as a group. The problem, I suspected, lay in many different areas, ranging from the teacher and knowing oneself (and Parker Palmer was close to my thoughts then), to the students (and the issues of these kids), to the school itself (and maybe an administration that did not give the teachers the support they needed). I was determined to explore all angles.

I had already started exploring the theme of teenage discipline and motivation on a personal level many years ago – a story I will later explain. But with each passing day it seemed that my path down this road was more and more pronounced.

So this was it, my personal quest – searching for means to improve teenage classroom dynamics – matched with a blatant need: the teacher’s call for more discipline and motivation of teen students in the classroom. I was going to mix all of my theories
and observations with more research and probing to try to come up with a few more theories and possibilities in this area. And there you have it: An IPP.
PART ONE

THE PROCESS
CHAPTER TWO

PERSONAL MOTIVATION

Now this was not going to be easy. Before I go into the process itself, here’s a valuable personal anecdote. I wasn’t always a savvy teen teacher (not that I can call myself one now). And I am not always successful with teens. Even as I write this, I know this doesn’t sound the least bit modest, but I know I’ve come a long way from where I started out.

My first year of teaching teens was all about fear – my fear of them – my desire to make them like me – my trying to seduce them into liking me. I played games every day, all the time (even ones that had no real learning value to them). I allowed them to talk about their own personal problems in class – in Portuguese. I even brought them movies we watched for much more time than we should have. Oh, and most of what went on in class was in Portuguese. The students loved me, and I trained them to do well on the test – working solely for the purpose of passing the test – working hard for the first fifteen minutes of the class and then spending the rest of the class being buddies with my teens.

At the time, I was twenty-three-going-on-sixteen myself, and was happy that the kids liked me and left me alone. I was clearly concerned that they weren’t really learning and terrified of what would happen if the administration found out about what was going on most of the time in my classes. There was also my conscience shouting in my ear: “You are not helping them learn. You are hanging out with them, and maybe catering to other emotional needs of these kids (I was a psychology major in college at the time), but you are not doing what you are being paid to. You are not helping them learn English.”
The second year, I taught teens, I changed my approach completely; it was a 180-degree loop from where I had started out. I decided I was going to teach them English whether they liked it or not. I went in hard the first day of class, authoritarian, laying down the law, telling them what was allowed and what was not, threatening them with negative points and calling parents, scaring them with the perspective of not passing, going from exercise to exercise – avoiding games as kids can get rowdy and out of control in them – and giving them little room for self-expression. The main reason for the latter being that I was not sure how I would react to humor that bordered on tasteless, or how to return from digressions of an emotional kind, both of which would take time away from “class time”. I really didn’t know how to draw the line between appropriate and inappropriate, so I decided to skip the whole subject altogether.

Students did respect me during that time – I think some even feared me. I was sharper with the tongue than they were (having had plenty of experience being taunted by teens in school myself), and they feared being humiliated in front of the others. In one particular class, I had one student who was particularly defiant and disrespectful, and in one face-to-face confrontation in class, I said something that made him cry. I cannot for the life of me remember what it was. I know I didn’t use any bad words or anything of the sort, because I never did, I knew better than that. But whatever it was I said really hurt this kid, and he began to cry and ran out the door.

I was in shock. At the end of that day, I went to my supervisor and asked her not to make me teach teens anymore. I could not figure them out. I went into class feeling like I was about to mount a wild horse, and at the end of class I felt exactly that exhausted – as if I had been tightly holding on to the reins of a kicking, spirited animal for an hour,
and that if I relaxed for one second I would get thrown off. I didn’t like the exhaustion.

But worse, I didn’t like how I felt about myself.

I hated that whenever I was in a class of teens, I felt the way I did. Of course this is an exaggeration and some groups were adorable, and those were a joy to teach – but many other groups had two or three “bad apples” that would completely take over and then… well, it was a matter of joining them (like I had the first year) or dominating them (like I tried to the second year). I was tired of these battles I could not win. I did not like myself in this scenario, and I figured I needed to leave before I lost myself in the process.

I remember the look of sheer disappointment in the eyes of my coordinator – Maria Estella Pinheiro Franco (Teli), the coordinator of my branch and the teen department of our school at every branch. She was one of the three people whom I considered to be my greatest professional mentors. She had taught me so much, and had trusted me and given me my first opportunity as a teacher. I looked up to her and admired her work and her management of teen groups.

She looked saddened and said, “What a pity, Anna. I always thought you would make a great teen teacher some day. You have a gift for it. It’s a pity you don’t want to explore it.”

I was speechless. I didn’t know what to say. That single moment had broken my heart. How could I let her down? And she believed in me. I went home feeling lousy and felt lousy all weekend long. Finally on Sunday, I made a decision that changed my professional life: I was not going to let her down. If she believed in me, I owed it to myself and to this person who had invested so much in me, to give it my best shot. And
though I had tried different approaches, I had not given it my best shot yet. I could do better. I had a Mt. Everest myself to climb. It was there – the question was: Could I do it?

I have been climbing this mountain since that day. It was very tough at first, I have slipped many, many, many times, but I have seen many beautiful landscapes. Sometimes I think I have reached the summit, and I act pretty cocky for a while, but then I realize there is a new peak to climb, and it’s out to tracking that troublesome terrain again. But this has been a lonely voyage for the most part. I was discovering myself as a teen teacher, and trying to learn about them as teen learners, and how we worked together in the English institution scenario.

During the years that followed, I was made a supervisor and my job extended to helping other teachers out. I understood a lot of their pain, and shared some fears we had in common, I also shared with them some of my personal findings and put out questions that I thought would help them. Many of these questions I did not have answers to myself, but I figured I could still discuss them with these teachers – maybe there would be discovery there.

But I did not come up with a true joint effort to work on teacher development concerning motivation and discipline of teens until this IPP project was proposed. Suddenly, all of the informal conversations, ramblings, thoughts, questions, and doubts would have a chance to be systematically observed and addressed by a group of people.

The first thing I had to think of was – who would my traveling companions be? I needed people like me – not in our teaching style, variety would be best here – but in our desire to climb a mountain. These teachers needed to be willing to look into themselves,
to look into their teaching selves, to expose themselves to the dangers of going into uncharted territory. I needed open-hearted, dedicated, persevering, brave volunteers.

I needed to put forth a proposal; I needed to shape this project. After careful consideration of our schedule and what could be realistically done within our time constraints, I wrote out an initial proposal (see appendix 1) for Alumni (the English language institute I work for in São Paulo, Brazil) and submitted it.
CHAPTER THREE

SCHOOL CONTEXT

The teachers involved in this IPP project and I all work at the same language institute – Associação Alumni. “Alumni”, as we call it, is a bi-national center – the USA / Brazil – that fosters language and cultural exchanges between the two countries.

Alumni is a non-profit language institute and it provides services to the community. However, the school’s main source of income is its English program, which caters to the society of very wealthy in São Paulo (the wealthiest state in Brazil). The school is divided into five branches. The branch I work at has approximately 1,200 students – 90% of whom are teens. We are therefore called a “teen” branch since most of the students who study at our branch are teens. This is not necessarily the case at the other branches.

The English Program is divided into four major age group programs – Juniors (ages 5-9), Pre-Teens (ages 10-12), Teens (ages 13-16), and Adults (16-17 and older). The course load varies according to each program. We will be working only within the context of the Teen English Program.

The Teen English Program is composed of nine core levels, and two advanced levels we call “high-intermediate” for the teens who go beyond that (though the course is named “high-intermediate”, the books used are all labeled “advanced”, and in most standards, students at this level could be considered high-intermediate or advanced). Teens that go even further beyond our “high-intermediate” courses can then take the adult-level advanced courses (they are usually 16 by the time they reach this level).
Each teen level lasts approximately four months (our semester), and the school operates with teens in a semester-based manner. Levels One through Six for teens are taken twice a week for 50-minute sessions each (Monday/Wednesday, or Tuesday/Thursday). From Teen 7 on, students take classes twice a week for 1 hour-50 minute sessions each (Monday/Wednesday, or Tuesday/Thursday).

The teachers in this project were all teaching classes within the first six levels of teens – specifically Teen 3, Teen 4, and Teen 5. Consequently, they saw their students twice a week for 50 minutes each time, and these courses lasted about four months – the first semester of 2004. I was the only teacher with a group that differed very much from the rest. I was teaching an Intermediate 1 group, which meant two hours, twice a week. This course also lasted four months.

Though any student from ages 13 to 16 could be placed according to level in any teen level from 1 to 9, you could break down the levels in our project in the following manner:

- Teen 3 – Ages 13-14 mostly – Level: High Beginner
- Teen 4 – Ages 13-14 mostly – Level: High Beginner / Low Intermediate
- Teen 5 – Age 14 mostly (some 13 and some 15) – Level: Low Intermediate
- Intermediate Teen One – Ages 15-16 mostly – Level: High Intermediate / Advanced

The school not only endorsed this project, but it also gave me a lot of freedom to work with the teachers, trusting that the spirit taught at SIT would be useful in this endeavor. Alumni is an institution that is familiar with SIT education and believes in it. They also value teacher development and invest heavily in this area – so it really allowed me to work quite openly with the teachers.
Main Challenge of this Context:

In spite of giving great support to the teachers and supervisors that work for it, Alumni has its limitations regarding the support it can give its teachers concerning students. In catering to the very wealthy of São Paulo, we are often confronted with problems dealing with the most powerful citizens of Brazil’s wealthiest state. This is particularly a problem in the Junior, Pre-Teen, and Teen Programs.

While some parents are very active and participate closely in their child’s education, many other children are practically brought up by the staff of the house. It is not uncommon for parents to be substituted in Parent/Teacher meetings by drivers, nannies, governesses, or even in one case of mine – the mother’s secretary.

Parents are often away and the education of the child, particularly one that is used to receiving money and gifts in place of quality time, can be faulty. And here is the challenge to teachers – when confronted with a child that believes that everything is “bought” – how far does your role as a teacher go? Are you at this moment an educator or merely a language instructor?

And here is the only place where the school’s philosophy is not clear. At one point I heard, “It is Alumni’s language teacher’s role to ‘inform’ not to ‘form’”. Yet Alumni seems concerned with issues of discipline and motivation, and I cannot separate these from aspects of a student’s formation.

This will be discussed to greater length as we discuss each issue. This is just to state this particular challenge the school deals with, and the challenge of this one aspect of the school’s philosophy that is not clear to all teachers.
Another challenge that we had to face was the issue of “guidelines”. The teen course is all divided into a day-by-day program. When a teacher receives their assignment to teach a teen course, they receive a binder with a day-by-day, activity-by-activity plan of the course. These class plans are called “guidelines”, and as supervisors, we tell the teachers that the guidelines are only there as backup, and that teachers should adapt the guidelines freely according to their needs. However, this is not what happens.

In effect, the guidelines have become an excuse for bad teaching. When teachers are insecure, they rely heavily on the guidelines and follow them like a bible, rather than really looking at their source of insecurity in the classroom and dealing with that.

As a result, the guidelines end up creating a barrier between the teacher and the students. The teacher is not looking at his or her class, trying to understand its particular dynamics – no, the teacher is following a manual, and in doing so is creating a greater barrier between teacher and students.

In some situations, teachers are pressed for time, as living in Brazil and making a living as a teacher is not the easiest thing, and teachers often work two jobs. Thus, it is also convenient not to have to plan your class at all – just come to school and take out “Day 3” and follow it step-by-step. Particularly with teens, this is not ideal. Teens are continually in motion, they have different moods, and different compositions in class will create entirely different groups.

Ignoring your group and following a recipe is usually a sure way to create a chasm between the teacher that teaches and the students who could potentially learn. It just makes Pink Floyd’s “Another Brick in the Wall” all that more perfect as a teen anthem. Getting teachers away from the guidelines was another challenge.
CHAPTER FOUR

THE PROPOSAL & PROJECT OUTLINE

The initial proposal for this IPP project had some general guidelines, intended tools to be used, and a proposed timeline and schedule. I realized of course when I wrote out my initial proposal that it would suffer modifications. Among the many things that I learned at SIT was that you needed to go with what the moment called for – that planning was necessary, but we also should be open and aware of the moment in order to really be effective.

Though I had an initial idea of what I wanted to do, and was able to structure it into a plan, I realized that the project would be led by the needs of the group of individuals working together. So, Step 2 was to find those individuals.

As soon as the proposal was accepted, I condensed it into a “learning” pitch to find volunteers to join me in this project. What I came up with was a short blurb and sign-up list (see appendix 2) that went up on the teacher’s room bulletin board. I wanted to have a small group of five people and myself so we could work closely and deeply together, and so I put up a sign-up list with six slots for six names – being generous but at the same time scared that I would get maybe one or two signatures only.

The blurb made it clear that this project would require a lot of work, and I wasn’t offering anything in return beyond self-knowledge. This is something I treasure, but in the practical world of today, I wondered how alluring it would be. I was relieved and elated when I found that five people exactly had signed up two days later.

The first meeting of the group (see appendix 3) was extremely significant for it would establish how we would end up working in reality. This is where needs assessment would
come in, and I would check and see if what I wanted to go after was the same as what my
volunteers needed. The initial proposal would undergo its first restructuring after this
meeting.

Gladly, I found my initial views weren’t too far off. The group of teachers I was
working with seemed, like me, to have had trouble in similar areas – involving
motivation and discipline of teen groups.

At the end of that first meeting, we altered our initial proposal to what actually
happened in terms of process. The process was divided according to the following items:

1. **Class Observation:** Each one of us was observed three times teaching the same
group over the course of a semester. Rather than just have me observe them, and
them observe me as initially proposed, we created a “buddy system”.

   I did observe all the teachers twice, and they came and observed my class at
least once (problems with scheduling made it impossible for some of them to
come and observe me), but they also set up a similar buddy system for another
observation – the videotaped class.

   This buddy system worked within the set format of the class observations for
this project (see appendix 4). What it basically meant was that we would pair up
and videotape our partner’s class and work around that one videotaped class with
our “buddies” – going through the class observation process with our “buddies” in
the proposed structure of the project.

   According to the proposed structure for class observation in this project, every
class observation session was composed of three parts – (1) pre-observation
meeting and discussion, (2) “during”-observation tasks and note-taking, (3) one-on-one post-observation meeting and feedback session. In the process, there was also a writing component for both observer and observed (see appendix 5).

In the videotaped session, there was a different questionnaire for the viewing portion of the process (see appendix 6). Pairs had a longer feedback session for this one class - the first part without the video, and the second part watching the video together.

Pairs had a viewing task, and discussed both their notes from before viewing, as well as those guided toward the viewing experience – relying on different experiences (with and without the video component), and contrasting feelings in both.

2. Group Meetings / “Swapshops”: These were held on Fridays every two or three weeks. We changed the original intended schedule to fit our needs. We figured around the middle of the semester that we needed more sessions, and had a harder time at the end of the semester to meet every other week, so we adapted the calendar as we went along – ensuring at least one meeting every three weeks. The time span of these meetings was also altered – I had thought originally of two hours per Friday, but some Fridays we went to two and a half hours, and one came out to three (with one teacher having to leave earlier but the others remaining).

3. Reading and Research of Published Materials: This was the part that was perhaps the most neglected of the workshop. It was not intentional, but there was
so much focus on what we were producing ourselves that the reading part of the project was left a bit aside.

I handed out reading “assignments” (see appendix 7) to be read in between group meetings – to be discussed in the next group meeting. What invariably happened was that we would start talking about some other aspect of the project and we would run out of time before we could hit the discussion of the reading. Also, not all participants had read the text, and in the end, we could almost never get to the discussion of the text as related to our classes. Our classes and our own ideas took up too much time in our meetings.

The two texts we were most effective in discussing were two of the first three texts – Introduction and Chapter One from “The Courage to Teach”, and *Extrinsic vs. Intrinsic Motivation* chapter from “Teaching by Principles”¹. As the group meetings moved further away from the readings and deeper into self-reflection, I left the readings aside as “optional” readings, and one participant in particular took full advantage of them and even contributed her own text (note bibliography), while others used whatever they needed more of (such as individual meetings to discuss class observation, journal writing, and group meeting time) to cover their needs.

4. **Journal Writing**: For me, this was where I made much of my discovery, where I put together things I had observed from different teachers. Sometimes, I had great “ah-ha” moments in observing a teacher, or in talking to a teacher, or in listening

---
to them during our discussions. But it was when I put it down on paper that I fully enjoyed the unfolding of different aspects of these “ah-ha’s”.

I cannot say, however, that this was true of all of the participants of the workshop. The enjoyment of journal writing was different for different participants. Only one of them had ever kept a journal before, and even this one had done it more for private matters while going to university than for academic purposes.

Being overwhelmed with work also posed a problem and participants often did not have enough time to dedicate to their journals, as they would have liked. As a result, some of the participants only had two or three entries, and I felt that in our group meetings and discussions, they had said much more and had much more to say than what they ended up putting down on paper. It felt like the completion of the journal was just a “required” task and time was short. On the other hand, some entries were very rich in content and it just made me wonder what we could accomplish with more time and a school system in a utopian society that would allow teachers more reflection time.

This was one area I felt I we could have produced more as a group. I guess there was so much going on (one semester can be very short when it is very intense), that in the end, they felt they got more out of the activities in our swapshops and all that surrounded the class observation portion – discussions and paperwork that went specifically into those situations.
5. **Informal Consequences of the Project:** Something that was not predicted at the beginning of this project was how the project would influence the teachers and move them beyond the borders of what was proposed.

What I saw happen in the teacher’s room as a result went beyond what I had imagined. The teachers were meeting among themselves, informally, to discuss aspects of the project. They developed a bond of friendship, trust, and camaraderie that allowed them to be more open with each other.

It also guaranteed the teacher-development continuity. After we finished, four of the five teachers continued on as a group, with their own new project – developing their English skills further. They asked for help of another advanced English teacher to help them further develop their vocabulary and writing skills in order to teach more advanced students.

After much thought on how to present this project to my reader, I have decided to focus briefly on each one of the participants in terms of their own process, and then condense all of our findings and discussions into the second part of this paper – “The Findings”.

The parts of our process discussed briefly above will be included for each of the participants.
CHAPTER FIVE

THE PROCESS FOR THE TEACHERS

The Teachers and I

Though a participant in this project at the same level as all the other teachers, the fact that I was their supervisor in our work environment may have played a part in our interaction. I told all of the participants when we began that this was an exploratory project, that we would be finding things out together, and that they were as much of an authority on the subject of teaching teens as I was, and that we were going to learn together. Even so, on occasion, I felt that the participants looked up at me as if I held the hidden answers to many of the mysteries involved in teaching teens. I did not, and I do not.

I hold no truths or answers, only my findings and thoughts which I will share with you, after I briefly talk about each participant’s experience. Because of the very subjective nature of this project, I will briefly describe my observation of the project as it concerned each one of the people involved, but I will save my own deeper observations for the “Findings” part of this paper.

I have the deepest admiration and respect for the teachers involved in this project, and because I do, I will try to make my observations as direct as possible. I believe we all profited from this project, each one of us in a different way. Because we all had different learning experiences, I will give you, the reader, only an overview of the teachers’ experiences, and then proceed to the “Findings” part of the project where I can offer my own subjective interpretation of the project as a whole.
Andrea

Brief Description of the Teacher:

Andrea is from the state of Rio de Janeiro. She was 30 years old when we started our project, and had 1.5 years experience teaching teens – six months at another English language institute, and one year at Alumni-Rio.

She holds a degree in journalism and worked for eight years as a journalist in the production phase of documentaries. She got tired of the lifestyle involved in this profession and decided for a career change.

Despite having little experience teaching, Alumni believed she had potential and hired her after the trial training period. I was Andrea’s supervisor in Rio, and we developed a very close relationship working together, since she had very little experience teaching teens. When Alumni-Rio closed, we both moved to São Paulo – in her case, coincidentally, her husband was being transferred to SP at the very same time – and our project began during her very first semester in São Paulo.

Andrea is a dedicated professional, who is welcoming and open to feedback and very interested in improving her teaching skills. She is sweet, funny, charismatic, cheerful, and easy to like. She is also transparent where her feelings are concerned and is quick to say exactly what is on her mind, without necessarily weighing her words. She is honest and sincere, which is abundantly clear when dealing with her, in any situation. She also cares very much about what she does – and this is equally transparent in all things she does.
Class Context:
Andrea was teaching a Teen 3 class of eleven students at 6 PM. These kids had been studying all day, and then came to school after a long day of working hard, and their desire to still be in class was not the greatest. Furthermore, many of them came together in a same van from school and arrived at class in a rather euphoric mood from playing around in the van. The level of the students in class was also different, having some students that were good and others that were very weak.

Personal Challenge and Objectives:
Andrea’s challenge was a mix of motivating her students to stay on task and keeping them together as a group. The group was scattered into mini-groups. There were some students who paid attention, others who wanted attention, others who thought it was too easy, and others who thought it was too hard. Andrea seemed to be having a hard time focusing on her group as a whole too.

When they had group discussions, she had a hard time keeping the group together - some would pay attention, some would not be able to keep up and would ask questions that kept breaking her flow, and others would simply space out and either daydream or start poking their partners and disrupting class.

When she proposed small group activities or pair work, some groups were able to complete the activity quickly and then proceeded to play around and become disruptive, while others demanded a lot of her individual attention asking her all kinds of questions related to the activities.
Portuguese was spoken most of the time during her classes, with English being spoken mainly only to fulfill the requirements of a given exercise.

Her students were mainly friendly toward her as she was friendly toward them. They related to each other on a very personal level – some students were disruptive but funny, and Andrea was able to laugh with them at their jokes, even though these did disrupt and derail her class often.

Then, when finally they took it too far and she would lose her patience, she would react in a strong manner and not necessarily weigh her words in doing so, which could hurt students’ feelings in the moment, or cause them to retract while not really understanding the incongruity of a teacher who is so open and laughs so much and then suddenly chastises them with such honest, direct, and incisive comments as she would sometimes make.

In Andrea’s journal, here is what she established as her personal goals:

“1. To be able to understand the students’ needs and to look after them, to understand when a student is bored because the class is boring, and be capable of changing; 2. To make a (good) difference in their lives, to know when to be just nice and know when to be rigorous, but still nice; 3. To pay attention to the signs students give, and to convert these signs into something positive when planning classes; 4. To never give up on a student.”

**The Project Experience**

It seems to me that Andrea went through many personal discoveries during the course of the project. I guess that was also because she had been teaching teens for a very short time, and there was just so much room for discovery. It was a pleasure to watch her go through all of these different moments, explore these topics so bravely, and examine herself so earnestly and come up with meaning.

Here are some excerpts from her journal:
“It was also good to think about the things that were interesting to us and realize how important these interests are to them. It gives us at least one undoubted fact: we have to bring their interest to the classroom in order to make our classes appealing, and therefore, to make them engage.”

“We also talked about our daily evaluation of classes and the importance of reflecting on the concrete experience: to see what worked and what didn’t, and from this point, try to create new strategies to bring positive changes to our classroom.”

“So I guess we have to show them that we care. When a teacher manages to show all students that they are important and that it is important that they engage, then I think we have achieved our responsibilities.”

It was clear that as Andrea went through this project, she put a lot of thought into how to reach her students, what was involved in her role as a teacher, and ways of changing herself and her classes to reach her goals.

As a whole, in terms of how her thoughts and reflection affected her classes, I believe that she changed most where class preparation is concerned. As she reflected on each of her classes, and as we had our group meetings and discussed our thoughts, Andrea had new ideas as to how to change the way she was teaching.

She began to adapt the activities in her class more. And though she still depended on the guidelines for each course a lot (she confessed these gave her a sense of security), she was able to be more creative and learn with her experiences.

One of her experiences was with the control of Portuguese (L1). She implemented a game (the Apple Tree Game – see appendix 9) that was suggested to her during a group meeting to try to control the use of the L1 in class, but it did not work. We examined why it did not work, and she was able to go back into class and discuss this with the students and come up with another activity that worked better. Though her class was still not ideal in terms of her expectations regarding the use of L1 in class, she was more satisfied with the results than before, and it did make the students try to use English more.
Andrea also experimented with changing the order of the activities, including extra activities, and adapting the timing of each activity to fit the needs of her group. She had to think of pacing and sequencing more specifically for that group, considering their dynamics and the challenge presented by what she was teaching that day - her group needed a lot of “practice”, and so her P-P-P pyramid included a very large amount of practice, and in some situations she would change her pyramid into a kind of winding staircase: Practice – presentation – practice – practice – practice – production. She also adapted activities to fit the interests of her group.

Most importantly, Andrea became more aware of herself. She became more aware of when things started to bubble within her, what kind of things bothered her and why, and learned not to withhold until she burst. She was able to remember what she was like as a teen, and realize that many times a lot of the things teens do are not because they hate the teacher, but simply because they have other things on their mind – other priorities, other motivations.

This awareness made it possible for her to bond better with her students and not be hurt when sometimes things didn’t work out quite as she had planned. At the end of the semester, I don’t think Andrea had her ideal class with this group we worked with, but still, it was a long way from what it was when she started.

As an observer and participant in this project, I was very impressed with the depth of thought, awareness, and understanding Andrea was able achieve. I believe she will continue to take these insights to another concrete level in the future as she experiments and works with teens. I think the spirit of curiosity, and caring for her profession, is very strong in her.
**IVETE**

**Brief Description of the Teacher:**

Ivete is from São Paulo. She was 50 years old when the project began; she has a degree in languages and Portuguese literature from Pontificia Universidade Catolica of São Paulo – one of the most prestigious universities in the country. She had 30 years of teaching experience teaching teens prior to this project, and she taught for most of these at another famous language institute in São Paulo – Cultura Inglesa.

Ivete appears to be more in her forties than fifties. She is very cheerful and upbeat. She is savvy in many different teaching techniques, and she has been around the block more than a couple of times as far as dealing with teens. Ivete is flexible and knows the importance of reading her group and bonding with them in order to create a fruitful learning environment.

She was the most experienced teacher of the group and she was open to us and helped the group tremendously.

**Class Context:**

Ivete had a Teen 5 group of nine students at 10:30 in the morning. There were four girls and five boys. Though the boys were a majority, the girls appeared to be more developed (looked older and maybe more mature), and were more outspoken.

The kids in this group were friendly and open to each other. The teacher promoted a lot of group activities and pair work, and the students worked well together. The teacher plays an L1-controlling game (the Apple Tree Game – see appendix 9) with this group.
that worked very well, so mainly the students stuck to speaking English. As a whole, it seemed like a very pleasant group to work with.

**Personal Challenge and Objectives:**

As far as challenges go, it seemed that Ivete had her class exactly where she wanted it, so I had a hard time imagining what she would write down as her main challenge.

Watching her teach was a real pleasure. She got along well with the students and they seemed to trust her. The only possible glitch would have been the age difference, and so Ivete would appear to be more of a motherly figure than a ‘pal’. They might not be into the same things – TV shows, songs, etc. – and thus sharing in the students’ interests might take some research on the part of the teacher. But otherwise, Ivete seemed perfect as the teacher of this group of teens.

Even so, we all have our own personal challenges, and Ivete wrote in her journal that:

“Although my students participate a lot, have good grades on the tests, volunteer to do the activities, I still feel that sometimes they get bored in the classroom. This may be due to the fact that some students are faster than others and consequently finish their work before.

*I know that I should have extra work for those students; however, this is not always possible, and also maybe the slower students would feel uncomfortable as they wouldn’t be able to do all the activities.***

**The Project Experience**

It seemed to me that where a lot of us had more basic challenges in teaching teens, Ivete had figured a lot of this out already and was at a different level of
development than the lot of us. For one, she would not allow herself to get bothered by things that completely threw many of us off balance.

She was endearing and positive most of the time – letting negative comments roll off her shoulders as if they were confetti. What I mean here, is that she would not get bothered by the typical teen complaint, “Oooohhh, teacher…do we really have to?”, and the whining of teens refusing to do things they’ll end up having fun doing anyway. When kids whined in her class, she would smile and make some kind of funny comment, and the class would go on as if the comment had not occurred.

This is not to say she would ignore negative comments that were disrespectful. She knew very well where to draw the line. When a student said something that was bordering on mean or disrespectful, she could be firm without being aggressive - just simply stating very firmly where the limits were. And she would do that in a no-nonsense way, talking to them like adults, appealing to the students’ own knowledge of right and wrong. She knew how to be serious when she wanted to, just as well as she knew how to transform whining comments into playful ones.

She was the only one of the participants who had had teen kids of her own, and I believe that gave her a level of experience we all lacked. I believe we all learned a lot from Ivete. Of the group, her class was perhaps the one that needed the least adjusting, or the one that was working out closest to our own expectations for our classes.

Yes, sometimes students drifted, particularly when a student was fast and had finished some activity and was waiting on a friend, well… that’s part of individuality within a group. Planning pair work and group activities helped, and she did plenty of that,
but she also had moments in her class where she wanted students to figure something out individually, to give each student time – and students work at different paces.

We talked about possible things to do in such situations, and discussed different alternatives to different situations, but in the end with Ivete, it seemed like we were talking about small adjustments. Most of the really important parts of the puzzle were in place for her.

Ivete was almost perfect. To not say that she was perfect, I tried to find something I could help her with. After careful observation, I could only find three small areas where I foresaw Ivete might have trouble:

1. Her language skills, though excellent, still had some minor pronunciation errors which an overly picky student could possibly pick up on
2. In being motherly, some very sharp student might feel patronized at times
3. Students might miss the generation gap and want to discuss things from their pop culture that Ivete may not be completely into.

All of these things were remote possibilities and I didn’t really feel she needed my help with those. I decided not to address these issues considering that:

1. Most English teachers in Brazil are not native speakers, so that shouldn’t matter except for a very picky student
2. Ivete is sincere and genuine in her care and her motherly nature, and there’s no “fake” patronizing here. Only a student who is very insecure about his or her maturity would be bothered by sincere care (in the case of teens, though it could happen, it surely means no demerit on her part – just a new thing to deal with, and it didn’t seem to make sense to bring it up if it hadn’t happened)
3. Though naturally Ivete and the teens are from different generations (as are all
the teachers in this project and their teens), Ivete keeps herself informed about the latest
teen trends covering as much of this gap as could be expected.

In effect, Ivete did not have any problems with these issues during the extent of
the project, so I felt that my bringing them up would be only an answer to my own desire
to find something to help her with – to feel like I was giving her more of an equal trade
for all she brought us.

So, with regard to all the big issues involved in teaching teens, Ivete was the one
lending us the benefit of her experience. In the group discussions in particular, she was
especially helpful as she had a positive attitude, and made insightful comments and
suggestions of things to try when dealing with our problems. These led us to look for
different possibilities, rather than give up on things we found too frustrating. She was in
many ways a gift to the project.

For Ivete, I believe the project was more about her remembering processes she
had already lived through, rather than discovering new things. It was more about
discovering new angles to old issues – issues that were new to us.

I believe Ivete made far fewer mistakes than we did because basically she had
already learned not to make those mistakes. And in a way, having made those mistakes
brought us more learning experiences, but for Ivete, I believe this learning had already
taken place.

The fact that Ivete signed up for the project shows her spirit of inquiry and
constant desire to grow as a professional – which is part of what has made her such a
great teacher. I believe that some change and discovery occurred for Ivete, but I think it
was more at an inner level, a reassurance of what she believed in, maybe new questions to be asked, or new strategies to be tried. I believe that in Ivete’s case, learning occurred at the level of “fine tuning”, rather than an inner quantum leap or change in teaching style as it was for some of the other participants.

I am extremely grateful though for her participation at all levels of the project – particularly in the group discussions. She was not the most vocal all the time, but when she spoke, she often contributed great pearls of questions or comments. She was a very strong participating energy in the project - she kept us on track, shed light on things we had not thought about, brought us encouragement, and I was happy to have her share her experiences with us.
**JULIANA**

**Brief Description of the Teacher:**

A São Paulo city native, Juliana was 27 years old when she started the project, and we celebrated her birthday while she was doing the project (turning 28 in March, still towards the beginning of the project). Juliana had studied English as her major in university, and she had attended a prestigious university for English language teaching - Pontificia Universidade Catolica (PUC – SP).

She had had about two years of experience previous to this project teaching teens, although she had not taught many teen groups, having taught mostly pre-teens and children previous to this project. Though very young, Juliana is also a mother of two handsome young boys (ages 4 and 2 at the time of the project).

Juliana is extremely pretty and sweet. She would remind me of Disney’s cartoon character “Sleeping Beauty” – the blonde belle that is unaware of her beauty and that sings the day along with a cheerful attitude. Juliana was in this way open to her group - upbeat, kind, generous, always sweet, always understanding, never angry or upset. This was part of her natural way of being, and in being so genuinely sweet and cheerful, she was naturally disarming – even to kids with an attitude.

**Class Context:**

Juliana taught at 9:30 in the morning to a Teen 3 group of four students only. She had three boys and one girl. There was a silent class division separating the four students into two groups – the two good students, and the two “difficult” students.
The group with the good students was composed of one younger and eager thirteen-year-old, who participated actively and willingly, thoroughly enjoying himself, and one shier fourteen-year-old who participated shyly, glancing furtively at the more “difficult” students, clearly aware of their presence and pull.

The group of “difficult” students was composed of one very talkative 15-year-old girl who enjoyed speaking Portuguese and testing her teacher whenever she could, and one very quiet fifteen-year-old boy who wore bangs way below his eyes, hiding him from the world, and who reacted to most comments with short grunts, often snickering at comments made by the participative students.

This boy was clearly more concerned about looking cool and impressing the girl next to him than anything else. He participated just enough to show the teacher and the girl that “yes, he could do it, if he chose to, but he really didn’t feel like it. It was all either too easy, or too boring for him.”

The “difficult” students here really did not present a problem in terms of blatant disobedience or disrespect of the teacher – or any other openly identifiable disciplinary issue. In fact, considering their teacher’s positive attitude and care for them, any such attitude would have been too aggressive – especially considering the fact that they were in small numbers. Instead, they simply used their silences, looks, and blatant lack of interest, to express their “teenhood” in that class.

Personal Challenge and Objectives:

Juliana’s main concern was that she could not motivate this class. She felt that the attitude of these two students who were rebellious was contagious at times and that
sometimes it felt like she was teaching to one student only – and that was not her intention. She felt devastated that no matter how hard she would prepare, and no matter what she suggested, the overall attitude of the two students took over the class, and there was this “heavy” feeling of “Oh, this is such a bore.”

She wrote in her journal:

“I don’t have any problems in terms of behavior in this group, but I never thought that motivation took such an important role. I mean, I know how important it is but what impresses me now is how the lack of motivation from two students can ‘destroy’ the atmosphere of my class.”

Juliana’s main objective in working with this group was to motivate her students and get them to participate more in class. She initially thought that having a class with four students would have been great, an ideal situation to get them all to participate and speak a lot during the time given. So she really could not understand why she could not move them like she had hoped.

The Project Experience

One of the very first group meetings we had focused on motivation. In this session, we talked about knowing our students and also about planning our classes for our students. As a result of our group discussion we came up with three guiding questions we should ask ourselves when planning our classes. Those questions were:

1. Is it challenging to them?
2. Is it interesting?
3. Is it relevant?

Juliana reported to me that those had become her guiding questions for every class from that point on, and as an experiment, she had talked to her students about their interests, and what they liked and did not like in class. Though the fifteen-year-old boy
remained quiet most of the time, the girl he was trying to impress and the other two students spoke up, and that helped Juliana adapt her class to their interests.

For starters, she allowed classes once a week to begin with a song of their choosing. The first song was chosen by the fifteen-year-old girl – who came to that class very enthusiastically – bringing both the song and the lyrics for the teacher to examine and create an activity for the group.

This girl became very interested in the song-portion of Juliana’s classes and always participated actively on the days when the song was present. As Juliana reports, although she did not participate all the time and at times drifted, her overall attitude was much more positive, and she was very enthusiastic about the song classes – always volunteering to bring the next song.

This girl’s enthusiasm was contagious in the rest of the group, since the one student who was effectively boycotting Juliana’s class with his sullenness was very much interested in impressing this girl. This helped Juliana succeed in certain activities.

Another interesting point that came up in student interaction was that the quiet, rebellious boy competed in his own way with the other thirteen-year-old boy who was very good at English. Here the fifteen-year-old boy wanted to always show the group that he could do the exercises and that he was good at English – but that he just chose not to do them because they were somehow beneath him. However, when Juliana proposed an activity in terms of a challenge, in the “let’s-see-if-you-can-do-this” manner, the boy was in a sense forced to participate to prove himself. Because part of being cool for this boy seemed to include being too good for school, he could not allow the thirteen-year-old participating boy to take all the credit for being the one who knows how to do it – the one
who can beat the challenge. Hence, when challenged he had to react, and when the 
teacher praised the thirteen-year-old for being able to do something very difficult, he had 
to show that he could do it too.

As an observer and lover of the Discovery Channel, the way the fifteen-year-old 
reacted reminded me very much of a program I once watched on group behavior and the 
alpha male. In this show, the males fought to establish the alpha male – the one that was 
most powerful and the one who would dominate the group. The fifteen-year-old could not 
allow his dominance to be threatened in any way – so challenging him positively in class 
was an effective way to bring him into motion.

Since the division of the class seemed to occur when the students came into class 
– the two cool students sat on one side of their semi-circle together, and the two good 
students sat on the opposite side together – Juliana allowed them to pair up in activities 
always in this manner. She was afraid that putting the two “competing” boys would be 
bad for the younger boy – that the older boy might try to pick on him.

After discussing the dynamics of the group in one of our group discussion 
sessions, Juliana decided to go ahead and pair the two competing boys together in a tic-
tac-toe activity – the two boys vs. the talkative girl and the shy boy. The result was 
positive. Juliana wrote in her journal:

“They really enjoyed it and for those minutes that the game took place, I wondered how 
nice it would be if I had them that engaged during the rest of the class.”

In effect, Juliana was successful in improving her class in chunks and pieces – in 
activities here and there. Students would show their appreciation of the changes she 
introduced, but would retract it when she went back to the core material of the course. 
The main challenge here for Juliana was to find a way to make the activities that she had
to cover according to the curriculum attractive to the students – once again, the guidelines proved to be a hindrance.

She adapted the guidelines and was successful in doing so to a certain extent, but still she did not meet her own expectations the whole way through. In observing herself on video, she detected another issue she wanted to work on. She wrote:

“Motivation is still what I’d like to improve in this group. But from what I saw (video) they participate and they speak up. But I’d like to see them doing it because they wanted to and not only because if they don’t the class just won’t go on. Portuguese is also a problem with them, and I wish they would use less of it in class. But I think I am so concerned about motivation that I haven’t paid enough attention to it.

I did change some of the activities, but I still think a lot about what I should and shouldn’t do with them.”

While clearly improving, she still felt there was a long way to go, and that in her quest for student motivation, she had overlooked the issue of L1 control.

After this session, she tried instituting a couple of Portuguese-controlling games (a system of negative and positive points that was devised together with the students) to keep them from speaking so much Portuguese. She said that it helped, but that it wasn’t necessarily so effective because she did not always remember to keep the game on as it had been proposed.

In the end, I believe that Juliana was very effective in experimenting with her group, understanding motivational aspects of her group, and with her own professional growth and awareness of herself as a teacher. She was still not satisfied with the end result she was able to achieve with this group, but she was able to accept this and keep to herself the ideal of always working toward improvement.

It felt very much like Dorothy on the yellow brick road, on the path to perfection, not always realizing that perfection is a fraud, and that it is the path that will show you
the tools you need. The path is what will give you all you need to achieve your goals as you go along. In the end, I think Juliana realized this, and I believe she is now very much aware of the path, knowing how important it is to simply follow it along.
Brief Description of the Teacher:

Marcia is a Korean-Brazilian from Brasilia, the capital of Brazil. She was 26 years old when the project began, and she had been teaching English as a foreign language to teens for two and a half years at a language institute in Brasilia. She held a business degree from UPIS University in Brasilia. This was Marcia’s first semester living in São Paulo, and her first semester teaching at Alumni.

Marcia is one of the most dedicated teachers I know. Keen on class preparation and preparation of her own materials, she was a joy to work with in terms of her zeal and earnest giving of herself to what she was doing. She was sincere and upfront about all of her concerns, which also made working with her easier.

Marcia is intelligent, diligent, organized, hardworking, and attentive to detail. As a professional, she even intimidated me at times with her efficiency and ability to be on the ball at all times, while I sometimes digress and procrastinate. I was proud to see her development, and she was able to humble me more than just a few times in terms of how well she worked with what she was given.

As a teacher, while having a gentle and friendly demeanor, she tended to be more on the strict side which proved to be challenging while working with the Alumni public of teen students – very powerful, not used to much controlling, with varying interpretations of what it means to be respectful.

As a supervisor, I had been involved in Marcia’s teacher-training sessions prior to her being hired, and had been designated Marcia’s guardian angel for her first semester
teaching at our school. I was immediately impressed with how much potential I thought Marcia had.

Class Context:

Marcia had a large Teen 4 group of eleven students at 9:30 in the morning. This group was made up of six boys and five girls.

The boys were very different among themselves. There was one boy who needed a lot of attention, asked a lot of questions and made a lot of comments always, no matter what was being done. He was mostly positive, but could threaten the teacher’s power if he was not getting the attention he needed. However, mostly he was funny, friendly, and content in being the class clown and getting attention that way.

Another boy was the exact opposite – smaller and younger than most, he sat quietly in his chair, not moving or speaking unless called on. Another one was also shy, but doodled while still paying attention to class, and answered when called upon.

The three others seemed to be friends and participated, but acted the part of cool – mostly with body language and comments that were directed away from class and toward soccer teams or other subjects. They were not challenging the teacher so much as they just seemed to want to look universally cool. An example of this was one student in particular with very bright red hair who wore a ski cap most of the time and sat with arms crossed, slouching in his chair but at the same time listening to the teacher, and always answering when called on, and participating in group discussions in general.

The girls were shier in terms of class participation. One of the girls was very shy, and spoke with her hand in front of her mouth when called on – mumbling in a shy
manner. Another girl was very good at English and participated actively, answering questions and volunteering frequently.

Then there was a clique of three girls that sat together against a wall. These girls were not so active in participating in class, but were very effective at complaining about having to do things. They would often roll their eyes when the teacher asked them to do something, and would exchange glances that were meant to be meaningful only to the girls.

It seemed these girls were sharing a secret from the class, and this secret could have been anything – even that one of the girls had a crush on the redheaded boy. However, these meaningful glances took their toll on the teacher who felt the students were mocking her, and that the resistance was towards the teacher and what the teacher proposed in class.

This contributed to creating a difficult class atmosphere at first, and hindered an initial creation of a sense of community within the group. There was a huge distance between the boys and the girls – excluding the shy students who were often overlooked – the boys were either outspoken and loud, or tough and funny, while the girls were secretive and mysteriously threatening. No matter where the three girls were placed in terms of seating arrangement, they would look at each other from across the class and continue their “secret” communication.

**Personal Challenge and Objectives:**

In regard to her teens, Marcia would come to class every day with a smile on her face. Young and pretty, she could be easy to like immediately, but Marcia was also easily
hurt by students’ lack of motivation or enthusiasm, and this was transparent to her class. Possibly, her students were not equipped with enough understanding of their teacher’s frustration. It ended up creating an invisible gap between teacher and students.

The students could feel their teacher was not happy – *Possibly with them? In their minds, isn’t that what teachers do – hate their students?* – and this would help create the Pink Floyd-like “Wall”.

To make matters worse, as the first weeks progressed, this small group of girls developed their own inner clique and secret language further, and kept on exchanging silent communication through body language which hurt the teacher even more. Marcia was deeply and personally affected by what she observed in the classroom, and it hurt her rapport with the students as a result.

Being as diligent as she was, she was especially hurt that no matter how hard she tried, students still complained about having to get up and do pair work, about having to sit down and open their books, about things in general, or rolled their eyes in typical teen fashion.

Marcia is a perfectionist, and she had the highest standards of what her class should be like; thus not achieving her own standards was painful too. Considering all the work Marcia put into every class, she would feel that the students’ attitudes and actions was a personal attack on her, and a blow to her professional ego besides. In her journal she wrote:

“My Teen 4 class is a great challenge. They always seem to be tired. They don’t participate actively and roll their eyes, sigh, and complain whenever they have to open/close their books, switch partners/group, or do an activity which they’ll have to interact. The girls always look at me with a face that I don’t know what they’re thinking. They whisper to each other, look at me, and laugh. It makes me uncomfortable. But, at the same time, I’ve been a student myself and I have already done the same things too.”
One of the very first activities we did in our group meetings was reflect back on what we were like as teens to start to look at what it meant to be a teen, remembering our own experiences, sharing them, and putting ourselves in the skin of our teens. We wanted to consider, as a teen, what could move you; what your interests are; what is important to you; what your fears and desires are; etc.

It was particularly tough for Marcia to understand the more challenging teens in this activity since as a teen she had always been eager to learn, supportive, always a volunteer, respectful, etc. And it was easy for her to feel hurt, since in her memory, when she had rolled her eyes or acted in a “teenish” way, it was because the teacher had been to blame – either for being condescending or for being inefficient. Those were two things Marcia strived not to be herself. As a result, she felt the burden of not being able to reach those students in the manner she envisioned.

This was what Marcia envisioned as her ideal class (from a needs-assessment group discussion activity):

“My ideal class would be excited to be in class and motivated. The students would respond to the activities proposed and participate actively. They would make an extra effort to speak English only. They would also want to mingle and trust me whenever I propose an activity. They would understand that there is a logical sequence in the classes and that the opening and closing of the books has its purpose. They wouldn’t be afraid to participate, expose themselves, and make mistakes. They would help each other and be nice to me.”

The Project Experience

In terms of a concrete change in class dynamics, Marcia’s group was the one that suffered the deepest and most significant change in the project. Marcia fiercely tackled her
challenges as they appeared, not shying from what she proposed for herself – staying true to her principles.

For starters, Marcia was comfortable adapting the guidelines and even discarding them if necessary. She never did so without reading the guidelines first, but she had it clear in her mind that she was going to have to change her class plan and activities to fit the needs of the group in question. Since Marcia seemed to get real pleasure from developing her own material, this was the first thing that worked.

She kept on adapting the material and activities to make her material more colorful and visually interesting, and make the activities more kinesthetic and active for the students. Her activities were visually appealing, but at first they lacked real relevance for the students while they were not quite challenging enough. After the first class observation, this was something she effectively changed. Making the activities more challenging made the students focus more, and this was another step in the direction of what she envisioned for her class.

She was also very creative with her new material and ideas for activities, and she came up with her own effective way of controlling L1 in class with yellow and red cards used like soccer referees. The students seemed to enjoy this activity, and she was able to control the use of Portuguese well in her class. In fact, of the classes observed (excluding Ivete’s), it was the one where Portuguese was most kept to a bare minimum.

Her class preparation and proposal of activities helped her class enormously, but there was still the question of the gap between students and teacher in terms of interpreted attitude – what she interpreted her students’ attitude to be (especially the
girls), and what they interpreted her frustration to be (the typical teacher dislike for them).

Getting her students to affect her less at a personal level was a big challenge for Marcia. In conversation with Marcia, I tried to soften her up to the students and to understand that much of their being tired, or whining (which was a pet peeve with Marcia), was not because she was a bad teacher, but rather because that was part of their own dynamics as teens – and that they would sometimes whine simply to act cool and not acquiesce too willingly in the eyes of their peers. There were thousands of possible reasons for the whining that went beyond Marcia, especially since lots of times they would whine before they even knew what was coming.

Marcia tried dealing with this by pretending it was not affecting her. It took pretending because in fact, though she tried, she could not simply “not let it affect her” at a deeper level. No matter what she tried to tell herself, it still bothered her. And the problem for her was that pretending is no good. Pretending was not genuine. She honestly felt disrespected, and pretending it was not happening was not working for Marcia, and she could not soften up to anything she felt was disrespectful. Pretending was self-aggression to Marcia, and though she meant well, it was also a see-through scam from the point of view of the students.

So the next step, in our conversation, was for her to know specifically what her own inner limits were, what she considered to be disrespectful and why, and to make sure she would be able to communicate this to her class in an attempt to break the cycle they had gotten into with mutual understanding. Before she got to the implementation phase of this though, something happened.
It was a small incident – the teacher had finished an activity with an overhead projector and had asked one of the girls in the secretive group who was sitting next to the light switch to turn on the lights. Apparently, the lights were slightly further from reach than this student could manage without getting out of her chair, and she came back to the teacher with some comment like, “You can’t be serious”, and rolled her eyes to a friend who then laughed. This was the last straw for Marcia.

In the spirit of not allowing students to disrespect her limits, Marcia confronted the two students in class, kept them after class, and spoke to each one individually. Of course at this point, it wasn’t just about the lights; it was everything that had been boiling inside for the last two months.

She was so direct in her comments that one of them felt hurt, and went home to complain to her mother who then returned to the school with ferocious anger, feeling her daughter had been picked on, and demanded Marcia be replaced as the teacher of that group.

The teen coordinator of Marcia’s branch (I am not based at Marcia’s branch) dealt with the complaint, spoke to and stood by Marcia – keeping her as the teacher of the group. It had been a misunderstanding to a certain degree – a very small incident in class had been the catalyst for a big reaction on the part of both the teacher and the student – since both had probably been feeling the rise of tensions for a while.

Marcia stood by her principles and went back to speaking to the girl who was hurt again. The student did not have the awareness that her behavior in class was disrespectful. She didn’t realize she rolled her eyes or defied the teacher at all. Her perception of the events was quite different. She simply thought the teacher didn’t like
her. Her secrets with her friends had nothing to do with the class itself, and she was
unaware of what her body language had been communicating to her teacher.

Marcia had chastised two of the secretive girls on that day. The first girl had
understood Marcia’s point immediately after the first talk, and changed her attitude and
behavior immediately based on that conversation. However, with the second student,
Marcia’s perception of the girl was so distant from what the girl herself perceived her
behavior to be, and interpreted her teacher’s feelings to be, that it caused this
misunderstanding and was dragged out a little longer.

Being brave and working it out was worthwhile for both students and teacher. As
a result of these talks, the two girls who were spoken to became more aware of the
behavior they had shown in class that caused the teacher to react, and they stayed away
from it. As a result, Marcia was friendlier to the girls, and in time was more able to win
over the more troublesome girl and make her engage. They ended the semester with a
good relationship.

Marcia was also able to work with the one hyperactive boy she had in class,
channeling his energy into the activities in class by making him a helper to her and to
others. She ended up improving her rapport with the group as a whole as her own attitude
and friendliness was able to come out through the demanding but gentle posture she
adopted in class.

In the end, Marcia’s working out of her pet peeves with the girls, coupled with the
whole transformation she proposed of her class in terms of activities and class planning
for her students, allowed Marcia to end the semester with a class spookily close to what
she had initially proposed as “ideal”.

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Though the students, particularly the boys, would still sometimes complain or whine about having to get up out of their chairs for some kinesthetic activity, they would end up enjoying the activity, and Marcia would feel less bothered by their whining over time.

Furthermore, the use of Portuguese was kept to a bare minimum. The secretive girls participated more actively and were less sarcastic. More importantly, in the end, it genuinely felt like the students helped each other and were nice to her – just as she had initially wanted.

I have no doubt that in spite of some perceived hardships on the part of the students of having a teacher that was clearly more along the lines of “strict”, those students learned a lot that semester. Her dedication and perseverance truly paid off.

Being the perfectionist she is, I do not know how satisfied Marcia was at the end of the semester with her class and her own progress, but I remember clearly thinking: “These students have really learned a lot”. And I remember marveling at how far that group had come in four months. In my career working as a supervisor with class observation and helping teachers in class, I don’t think I’ve ever seen such a huge development in a group from beginning to end.
**PAOLA**

**Brief Description of the Teacher:**

Paola is an Italian-Brazilian from São Paulo. She was 31 years old when the project began and had had four years experience teaching teens at Berlitz and then Alumni. She holds a degree in psychology from the Pontificia Universidade Catolica of São Paulo (the psychology department of PUC-SP is considered the best in the country). She went through the five-year program which allows professionals to engage in private practice if they choose.

Paola is a warm, dedicated professional. She is a fiery redhead, with a warm-blooded Italian nature to match. She is relentless in her search for solutions to her problems. She has a fighting spirit like few I have seen in my life, and she is extremely brave. She is inquisitive, and has the curious drive of those who choose to major in psychology – searching for answers about human nature, searching for understanding of human behavior, and presumptuously searching for meaning in human existence itself.

If I had to choose three adjectives to describe Paola, I would have to go with passionate, determined, and inquisitive. In fact, I’d say she possesses the most interesting form of inquisitiveness there is. Paola was never concerned with local school gossip or petty things of this nature. She was seeking answers to bigger questions, and her interest in discovering and going deeper into the issues in life make Paola a very interesting person.
Class Context:

Paola taught a Teen 4 class at 6 PM. She had eight students in her class – two boys and six girls. This was perhaps the hardest of the groups in terms of the participants. One of the two boys was very active and needed a lot of attention. He could never sit still and wanted to be the center of attention 90% of the time. The other boy was quiet and a little shy. He had a nice smile and participated, but only when called on.

Then there were the girls. Among the group of girls there were two girls with a particularly mean streak – they had been in class together before, and had their own dynamics in relation to the “new” teacher.

They seemed to have just learned about irony and sarcasm, and seemed to be sharpening their predatory social skills of wit, irony, sarcasm, and cunning on anything that moved. These two girls had a third sidekick who seemed to be their groupie – not quite as talented in being mean, but trying as best she could to be “in” with the two mean girls (laughing at their comments, eye-rolling, and using all of the body language of a mean-girl groupie).

There was one older girl (fifteen, but very developed physically who looked like she could be sixteen) who was positive and self-assured and who participated in class discussions and was not intimidated by the mean girls. The other two girls, along with the shy boy, were basically reserved and quiet, and reacted only where they felt it was safe.

The hyperactive, attention-seeking boy often received mean comments from the girls, but he didn’t mind them at all, answering back in a similarly aggressive manner and laughing it off. He simply seemed to enjoy any kind of attention – good or bad, and had
no trouble dealing with the irony of the girls since he also seemed to get them to laugh at his silliness at times. He was genuine in his own way, and that was enough for him.

Paola was clearly the “because-I-can” Mt. Everest that the mean girls wished to climb on. “She was there”; and from the very first class, it seemed the girls had come in ready for a power match.

**Personal Challenge and Objectives:**

Paola is a self-described Italian-Brazilian – which means “Latin”, with more “Latin” mixed in, where the blood boils easily. Dedicated as she was, she always brought in a class planned out to a tee. Thus, one can imagine her frustration as class begins and things don’t go as planned.

Besides being foiled in her attempts to reach her students, Paola was quick to feel hurt at a personal level. Her transparency in her hurt and lack of patience with the students’ snide remarks (particularly from the mean girls) made for a bumpy semester beginning, where establishing a positive working rapport with the group was part of her initial challenge.

Paola wrote in her journal:

“One of my main challenges is to have them speak English and really profit from a class in which there are few people and lots of possibilities to improve their knowledge/skills. I’d really like them to participate with more enthusiasm and “understand” that somebody (their parents probably) is providing them with an excellent opportunity to learn a language and they have been wasting it (most of them). It seems to me that it’s hard to make contact with the most talkative ones.”

And also:

“I started to wonder how I could establish a good rapport with my students, how we could have a nice semester and mainly how I could have them interested and motivated in what I needed to teach them without speaking English only 10% of the time.”
Together we decided that she should focus on two main challenges first:

1. In the ambit of discipline: She should first work on establishing a positive rapport with the students. This would be key to then working on a system that would allow for rules to be agreed upon and abided by more naturally.

2. In the ambit of motivation: She should work on understanding her students for the purpose of organizing her classes – class planning – to include activities and strategies to move them. Paola seemed a bit too attached to the guidelines proposed in the teachers’ Teen 4 binder.

**The Project Experience**

Although we began working together on many different things at the same time, I believe that at first the main concern for Paola, and the one that she tackled more immediately, was the issue of bettering her rapport with her group so as to be able to work productively together.

The girls in her group that challenged her read her frustration in not being able to reach them as a sign that they were in fact on opposite sides in an unspoken war: teacher vs. students.

When the students managed to irritate Paola, it was clear on her face that she was upset. From getting flushed, to avoiding eye contact with the group altogether, to still silences, to harsh comments: different aspects of being aggravated all went through the teacher’s physical demeanor. As a result, the students, particularly the two mean girls, seemed to see this as justification for their theory that the teacher is the bad guy, and they would not submit to anything the bad guy could possibly propose.
So, the first thing Paola worked on changing was herself. It wasn’t just a question of disguising her frustration, or swallowing things and pretending they did not affect her. No, nothing fake could possibly work here, and it would be a kind of self-aggression towards Paola which could not possibly be healthy. The change had to occur at a deeper level – the level of understanding and awareness.

During one of our very first group meetings, we went over what it was for us to be teens. We relived our teen days, our priorities then, what kinds of students we were, what kinds of classes we liked, what kinds of teachers we liked, and why. We then used our own experiences to talk about “teenhood”, and the different facets of this moment. This discussion was particularly meaningful for Paola (as well as Andrea and Marcia in different ways).

She was able to couple our discussions with all that she had learned in university in studying psychology. She was able to understand our discussions at an even deeper level, and refresh concepts learned in the past to serve her in the present. She was able to then realize that a lot of the girls’ dynamics had less to do with hurting her personally and more to do with their own dynamics as teens. This allowed for a huge change in Paola.

The change did not occur all at once. It went through phases in a winding sort of way, going from positive to negative and then back up towards improvement. Paola was working towards not being affected so directly by the teen girls’ meanness – she attempted at first to work specifically with humor to counteract the poison of cruelty.

This was trial and error. In good Ivete fashion, she was aiming at having her students’ negative comments roll off her shoulders, leaving her unscathed. She wanted to
transform these comments into cheerful, funny comments that would not hurt her or anyone else.

In her process of trial and error, at times she would go too far, not realizing that she was in fact irritated, her humor could be almost as caustic and ironic as the girls’. In these moments, she had been clearly contaminated by the girls, and these comments were not so helpful – in fact, they instigated the girls to challenge Paola even further in a kind of battle of wits and being witty – let’s see who can win this argument – it reminded me of “dissing” competitions of rappers. It really motivated the girls, but not to learn English.

Paola was quick to see that. The observation of her class video made her aware of her class in a whole different light. Besides aspects of teaching which came in handy in regards to her other challenge – regarding preparing the class for that particular group of teens – she was able to observe the teens and herself in terms of feeling and attitude. Having this kind of vision, and the kind of training she had had previously in psychology, allowed her to change herself further.

She convinced herself to not take things personally, to remember at all times who she was in class, to not lose herself in the moment, and to not allow herself to be so wholly contaminated and baited. I believe this was the real breakthrough moment for Paola. She was then able to smile in class, and even smile legitimately in spite of provocation. She was able to ignore comments that were cheap shots to disrupt class or to get at her. She was able to try to see the mean girls, try to understand them, and even like them, in spite of their very hard carapaces.
It wasn’t then a question of counteracting poisonous remarks with humor (more on this in the “Findings” portion of this paper), but of counteracting these with a genuine smile and openness – ignoring that which was nonsense, and being direct in addressing that which might be meaningful. Paola would deflect the cheap shots and smile, and would address comments with real content directly and openly, by listening and asking them what was meant by the comment. She was then able to ask her students what it was that the students wanted. She made herself open to hearing the students where it counted, and this made a huge difference. The students still made light of being heard and still tried to act tough - particularly the mean girls. But their attitude in class changed nonetheless.

As a result, she was able to not let the mean girls and the very active boy shadow the rest of the students, and she was firm when she needed to be, without being strident in her voice or giving away too much emotion. By being firm, she was able to secure a safe environment for the shier students to take chances with the language, and she worked harder in drawing them out.

The other big aspect Paola worked with during the project (which was also very much connected to class dynamics) was the aspect of adapting her classes and the guidelines in the teachers’ binder to the group in question. Paola had always been very dependent on and constricted by the guidelines in the binder. Particularly when being faced by such a challenging group, it seemed like she clenched the Teen 4 “bible” as if it would keep her safe from the evil ones. In fact, it was the exact opposite – holding on to the mechanical class plan of the Teen 4 Teachers’ Binder helped create the gap between the teacher and the group.
With the support of the teachers in the project, and our own group meetings, Paola went on to adapt her classes, as she came to understand her group and their dynamics more and more.

She was able to ask the students what they were interested in, and though they were still glib about a lot of things, including their own participation in what they thought was interesting, they were able to give her clues to their dynamics that allowed her to prepare better for this class, and to engage them better.

In the end, Paola was the one participant in the project who I believe went through change at the deepest level. I think that Paola was able to change her attitude towards teens more completely and deeply than I could have hoped for, and this ended up becoming visible in her classes.

Paola was able to discard the guidelines and teach from the heart; she opened her eyes through a very painful barrier which was dealing with girls who had a genuine mean streak (the only group in the project who had students who seemed genuinely mean – and though not frequent, teens can be cruel, and very nice people can go through a “mean” phase when they are teens) and dealt with it as best she could, given the constraints of her role as a TESOL English teacher at an English-language institute. And this is a lot.

I would like to end this segment on Paola with an excerpt of a letter she sent me at the end of the project. I have put in bold a part of this excerpt which I believe was particularly meaningful in her experience working on this project.

I am very proud of Paola and of what she was able to accomplish. I am equally confident she will continue growing as a professional, as I believe her inquisitiveness and passion to be part of her personality. I was truly privileged to have worked with her.
Paola’s letter:

“... questions, questions, questions. Where were the answers? No matter what I had to
 teach them. Being videotaped and having you watch my class three times certainly gave
 me more confidence to try out new things. There were also the three questions you posed
 us: Is it interesting? Is it challenging? Is it relevant? (A new mantra, so to speak.) But
 still I got frustrated a couple of times because I expected to have them involved in
everything 100% of the time and eager to have an English class with me. Though they
weren’t involved all the time I realized there were “moments” which worked well,
moments in which they felt challenged and motivated and that there wasn’t such a thing
as a perfect class every day. Being able to show them that we could have these moments
made it possible for me to show them that though there were ‘boring’ things to do in
class, there were also nice things - provided that they wanted to do them.

Also, I realized more clearly how a group can be different from the other. A teacher
should focus first on the group dynamics to then focus on content and eventually build
up a class plan that fits that group with the content proposed.

What I would really like to say in ending this letter is that this project made me more
aware of my role as a teacher, of my performance as a teacher and of my role in
somebody else’s life; and especially it made me realize that teaching teens is not a
horrible experience. It’s a challenge, so that when I have new groups to come, I can ask
myself: “Are they interesting?”, “Is it challenging to work with them?”, “Is it relevant to
learn new things from them?”.
CHAPTER SIX

THE PROCESS FOR THE WRITER

ANNA

Brief Description of the Teacher:

I am an American-Brazilian from São Paulo. I was 32 years old when this project began, and I had been teaching teens at Alumni for 9 years. I have a degree in psychology from Pontificia Universidade Catolica – one of the most well recognized courses in one of the most prestigious universities in Brazil. I took the five-year intensive program at PUC which enables the graduate to practice privately. I tried working in the field of psychology for a year after graduating, but decided my passion was more committed to teaching and followed that path – using what I learned to help me along the way.

It is hard to describe myself as a teacher. I really enjoy building a sense of community in my classes. I am partial to group work and pair work as I think students get more out of that – but I often comment on what they are doing in groups as I get excited about it, and I know I should perhaps be more like the fly on the wall at times. I am very enthusiastic about my students and their learning which is often good, but this sometimes can also make me a rather demanding teacher, and allows me to get frustrated with myself often too when I think I was not able to engage students as I would have liked.

I glance briefly at guidelines to get the gist of what is being proposed and to understand the content of the curriculum, but I haven’t followed the guidelines as they are proposed in nine years – since I entered the school. I have always found that they hindered me in my connection with the group, and in their learning as a result.
I am a perfectionist and often very hard on myself. I strive to become a better teacher, and I am curious about all things related to the human existence – learning and teaching are my professional curiosity, and I enjoy learning and growing from that which I learn.

**Class Context:**

I had a group of nine students of Teen Intermediate Level One at 4 PM – four boys and five girls. Their names are marked here by their initials. The boys were R1, R2, B, and M. R1 is slightly older than R2 – therefore the choice in numbers (1 and 2). While almost all of the students in class were 15, R2 was the youngest at 14. He was very tall though, and had a deep voice which allowed him to blend in with the older crowd easily. The girls were Iz, C, A, L, and M. I will get into their descriptions soon.

Some of these students knew each other (two had been best friends since they were ten), and some came together from school in the school van. These groups within my group already had a rapport established, so when they entered class they would always sit close to each other in the semi-circle.

The students were very positive and playful, and their coming in together and having their own established groups did not present a problem to me. However, since I did want to create a sense of community, I did work on them establishing new friendly relationships in the classroom (which I will also get to soon).

There was really only one boy who was very loud and needed a lot of attention – R1. R1 was very good looking, loved attention and being the class clown. His English was not very good, and this was a concern of mine from the start. The class enjoyed his
funny side, and I must confess I did too. I was concerned as to how to get him to participate in class without digressing too much or taking too much space in the class so as to shadow the rest of the group.

There were two girls (A and L) who had been friends since they were ten and who were extremely good students but very shy. I wanted to draw them out more – particularly the less dominant of the two who also seemed to be the less fluent, though still a very good student.

There were two boys (R2 and M) who bonded immediately over soccer and remained close to each other in every class. They were excellent speakers of English and quick to participate in every activity. M was always smiling and laughing, while R2 participated more seriously, constantly showing me how good his listening and vocabulary were. He was, in spite of his no-nonsense way, one of the most participative students in class.

Then there were C and B – two friends from school who were the party-going type, very sociable and friendly, always with the latest party news, who came together in the van from school. C was extremely talkative all the time. Though very respectful of me, it was hard to keep her quiet for more than a minute which meant I had to keep her as much as possible on task or engaged. B, on the other hand, was the gentleman himself, being helpful and friendly towards all, and helping create a very cooperative atmosphere in class.

The only problem with C and B was that they would always come in late and would always be the last to come in from the ten-minute break I gave them after 50
minutes of class (50 minutes of class, a 10-minute break, followed by 50 minutes). C always had some party gossip to share, and this proposed a challenge as well.

In fact, C herself proposed a bit of a challenge. Besides being late, there were two other things about C that were troublesome: (1.) Her talkative streak seemed at first virtually uncontrollable, and (2.) she tended to whine and complain a lot about anything that was a little tough. As for the first item, C loved to talk about her personal life and the school gossip, and because she was constantly speaking, I was concerned that she would often derail class with new unrelated topics. Talking to her partner outside of the pair group task was also a concern, especially since she would tend to resort to Portuguese in this case (where she felt comfortable sharing the latest news).

As for the complaining and whining, C was also a perfectionist, and I suspected that it was not that she did not enjoy the challenge or that she was lazy or tired and did not want to put in the energy (which could have been the case with a lot of other students), but that C’s whining was a natural preamble she had picked up to excuse herself in case she didn’t get it. By stating that an activity was too difficult before she even tried, she built herself an excuse if she failed, and a prize if she succeeded. The previous whining was a disclaimer of sorts – “This is hard and I’m tired, so if I don’t get it, it’s not because I can’t but because it’s difficult and I’m tired.” Anyway, at first her whining bothered me, and dealing with it was a challenge for me.

Iz and M were the only two students who did not come from a pre-established group. Iz knew R1 from school, and they had a friendly relationship, but they were not too close. Funny enough, Iz and M were the two oldest of the group – the only two
sixteen-year-olds in the group. They both had boyfriends, whereas the rest of the class (apart from A) was not dating, and M smoked and was taking driving school.

In a sense, they had different preoccupations than the rest of the group – the two girls were already looking ahead to college, driving, and dating. However, they were not bothered by the rest of the group’s possibly being less mature. They were interested in class and they participated, and they contributed with their maturity and insights and offered different points of view which created a richer environment for discussion.

Though this group was at 5 PM after a full day’s schoolwork, they came into class still energetic and playful, and I was always glad to see them.

**Personal Challenge and Objectives:**

As it worked out, this was the only teen group I was given during that first semester of 2004, and I really couldn’t complain because they were in effect a gift to any English teacher. There were no mean students, no secretive students, nor any terribly problematic students. The students in my class received me well on my very first day of class, and I was able to work with them well from the very beginning.

The only two “harder” students to deal with were R1 and C. R1 posed a challenge because he wanted so much of the attention of the group and the teacher. Since his English was visibly at a lower level than the rest of the group, I was also worried about his progress. On the first day of school, though loud and funny, he was mostly friendly and respectful of me. However, he used a lot of Portuguese which I suspected would be a problem too.
Since he enjoyed constant attention, I was wondering how to channel his energy in a productive way into the classroom and his own learning. Dealing with him and integrating him constructively in the group – without letting him bite into too much class space and time – was a big challenge.

As for C, there were three challenges (not in order of importance) – (1.) Getting C and B to come to class on time, (2.) getting C to channel her talkative streak into class and class activities in English, and (3.) getting C not to whine or complain about having to do work.

As for the group as a whole, my main challenge, which was also my objective, was to give myself up to this group to really get them to engage and learn to their full potential as much as possible. I had been given a jewel of a group, and I felt I needed to live up to this group’s potential.

**The Project Experience**

The project experience started on the very first day of class. I was determined to use all that I had learned up to this point in my life, including all of my SIT experience, in service to this group. On the very first day, I began with a Needs Assessment, both theirs and mine. During class, I asked them about their previous experiences learning, what they had enjoyed, and what they had not. We went over what they considered to be an ideal teacher, what they thought was an ideal class/group, and an ideal student. We talked about our expectations, and in this way, got to know one another.

To tell the truth I spent a good part of the first day working on rapport and mutual understanding. We had a few icebreakers, we talked about the school, our past
experiences and expectations, and we worked on a class contract (see appendix 8 for more on class contracts).

The class contract is something I am constantly working on and trying out new ways of improving. The class contract is a contract I establish with my students on the very first day of class as to what goes into the class, and where the boundaries of the class are. In my experience, talking about what is expected of each one of us on the first day of class has always helped, and then keeping these expectations alive in a contract of sorts has always helped too.

For this group, I used a large piece of brown recyclable poster paper. I pinned it up next to the board and divided it into two parts: (1.) teacher, and (2.) students. I also drew a line in the middle of the white board, and on one side wrote the word “teacher”, and on the other “students”. I let the students tell me everything they expected out of me, and I wrote everything down on the white board – no matter how impossible (for example: one student wanted for us to have classes outside, which is against school rules; another wanted us to have parties in class for every birthday in class, also against school rules). When they finished, I went over each and every point, telling them what I could and what I couldn’t do, and negotiating items I could only do occasionally. Here are some examples of what was asked for and what was negotiated:

- **Lots of Games**

  This did not need to be negotiated; I am a big fan of games for learning purposes, so I had no problem fully conceding to this, though I knew of course that they wouldn’t be playing games just for the sake of game-playing – but I was pretty sure they wouldn’t mind.
- **Songs Every Class**

Negotiated: Songs every so often as a warm-up for class. The students would have to come and bring me the songs and the lyrics, and I would adapt them into an activity, provided they were appropriate (though I would not have had a problem teaching these kids songs that had bad words in them or polemic issues – i.e., sex – I wasn’t sure that this would be okay with their parents, and was aware of the fact this might bring problems to the school, so I stuck to the “appropriate” rule).

- **Parties**

Negotiated: A party at the end of the semester – I would bring the cake, whatever flavor they asked for.

- **Movies**

Negotiated: A few clips, related to the subject matter being taught. I would consider suggestions.

- **Free Conversation**

Negotiated: This was a two-hour class with a ten-minute break in the middle. I negotiated five minutes of free conversation in English, every day, right after the break.

- **No Homework**

Negotiated: Homework would be given on both Mondays and Wednesdays, but only corrected on Mondays, so if they did not have time to do it during the week, they could take the weekend to do it.

- **Classes Outside**
Negotiated: Not possible to negotiate apart from the final party on the last day of class. The party could be held in the school canteen.

- **No Tests**

Not possible to negotiate. This is school policy.

- **Food in Class**

Not possible to negotiate. This is school policy.

- **Twenty-minute Break**

Not possible to negotiate. This is against school policy.

After we worked on what I was going to give them as a teacher, I wrote on the brown piece of paper under the title “teacher” what we had finally agreed on from the items on the board. I then turned my attention back to the white board to the side of the board that said “teacher”. I asked them to guess what the three things were that I would ask / expect from them in our contract.

They were much stricter than I could imagine. They came up with such ideas as: Respect; don’t speak Portuguese; don’t chew gum; don’t wear flip-flops; don’t talk to your neighbor; don’t interrupt; do all your homework; study; participate; don’t be late; don’t be absent; don’t disrupt class; don’t ask to go to the bathroom; and R1’s funny comment, “Bring your teacher chocolate and flowers every day.”

I told them there were three things I absolutely needed, and here I was serious. I circled what they were from what they said on the board, and gave them my own spin into what I was going to write on the brown paper. I circled “Respect”, “Don’t speak Portuguese”, and “Participate”. This last one I changed to “Be present” which is what I require, and which requires participation, if they are motivated to do it.
I went over what they understood and what I understood each item to mean so as to establish clearly with them what it was that they would be expected to deliver.

I have found in my experience that sometimes something as simple as the word “respect” can mean a lot of different things to different people with different social, cultural, and “chronological” backgrounds – the meaning of the word “respect” can be very particular to a 15-year-old in the 2000s who is extremely rich, who is being brought up by a maid, nanny, or governess who can barely read and write (which is the case in Brazil), and who is in the very tricky position of trying to raise her “boss” – who can easily get her fired. This kid is used to being seen as a dollar sign, and to relating to people that way. This kids’ notion of what “respect” means may be very different from that of a middle-class, hardworking 32-year-old teacher who was raised in a Catholic school by nuns where you stood up in third grade (and every grade after) whenever Sister Agatha walked in.

Our experiences of what “respect” means are very different. This is something I learned to take for granted and go over with my kids, no matter how silly it may sound. I ask them what they think is disrespectful, and I work from there. Even among themselves, there is much disagreement when we work out a common code for what is acceptable. However, once we work it out, this code is an invaluable tool for establishing a safe environment in class for them to come out and expose themselves, without fear of being ridiculed or put down. I will include safeguards to that effect if the students don’t mention them themselves – happily this group did mention them, and working on a common understanding of “respect” was not difficult.
We then turned our attention to the “Don’t speak Portuguese” rule. I asked them why they had included that – it was the second or third thing they mentioned immediately. I probed a little further with them as to why this rule was so important for our classroom environment. They all agreed that when immersed in a situation of having to speak English only, they tended to learn more – a little like “brain aerobics”. They would have to exercise their English-learning neurons and develop new synapses. It took work and effort since it was not their natural means of communication.

Given that speaking in English did not come naturally to them, I told them that it was my job to turn the class environment into a place where speaking English would come naturally for them, and for that purpose I was going to propose a Portuguese-controlling game.

I have several Portuguese-controlling games that I have used in the past (see appendix 9). I usually propose one to them, see how they react, and either adapt it or change it altogether, depending on how they react. I never go about a group of teens though without a Portuguese-controlling game. I find that simply asking them to speak English every class or every so often within class is not effective in curbing their natural instinct to communicate in Portuguese. For reasons that I will go over in the “Findings” part of this paper, I believe that teen students will too often go back into their L1 to express themselves in the class if there is no such activity or systematic strategy present.

The Portuguese activity I proposed was the Apple Tree game (see appendix 9), and I proposed that they play this game against another one of my groups (an advanced group that had mostly seventeen-year-olds, though it was considered an “adult” class),
and some of the groups in the other teacher’s classes from our project. They agreed to it, and we began playing the game immediately.

I allowed for Portuguese to be spoken in class under two circumstances only: (1.) To confirm understanding of a new word if they could not explain it, use it, or find a synonym in English, and (2.) to express a concept they could not explain in English – in which case they would need to ask permission for a “time out” in the game to speak Portuguese – they could not speak Portuguese unless the time out were granted.

The third item I asked for in our class contract was: “Be present”. I changed the name on that one from “Participation” to “Be present” because I thought the latter had more to do with the general idea of what I wanted which was for kids to be present in my class – mind, body, and soul. This meant that kids were to be in class on time, avoid being absent, and when in class, be present rather than daydreaming, be attentive to class, and participate as much as they would be compelled to.

This seemed like an acceptable contract to them, so after writing these three items I needed on the teacher’s side of the brown paper class contract poster, I asked each student to come up and get a colored marker and sign their names to the brown paper poster – which I also signed and left up on the wall throughout class.

The class contract poster had seven items on the “teacher’s” side, which meant that I had to give them seven things they had asked for, while on the “student’s” side there were only three, and I think that pleased them. I left the class contract up on the wall, and B (who had not been there on the first day of class) signed it on the third day of class – his first day – after the class went over what the class contract was, for his benefit.
The class contract is a tool I find very useful in terms of my understanding of the group to later plan classes for them. But also, it’s especially beneficial in terms of keeping discipline in class, and avoiding my personal pet peeves (which I discuss when coming up with the contract). If I am open about these on the very first day of class, and we can come to an understanding about what is accepted conduct and why on this first day, I find it saves me a lot of misunderstandings and aggravation later on.

I go back to the class contract during the first two to three days of class for the benefit of students who are not around on the first day of class, and then go back to it whenever needed, if needed. In this class, I didn’t really have to go back to the class contract, and though I planned to keep it up on my wall for the duration of the semester, I ended up removing it from my wall three weeks later – for maintenance clean-up, and forgot to put it back up!

From the very beginning, these students rarely spoke Portuguese, and the fact that we had the five-minute free conversation activity after break also helped on two accounts: (1.) When we started to get too sidetracked and started going too far into other subjects, I’d write them up on the corner of the board – “to be discussed at the five-minute activity”, and (2.) it encouraged students to come back from the break on time, since they knew they’d be missing out on their free time together as a group if they did not.

This was particularly helpful when dealing with C – since it addressed two of the troublesome issues of hers – tardiness, and her tendency to digress and be very chatty. C was allowed time to chat in English about anything she wanted during the five-minute activity, and since she also spoke only English in class, I was not bothered by her chatting
with her partner about other subjects if she were to finish a pair task sooner than the rest of the students. To me that extra chatting time was practice in English, and I was proud to see her slowly include into her natural oral production things we had been practicing in class.

During the semester, I was also able to learn how to deal better with C’s tendency to whine and complain about doing work. Part of my dealing with this was related to understanding her better, part was achieved after this understanding by being inspired by Ivette, and how she dealt with her teens’ whining in a cheerful manner, and part was by a conversation I had with C about the whining. I let her know how much potential I thought she had, and explained to her that when she whined it bothered me because I really thought she was not showing enough confidence in herself or in me – I wouldn’t ask her to do something I didn’t think she could. We talked about it a bit, and she blamed her whining on being tired. I believed her, but I also thought there was more to it. We talked about it a bit more, and in the end, in class, she stopped whining quite so much, and when she did, it didn’t bother me so much, and I was able to deal with it in a cheerful manner. I find that honest conversations with students can be very effective (more in the “Findings” part of this paper).

As for R1, the other challenging student in my class: That turned out to be even more positive than I had expected. I spoke to R1 in private after class, after our fourth class together. He was visibly worried that I was going to scold him and seemed a little upset about this. The general group rapport was a positive one from the very beginning and he seemed upset to be asked to stay after – as if whatever happened was going to break that positive atmosphere.
The content of our conversation was, I suspect, different from what he was expecting. I was open with R1, and told him that I very much enjoyed having him as a student, and that I needed his help. I explained to him that I thought he was a natural leader, and that as an extrovert, he had a lot of advantages and skills that he could use to benefit the group. I asked him to help me with the shy students in class, helping me draw them out kindly whenever possible, and making sure that they had an equal opportunity to be heard, without the fear of being “embarrassed” by others. I told R1 that he had a talent for making people smile, laugh, and be at ease, and that sometimes he was so bright in class it could intimidate others. So, on the one hand, his talent to make people smile could bring people out and welcome them into the class, and on the other, he should be aware that he could be intimidating, since most people would love to befriend him, and would be worried about R1’s opinion of themselves.

Everything I said to R1 was absolutely heartfelt and true from my point of view, and I tried to talk to him as honestly and openly as I could. I didn’t mean to give him control of my class, as I know that may be what this sounds like, but I did want to empower him to know that he could channel that energy of his into doing a lot of good for the class – that this was another way of getting recognition and attention.

Well, I don’t remember exactly how the conversation went at the moment that it happened. What I am sharing here are general memories of the moment from my journal. I cannot be precise as to who said what. What I do know is that R1 and I became friends and he was most helpful in class, being particularly careful of the two girls who had been lifelong friends, and who were visibly shier and quieter than the rest.
From pretty much the first month on, this class was a dream to teach. I adapted every class to their specific needs, and they responded accordingly. Sometimes things were too easy or too hard, and I would have to change something on the spot. Sometimes a student would come in with a particular problem of their own, and I’d try to respect that. Iz suffered from very strong cramps, and came to class on the day in which I was filmed with a very sour expression on her face. I asked her if she wanted to go home and she said no, that she would just take it slow, and for me not to mind her too much. And so that was exactly what I did. It was strange not to see her participating as usual, and looking so cross, but it was something I had to give her room for.

Small glitches aside – class plans that did not work, activities that worked better or worse, days on which certain students were more or less engaged – the group came to class with a positive energy, and participated actively. As a whole, they learned and progressed to my full satisfaction, and more importantly, to their own. At the end of the semester, they petitioned to have me be there teacher again, and I taught them again for a full semester.
PART TWO

THE FINDINGS
INTRODUCTION TO THE FINDINGS

The next part of this paper is dedicated to a general overview of “teenhood” – considerations and interpretations achieved through active observation, reflection, and discussion within the “think tank” that was this project’s group of teachers. It is a subjective narrative, journal-like in format, developed from my understanding of the material discussed on what it means to be a teen. To make all the correlations between all the different insightful “ah-ha” moments and their causes, and how these were built over a six-month period with the teachers involved, would have been impossible if attempted.

The findings expressed here were a result of interwoven moments of communication – in the classroom in connecting with my teen students, in the group discussions connecting with the other teachers, and in class observation and journal writing connecting with my inner self – weaving in previous experiences, feelings, and beliefs with moments of new and altering understanding, possibilities, and questioning.

I believe the thoughts that were produced as a result of all this communication and reflection helped me make the choices I made, and helped me learn. I believe that though the next part (particularly the first part) may not seem practical to the reader, its understanding yielded very practical results for me, and so I feel I must include these thoughts here. My better understanding of teenage inner workings, and teenage possibilities of “being”, helped me as a professional, and helped me help other professionals struggling with class dynamics of teenage groups.

It was also through the considerations of what it meant to be a teen that the teachers and I were able to formulate our theories, deal with our inner selves, and establish better choices for our classes. In the next part of this paper, I will explore these
with you – first, what I understand as “teenhood” and what it means to be a teen, and then
to explain the practical ramifications of this understanding as it concerns class dynamics
– particularly motivation and discipline of teens.

I would like to remind my reader that I don’t have all the answers; I have only a
few good questions and possible, temporary answers to some. I am barely scraping the tip
of the iceberg with some personal findings, but I would still like to share some thoughts
with you.
CHAPTER SEVEN

ON HOW TO APPROACH THE SUBJECT OF TEENHOOD

Childhood, adulthood – where’s teenhood? We wonder why this word is not used more often, and why it cannot be found in most dictionaries. Isn’t it a distinct phase of human development such as the first two? Why must it be given a more scientific name – “adolescence”? Besides the etymology of the word, is it possible that today this distinction still reflects a little of how many of us feel socially about this phase?

When talking to most of the educators I deeply respect, I get a sense that teenhood is a phase that is not so appealing for them to teach to. Too many loving, devoted teachers believe that teaching for such a “difficult” phase is just too much trouble and heartache, with not enough reward. I know the feeling, and I completely understand why those who really care would rather invest their giving energy in something that would give back to them, or that would yield fruit more surely (as a perfectionist, why risk such bumpy terrain?).

This feeling of unease in dealing with the education of teens seems to reflect a view of the teenage period that affects not only teachers but parents as well. In Brazil, adolescence has a nickname. Brazilians often refer to adolescence as “aborrescencia” – a play on words taken from “adolescencia”, the Portuguese term for adolescence. If we were to attempt a translation of the term “aborrescencia”, it would translate roughly to “annoyescence” – to say that adolescence is essentially a phase where we become “annoying” and “bothersome”. Socially this is the stereotype: Teens are bothersome. Parents may often joke around when their kids act out, and say to their friends, “Won’t you take them and give them back when they’ve hit twenty?”
So what is it that makes being a teen so troublesome? What is involved in this period that “covers” being a teen (which I will lovingly refer to as “teenhood”)? As I see it, teenhood is about being stuck in the middle; it is a period of development of self; it is a moment of transition, and as in any transitional period, it is volatile and full of potential. It is, in my opinion, a most interesting time to be talking about.

**Approach To Talking About Teenhood**

First of all, it is hard to build a mold for teenhood – and here I must digress before in fact discussing our topic fully.

When reading Parker Palmer’s *The Courage to Teach*, he speaks of us adjusting humans to methodologies that are like “Procrustean beds”\(^2\) to the human existence\(^3\). It is an idea I had heard of before when studying existential phenomenological psychology. The idea of “the Procrustean bed” (in this context) is that you build theories and then try to fit your subjects into them.

For example, if you subscribe to psychoanalysis, every subject you meet must be essentially motivated by the id and controlled by the ego after the repression of the superego – basically we are all out being driven by our desires.

Or if you follow the behaviorist point of view, your subject’s motivation comes from a result of all the experiences and the collective learned knowledge and associations you have made that form the matrix of meaningful experiences that form you.

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\(^2\) Procrustean Bed (from Greek mythology): Procrustes was a bandit who took his victims to a bed he created and adjusted them exactly to the dimensions of the bed – stretching the victim to the bed’s dimensions if they were smaller than the bed, and cutting off body parts if they were bigger. As a metaphor, we speak of Procrustean beds as an attempt at adjusting a human being to one type of thought or standard.

\(^3\) Palmer, p. 11
Or you may follow yet another theory that says that humans are all motivated by fear and the desire for power. Or another that we fit into a personality type, and this will drive us to our action. Or that the collective subconscious motivates us subconsciously into action all the time. Whatever theory or theory combination you believe in, you take that and then you take your subject – the student, in our case – and try to fit the subject like a rag doll into this theory, cutting off any detail about the subject that does not fit the chosen theory, and patching in others that do (whether they are meaningful or not).

Rather than do that to our subjects – the students – I would rather try something different. I’d rather consider as many different possibilities and have as much knowledge as I can gather from as many different sources as possible, and then use them or ignore them if they help me understand what the student is showing me. In trying to understand this student, all of my resources and all that I bring with me should be used to benefit this student. I should first focus on the student – his experience and existence. And then I should ask myself if there is anything that I possess (intellectual, emotional, or spiritual) that can benefit this student, or if I must construct brand new meaning from scratch so as to best profit our work together.

I was inspired by Husserl’s “phenomenological suspension”, stemming from “phenomenological reduction”⁴, directed toward the understanding of human existence as it was taught to me in my undergraduate studies in psychology. I used my former teachings to explore the kind of suspension I believed would benefit me as teacher-researcher. It is where I based much of my approach to this project. In my view of suspension, I proposed to myself an ideological suspension of sorts, where all my

ideologies, all my ideas, all my feelings, intuitions, curiosities, and possibilities are here to serve the subject, and not the other way around. If necessary, I would have to be willing to throw them out the window and start fresh, to be true to the experience as it unfolded before my eyes.

I proposed this way of operating to the group I was with. We would read papers related to teaching and motivation, but we would not be restricted by beliefs and theories previously built. In this way, we tried to take the subject as openly as we possibly could and tried to understand our students and classes without trying to fit them into a Procrustean bed of pre-established thought and theories.

Our belief was that you let observation guide you and you can fish in your “self” (mind, intuition, feeling, spirit, etc.) for an understanding that might be useful for the case in point. If the experience could not be well served by what was already in one’s possession, you would need to create a whole different set of ideas and attempts at explanations or elaboration, given the group of students or student before you.

In my findings, this is what I will show you: A subjective collection of thoughts based on observation of specific groups. I will work from my own experience and also from my observation and interpretation of the experiences of the teachers I worked with.

When earlier I mentioned that we were only scraping the tip of the iceberg, it is true, for our subject is as infinite as the possibilities of human existence. So the observations I include here are limited to the moment I worked in and to that which was within my ability to perceive. There are infinite variables and aspects in addition to what was observed, but I will include only what I was able to observe that I consider useful to others – to be taken not as absolute truths, but as possibilities of existence.
CHAPTER EIGHT

UNDERSTANDING ASPECTS OF THE TEEN MOMENT

From my observation of the teen groups, I saw a variety of different individuals struggling with different issues, and being successful with others. There were some aspects which I saw repeat themselves with more individuals, and there were others that seemed to be more particular to the person in question. I am going to address here issues that I saw come up frequently.

I know it is dangerous to deal in generalizations, so I would like to remind the reader that the following paragraphs report possibilities and observations of some situations, and that these should not be taken as rules to explain teenage behavior across the board. Having said that, let’s take a closer look at some possibilities of “being” in teenhood.

Being Sexual

What are some things involved in being a teen? Well, for starters, hormones become active, changing the person in many ways. For girls, the change can often even be violent and painful – breasts develop, skin changes, hair grows where it wasn’t before, and a girl’s period can be not only messy and limiting (you have to adapt to the most uncomfortable devices where before you could just be), but also painful (cramps). The change in hormones frequently brings with it increased sensibility and often mood swings. Go to a thirteen-year-old’s party and invariably some girl will be crying in the corner over some personal drama – while the boys are horsing around somewhere else.
Emotions can get intensified for girls; and boys will be called immature for their lack of understanding of them.

Puberty affects boys and girls differently. Boys seem to suffer from their hormones more in terms of a sexual drive, where everything becomes sexual in nature. At the same time, the desire to be physically interesting can lead them to be more aggressive towards each other – trying to show how strong or powerful they are is not uncommon.

Desire often leads to the realization that in order to get the object of one’s desire one needs to be desirable oneself. This is one of the reasons why teens at this developmental stage suddenly become so aware of themselves. Now they also have to worry about whether they are sexually interesting. In the one moment of their lives when being attractive or “cute” is for the first time REALLY important, they get handed challenges such as acne, body odor, braces for their teeth, and all other manner of physical awkwardness.

Besides being a source of great frustration and preoccupation – something to be kept in mind for teachers – the changes that come from being sexual spread out in many different meaningful directions. It leads to self-consciousness as for the first time they desire to be appealing, and they are not sure if they are. They are facing themselves meaningfully in the mirror every day, for the first time.

The awareness of what they don’t know weighs heavily on them maybe for the first time too. The distance between what the teens are unsure of, and the confidence they believe they need to express, is inversely proportional to the amount of time they believe they have in which to gain this knowledge. Confusion is often a result. And particularly for boys, who want to seem strong, confusion is not a very “sexy” feature.
Being “Mean” And Aggressive

Another consideration that may come from the sexual awakening of humans is that if we put sexuality and the desire to seem strong together, in meaningful creatures such as humans, you can easily get some very “mean” behavior. For humans, power doesn’t only come in the physical ability to beat someone up – though certainly the boys would respect that. It also comes in terms of wits, and being sarcastic or funny. Being funnier than someone else, or getting people to laugh with you is a prized event – even if at times it is at the expense of a person who is shier and maybe perceived as weaker.

It is not uncommon for teens to be cruel at this age. The changes that start out at a hormonal level lead to all kinds of consequences. There is a desire to be appealing to the opposite sex – how this can be achieved by the male, like I mentioned before, may come from simply stepping on someone else to look strong. This is not unheard of on the side of the girls either – they can get attention by bringing someone else down too.

Sometimes such aggressive behavior can also be caused by fear and insecurity. The abrupt changes in their physical form can often lead to a feeling of inadequacy. Take a ten-year-old running around, and you can see a graceful child accomplishing great things with his/her possible lack of fear.

Take the same child at thirteen, and you might see someone who has suddenly become clumsy and somehow less graceful. With so many physical changes of such a delicate and often taboo nature (there is so much to hide at this age), it is not unheard of that children may suddenly become insecure.
Being Insecure

Teens can sniff out insecurity like dogs sniff fear. It is at the heart of being a teenager. They are changing, they don’t know what’s to come – they may pretend very well that the information they get from books, movies, and their peers is enough to get them through, but many know that it isn’t.

They have grown and changed before, so what makes them feel particularly insecure now? Many different things, as we will be discussing here. However, the taboo nature of their changes surely doesn’t help. Subjects such as masturbation, menstruation, libido, pregnancy – such huge and ugly names, and subjects that are so hush-hush, can be confusing. Though times are changing, and information is becoming more available, the understanding and the genuinely comfortable talk about these topics is something that teenagers will still not always experience.

They have insecurities regarding sex at a more basic level too. They have a brand new drive, and they don’t know what the destination feels like. In a way, it’s almost like dying: You know it’s out there and you are moving towards it, but like the unknown, you don’t know what it will be like until you get there. Not knowing renders you vulnerable, and vulnerability can be perceived as weakness, which is why it is usually so important for teenage boys to pretend that they know all about sex, as a way to avoid seeming insecure about it.

For girls, the insecurities regarding sex are even more complicated. In a post-sexual revolution society, where the family structure is still shifting, and we do not have
established or accepted rules of behavior or role models to follow, sexual awakening can be particularly confusing. The “double standards” that boys can and should, and girls should wait, is still out there – though a little mixed and confused now.

For girls, sex is a bigger mystery still as many are taught, and modern media endorses the belief that sex and love should go together. Girls may think, “I need to understand both sex and love in order to have sex… and well… okay, so I think I’m in love. How do I know if the boy is?” Girls are insecure enough about their own feelings, including love, to even begin to try to understand their partner’s. The idea that respect or the loss of respect has something to do with sex is still out there in rap songs and in other pop culture – with mixed messages from the latest TV shows such as “The O.C.” and others.

Pregnancy, disease, and other issues are still often held over the girls’ heads more than over the boys’, and in a sense the sexual desire is from the start often coupled with the instilled sense of doom that could come from giving into it. Yes, you can follow your sexual drive, but hey, don’t forget the consequences: Pregnancy, AIDS, your friends will look down on you, your parents will kill you if they find out, the boy you are with might love you and leave you, etc. Though some may say that teaching about prevention of sexually transmitted diseases is what sexual education needs to be about nowadays (and I agree it’s important), the moral burden of choosing still seems to float more toward the girl – and this is not often discussed in sex-ed.

Times are changing, but they haven’t changed completely yet. Things are still very much up in the air, and it is a confusing time for girls regarding sex too. The maxim

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5 “The O.C.” is a TV show that has become very popular and talks about the lives of wealthy teens in Orange County, California. The show talks about sex, drugs, rock n’ roll, and other teen issues.
that women just instinctively know about all things around sex and maternity is one I have never observed in my teenage girl students or in myself.

**Being Free – Testing Limits**

Of course sexual insecurities can lead to other insecurities, and then there are other insecurities that come, on their own – not linked to sexually based concerns. The desire for freedom can be based on sexual drive, or not. One can desire to be more autonomous because, like Mt. Everest, it is simply there, it is my potentiality, and in time, as we become stronger, we are able to face larger challenges, go further, do more. This world of possibility can create a great desire for freedom, but it can also be a source of insecurity. How autonomous can I be? Am I omnipotent? Eternal like the heroes in my comic books? I certainly feel strong, but what if I fall?

Being a teen is a time to test the limits of what was there before. It’s a “what can I do?” kind of moment. This general attitude is a positive one, and one most parents encourage their teen kids towards – giving them more and more freedom as they go along. The problem here is the parental imposition of, as Sam Raimi’s Spiderman\(^6\) puts it, “With great power comes great responsibility.” The expectations put on teenagers are often proportional to the amount given to them in terms of liberty.

In many teens, the more childish nature of taking only what is wanted will still scream louder and say, “No, I don’t want that. I want the freedom part, but let’s scratch the responsibility part.” This can present itself as a challenge to teachers in the classroom. The desire for freedom in the classroom is there, but not necessarily the willingness to be responsible in the same setting.

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\(^6\) Pop reference to the 2002 movie version of the comic book hero Spiderman directed by Sam Raimi.
It is during the teen years that the weight of one’s choices becomes clearer. It is during these years that a teenager understands the passing of time and the nature of human existence a bit better. Though many teens do not have contact with meaningful death (the death of a loved one, or death that will mean something deeper to the teen) at this age, they do have contact with choices they cannot undo, and living with the consequences of their actions. Suddenly, life becomes less inconsequential, and the fear of making a wrong decision, one that will affect one’s happiness, comes into play. This is a source of insecurity – the choices one makes.

Being Meaningful And Being Yourself

Another great source of insecurity, perhaps the greatest, is one’s own self. When we say that a child is selfish or self-centered, it is really no demerit for this is part of the nature of a child. We will often think to ourselves, “Well, they don’t know any better”, and teach them the golden rule so that through empathy children will learn to be mindful of the world beyond their own borders. As children get older, and their borders of understanding become greater, they become aware of more, conscious of life at a greater level. Besides looking outside, they begin to explore the borders within.

As teens, these children are growing out of their own world of influence, and becoming more and more aware of others as owners of their own worlds of influence as well. The fear of others becoming more and more aware of themselves is present too (especially when one doesn’t really know how to explain oneself – explain who one is, how, or why).
Rather than only an issue of not knowing who you are – I believe that teens have the knowledge within of who they are to some extent, though they are still forming their “selves” as they go along – this is an issue of having to explain to others who you are, and this is not a kind of knowledge that has necessarily been well elaborated yet through abstract reasoning into concrete thought.

The resulting exacerbated self-consciousness of teens can come from their lack of a prior, deeper consciousness of themselves. It can come from a new look at themselves coming from their desire to be desired – sexually –, and accepted – socially. It can come from their first contacts with having to justify themselves, explain themselves, and not having well-thought-out answers, because really exploring within has not been something they have done a lot of up to this point.

Up to this point, the world had been there for the child and worked for the child, a place to be explored where inner desires command outward exploration and expansion, but the child has really not taken too much time to think about himself because really there has been no cause to. Now, suddenly, teens become interesting to each other at another level. It is part of their own discovery, as well as their interest in each other – sexually and socially.

When others are suddenly turning their focus to them and asking them what they think, what they feel, and who they are, the elaboration of these issues in language is not so easy, since it is not something they spent a lot of time contemplating before. Not many eight- or ten-year-olds spend a lot of time contemplating their own existence.

Before it was merely a question of living – no deep questions about myself asked, and certainly no judgment from others on the kind of answers given. Now, there are
questions about myself and how I can serve the world ("Hmm...that’s new") and can be a little threatening. Then, you add to this the awkwardness of not actually having ready answers to the simple questions you may be asked:

“Why don’t your socks match?”
“What did you do to your hair?”
“Oh my God, is that a Toy Story pencil case? Wasn’t that cool like last year?”
“Do you really listen to Britney Spears?”
“You like math?”
“Have you ever heard of facial cream for acne?”
“Are you on the pill or something?”

These questions don’t necessarily want answers – some may be even absurd if asked to a thirteen-year-old. They sound like personal attacks because mostly they are. Sometimes these questions can be of a purely defensive nature. They could be questions to defend the very fragile ego of someone who figures that being proactive in threatening is a sure way to avoid being fired upon himself/herself. Placing awkwardness outside can be like a camouflage tactic – you create a diversion to take the attention away from yourself.

The funny thing is that four years ago being asked these questions would have gotten honest, direct, no-nonsense answers: “Yes” / “No” / “I have no idea what you’re talking about.” / “Why are you asking me that?” But now, in plain teenhood, teens might either shy away, or answer even more aggressively.

What has charged these questions now? One possible outlook is that teens have never really examined themselves from within or contemplated themselves and their existence from within until this moment – and suddenly who they are has become an issue. They are testing who they are through their own explanations of self. Besides testing the limits outside, they are testing the limits within, learning how to defend who
they are before they can even elaborate aspects of themselves into meaning. Out of social self-defense and social life for teens, they might need to develop their wit and sarcastic cunning, before they even understand what it is within they are defending.

The contemplation and attempt at understanding our subjectivity, of our vulnerability – even if it is only at a subconscious level – is very much a part of the teen moment, and it is a great source of insecurity. This is something that behooves us as teachers and educators to keep in mind.

**Being Accepted**

Essentially for a teen, these are very plausible thoughts:

- I don’t know if I’m pretty or handsome – maybe I’m totally unattractive (certainly my zits don’t help).
- I don’t know if I am smart – I get zinged by this kid in school all the time, and it makes me feel stupid.
- I don’t know if I am liked – not by my parents (I might feel secure about that). I want the interest of my peers, and I’m not so sure that my friends would stand by me if I did something stupid and became a social pariah.
- I don’t know exactly what is cool and what is not – so my chances of screwing up and doing something uncool in front of everyone are pretty reasonable, and then I would become a social pariah.
- I don’t know what to say in certain situations, and I don’t want to put my foot in my mouth and sound stupid.
- I want to be accepted, considered cool, liked, possibly even looked up to.

Put this all together and you can get a pretty good idea of why a student won’t speak up in class. Because if a student is naturally feeling vulnerable, putting him in a situation of vulnerability, such as the learning experience, only intensifies this feeling. Unless the learning environment is a welcoming one, one that the student will feel safe in, getting a student to risk embarrassment and revealing his / her insecurity or ineptitude is too much for some.
The Classroom

The classroom is a natural place of vulnerability. It is a possible stage for embarrassment, and students often enter a classroom knowing as much. According to the student, this will come out in different ways. This can come out as shyness, or it can come out as defiance. It can come out through humor, or it can come out through the brave embracing of the truth of not knowing.

The students who can truly embrace their insecurity – their honest not knowing and their honest not needing to explain themselves – these are the students others will often look up to. In a sense, they are the ones that know themselves best – they know that they don’t know, and that doesn’t bother them. They can be honest about life as it presents itself in the moment. They somehow know that what they know is enough to satisfy them, and what they don’t know and need they’ll find out in time.

For a teacher, it is important to always remember that this is a moment of discovery for students at a much deeper level than one can imagine at times. At these times, when you are merely thinking of going over Exercise 3 in the workbook, the student you called on might be terrified that his voice is going to change when called upon, and may want to make a joke to take away from this fear. Or student X who has just discovered sarcasm as a tool for power may want to sharpen her new skill on someone’s back – the teacher being a perfectly acceptable target. Or student Z who has discovered that being funny gets the girls’ attention is trying to disrupt the class. Or student W who has discovered that teachers are mortal too wants to find out exactly how human teachers are.
The classroom is a melting pot of potentialities and possibilities. It is the most common place where teens meet and interact, test their new selves, and live and learn about themselves. In this context, learning an academic subject, though the setting is academic, is not necessarily the foremost thing on a student’s mind.

For a teacher, keeping all of this in mind may be helpful. The truth is that here I have only sketched some possible aspects of teenhood; the possibilities in the classroom are infinite. The teacher’s awareness that the classroom is a rich social environment for teens is something that can be helpful for a better understanding of one’s group and establishing a welcome setting for learning.

If a teacher walks into a teen classroom, material to be taught in mind only, expecting connectedness to occur from the students’ natural desire to learn, there is a good chance the teacher will not be successful. Understanding the teen classroom, and furthermore each different classroom – with its infinite possibilities – can be an incredible challenge. For the teacher to be mindful that there might be more there than at first meets the eye is an excellent beginning.
So, what does all this speculation about teenhood offer a teacher that could be useful? For starters, understanding aspects of the teen moment may shed some light on understanding the motivation of some teenagers. The understanding that the classroom may be to teenagers primarily a social stage, rather than an academic one, is in fact a good starting point.

Yes, I would agree that as human beings we are always naturally learning, and that we are naturally motivated to learn. Now, I believe that what we need or are interested in will direct the focus of our learning, and this will be our natural, intrinsic motivation. Considering then that teenagers may have other interests than the academic subject imposed, and that the classroom is the most common site for them to meet and test their new potentialities, wouldn’t it make sense that there might be a conflict of interest between what the teacher means to teach and what the students are naturally inclined to be interested in learning in that scenario?

While the students’ minds are filled with other pressing subjects, curiosities and even physical needs, isn’t it sometimes too daunting a task for a teacher to ask students to ignore the wealth of social, sexual possibility contained in the classroom, and concentrate on learning a language they might not have been interested in to begin with? In an inward battle of the student between learning a language and looking like a fool, or impressing his peers and getting the huge prize of being respected (or simply left alone), what can possibly win: learning a new grammar point or preserving oneself? Learning a new word
or getting the much desired respect or attention of a peer? Hmmm… something not to be ignored.

As a teenager, students may not consciously be going through all these steps. In fact, oftentimes I believe the interactions that occur in a teenage classroom occur at a subconscious level – that which is there but is not at the top of one’s consciousness or awareness. It is a more basic motivation, and therefore harder still to understand or interpret.

For a teacher, understanding this proves very useful in two different ambits – (1.) In terms of self-preservation of the teacher, and (2.) in adapting one’s class to connect with one’s students. The first is quite simple, it occurs when you realize their lack of motivation to learn English may have more to do with their own dynamics, and the dynamics of their moment than with your “self” as a teacher. This will offend one’s ego less as a teacher, and allow you, the teacher, to approach your subject – the teens – more lovingly or openly. This will allow the teacher to not take the students’ apparent lack of motivation to learn as something personal against this teacher.

The second useful ambit is more interesting still as it will be the key to actual, useful changes that will occur to bring the students to the subject to be learned. When a teacher understands that the students in class have their own motivation, this can become the subject of discovery for the teacher for the sake of the class. The question then becomes: How does one channel the students’ natural, intrinsic motivation to learn to the learning of the language proposed?

This will vary tremendously from group to group, each group being a unique combination of the unique individuals within. For the group of teachers involved in this
project, we understood that this would have to happen daily even before we entered our classes on each given day. We would have to plan for the group of students we possessed specifically. We devised three guiding questions that helped us be mindful of our students when planning activities for our classes. These guiding questions were:

1. Is it challenging?
2. Is it interesting?
3. Is it relevant?

Though very basic, these questions were pegs to remind us while in the concrete experience that we should be mindful of the peculiarity of our own group.

The first question, “Is it challenging?”, takes us to Krashen’s i+1 rule. We often observed that in class, students would digress when the task proposed was too easy or too difficult. The former was the more common of the two since the curriculum and the guidelines seemed to take for granted that students would not be capable of too difficult tasks. We had also become used to taking for granted that students knew very little, and we would give them much more “scaffolding” than they really needed. The result was that there was no Mt. Everest to be climbed, but an escalator leading to the top… and really, for mountain climbers, what’s the fun in that?

Plus, for teens, existing socially can be the challenge, and the classroom a very propitious environment to work on that challenge. Why take attention away from this with easy little tasks?

Teachers found that when upping the academic challenge, when challenging the students into learning the material at hand, the response they got from students was often more positive. The intrinsic motivation of teens was often best tapped with a good

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challenge – the use of games and puzzles was particularly useful here. This was one way of channeling teenage motivation into language learning.

Of course, challenging teens to learn wasn’t enough on its own. We also found that embracing the teen’s natural motivation by using the subjects they were interested in often helped in class. Using songs to teach was a prime example. The idea was to plan one’s class including subjects that were meaningful and interesting to teens.

In our classes, we are obliged to follow a set curriculum, and oftentimes the subjects proposed are so distant from our particular groups’ interests, it makes it virtually impossible to meaningfully engage them. So, we had to adapt much of the material. Through conversation and observation, the teacher learns more about the students’ interests and then adapts.

For example, in the book we were using, the topic at hand was “Feng Shui”. Most of my teen students are not interested in decorating their apartments to better “the flow of chi”. But they are interested in dating, and so using Feng Shui to help with their love life was a funny theme to be adapted and adopted. It also led to discussions on mysticism, solar signs, and their own personality quizzes. It was in a playful spirit, but it brought the subject closer to their real interests – their interests in learning about themselves and each other, their interests in becoming appealing – and I was able to more fully engage them that way while still teaching them the vocabulary of the unit and joining the four skills.

The five-minute free conversation activity I had proposed to my group was also a great motivational tool. Each student was given the assignment to bring in a topic which would serve as a conversation opener, I would mediate when needed, and we would sit in a circle and discuss any subject – in English – that the students brought up. This activity
was useful for many different reasons. For one, it allowed me to hear the students more and understand their interests more – which helped in class preparation, in the choices I made in class, and in keeping the students more interested in general.

There were other positive effects to this activity. The conversation circle allowed for students to bond with each other more, and it helped create a sense of community in our class which extended itself into different parts of the class. Students were friendlier toward each other, and it became a safer place for students to take risks with the language. To me personally, the best effect of this circle is that it really helped me connect with my students, and this connection was helpful throughout.

Of course, there is possible danger in the free-conversation circle. The teacher needs to be very sure of herself, and know that sometimes the teacher’s gentle mediation may be needed to avoid misunderstanding. In proposing a free activity such as this, you must expect the unexpected, and know that there is always a risk that something unpleasant may come out. The teacher needs to know how much he/she can handle in order to steer away from subjects that may be too personal in content if the teacher finds that those may be beyond his/her area of comfort. The teacher must always be true to herself first – as we will soon discuss in the “Knowing Thyself” portion of this paper.

There are many examples for me of how activities that allowed me to understand my students’ interests, or that played into my students interests, allowed me to motivate my students more. As long as the teacher is not being untrue to some personal aspect of his/her own in embracing the students’ interests, I find that adapting curriculum, guidelines, and one’s whole approach to the class to be nearer student interests is extremely helpful.
The third question proposed – “Are the activities relevant?” – speaks to the human existence, and reality of the teenager. It is not only a question of how useful this language learning point will be for the teenager, which is a great question in itself, but it is also a question of how much this student will “own” the language. In our project group discussions of this question, we ended up talking about both relevance and ownership, and connecting the two.

According to our observations, that which was more relevant to the student in terms of learned language, ended up being language that the student took on as his/her own more quickly. Along with the ownership of the new language came also the ownership of the learning process. In a sense, we were working on creating a virtuous cycle.

By presenting relevant language, language that students needed and would tend to use since it was relevant to their realm of existence, students became more motivated to learn this language, and in being more motivated they learned better, and in learning better they felt better about themselves and more powerful, and in being more powerful they sought out more relevant language, and the cycle would start anew. They “owned” not only the language that was once artificial and foreign, but they were also the “owners” of their learning process and the choices made within.

Up to this point, I have been talking about motivating teens primarily intrinsically. Even here, where learning meaningful, useful language will increase self-esteem and the desire to learn further, I am still talking primarily about intrinsic motivation. So what of extrinsic motivation?
One of our project group discussion sessions was devoted largely to speaking about extrinsic vs. intrinsic motivation of teens. And I must say I consciously and deliberately tapped into both in the classroom.

The main example of extrinsic motivation being used positively in my classes is L1 control and the motivation to speak L2. The one aspect I am most proud of in my classes is that I manage to keep teen students speaking English only – at this level (high-intermediate), for several consecutive classes. I might go a month before a student checks the meaning of an English vocabulary word with me in Portuguese. It is the one aspect of my class I am not humble about. I truly believe that this is useful. The students know that if they need to speak Portuguese they can, but that we have created an environment in which they will be able to speak only English, and after a month, not feel like it is artificial – it becomes the natural mode of conversation in that setting – in the English class.

The means to this end is a Portuguese (L1)-controlling game – in this group the Apple Tree Game. The reward for winning the game is a party at the end of the semester. At first, and as an excuse, the motivation is external reward – the party. In time, and after a while, it becomes a personal challenge to win, since they are playing against other groups, or at least to show each other and myself that they can. In a sense, they are proving themselves, and this is a combination of both extrinsic and intrinsic motivation.

By the end of the semester, the students are speaking English in class only and enjoying themselves doing it – there is a definite sense of “I can” when they express themselves that way. They are empowered, and often they even forget about the prize of winning a party. They remember the game more in terms of pride and knowing either that
they are winning or that they are on par with other groups, but even this is secondary to their achievement in class – speaking English naturally. As a group, they can revel in it. So, in a sense, we go with activity from extrinsic motivation to intrinsic motivation.

I believe a mesh of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation can occur in other situations too. A good example of this is when we talk about expectations and how expectations can motivate students. I expect a lot of my students. I give them a lot, and I expect them to give me a lot too. I think very highly of them, and I try to show them this. I know that some students are also motivated by what I expect of them – by the way I look at them and believe in them. It is not so different from my own doing my best at my job to try to show my boss I am a good teacher. It is seeking approval, and it is extrinsic motivation at first. It is extending oneself, and reaching out to try to meet the expectations of another.

I do not subscribe to an absolute sense of a “no praise” / “inner criteria” / “intrinsic motivation”-only approach. However, when I see that students are doing their best to impress me or show me that they can, I try as much as possible (while also celebrating their success with them) to throw their success back at them; to make sure they feel that sense of ownership we discussed earlier. Show them how great their achievement is for themselves – not for me – and make sure that their accomplishments are meaningful for themselves. This often makes them even more confident and strong, and it is extremely gratifying to me – just to see them grow.

I know I may sound like a sports coach here – pushing the team, expecting the best, etc. This is not the feeling I hope I pass on to them in class. I go for a much more understanding and loving feeling in nature, trying to seek out what is meaningful to them,
to see how far they can go according to their own criteria of success, and let them know
that I will be there to catch them if they fall trying to achieve it.

I am not going to stop believing in my students, or stop expecting the best from
them, and giving them the best of my confidence just so as to not risk them trying to
achieve things to impress me. I will however be mindful to transform that which may
come out initially as extrinsic motivation – trying to live up to my belief in them – to
their own inner belief in themselves. This way they can celebrate their successes more
deeply and truly.

In the end, it is often a question of adapting extrinsic motivation into intrinsic
motivation, or simply being aware that in some situations one can lead to the other, or
that both can co-exist, or that sometimes simple extrinsic motivation can serve an
immediate purpose. The main idea is to try not to be subjected to absolutes, and to put
both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation to the service of the class – being mindful of the
choices one makes, and in what those may implicate.
CHAPTER TEN – TEEN DISCIPLINE

Note: This chapter will discuss the discipline of teenage classes in general terms. I am aware that there are extreme cases of “difficult” students, and teachers of these may not be satisfied with the options discussed here. When talking to teachers, this is usually the first line of defense: “But this group is special; there is one student that really spoils it, and he really doesn’t care about a thing. All he really wants to do is disrupt the class, and nothing and no one will change that. He is the bad apple that spoils the bunch.”

I am aware of special cases and particularly difficult students. This has been a topic so often and for so long that I have devoted a chapter exclusively to this subject – this will come next. In this chapter, I would like to discuss what we most likely and most often see and observe in class, rather than the exception. Please be aware of this distinction while reading this next chapter.

**Discipline and Motivation**

“Motivation” and “Discipline” are intimately related. I find that classes in which motivation is a problem discipline is often a problem too. As we discussed earlier, teens are naturally, intrinsically motivated to learn, just not necessarily motivated to learn the subject of the class being taught. If the teacher is not able to channel the students’ motivated energy into the class and engage the group, this energy will dissipate or flow naturally into other areas – possibly areas that will disrupt the teachers’ class and may cause a lot of problems.

It is no surprise, therefore, that when I talk about the discipline of teens in a class, I will start by talking about motivation. We have already discussed some possible ways to engage students and tap into both their intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. What we have not discussed is how achieving this will help with the class discipline.

The first thing is that when students are motivated and eager to learn, they put themselves into the class. Their voice is an integral part of the class, a building block of the lesson. They are invested in the class, and as a teacher, you can use this energetic investment to keep the class intact. As a teacher, if you respect the students’ voice and
value their participation, you can level with your students and show them that certain things are harmful to the class – since the class is one that they are an essential part of, it is harmful therefore to themselves.

Another thing within this subject is that in having students motivated and engaged, the teacher achieves a cooperative relationship with the group, since they are included in the class that works well, as is the teacher. It is in this way easier to create a bond of trust with the students. This bond of trust will allow the teacher to speak openly and sincerely with the group, and be heard openly as well. It is another aspect or way to achieve the all-important forming of rapport with the group. A cooperative relationship with a group achieved through the successful motivation of teens in the class will allow for the group rapport to be formed so as to give the teacher the position of the trusty leader that will ensure that the environment they are learning in is safe.

When we talk about discipline, this is essentially what we are talking about – the teacher creating a safe learning environment in the class by making sure that no one or group of students goes over their own boundaries and into another’s so as to threaten them or take away their personal space. When we discuss discipline in a class, we are discussing a regulating of personal space – physical, intellectual, emotional, ethical, and spiritual. You are dealing in ensuring your students’ physical, intellectual, emotional, ethical, and spiritual safety.

When you establish a good rapport with a group, the students may more easily understand this. Traditionally, when you mention the word “discipline” to a teenager, they will immediately react negatively – the connotation of the word to a teenager is
negative. It means repression, outside regulation, taking away freedom, forced authority: all that they are so meaningfully engaged to fight against in this phase of their lives.

When the rapport of a teacher and group of students is positive, it allows for teachers to show the students that they, teachers, care for their students. And showing the students that we care, when this care is genuine and not just an artifice, is one of the most valuable things we can offer a group in terms of keeping this good rapport. This good rapport will be what will allow the students to realize that whatever this teacher attempts to regulate is not hurtful, or a desire to impose repression and forced control. The good rapport will allow the teacher to discuss with students the regulations that may be needed, and discuss with students the boundaries of the class and why – to come to an agreement on the boundaries of the class, and why. It is an invitation for students to regulate their own area together, cooperatively. When the rapport of a teacher and a group is good, students will understand this effort as a step to ensure their safety and liberty, not one to simply constrict their self-expression and stifle them.

In practical terms, I have worked with “class contracts” (see appendix 8 for a full description of ways to work with this) to help with the inclusion of students in establishing these boundaries of the classroom, and that which is safe in the class. I find formalizing our agreement and working on it from the very first day of class to be helpful. It sets the scene for these kids as to what my teaching style is like, and what I would like our classroom to be like – a cooperative area. It is a setting where their voice is very much taken into consideration and heard, but where chaos is only allowed to occur so long as it doesn’t hurt, hinder, or restrict any one integral member of our class – myself included. I do not know if chaos within an organized setting is too much of a
paradox, but I know that if it were possible and it helped my group’s learning, I would have no problem with it.

In the end, this is the most natural marriage of sorts for the classroom, since motivation of the students in the class is naturally a building block for the formation of a healthy, safe environment for learning. The discipline factor of the class is not seen as one of enforced “police-like” authority of the teacher, but one of cooperative understanding and compromise. It is, in a sense, an extension of real life and what these teens will face as adults – a society that needs to regulate itself so as to ensure individual freedoms.

**ASPECTS OF DISCIPLINE IN A TEEN CLASS**

Having talked about motivation and discipline, I would like to address some of the problems our group of project teachers faced the most regarding discipline – disregarding the motivational aspect (some of these aspects occurred in classes where motivation was equally a challenge).

Here we will address discipline separately, already having taken into consideration the importance and the value of motivation linked to discipline, but not going into this interwoven aspect too much. Here we will discuss considerations of specific discipline problems, and how we dealt with them. For this purpose, I have subdivided this chapter into smaller, specific topics. They are as follows:
Being Disrespectful – Defiance of the Teacher

One of the most common problems for teachers dealing with “troublesome” groups is that there seems to be frequently a “defiant” or rebellious element in the class – usually present in the attitude of one or a small group of students. This attitude frequently contaminates the class, and once you see it, it seems it is too far-gone, and the group has already been “spoiled” by this feeling.

Whatever the teacher proposes, the students will complain, and some will downright boycott the activity. Students talk to each other loudly, ignoring the fact that the teacher is speaking. Objects can be thrown across the classroom, as students “rub it in” that the teacher is not in control of this class, and the students will do whatever they damn well like.

Irony and sarcasm are not uncommon. Students will respond to the teacher in an ironic tone, and will attempt to use humor to put the teacher down. Students may laugh at the teacher, and in this way communicate exactly how silly and ineffective they think the teacher is. They may also simply slouch in their chairs, and give the teacher disdainful looks while giving each other meaningful ones.

Notes are passed. There is parallel conversation everywhere, and the students make perfectly clear to the teacher how much they really don’t want to be there, and exactly how useless they think this teacher is.

The teacher, on the other hand, is contaminated by this sense of uselessness and impotence. No matter what the teacher proposes, the students don’t listen. The teacher becomes more and more frustrated, and changes tactics going from trying to seduce the students with promises of songs, chocolate, and games, to an authoritarian threatening of
students with low grades and calls to parents. Solutions to things are temporary, and not a change or shift in the group’s general attitude. As the dynamics of the class continues, the teacher loses himself / herself in the classes, and becomes, in each failed attempt, more and more impotent daily.

There is clearly a power struggle in such classes, and the teacher rarely wins when this happens. The biggest solution to this problem is usually one that occurs outside the classroom, and previous to the class. It is a solution that must occur within the teacher – one we will discuss in more depth in the “Know Thyself” chapter of this paper, the most important one of all (we leave the best for last). It is a shift in attitude within the teacher, and inner knowledge of all we have discussed so far so as to not allow the group to affect the teacher in such a way, so as to recognize the inner workings of the class, and engage the class to change itself – by not trying to control the class, but asking the class to control itself, and making a convincing case for it to do so.

When the teacher gets lost in the moment, he / she is lost in the whirlpool of actions that build the class, with little understanding of the subconscious level of what is really going on. When you have an aggressive group, you cannot fight aggression with aggression. Or better, you can, but the results are seldom pretty, and rarely effective to the degree that they could be with a more caring approach. People who believe that we can fight fire with fire are basically just burning whole fields down, and leaving nothing left of life in that generation. This is certainly an approach, and it might have its appropriate time, but for most groups, fighting fire with water is usually a better approach – one that will allow the crop to be saved.
But of course, like with any fire, the best option is actually prevention, so that no crop will be lost at all. When you sense that a group has aggressive individuals in it on the first day of class, this should be addressed immediately. The number one rule I find is, “Do not buy the power struggle”; I repeat: Do Not Buy Into It. Buying into a power struggle on the first day of class is the surest way to create a fire, and once a fire starts, it’s just that much harder to put out.

Rather, on the first day of class when you spot defiant, fiery, feisty elements, welcome them. Let them know that you have no problem with them being powerful. And this last statement is one that must be true within your heart – we will again address this more carefully in the “Know Thyself” portion of this paper – because if this is not true within your heart, if the student’s power is something that bothers you at some level, you can count on this being evident to the student, and the power struggle will inevitably begin.

Being powerful does not necessarily mean being abusive. For teens, this may be a bit confusing, and even for adults at times this may be threatening, since teens may be abusive in exercising their power. A teacher who does not have a problem with a student’s power will allow that student to express himself / herself, and value that student’s voice without challenging it. This same teacher will be secure enough to know when the student has gone beyond the limit of power and into abuse, and can put this to the student gently, openly, and honestly – respecting this student’s sense of self, and showing this student that this is not an invitation to “tangle” (the teacher is not challenging the student), but rather acknowledging the student, and being sincerely straightforward in throwing back to the student the boundary that the student has crossed.
With aggressive students, it is a question of “tough love” to an extent. It is a matter of not engaging in the power struggle, recognizing the student’s power, letting them know that you have no reason to compete for power, that you are secure in your position as they are in theirs, and you can talk to each other as equals – something teens are striving for. The teacher can counteract the power longing of a student with a little TLC. By honestly caring for one’s students, the teacher shows the students that they are important and valuable, and that the teacher is not interested in struggling for power, but rather in working together.

I am calling this tough love because this loving nature of the teacher to counteract aggression is not absolutely permissive. The teacher must stand firm where a student crosses over the line of power into abuse. The teacher is the safeguard of the class and its students. The teacher’s “love” is for his group of students one and all. He is the valiant knight ready to defend all. So being firm is very important, it shows the group: (1.) I care; (2.) I am not going anywhere because I care; (3.) I am brave because I am here for you and will stick to it come what may; (4.) this proves I care; and (5.) I am here for you, so why do you want to do battle with me?

Why would a student want to do battle with a teacher who (1.) has no desire and is not easily baited into a power struggle; (2.) cares about the students, and is interested in them; (3.) “believes in my potential and respects me”; and (4.) is brave and is going to stick by the students, not easily giving up? Most of the time, when you come into a class legitimately interested and caring for your group, showing them that you are interested in developing their potential – not stifling it – not allowing them to engage you in a power struggle, and just abiding by this tough love (“I recognize your power, I care, I will listen,
I will give of myself to you, but I will not allow you to step over your boundaries and hurt anyone, because I care”), the teacher’s chances of establishing a good rapport, and never getting into the nightmare scenario I described in the beginning of this section, are quite good.

Should the teacher lose herself in her own personal insecurities and allow this scenario to develop anyway, I recommend trying to be as aware as possible of the power struggle element so as not to engage in them subliminally. A good example is the following:

An aggressive student throws a piece of paper across the room at the wastebasket and misses. The teacher is standing right next to the wastebasket. The teacher feels challenged, and then turns to the student and says, “Come pick this up. I am not your maid.” What a great invitation and great acceptance into the power struggle – and over something so small.

Ignoring the student and the paper can be equally aggressive, particularly if the teacher gives the student a disdainful look (yes, as teachers our body language is in action much more than we seem to perceive it to be). It is equally an invitation into the power struggle – from the teacher: “You are so immature and insignificant that I’m not even bothering with you.” When teachers react in kind to cheap shots, they fuel the fire that this classroom will be consumed by – the teacher being the main victim in the end.

How should a teacher react to such a situation? That will depend immensely on the teacher and the group at hand, their dynamics, their class contract, etc. Personally, with my students, I might pick up the paper and throw it in the wastebasket and tell the student he has to work on his right hook, … “But not in class, okay? Hold on to future
projectiles, and drop them off in the wastebasket on your way out of class, please.” And
downplay the incident lightly, not putting the student down, acknowledging the student’s
desire to call attention to himself, and his “power” within the class, and respectfully
asking him to return this respect by following the rules of the class and my own.

Of course, there are extreme cases of defiance where common sense, avoiding the
power struggle, and tough love all seem useless. We will go into this further in the “Bad
Apple” portion of this paper.

**Being Disrespectful – Testing One’s Limits**

Oftentimes, though, students can be disrespectful while not necessarily being
interested in any sort of power struggle with the teacher. Sometimes students are
disrespectful simply because they are experimenting with new ways of being, and they
make social, behavioral “mistakes” in their social experimentation, and go too far. This is
not a deliberate effort to aggravate the teacher, and as teachers we must be mindful of
these so as to not be too severe in dealing with such blunders. These are often just honest,
social “mistakes” in a student’s attempts to test the new limits of their existence as a teen.

What works best here is honest, open exposure to the nature of the mistake – no
irony, no making fun, just straightforward acknowledgment of the mistake as a mistake,
and explaining why it is unacceptable behavior. It violates “respectful” social interaction:
“This is not acceptable social behavior because…”, and a lot of times this will be enough,
as long as it does not ridicule the student, or offer too strong a blow to this student’s ego
or self-esteem.
Like correcting any language error, if the teacher does it carefully and objectively, recognizing the benefit of whatever underlying logic or motivation there was that was positive, but pointing out that which is not acceptable, this will be enough to “correct” the problem, without embarrassing the student.

An example is a teen who in response to a teacher’s comment he deems ludicrous may react by saying, “Are you mad?!” in the same way he would to a peer. Going too far would be for the teacher to simply respond: “No, but you clearly are for speaking to me in this manner.” And then simply chastise the boy for being so “rude”.

I would probably react to this by smiling and responding honestly and objectively to the student as to why I put out the point of view he thinks is so absurd. Then I would approach the student after class and explain to him that I realize there was no ill intent in the comment, and I appreciate this student’s energetic participation. But I would also ask him to be mindful of how he puts out these comments out so as to be sensitive to me—not as his peer, but as his teacher.

I would make sure to let him know that I appreciate his participation and that I respect his passion, and that I know that he didn’t mean to be disrespectful, but that he crossed the line. This way, I would not embarrass the student in front of others, and still give the student the benefit of the doubt and the opportunity to develop a better relationship with me while still shining in class. The student learns what is and is not acceptable in terms of class limits, without being put down.

At times, I might not have the luxury of waiting until after class as I might see a line that was crossed that might invite others to cross as well. In this case, I would also acknowledge the student’s positive participation and make sure the student doesn’t feel
put on the spot as far as being chastised or embarrassed. But I would have to address the issue – the line that is not to be crossed – with the group – still doing this in the spirit of tough love.

**Being Disrespectful – Picking on Each Other**

Sometimes while testing the limits of acceptable behavior and of their own freedom, or testing their own power, teens may be abusive or cruel toward each other. The scapegoat element is not unheard of in classes. It is the teacher’s job to make sure that there are no scapegoats in class. It is the teacher’s job to ensure that everyone is respected, and no one is made fun of or picked on.

Students playing around with each other is acceptable and fun, being mindful of when certain lines are crossed into being mean to someone, or playing with “sensitive” aspects of someone’s being. This is also part of the teen teacher’s job. So how does one become the guardian of the learning space?

Again, we go back to motivation and building rapport. This lays down the groundwork for the teacher to take on the role of the one to ensure a “safe” learning environment for the kids. Without the proper rapport, the teacher will never be granted the status of guardian of the teen class realm, and will not be able to protect other students from being picked on, since most likely the teacher himself/herself is a target.

Moving from the precept that the teacher is well liked and respected, and that the students are not engaged in a power struggle with the teacher, how does the teacher ensure that other students are not put down?
In order to answer that question, we need to look a little at what is at stake here. Why is it that students do pick on each other, and how do they most commonly do it?

Though there are many different labels for kids who serve as scapegoats – “basket case”, “nerd”, “wimp”, “perv”, “teacher’s pet” – any kid is vulnerable at any moment to the poison at the heart of such labels. The operating word here is “ridicule”. There is nothing more fearful to a teenager than to be ridiculous or appear ridiculous to his peers.

This speaks to the insecurity of “being” and having to justify oneself as we discussed earlier in this chapter. In this great feeling of vulnerability of not knowing oneself well enough to justify oneself, or not being sharp enough in social sparring skills, not having a quick enough wit or tongue, kids’ fear being inadequate – it is a fear of being “less” than others in some way or “unfit” in some way. The cruelest way to explore this feeling of being less or inadequate is through ridicule.

For many who fear being ridiculous themselves, attributing this feeling to someone else may seem like a good way to self-defend. I remember having a great feeling of déjà vu regarding this feeling while watching a Harry Potter movie. In the third Harry Potter movie, Professor Lupin speaks to the children about the essence of fear that is personified by a type of “bogey monster” – a monster that lives in our “closet”. The monster appears differently to each of us, according to our fears. The single most effective way to destroy this monster is through a spell by which the wizard points her wand at the monster, utters a word very close to “ridiculous”, and the monster will then be transformed by whatever ridiculous thoughts the wizard has. That which is frightening will thus appear ridiculous, and the wizard will laugh. Laughter is believed then to kill fear.
Though this is specifically pop culture, it seemed to me too close to true, since I have seen often a very similar kind of interaction occur in the same classroom setting – no magic needed. Out of whatever fear of inadequacy, kids will ridicule each other, throwing their fear out there magically to be laughed at – preferably at the expense of someone else.

What kids do not always fully realize is that everyone is open to ridicule always, and will always be, and there is nothing wrong with that. Teens are not always comfortable laughing at themselves because they are so often covered in social fear. When a teacher that the group respects is able to show students that ridicule is the most natural and inescapable thing on earth – natural and inevitable to ALL human beings, and therefore not such a big deal – the students’ desire to escape their fear through ridicule of others may be lessened.

You fight fear with understanding. You explain to them that a good, honest laugh is a great thing, but that no one is immune to being ridiculous at times, and laughing out of cruelty makes no sense – no person is better or worse for being in a ridiculous position at any given time or moment – we will all be in one at some time or another. Students can profit greatly from the understanding that “normality” and “being cool” are unreal goals. These concepts are subjective. The nature of human beings is diverse – acceptance of this diversity is much more real as far as a worthwhile goal. Talking about these concepts with the class can be helpful.

I am not proposing a brainwashing of sorts, or idealistic, moral, or ethical education. I am just saying that in class, beyond simply telling students, “Don’t say that,
that’s mean”, the teacher can talk to students about subjects such as diversity, cruelty, and the feeling of being inadequate.

The feeling of inadequacy is part of the human condition. We grow used to it the moment we realize that no one is fully “adequate” in a shifting society – a society that is culturally, socially, and historically determined. We are vulnerable in our mortal existence, in our never-ending quest for meaning, in our lack of absolute determination. The minute teens understand, even at a subconscious level, that in order to be strong they just have to embrace their vulnerability and understand their fears, the risk of cruelty in the form of ridicule – or any other – will be much lower.

In practical terms, what I suggest is bringing the members of a group close to each other, having different pairs interact, promoting activities that will bring food for thought, and foster mutual understanding and cooperation. The teacher needs to be aware of small details, and never ignore small things like an apparently harmless but potentially demeaning nickname. The teacher must also be aware of kids forming sub-cliques in the group, or shooting mean looks at other students. We must not allow name-calling or note passing.

In general terms, what I mean to emphasize is the need to be aware of the small details that may point to a brewing problem. Working on prevention, and even talking to the group in general terms if necessary, may be very important. Personally, I take this to heart as a knight of King Arthur’s court would, and it is part of my inner teen-teaching creed: “The teacher is the guardian of the classroom environment, and must be true to the teens he/she cares for”.

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Much of the potentially troublesome behavior of teens can be discussed on the very first day of class. I usually address it in my class contract when I talk to them about “respect”. While also listening to them, I tell them very clearly what it is that I consider disrespectful, towards myself and others. And I put out to them how I feel about ridicule and ask them why they think this can happen, and why they think I will not allow it in my class.

So far, this has proved effective. I know there is always a possibility of a boycott – the classroom is infinite in possibilities. I believe, however, that if the teacher has it as a clear inner mission to ensure emotional, psychological and spiritual safety and well-being to her students in the classroom, then solutions will be had according to the problems that present themselves.

**Laughter**

Laughter is a most valuable but dangerous thing. It can be the most bonding of experiences, it can be the sweetest manifestation of happiness, it can liberate great tension, or it can be a powerful and hurtful social weapon. We have just discussed ridicule, and how I propose that teachers be mindful of this possibility in class. I ask teachers to be equally aware of laughter, and what it means in a classroom.

I am not proposing not allowing laughter. Much on the contrary, I believe that the more a group is able to enjoy their classes together and laugh together, the better. I am just proposing that teachers be aware of how laughter occurs in a class so as to continue safeguarding the students within.
For example, this semester I began teaching more students from a certain school here in São Paulo. These students were scattered in different classes of mine, and probably composed anywhere from 10 to 40% of the student population of any given group. Within the first week, I learned how to identify the students that came from this school. I didn’t identify them by their uniform (they didn’t wear one) or any other telltale sign. I identified the students from this school, particularly the girls (where I hit 100% accuracy in my guesses), from their laugh.

The girls from this school came in with incredibly similar body language where laughter was concerned. They had the same eye expression and manner of giggling. Furthermore, they laughed at absolutely everything, like it was punctuation in their sentences. They smiled and giggled from the get-go and at absolutely everything:

“Hi Mariana. (giggle, giggle)”
“Do you have a pen? (giggle, giggle)”
“What time is it? (giggle, giggle)”
“You watched that movie last weekend?! (giggle, giggle)”

What I realized in these kids in the first weeks of school is that somehow, somewhere, someone had taught them that laughing first was a great way to keep yourself out of trouble, and out of someone’s target of ridicule. For those students, that giggling tick was a defense mechanism, and the minute they started relaxing in my classes, their laugh changed and became more personal for each person. As the semester progressed and the students created a friendly community within class (including me), that systematic giggle disappeared altogether. The kids still laughed. In fact, more than once a student in particular had a laughing fit in class. But now this laughter was
spontaneous and genuine. It did not occur automatically as an introduction to any given speech.

Too often students’ giggling in class can be irritating to the teacher, and for good reason. Like I mentioned before, laughter can represent many different things. Laughter can be a symptom of ridicule, and therefore aggressive. Laughter in small groups can be excluding of others, granting the ones laughing a secret “power” of knowledge above the rest of the group. Laughter can be plain disruptive of a teacher’s class when the teacher is trying to focus on the latest and toughest grammar point.

Reminding the teacher that laughter can have so many different meanings will allow the teacher to be less irritated by the giggling, and look at it openly and objectively and have greater accuracy in assessing what the source of the laughter is, and therefore, how best to deal with it.

If students are having a good, honest laugh, the teacher can invite students to share the source of laughter with the group. In fact, I often have that as a rule: If you have a laughing fit, you have to share with the class what caused it, or explain why you won’t. I find it dispels all kinds of speculation that may occur if one particular group does have a laughing fit, and another may feel it’s at their expense.

If students are laughing because they are nervous or self-defending, then this too is important for the teacher so that the teacher can address whatever it is that is threatening the kids. By removing whatever threatening element may cause nervous laughter, the teacher is also helping his students.
If the student is just being silly and trying to cause attention to herself, you can give that student a bit of attention, and then bring that student and the class back to the activity at hand.

Whatever the cause, understanding laughter, being able to laugh with students, being able to laugh at oneself, knowing when to cut laughter short, when to address laughter, how to protect students, and rid them of nervousness and unease, are all worthwhile goals that start with one simple thing – being aware of laughter. At the heart of it, if the teacher is not aware of laughter, and is simply irritated by it if it disrupts the class, then the teacher is missing out on a great opportunity to connect with her students and understand and reach them better.

I do not have recipes as to how to deal with different kinds of laughter. I have had kids have laughing fits in class, and I have joined them and have had to really ride out the laughter until it ended; I have had students have laughing fits and asked them to go outside, have a drink of water, and come back when they have recomposed themselves; I have had kids laugh, and ask them to beware of what they were laughing at; I have laughed at myself; I have accidentally laughed at a student and apologized profusely and explained why I wasn’t laughing at him, but with him; I have observed laughter and worked on it in terms of more activities that brought my group together and made them more comfortable; I have approached kids who are giggling and talked to them openly and seriously; I have laughed out of happiness at seeing a student succeed at something that was very difficult to do.

Determining what one understands is at the heart of laughter, and checking one’s understanding and feeling with the person laughing is often a good way to establish what
the next step is. The point I mean to make here is: Listen closely to laughter, join in when it is natural, and be aware of when and why you feel it is not. This will lead to more understanding, and a safer, more welcoming and pleasant learning environment in the class.

**Speaking Too Much L1 in Class**

There is still a big debate as to how much L1 students should be allowed to use in class. It seems that different teaching approaches have gone from one side of the spectrum to the other – from translating methods, to methods in which no L1 is permitted whatsoever. For me (as I believe every teacher should do), I have my own criteria as to how much and in what situations L1 is used.

Personally, I believe that the more the student strives not to use L1 in class and to communicate in the target language, the more this student is exercising his mind to become fluent in the target language. The student will this way, exercise his thinking to adapt to the language being learned, working hard to overcome prior limitations, and extending and enhancing his language scope and skills.

This does not mean, however, that I absolutely do not allow L1 in my classes. I know a lot of teachers that get very aggravated when students translate a word that the teacher has just spent minutes explaining in English. This does not bother me at all. I will still take minutes explaining a word in English, and I will not translate for my students unless all else fails, but if my student needs to confirm her understanding by checking with me through the translation in L1, it does not bother me.
I find that sometimes these immediate translations are just this – the student’s desire for confirmation of comprehension. It comes from that particular student’s need to check and make sure he is “correctly” getting it. Of course, not all words and expressions can be translated, and when students check with me in that way for a word that is incorrectly translated, or cannot be translated, I simply tell them as much.

From the moment a student has learned a new word in class, they are no longer allowed to refer to its translation in Portuguese (the L1 for my classes). If another student doesn’t remember a given learned word, students can explain the word, or give an example of its use in English, but not give the translated word in L1.

Some professionals may find this too time-consuming. I think the time that is spent is worth the learning that is achieved. I find that when students have to exercise their minds to understand or explain, their retention of the words is better. It’s funny, because in the end, sometimes it won’t even take the whole explanation of a word for a student to remember what it means. Sometimes, merely the first two or three words of a previously given example will be enough for the student to say, “Oh, right, I remember.”

First and foremost, when speaking about the use of L1 in the classroom, the teacher is to determine their own personal criteria for what they believe is acceptable and beneficial for their class. In my classes, Portuguese is only allowed in confirmation of a vocabulary word they have just learned, and in special cases, when they really need to express themselves and absolutely cannot in English. In this second case, the students have to ask for a “time-out” in order to speak Portuguese, and they cannot begin to do so unless the teacher has given them the green light on their time-out to do so.
In this way, the use of Portuguese is restricted to two situations only. In no other circumstance is Portuguese allowed in my class – not to ask a partner for an eraser or a pencil, not to apologize for stepping on someone’s foot, not for gossiping with a partner at the end of a pair work task, not for anything. I will allow gossiping with one’s partner at the end of a pair work task, while waiting for other pairs to finish – so long as this gossip session is carried out in English.

Speaking in Portuguese deliberately in class is my number-one pet peeve, and the one thing I am strictest about. And yet, there is nothing more natural to them than to speak to their partners in Portuguese. It is absolutely artificial and unnatural to propose something different, not to mention the potential risk of embarrassment for either student, if one student isn’t quite as good as the other.

Besides the L1 coming naturally to students while English is “forced” and “artificial”, a teacher also needs to be mindful of ego issues, and what speaking English might represent to students. Some students might not want to seem like the teacher’s pet or arrogant by speaking English constantly, if they are good at it, and others might not want to seem unable or less competent by making mistakes in English, if they are not so good at it.

How does one manage to keep students away from L1 while using L2? A lot goes into it. Creating a safe environment, motivating teens – this is all part of it. But I find that in addition to all this, with most groups, it is not enough to just have a good rapport with your groups, create a safe environment, and continuously ask them, “Please speak English.”
This may work with some groups, but most of the time what I have observed, both in my groups and in others, is that unless the teacher has an effective L1-controlling game or strategy, the students will inadvertently revert to L1 whenever they can. They will do it for the most varied reasons – mostly when they are excited or emotional about some aspect of the class or of a prior experience they want to share.

This switch is not always conscious for the students. Sometimes it just occurs because of the importance of what the student wants to communicate. So how do you make them naturally communicate in English in that environment, so that when a base need, an emotional pull comes over them they will not naturally revert to their L1? In my experience, I have only seen it achieved after the group has worked for a while with some sort of L1-controlling game or activity.

In the past, I have worked with several different kinds. I think I favor the Apple Tree Game, the Hang Man / Save Narf Game, and the Wish Box Game (see appendix 9). I favor L1-controlling games that make the group work as a team, bringing them together, rather than having them work against each other. I find this disrupts my class less, and they are more effective in controlling each other this way.

At first, the L1-controlling games are as artificial as anything. It is imperative, therefore, that when proposing an L1-controlling game, it is one that you are comfortable with as a teacher, and that the students buy into or adapt into something they can live with. Oftentimes the students will tell a teacher that the game is childish or unneeded. The strategy for the teacher then can be one of “prove to me that it is not needed”, by challenging the students to go through a whole class, as a group, without speaking Portuguese out of the constraints agreed upon by the group. If the students can do this,
class after class, then the teacher really does not need an L1-controlling activity. If they cannot do this, then an activity or game is necessary, and it is up to the teacher to strike a deal with the group for the L1-controlling challenge / game they will face.

At first, this game will be tapping into their extrinsic motivation, and they will most likely restrict their use of L1 to achieve whatever prize was promised. In time though, what I have observed, along with other teachers who have had positive experiences with these games, is that students will in fact approach the English class as an English-only environment (like being in an English-speaking country, or being suspended in the twilight zone of languages where English is all they all speak). One way or another, it will be the target language that they’ll be producing throughout.

I remember my first successful experience with a Portuguese-controlling game occurred with a Teen 6 – a Pre-Intermediate to Intermediate level teen class. We had been working very closely together, and two students got into an argument, and a verbal fight broke out in class. It took me two seconds longer to respond than I should have because, for a minute, I just stood there and marveled at the fact that these kids were fighting with each other in English. In spite of the strong emotions and excitement, they had gotten so engrossed in the feeling of English in this environment that it had become natural enough for them so that it was the medium in which they communicated when they lost their heads. Two seconds late, I had a tear in my eye as I jumped in to try to remedy the misunderstanding. Though this may sound crazy, given the situation, I was touched by what they were able to produce.
This was four and a half years ago. From that group on, when teaching teens, I have always adopted some sort of L1-controlling game or activity for our classes, and I have been very satisfied with the results in this respect.

Awareness of Body Language

In my observations, I have come to the conclusion that we are much less aware of our own body language than we realize. In workshops with teachers, when I ask them to role play a student with a certain attitude, they have no problem getting into the part immediately, and it is just as quickly reflected in their body language. But, when I ask teachers to role play teacher’s attitudes, they have a much harder time getting into the body language of that teacher with that kind of attitude.

The reason is simple: We are always looking at the other person, the person we are interacting with. In class, we do not teach facing a mirror. We have better things to do in the moment, engrossed in class with our students, than to think about how we look. And yet our body language often speaks a thousand words.

It is no different with the students. They have less experience at living, and possibly even less awareness than us of how much body language they are using, and how much it is communicating even if their mouths are closed. Here’s an example:

Student A makes some rude comment in class. The teacher calls Student A’s attention to the fact harshly. In order not to lose face, Student A turns to her back-up, Student B (her best friend sitting near her), makes a face and rolls her eyes. The friend, in order to show sympathy, reacts by making an equally meaningful face, rolling eyes and
giving her friend an evil grin. The teacher catches this last bit of body language, and calls the attention of Student B.

It is not uncommon then for Student B to complain loudly to this by saying, “But I didn’t do anything. I didn’t say anything.” And the teacher might even respond with, “You know perfectly well what you were doing.” The fact is that sometimes that is not true – they might not know *perfectly well* what they communicated silently through their body language. And sometimes they may realize they communicated non-verbally, but not be aware of the importance or weight of that. After all, they didn’t “say” anything.

Awareness of body language is important for both teachers and students. We will discuss further this type of awareness for teachers in the “Know Thyself” portion of this paper. Here we will discuss how making students aware of their body language and what they communicate can be useful.

This is a very sensitive subject, and one I should advise the reader that still needs much consideration and experimentation. I have only experimented with this twice, and not with the group I was working with while working on this project. The experiment consisted of a role play activity for students where I would give them a card, and they had to role play, without speaking, by simply sitting on a chair, the attitude of the student described on the card. Amazingly enough, though they had no problem doing this naturally, they had a hard time role playing it. So I inverted the situation, and told them I would role play, and they would simply have to guess the “attitude”. Here they did very well, and when I asked them how they had come up with the equivalent attitude, they were forced to meaningfully and deliberately decipher the code contained in my body language – body language they use naturally in class every day.
To me it was amazing the first time I tried this (and I have only tried it twice) because I was so sure that their use of their own body language was deliberate, and that they would have no trouble talking about it, recognizing it, or being open about it. In reality, it seemed that their acquired body language was something much more subconscious to them than I had imagined. They were not always aware of what they were communicating.

Talking about body language, opening up, and putting in plain sight the meaning contained in much of this physical behavior allowed for pet peeves of mine – such as kids slouching – to dissipate. These pet peeves dissipated for two reasons: (1.) Because the students engaged in this behavior less as they realized they were doing it, and/or what they were communicating to me, and (2.) because I became less bothered by the subconscious use of this body language – especially when I recognized “self-defense” in their body language, rather than “boredom” or “defiance”. I was able to read my students better and be less bothered by things, and they were able to be more self-aware and engage less in certain kinds of body language.

When they did still engage in body language that was sensitive to me, I could address it openly, and ask them what it was that they meant to communicate, without being aggressive or threatening – more like a checking of sorts. That improved our overall class communication greatly. Sometimes correctly reading “boredom” in the body language of a student could help me plan for new activities, and checking this with students could give me a new insight into something I could do better.
It is funny, but I find that as a general rule, being frank and open about things, while meaning well, is often very useful. Bringing into the light that which is often not spoken could and did make a difference in my interaction with those two classes.

I am not proposing a model for working with body language in class by describing my experiment. I am, however, underscoring the importance of paying attention to body language in class, and personally considering a way to reach students and work on awareness of such so that the communication that goes on through body language does not become veiled aggression – so that the communication that goes on beyond spoken language will actually help both teacher and students.

**Parallel Conversations and Talking Out of Turn**

Sometimes it is not a question of “if” something happens but when, how, and how much something happens. I believe the latter to be the issue regarding parallel conversation, and talking out of turn – particularly so in a “polychronic” society such as our own in Brazil. In most social environments, this is what we witness: People talking at the same time, finishing off each other’s sentences, interrupting, touching each other to get a word in edgewise, it’s just a natural part of social communication in Brazilian society. So how do you address it when it happens in class?

Like I mentioned above, for us in Brazil, it is not necessarily an issue of changing them culturally, and “training” them in a more Anglo-Saxon way of turn-taking when speaking, but of making students aware of the cultural differences in communication regarding turn-taking. We might play around with this in class, and make them aware of what the teacher expects of the group so that individual participation is valued.
At this point I’d like to separate turn-taking in speaking from parallel-speaking in class. Parallel-speaking in class seems to be a phenomenon that most bothers teachers when they are lecturing in class, whereas turn-taking is a constant challenge throughout class, no matter what the activity.

Parallel-speaking is actually the easier of the two items to deal with as it is a clear and identifiable interaction. When it occurs while the teacher is lecturing, if the teacher were to stop lecturing, basically the voice of the parallel speakers would become immediately more evident. A lot of teachers choose to deal with parallel-speaking this way, and I believe that it is effective to a large extent. I think here it is mostly a question of awareness. The teacher needs to make sure the students are aware, first of all, of what they are doing in class, and of why this is disruptive. This awareness will lead to being able to address the problem specifically with whoever is the main cause.

Turn-taking, on the other hand, is a harder issue to deal with since it does address some fundamental, cultural aspects of Brazilian society. Nonetheless, sometimes in class the more dominant students will take over, leaving precious little space for the communication of shier students. Since communication is at the heart of what we are teaching, we need to find ways to draw the shier students out, without constricting our outgoing students too much.

Again, many times students aren’t aware of themselves in terms of how they interact in the group. The Beans Game (see appendix 11) is often a good strategy to be used to help build awareness with students, and draw the subject out in the open, if the teacher decides this is needed.
In cases of extremely talkative and dominant students, I have often chosen to speak with them after class privately. This conversation is always a sensitive one. In the past, I have told my overly dominant students that I appreciate very much their participation – which I truly do, these students tend to enrich our classes very much – and I let them know all about them that I truly value. Then, I ask for their help, and very openly and truthfully expose to them the situation as it is – they have a talent for expressing themselves while others are shier, and they could use their energy and talent to help draw others out, to help bring out the voices of others.

In one extreme case, prior to this project, I had one student who was so overly dominant that in the “private” conversation I had with her, I had to come straight out and ask her to allow some time for other students to think of the answers before she gave them, for her to time herself before she gave an answer. I realized she craved my approval, and needed to show me how much she knew, so I told her I would know she knew an answer if she gave me a little wink and I would know she was holding back to let someone else try.

As I mentioned before, I truly believe that honesty is the best policy with students of any age – teenagers especially. These talks have always been helpful in keeping students that are overly dominant at bay. I always make sure they are aware of how much they contribute to class sometimes just by helping shier students express themselves, sometimes by just being supportive, or asking meaningful question, or simply by waiting a minute longer than they normally would to jump in and give their opinions. In the end, through this recognition of mine, and self-recognition, I felt they would also get a sense of fulfillment out of knowing that they were “giving” of themselves to the class in
another manner. I can’t say I always got this feeling from students, or that I was always successful in my talks. But I can say that I have been successful enough, and had this feeling enough, to continue having these talks whenever I deem necessary.

Too Much Physical Contact – Poking Each Other, Play-Fighting, and Such

This type of contact seems to be more common in younger teens, specifically in boy-girl interaction, trying to establish playful pre-sensual physical contact, and in boy-boy interaction, where the boys like to hit each other and play-fight, besides poking each other, in genuine expression of their male energy – a little like male deer sparring with each other, trying out their antlers. Girls seem to be much more comfortable with touching each other, and don’t end up poking each other, and letting the physical aspect of their interaction interfere with class.

How do you deal with too much poking and play-fighting? I have found that besides keeping students motivated for class, it is often helpful to keep them on task and busy with other activities, so they don’t have time for play-fighting.

Then there is the much used tactic – changing partners. If two partners are constantly play-fighting, changing their seating arrangement can be helpful. Except that you don’t want to put those students on the spot. They are not play-fighting because they mean to be hurtful toward the other student, and they are not being blatantly disrespectful of the teacher. Their motivation for play-fighting can be very much part of their instinctive nature. It can just feel good, because it is a natural way at this developmental phase of interacting with similar individuals.
An activity that has worked for me is to play the “Change seats if…” Game (see appendix 10). It is a playful way to make students expend some of their natural physical energy, while allowing all partners to change, without putting anyone on the spot.

In cases in which there is an exacerbated tendency towards play-fighting that is really disruptive, despite a new seating arrangement, I may speak to students after class, and let them know that they have gone too far, and decide with them what the next step will be to curb this natural tendency of theirs. I will often encourage students to give me the solution to the issue, and find safeguards to make sure they enforce this solution the next class.

On some occasions, their proposed, “Oh, we will take it easy next class” will meet with my, “How can you ensure that?” Then we will discuss specific things that will be done. In some cases, students propose to sit apart from each other for a couple of classes – they come into class and choose to sit apart from each other; I don’t tell them to. In this way, they are more independent, and look cooler to their peers.

Whatever they decide on, I try to make it as concrete as possible. Solutions such as “Oh, we won’t do this again”, or “Oh, we’ll take it easy next time” are often unreliable if not coupled with a concrete action plan.

In the end, dealing with play-fighting is not usually the hardest thing to counteract, but it needs to be done. I have learned this the hard way. You see, play-fighting and poking was not something that ever really bothered me. Being a very kinesthetic person myself, I often saw play-fighting as just a physical manifestation of affection and playfulness.
However, play-fighting, just as we learned when we were kids, can sometimes be dangerous – especially when you can’t really measure your own new strength, and what might be meant as a harmless poke can end up really hurting someone else who will then react with an intentionally strong slap, and there you have it – not-so-playful fighting.

This occurred once in my class because I was not mindful of how play-fighting could get out of hand, and I let two kids sitting next to each other get too comfortable playing. Well, we learn from our mistakes, so I now encourage teachers not to ignore play-fighting, and relegate it to the secondary status of misbehaving that deserves just the short occasional comment and not much more attention. If you want to avoid real trouble in class, be aware of this too. Kids will have plenty of opportunities to play-fight on their own outside of class, and they will grow out of it soon enough. I recommend not allowing it to take place in class.

**Doodling, Chewing Gum, Answering Cell Phones, and Other Misdemeanors**

These are all pet peeves of some teachers which do not necessarily bother others. For example, I am not bothered by students doodling. I am not bothered mainly because I am a great doodler. I do it all the time. I cannot talk to someone on the phone and not doodle. It seems to actually make me concentrate better on what the person is saying. In class, most of the activities proposed don’t allow for doodling. I like to work a lot with pair work, kinesthetic activities, and group activities. The students need to keep eye contact with their partners, or have something else in their hands, or use their pens for a different purpose. However, on the rare occasions that I do lecture, if a student doodles but participates, I have no problem with that.
I realize that this may not be true for most other teachers. Doodling is something that bothers lots of professionals. When I ask most of the teachers I work with why this bothers them, I traditionally get as an answer: Well, I feel disrespected, it’s like they are not listening to me, they are paying attention to something else. If this is the case, then I really encourage teachers to talk about doodling with their students in class, and let the students know why it is distracting for them, and why they will ask students not to do it.

I extend this rule to chewing gum, answering cell phones, and all other small classroom misdemeanors that are pet peeves for the teacher. As a teacher, if I have a pet peeve, I should not ignore it. I believe we should address the issue openly with the group, and explain why that is something that bothers the teacher, and why the teacher is therefore asking students not to do it.

I have no problem with students chewing gum (even though I don’t like gum personally), and I find that if the students’ chewing gum does not affect their pronunciation or fluency, I will not bother with the subject. However, I am mortified by students who write on their desks. It is to me just as big a pet peeve as people who litter – up there with my top five pet peeves. I need to address this subject then and there.

I choose to do it when I establish my class contract with my group – on the very first day of class. Why? Because I really believe in prevention being better than a cure, and also because I think it is fair to the students. If they know what I consider acceptable or not, they can make their choices accordingly. They won’t need to test limits which have been openly discussed – unless they really mean to defy me, but that is a specific case.
I find that by putting out the rules of conduct, and that which bothers me, while listening to the students and what bothers them, the group avoids negative feelings in the future. I won’t have to chastise a student for doing something unacceptable. If the student knows something is unacceptable because we discussed it as a group and agreed as a group that it would be unacceptable, the chances of this student doing this thing are smaller. And if the student does start to engage in this kind of action, I can quickly refer to it, and deter the student without having to make a big deal of it. I can simply refer to the class contract.

Most importantly, I believe that the teacher needs to know very well what his pet peeves are, what kind of small classroom rules cannot be broken, what kind of classroom misdemeanors are not acceptable, before the teacher ever enters his classroom on the first day. The teacher then has to discuss these with the students as soon as possible, so as to avoid this particularly “annoying” kind of contravention from happening in the classroom.

This may seem like a small issue, but I truly believe that sometimes the devil is in the details. Sometimes a small thing, like the continual disrespect of a pet peeve of the teacher or the students, can really derail the whole connectedness that the teacher is striving for with her students. This is not to be taken lightly.
CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE BAD APPLE

After reading all this, you come to the point where you say, okay, I understand this, it isn’t too far from just elaborate common sense… Now, what do I do when I get the “troublesome teen” – the student that is in class with the sole purpose of boycotting the class, the kid that no matter what I say or do will cause me problems – either because he is hell-bent on it, or because he can’t help himself?

This is the case of the infamous “Bad Apple” – which Parker Palmer calls the archetypical “Student from Hell”\(^8\). This is a label that ideally would not exist, but that has in fact reached archetypical status in the realities of most teachers, as can be easily proven by five minutes in any high school teacher’s room. At Alumni, in our community, this “Student from Hell” goes under the pseudonym of “The Bad Apple”, since it is clearly he who spoils the bunch.

In our pedagogically conscious minds, we feel a little guilty referring to this student this way, but that is in effect how we feel as we vent, and we seek support from others in the teaching community when we have this one bad apple who can simply ruin a class for students and teacher alike. The community is needed here for this one teacher who can, as we all can when faced with this challenge, feel so empty and impotent. No matter what you do, the bad apple is there, and the festering feeling within the classroom and ourselves is sometimes almost too much to bear. What can be done?

Honestly, this is the badlands from which many a teacher has not returned. I have a lot of colleagues who have given up teaching teens as a result of having one group of contaminated apples that was the last straw for them. I ask them whether the bad apple is

\(^8\) Palmer, p. 43
nonexistent in adult classes, and the answer is usually, “No, there are still some characters out there, but they are rare and far apart, or they are manageable.” With teens, the bad apple seems to be waiting behind one of every two or three first-day doors. You get your class assignment on your first day, say a little prayer, and open that door to that first-day class, hoping you didn’t get the short stick that says you are the one that got the bad apple.

What I can share that is useful is the knowledge that there are infinite reasons why a kid is the bad apple at that given moment in life. That kid may not always be or have been a bad apple, and that kid may be your bad apple for more possible reasons than we could possibly fathom. But he is yours to deal with nonetheless. Evading the bad apple, or simply saying, “Well, there is nothing I can do”, and allowing yourself to fall prey to the bad apple, is really selling oneself short.

I am not saying that teachers need to be psychologists, and know how to deal with all of the infinite possible dynamics of troubled kids. I am also not saying that there is in fact something the teacher can do to help the kid. I am just saying that if the teacher cannot reach the kid, the teacher cannot give up on the class and herself because of the kid.

Here are my personal guiding elements for approaching the bad apple – as I understand them now after the discussions and self-observation obtained through this project. This is not a recipe for success, but rather food for thought. These elements are not necessarily in order of importance, or order of when I address them – they all occur simultaneously in varying degrees of importance according to the person at hand.
1. Working With The Student

In working with the bad apple, I need to strip this student from the label. The label was useful just as a flashing red light to let me know, “Beware, possible danger brewing here.” Once this danger has been identified, I need to strip the student from the label so that I can honestly look at the student.

I will no doubt try to understand the student within the group first of all. I will do this by reading what the student communicates in class – verbally and non-verbally. If I am able to read this student and connect with this student in class during the first week, then I will have achieved a great victory for us both, and working with this student will follow a lot of what has been discussed so far in terms of listening to this student, motivating this student, and making sure this student does not go over the agreed boundaries of the class.

However, I may not understand the student within the class, despite all efforts to read him (since he is the “exceptional case”), and may ask this student to stay after class to talk to him. This will possibly occur within the first week of class, since I will want to address the problem as soon as possible so as to not let it develop into something too big to contain.

The moment of talking to the student from hell is a delicate one. The intention of the conversation is not to put the student on the spot, or push him further into himself, so he’ll “shape up, learn some respect, and behave”. The intention is to draw this student out, and one must be very careful when talking to the student for this purpose.

I tend to work on honest, positive comments to let the student know that I have been paying attention to him, and can see the “good” in him. I will let the student know,
not in general praise (which can sound empty and fake), but in specific comments on specific observations in class, what I think the student’s potentialities are, and how I would like to explore them with the student. I will invite the student to explore these with me.

I will ask the student what he feels he needs, I will invite the student’s voice to be heard, not by asking him “yes / no” questions, but content-seeking ones. I will allow for the student’s silence in this conversation, and try not to push him into answers. I will try to be as sensitive as possible to this student’s “pressure” points, and approach them carefully.

I will try to let this student understand me. I will let the student know that I care about my profession and the people in the class, including the student. I will attempt to show the student that because I care for the student himself, and for the others in the class, I will not allow this student to trespass certain boundaries.

I will try to reach an agreement on whatever it is that is bothering me with this student, and whatever may be bothering him about me. I will try to do so in conversation with the student, rather than in a monologue on my part, where I lay down the rules and check if they are understood. I will try to get the student to tell me what it is that this student can and cannot give, and what this student is and is not willing to commit to, and what this student needs me to give in return in order for this to work. I will negotiate with the student to this purpose.

It is an honest and straightforward, no-nonsense conversation, but it is also a conversation where I am aware that the voice of my student needs to be heard. This voice will be a most valuable tool for me to understand him and I need to create the conditions
in this conversation for this voice to come out. Without this student’s voice, there is little chance that I will achieve much without confrontation.

In previous conversations with “troublesome” students, I have found that small changes can go a long way. With a student who needed a lot of attention, making this student my “helper” as the one who kept tabs on points in the Portuguese-controlling game was a position of status that the student appreciated, and made her engage more in class as a result. With a very vocal boy, getting him to be my helper in drawing out the shier girls in class was his invitation into the community, and he responded to that. With a more sullen heavy-metal student, allowing him to bring in one of his songs was an invitation into the community.

Feeling like the bad apple is part of the community “with” the teacher, in communion with both the group and the teacher, is often one of the best things one can hope for in reaching the troublesome student. Inclusion can be a healing force.

The content of the conversation with the troublesome student must then be clear to both teacher and student, and if possible, concrete measures must be agreed upon for the next class – measures that can be concretely seen and addressed. And these must be easily identifiable, and respected by both teacher and student in the following classes.

For example, if in conversation the teacher agrees to give the students more free conversation time, the next class the teacher must bring this up openly with the group so that the student realizes that his voice was heard, valued, and is in fact being recognized and making a real difference in his environment. The teacher must concretely show she listens and cares.
2. Working With The Group

This does not necessarily mean that the student then dominates the group. It can mean that, and sometimes it does mean that, because the personality of this person is so great and so much that of a leader, that this student will naturally have the charisma to lead the group one way or another. Rather than try to stifle this personality and charisma, the teacher can welcome it in the group, and work constructively with it. I do not need to feel threatened by it.

On the other hand, this can also mean that this student has the natural charisma to derail your class. The teacher cannot allow the student to dominate if this is the case. While we can try to reach the student both in class and outside of it, if the student really cannot be reached within the limits of my personality and my understanding of his, then what can one do?

Though I really discourage people to give up on the “troublesome” student, I realize that sometimes we push the limits of ourselves, and still we do not find the solution to reaching this kid. With an infinite possibility of internal dynamics, it is also possible that this kid’s dynamics may be beyond what I can understand or reach at a given moment – my psyche and his are not at this point capable of genuinely connecting.

In this case, one cannot lose sight of the group. I cannot allow my energy to be so completely focused on the student so as to lose sight of the group. If I do this, I am justifying to my group that this kid is really what it is all about and I am inviting them to look at him as the most important element. In a sense, I am contributing to the further contamination of the “bad apple”.

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What I can do in this case is focus on all the other students in class, and, as best as I can, connect with them. Pay attention to them, listen to them, give them what I would like to give the whole group. I do not stop preparing games or activities which I believe they will benefit from because I am afraid that the bad apple might say they are “silly or childish”. I am not threatened by the bad apple in the class if he says this.

I am not going to be baited into an argument that will boycott my class. I will think of the group first. I will smile genuinely, not sarcastically, and tell the student that I am proposing the activity to the group nonetheless, and invite him to try nonetheless. I will not run away from myself or my group because of the “bad apple”. I will create a safe scenario for the other students to engage in the activity.

In working on the specific potentialities of each of the members of the group, I can create a sense of community. In creating a sense of community with the group, in not ignoring and genuinely appreciating and bringing together all the members of the group, I can possibly create an environment that the “troublesome” student will want to become part of.

I think I need to make it clear that I will not be ignoring the “troublesome” student to work on the group, and work the group against this student – excluding him. I will be working on the group in a way that will allow us to reach the “troublesome” student. Again, I will be talking about inclusion. Instead of working on reaching the student first to form the group, I will be working on creating the group first to include the student, and in working on the group, making sure that everyone feels valued and listened to.
3. Working With Myself

While I am working on understanding the troublesome student, and understanding my group, there is another important understanding that needs to be taken into consideration. I need to understand how I fit in, how this experience is affecting me. To this purpose, there are some questions that I almost always, instinctively ask myself when in contact with the first day or week “bad apple” student:

How does this student affect my feelings about myself? How much does this bother me? What can I do about these feelings? Can I bring myself to care about this student? If so, how can I show this student I care? Will this help her?

I work with myself in order to preserve myself, respect myself, learn, and better myself. I work on my inner dynamics for my own profit first and foremost, and then secondly to see if that which I achieve within can also help the student.

Some teachers, and during my first years of teaching I was also guilty of this, work on the “bad apple” in terms of seduction: If I can make her my friend, make her like me, then I can avoid the confrontation in class. The problem here is that often teachers will self-annihilate to reach the student, and this can be a problem in itself.

Out of fear, we cannot give the reins of our class to “the bad apple troublesome student from hell” so that we can then beg her to get the group to do Exercise Number Five. This is self-degrading, and does the teacher no good. Even if in class the atmosphere can be fun, and the class is a big party, and if the students tell the teacher they like her for allowing the group to do whatever. As teachers, we honestly know when we have sold out to the student from hell, and it does us no good – we are not being honest to our own teachers within.
I need to understand myself in the teaching scenario in order to truly be honest to
the group, and the troublesome student. I cannot allow myself to be stepped on or
disrespected. I must try to understand my feelings and translate them into constructive
information to lead me in my class preparation and class interaction.

This now leads us to the most important chapter of all. One that can greatly help
us interact from our deep inner selves with the inner selves of all our students – including
the “bad apple”. I have saved the best for last, because I believe this is better discussed
and understood once we have gotten other questions and issues out of the way. Stripping
away all of the practical issues of the “otherness” we are in contact with, we can more
openly and honestly focus on what is at the core our teaching – ourselves.
CHAPTER TWELVE

KNOW THYSELF

This above all:
to thine ownself be true,
And it must follow,
as the night the day,
Thou canst not then be false
to any man.

- Shakespeare, Hamlet

I owe the title of this part of the book to my high school English teacher, Mrs. Termaat, who made me love both Hamlet and MacBeth, and to Parker Palmer’s book, The Courage to Teach. As it may have become evident by now, Parker Palmer has been present in a lot of this project. I remember reading The Courage to Teach for the first time at SIT, and having real tears in my eyes, as I read words that echoed so deeply inside my soul I could not contain the sound within. The value of the teacher, of knowing oneself, of teaching who we are, of how that affects the classroom – it all rang so true within me, and from that moment on, I have never been able to escape this observation and this awareness as I trek on in my profession, and meet others like me.

In all the different classrooms, with all the different participants, the one common thread we all held was that at the core of our discussions lay the simple words: Know yourself. As we went on and on about our problems, we kept on running into the issue of subjectivity, and how we interpreted each problem differently, how each problem held different meaning, and therefore different pull with each one of us. The conclusion then was that each issue for each one of us had to be dealt with separately, under a particular kind of light for each one of us – subjectively. The focus to begin with was us. We were going to start with the teacher.
In the case of teaching teens, and in the case of any teaching I believe, when you talk about change it is not simply a change in methodology from the outside in, or a change in strategies or approach, based on outward concepts. In order for real change and progress to occur, the change had to occur within ourselves, and in order for this to occur, we had to look within and see what we really looked like from the inside, what it was we wanted to change and why. We would need to understand our fears, look at our limitations, point a magnifying glass to the horrid blemish we were trying to hide – just so we could find the right way to care for it.

In our discussions on teaching teens, it became evident that knowing oneself was paramount, and in sharing our thoughts here with you, I believe it relevant to explain a little more why, and this “why” within the context of this project – teaching teens. The next section of this paper is dedicated in part to this, in part to why this self-knowledge is sometimes so difficult to deal with or even achieve, and in part to how we can achieve this type of knowledge.

Knowing Oneself Prevents Contamination

In a classroom setting, there is an exchange of energy, and the teacher can often be “contaminated” by the students’ attitudes and the energy they put out. If the students are insecure, they can easily transfer this feeling of insecurity to the teacher. If the students deal in irony and sarcasm, they can easily get the teacher to deal back in the same exchange. If the students are tired and bored, they can easily make the teacher feel drained from trying to motivate them to no avail.
So how can knowing yourself prevent this kind of contamination? Because knowing yourself means you know what is “yours” and what is “theirs”, and in doing so, you are able to draw a line between the two. You are then able to be more aware of yourself in the moment, and not be prey to a situation, mood, or feeling – such as when the kids come to class with an attitude or energy that is contagious.

When the students come into class, you are able to distinguish between the energy of each individual, the groups’, and your own, and this information and awareness will inform the choices you make in class. One must keep in mind that the energy flow in a classroom circulates round and round, and the teacher’s attitude is equally contagious, and the cycle of contagiousness can be a positive one as well – especially if the teacher is aware of herself as an active force in the classroom.

In the project, we had several examples of contagiousness of energy: Paola, Marcia, Andrea, and myself all were perfect examples of how we can get caught up in vicious or virtuous cycles of feeling in a class. Knowing oneself allows a teacher to break out of such vicious cycles, and help work towards building virtuous ones.

**Knowing Oneself Physically Can Be a Tool for Connectedness**

When I say that students and teachers can contaminate each other mutually through their energy flow, I must make it clear how this energy flow can manifest itself. Our attitudes, feelings, and beliefs (our self in fact) are often communicated not only through the explicit language we use, but also by the register, connotation, genre, and mood of the words we choose; the volume, tone, and pitch of how we use these words; when and to whom we choose to speak; and by our body language.
It seems that we learn more and sooner about our verbal communication – teens are practicing sarcasm and irony and playing with words quite a bit (both the choice of these, and the delivery) – but we seem to gain awareness of our physical selves and body language later, and tend to pay less attention to it. I found that in class, teenagers and teachers alike were much more aware of their intentions to be aggressive as they were manifested through their speech and manner of speaking than through their body language.

Body language seemed to be right beneath consciousness. Teens automatically adopted similar body stances according to friends and people they looked up to, according to the situation, or according to some other personal element. Whatever the real reason was, if asked what was behind that physical expression, people would often not be aware that they were expressing anything physically at all. This goes for teens and teachers (and I include myself).

I remember observing classes before this project began and thinking, “Man, this teacher is getting really irritated at this class; How can I tell her that?” In time, I learned that describing one’s physical behavior was often an accurate way of showing what had happened – like drawing a picture – “You started looking at the floor, avoided eye contact, ignored students who were talking to you, crossed your arms, furrowed your brow.” The fact was that oftentimes I felt that teachers were not buying my physical description of them. I tried to tell them that sometimes I did it myself.

My first insight into the importance of the teacher’s body language came from my own experience in class, in a class I already had a great rapport with. We were approaching the end of the semester, and I had fallen behind with the curriculum and on
this particular day, I had a headache, and the mission of fitting in loads of material into one day.

As the day progressed, I felt the atmosphere of the class getting heavier and heavier. One of my best students was for some reason making silly remarks, and though I needed to finish what I needed to finish, I felt they were much more tired than usual, and the task was going to be impossible. The heavier the atmosphere got, the more I felt my head pound.

Then as I was asking them to repeat the pronunciation of new vocabulary words, the girl that I liked so much but was misbehaving so much on this day, interrupted and asked me, “Anna, why are you standing like that?” In hindsight now, I could have kissed her, but at the moment I reacted as defensively as my posture – without even realizing what it was – and said, “Because I am concentrating on hearing all of you.”

While this was true, I should have taken a minute to understand the girl’s question before answering. I was standing arched over, looking at the ground, with my hands over my eyebrows, shielding my eyes as if my hands were a tennis visor protecting my eyes from the sun – except this would have been a horizontal sun since I was looking down, and horizontally the only thing standing (or rather sitting) were my students. It was then clear to me that, to the girl, I looked irritated. It occurred to me that they might all have thought I was angry or annoyed. It occurred to me that on that day I had completely disconnected from my class.

As I realized the girl’s question (it took me a minute or two to do so), I looked up and saw the students looking at me wide-eyed. Apart from this girl, the students had been abnormally silent that day, and I took it as their being too tired or just plain unmotivated
– which bothered me even further – but as I looked at them then, it was clear that they had been observing me and reading my body language that day.

I stood up straight, smiled at the girl, and told them something along the lines of, “I’m sorry, I have a headache, and am concerned because we have a certain amount of material to cover, and I want to do the best I can by you, but I am worried that I won’t be able to do this properly because of the time we have to cover this material in.” Some students looked a little concerned about the statement about the material to be covered, some smiled, including the girl that was more vocal, and somehow the flow of the class improved considerably after that moment.

This was to me a prime example of how a teacher can initiate a vicious cycle of contamination. I took this to heart, and I try to share this often with teachers when I see them communicating so much through body language. Often, I just want to check the teacher’s awareness, and discuss what this means. However, no matter how well I may hope to paint a picture of what I observed with words, sometimes this realization is covered with skepticism. I am a supervisor, and I feel that many times teachers think I propose the impossible because it may be “the latest pedagogical fashion”. They know I am into research. Or more likely, this kind of description of self may be too much for a teacher to hear from another, as we protect ourselves instinctively. For whatever reason, I found that I needed a better way to communicate to teachers what they communicated physically in the classroom.

That is why when I proposed this project, I wanted videotape to be part of it. It’s a cliché, but sometimes a picture really is worth a thousand words or more, and seeing ourselves, not having someone else tell us what they saw, was most worthwhile. Besides
all else it brought in terms of awareness, we were able to “coldly” analyze our body language as well as that of the students.

What we learned from our body language helped us become more aware of how we use our bodies in class, and how we can further use them to benefit our classes. What we learned about the students’ body language helped inform our choices for our next classes. In both instances, it helped us also to be aware of that which is mine, that which is the others’, and that which is a result of the spoken and unspoken communication between us – that which is energy-building and forming a cycle of communication which can become a virtuous or vicious cycle of attitude and conversation. It was yet more evidence of how we influence each other, and how we enter and engage each other in our inner worlds.

**Knowing Oneself Establishes the Choices We Make**

Take the previous items, awareness of energy flow, awareness of body language, awareness of yourself and others so as not to be contaminated by an attitude that is nothing more than a reflection of another’s, and use this to inform your choices – as we mentioned before. Now here are other ways in which the awareness previously described becomes useful for the teacher.

Once the teacher is aware of what is “his/hers”, and the “students”, one is able to observe the students without being so emotionally “hurt” by possible attitudes. A kid comes into class on the first day with hair covering his eyes, a stocking cap, skeleton pins on a ratty jacket, slouches in his chair, and grunts at the teacher when the teacher welcomes him. Rather than immediately reach for my armor, shiny helmet, and sword as
a teacher, I can see that these are his dynamics, and that he brought them into the class before he even met me. Though I like to think of myself as all-important, there may be some other very good reasons why this kid comes into my class this way, and why his original attitude towards myself and this class might be a “negative” one. It isn’t just that he took one look at me and determined that I am a total loser; his attitude may be attributed to something greater than just me.

This awareness which we have discussed, then allows me to, without the need to put on my armor, defend my ego, and my poor caring teacher’s heart, honestly look at this student with a sincere wish for understanding. This sincere wish for understanding allows me to make choices when planning my class and when teaching that will better serve this student and the group.

My kids’ body language and comments will then not be a frightening element for me to resent, but rather something for me to work on – important data for improvement. I will then be able to approach that which I observe from different angles and propose many different solutions. I can consider the implementation of new activities; I will need to change my classes for this group. I might even need to engage the group more truthfully through an open discussion of our dynamics, if I believe this will be useful and important.

Rather than back into my class plan, using it as my armor, and my teaching strategies as my shield, I can reach out and connect with the class. Because I am sure of myself, because I know myself, that which my students tell me will help me work on things I had not considered before – and not threaten my very being.
The Fear of Knowing Oneself Can Cause Paralysis

Of course, not feeling threatened is much easier said than done. What if what my students tell me is something that reaches the limitations of myself? I know myself plenty well, and what they are telling me I cannot change – it is either than I am too fat, or my voice is too strident, or my creativity is not enough, or my knowledge of my subject is not enough, or God forbid, that there is too much wrong with me for me to even know where to start.

Funny enough, this is the heart of the teenage fear, and this is why so many times we are contaminated by it. We are talking about the fear of not knowing oneself well enough (Who am I really?), or not being able to justify oneself (Why am I this way?), or not being good enough to be accepted (Am I less than everyone else? Does the way I mean I do not fit in?). It is in essence a fear of not “being”. It is a fear that will accompany us for the rest of our lives as we seek meaning in our lives, and it can manifest itself in the smallest of details – “My haircut looks ridiculous” (why should that matter in the scope of things?) – or to the bigger issues of life – “What will become of me, will I live on in my children or in my work? What if the choices I make end up making no difference?”

We are exposed to this fear more concretely as teens, because it is the first time in our lives when we really consider such points, and how they will determine us – this first contact can be brutal, and it is when we have a greater awareness of it. In time, we grow used to this fear, and put it in the back burner. This fear is tucked away because we realize with time that the answers to these questions are not readily available, if ever, and real life moves on, and we need to keep up with it in the practical world. We realize that
the world will not end if we get a ridiculous haircut, or if we do not know what will become of our choices, but that we will continue living regardless, and that this is part of the human condition – not exclusive to just one of us, but common to all.

And once we realize, even at a subconscious level, that there is really nothing we can do about this fear, the fear of not being adequate, the fear of being insignificant (with no “significance” or “meaning”), we accept this fear better, and we stop needing to challenge those we feel are more powerful than us. We accept that the figures of authority – parents, teachers, bosses – are all just as vulnerable as we are. And that is usually when teens stop fighting with their parents and teachers, and start understanding the underlying humanity in all of us. It is maybe a subconscious understanding of our humanity that allows us to put our fears to a calm slumber, just beneath the surface, so that we can continue dealing with the troubles and challenges of practical daily life. Yes, we are talking about our mortality, and all of the fears unfolded in the many dimensions of the consequences of this fact.

In a teenage classroom, this underlying fear – the fear of not being (in its many dimensions) – is constantly called up to the surface, it is awakened in every class, since it is very much a part of the developmental stage of these kids. “Understanding” and forgiving our humanity is something kids are still digesting. The fear that comes from not understanding will be substituted by the fear of not being able to overcome our finiteness – it is an understanding that we are intrinsically vulnerable, nothing like our comic book heroes, and this can be painful. Until this fear slumbers, it will be awake, painful and contagious in a teenage classroom, translated into a dozen different attitudes, and reminding the teacher of how fear is really lying just beneath the surface.
Knowing this about the situation we are in may help the teacher. The teacher is going to have to relive his teen fears of not being, fears that were maybe never truly resolved, but just nicely tucked to bed, and face these fears and understand, “Hey, I’ve been there, done that, I have my own life now, and the demons these kids are fighting will be transformed in time, they cannot be beaten the way these kids want to beat them, and as a teacher who cares, I will not be sucked into this fear, I will not be a casualty of a useless battle.” Fighting against our human condition yields no winners. Teenagers suffer not always knowing this, or taking this for weakness, or a lack of honesty or bravery.

Realizing that being overweight, or having a strident voice, or not being smart or witty enough, is really of no relevance to one’s ability to be a good teacher, and may very much help a teacher deal with his fears. Our fears of not being (i.e.-adequate, good enough, meaningful, lacking in some way, etc.) may never leave us. As in time we have learned to deal with these fears, in the classroom we must also manage them.

Having these fears has not stopped us from operating in society, from achieving the successes we have in life, from meeting the interesting people we know in life, from being in other ways. “Know thyself”: Remember this in all its poetry and meaningfulness; remember it in the bravery of an Arthurian knight; don’t forget this in the light and honesty of the classroom. Allow the students’ vulnerability to connect with your own not to create collective fear, but to create community – acceptance and camaraderie for the purpose of growth.

You respond to this fear with, “Yeah, some things I can change and some I can’t, and this makes me no less, and I know how to deal with this, and so, I am here for you and I care, so what is it you need? How can we work together? What is it that I can
change that can mean a significant change for you? And if I reach out to you, will this help you reach out as well, to myself, to others?”

In doing this, a teacher shows his group a great thing – he shows them that whatever shortcomings we all have, this teacher is brave and will not recede into a safe corner to deal with students at a safe distance. The bravery of being oneself, of accepting oneself, shortcomings and talents, is often one of the most respected and treasured elements in being from the perspective of a teen – it is what they are fighting for.

A teacher that can show his students this true being honestly and straightforwardly will most likely gain their respect. It is the bravery of being oneself, paradoxically vulnerable and strong in the genuineness of the human condition.

**Knowing Oneself Prevents Losing Oneself**

By now, this statement doesn’t really need a great deal of explanation beyond what it states – I believe this is self-evident and a point already made. However, it is so important that I have turned it into a subtitle nonetheless. It is important because it is still what I hear most as a supervisor working with teachers teaching teens. The complaint is, “I know myself plenty well when I am outside the teen classroom, but when I am in it, in the moment, somehow I lose myself completely. I don’t know who I am, what I’m teaching, what I’m doing, how I’m reacting. And I leave the classroom feeling drained, beaten, and completely lost. Like I don’t exist at all, or as if the “I” that exists as a teacher is a total failure.”

There are some tricks I have found to remind ourselves during the teaching experience of all we have been discussing so far in this chapter. When I first feel myself
becoming irritated in a classroom, I become aware of this moment specifically. I take a deep breath, and remember who I am first.

Then I smile. I smile, because I am aware that I have most likely been baited, and here comes another lesson for me. The smile is a contagious element for me, because it is genuine (I am smiling first at myself), and it relaxes me. In remembering who I am and in smiling, I am trying to regain my north. I am halting the “losing-myself” process. It may mean a moment of silence in class, or a moment in which the students are talking to themselves while I regroup. I allow myself this.

Then, from the moment I feel I have regained myself, I try to zero in on the source of this irritation, examine it, put it on record for me to go over it better after class, and try to deal with it as best I can in class without letting it get to me in the moment, without losing sight of the bigger picture in my teaching context. Knowing the source of that which is causing me to fall off balance, to “lose my north”, will allow me to deal with it better so as to (1.) not lose myself, and (2.) be able to address the “misguiding” force.

**Knowing Yourself Allows for the Group to Open Up**

If I feel that the disruptive force in the class cannot be zeroed in on because it is dispersed throughout the class, then this may be a moment to stop and talk to the class as a group, bring things out in the open, and address them. And from this moment on, work on that which was brought up. When you know yourself, a situation such as opening up to the group should be manageable, and dealing with what the group puts out should be something equally possible to a reasonable extent.
Sometimes teachers will not open up whatever issue to group discussion because they are fearful that it may make them lose face or authority – giving the students too much power. In other situations, teachers may not be prepared to deal with what may come from the group, and are fearful of what they might hear. And in still others, teachers may open up just to allow the group let off steam and seem like the group’s pal, but not actually do anything about that which is brought up.

The situations above all seem to come from our teaching selves when we are dealing with ourselves at a very protective, subconscious level. They do not always seem like solutions that are thought out properly or considered honestly for improvement. They are too threatening for some reason – either because they challenge the limits of who I am, or because they challenge the limits of how much I understand of myself. Or for yet another reason, they are most likely related to protecting one’s sense of self. The question that needs to be asked is, “Why does this possibility threaten me?”

Fear isn’t always a negative thing. In fact, it is often a very positive and necessary thing, as it is the means through which we preserve ourselves. The question we need to ask earnestly is what am I preserving, and for what cause? How can I use this fear to learn? What is it that really needs to be preserved, and what can be challenged to grow?

Again, “knowing oneself” better here could lead to a good learning opportunity for the group, possibly even a “fixing” of a given class dynamic through a group conversation. Opening up to a group may be scary because it may challenge the teacher’s way of being, but if a teacher is secure enough in her identity as a teacher, then that which will come from the group won’t be too daunting as to challenge my own views of
myself. It won’t be too great as to “hurt” my ego beyond repair. It will be a stepping stone to development.

Of course, opening up to the group doesn’t mean just opening up to a group discussion that will become simply letting off steam with no real purpose. I realize that sometimes teachers really don’t want to be “disliked” by students, and will agree plainly to anything that is said just to be in the students’ good graces – or blame someone else (the book, the school, the previous teacher, etc.) for whatever criticism is received.

Attributing blame elsewhere (i.e.-school bashing) will not lead to an improvement of the class at hand if no real measures are taken for change. Opening up to a group discussion about the class is meant to serve the teacher and the students to improve the quality of the class – dismissing the content of such a discussion as something “we can do nothing about” is a waste of valuable resources – the group’s voice, and the teacher’s inner self and potential.

I realize that for some teachers this is not a matter of “knowing yourself”. For some teachers, they know themselves enough to know that going the distance and giving of themselves to adapt a class to the groups’ needs is not within what they have to give at the moment. To some teachers, it is not in themselves at this moment to have to go through the hassle of dealing with this kind of adaptation – and to some professionals, caring for the subject that they are teaching is a higher priority than caring for the people they are trying to reach. One cannot be subjected to the other, or even adapted.

I do not mean to put down these teachers, but I do believe that perhaps they may have made the wrong career choice in the teaching of this material – particularly if they are teaching teenagers. Teenagers need teachers that can move and sway so as to reach
the moving and swaying nature of their developmental stage, and the
social/cultural/historical moments in which they exist (which will greatly determine a lot
of this sway).

While “knowing oneself” may make it easier for a teacher to approach and deal
with the situation of opening a class up to a discussion about the class, I understand that
even when “knowing oneself”, it may not be easy for a teacher to be open to this
possibility. In my experience, at times it can be a very effective tool – provided that it
comes from the sincere desire of the teacher to work constructively, truthfully, and
bravely with this group towards further growth.

Knowing Oneself Brings Safety Within the Vulnerability of the Classroom Setting

When a teacher is secure of herself in a class, it usually shows. A teacher who is
comfortable in the classroom setting is usually more capable of making others
comfortable in that environment too. It is a lot like visiting someone at their home. When
you arrive, you may not feel very comfortable, but when the host welcomes you in, you
do.

In the classroom, the teacher is the host and keeper of the learning environment. A
host that is comfortable in her setting will have a natural aura of authority that comes
with “owning” the learning environment beyond challenge. I need to make this clear this
is not an invitation to a power struggle. This is rather a simple knowing that this is your
comfortable realm of professional existence. This commands a quiet kind of authority of
not needing to prove a thing, but rather smiling and welcoming students into a place
where you are naturally at home.
A teacher who is that comfortable will communicate this to his students immediately through his body language. The teacher will not be afraid to smile and make eye contact. The teacher will not be pushed back by a student who slouches in his chair or does not respond to a question. Rather, the teacher will approach them directly, and in a matter of fact way, repeat a given question, or call on a student even though they are slouching, or simply without threatening invite them to sit up, invite them to participate in a game, invite their voice into a discussion, simply “invite” them. Because the teacher is in fact the natural host of the classroom.

A teacher that is self-assured will be strong enough to not allow limits to be crossed within “her” home. In the same way that you would not allow a visitor to come into your house and trash your furniture, or disrespect your other family members, a teacher should not allow students to come in and trash the desks, or each other. In commanding the authority of the keepers of the “house”, the teacher ensures the group that their own safety will also be ensured. In not allowing anyone to trash/bash anything/anyone in the class, the teacher is in fact ensuring a safer environment for the students themselves. This is absolutely important.

An insecure teacher cannot defend himself, and will most certainly not be able to defend any other member of the group against any of the possible threats that may occur within a classroom. In that way, knowing oneself is an essential building block in the self-confidence and ease of a teacher in the classroom. A self-confidence and ease that will later command respect and allow the teacher to be acknowledged and accepted as the natural keeper / host of the classroom. Under the care of such a strong and caring host, students will feel safer to accept invitations into the learning experience. Without this
sense of security in the teenage classroom, much is at risk, and there are good chances that the true learning experience within that setting might not occur.

**How Do You Come to Know Yourself?**

It is undeniably clear that knowing oneself and having a strong sense of self can really serve the learning experience (from the perspective of both teacher and students, though we are not exploring the latter here). However, for many of us, having this strong sense of self and being self-secure is not the easiest thing. How does one go about doing this?

As a psychology major, I myself was in therapy for many years. I can say that this certainly helped me to know myself better. However, I would say in no way, shape, or form that the years I spent going to therapy were necessarily the ones in which I learned the most about myself. Knowing about ourselves requires an open and inquisitive attitude more than anything else. We need to be willing to look within every day. We need to ask ourselves questions every day.

After we teach a class, do we just walk away with whatever feeling we have, and go on to planning the next class, and never think about it again? I know I have certainly done this a lot. But how often do we take the feelings after leaving a given class into serious consideration to self-analyze and learn? How much attention goes into replaying a class in our minds, and going over what we understood and felt in that moment for the benefit of the next experience with the class?

You do not require a shrink or counselor to do this type of self-examination. You require only an open heart and inquisitive drive. At the end of the day, going over your
classes (if you did not have time to do so before), keeping a journal if you can, asking other teachers to come in and observe you so you can have someone to toss ideas around with, asking yourself questions about why you felt one way or another, delving deeper into general impressions of interactions with students in class, allowing yourself to consider many possibilities before you make up your mind – all these different possibilities can lead to self-discovery.

I find that knowing oneself comes much more from an attitude of wanting to explore than from a given, structured method to self-explore. Though establishing structure – such as journal writing, or systematic class observation (as was the case of this project) – may lead to self-discovery, simply having an open attitude, an open mind, open eyes, ears, and heart, may lead you down the same path. It is a question, as Parker Palmer put it, of entering, not evading, our teaching tangles.\(^9\)

If a teacher demonstrates this kind of courage and willingness to enter, not evade, their inner selves, the manner in which one obtains self-discovery may be any manner that the teacher feels comfortable with. The manner matters much less than the discovery itself, and occurs as a natural consequence of the curiosity and desire to know oneself better.

Some possible tools, as I mentioned before, are: Simply asking oneself questions, keeping a journal, observing classes, being observed and discussing these, reading with a conscious analysis of the topic, talking to other professionals, or simply spending some quiet time going over your classes when preparing for the next. The thing to remember is that more important than possible tools one might use is the openness of the teacher to

\(^9\) “we must enter, not evade, the tangles of teaching …”, Palmer, p. 2
think deep and hard about oneself, and oneself as a teacher, and about the
teaching/learning experience. In these thoughts lie the keys to knowing thyself.
CHAPTER THIRTEEN

CLOSING COMMENTS

There is still much more to be included here than I have. I find that every time I reread what I have written, I change it more. With every passing day, there is more for me to write as I continue to learn more about the teen learning phase, and implications for the teachers.

Since the end of this project, I have gone on working on these topics with more and more teachers. At school, as a supervisor I have continued to observe teachers and help them out working with issues of motivation and discipline in the classroom. I have also been asked to conduct workshops at our school on “Lesson Planning for Teen Classes”, “The Use of Portuguese in the Teen Classroom”, and “Class Contracts”. This year (2005), I will present a workshop on “Exploring the Teen Teaching Self” at Alumni’s 30th TEFL conference in Brazil.

This year I was also asked to be responsible for Alumni’s Teen 7, 8, & 9 levels, which means I can alter the curriculum. The first semester of 2005 I spent developing a new course for Teen 7, adapting material to be more teen-friendly and teacher-friendly. The product is a student binder with more than 50 pages of interactive activities, lots of games and activities for teachers to use with their classes on cards and transparencies, activities with songs and videos (including animation), integrating the four skills with other media for learning, and other extra proposed activities and strategies.

I am still trying to convince the school to not include guidelines and day-by-day class plans for each level, but rather include considerations or questions teachers might ask themselves which might help teachers when approaching a class. The principles
behind knowing ourselves, our students, and our subject are often much more useful than some recipe that has been set out for us. I am still negotiating with the school on the issue of guidelines.

The Teen 7 course I worked on during the first semester of 2005 will be piloted one more time in August of 2005, and launched across the board in February of 2006. Meanwhile, I will also produce material for the Teen 8 course for a pilot in February 2006, to be launched in August of 2006, and the same process will follow for Teen 9. These courses will be used throughout all Alumni branches, which means I will be in contact with many more teachers as I follow up on how this material is being used and learn more about the production of material for teenage classrooms.

There is still much to be explored in teaching teens. I believe that oftentimes there are more nay Sayers in the teen teaching environment than in any other. This in itself indicates the level of challenge in our realm. I fight very much against the attitude often behind the nay saying. It is often a defeatist attitude of rigidity from a place of extreme defensiveness where our egos are just too tender or fragile and need to be protected. Or just hard-bitten stubbornness as a result of having created such a tough skin over the years from being defensive for so long.

What I mean to do with my work is challenge myself and others not to quit when the going gets tough, when the teens in our classrooms are a handful, or seem like too much to handle. I am not denying us teachers the right to run and protect ourselves when it is needed. I am just pointing out that we need to be aware when this happens. In fact, this is precisely what we are doing – defending ourselves – and then we need to ask ourselves: “What am I running from? Why? How?” In order to be true to ourselves, it is
imperative that we acknowledge and attempt to address the cause of that which makes us seek shelter, rather than just ignore it as too painful to handle. I have too much respect for the teaching self to be satisfied with a simple “it’s useless” or “there’s no way.” I want to encourage teachers not to give up, urge us all not to lose heart. This paper is my first formal dedication to this ongoing work.

I know that there is a lot that I cannot change. I have in the beginning of these last comments shared with you a tough challenge which comes from my teaching context that I may not be able to win over – the administration’s views on guidelines. Within my teaching context, there were other considerations I was not able to address – the school’s views on the role of the teacher as an educator, for example – because they were not timely\(^\text{10}\) and could only be addressed when the time was right. Maybe now is the time for me to approach that one.

I realize that there is much more beyond my reach at the moment. I realize time will change things, and I might reach out further. I hope to learn more and make a difference for teachers who, like myself, love teaching. These observations presented here may have had some use to you, the reader – either because they were interesting or entertaining, or because you came up with a new idea as a result – or perhaps a new spin on an old idea – or because they reminded you of how much you disagree with any particular point of view of mine.

As I end my work here on these pages, I am thankful to you, my reader, for having shared my thoughts – whether you may have agreed with them or not. I hope we

\(^{10}\) At the time of this project, the school was downsizing due to financial problems. Most issues involving change were sensitive. The issue of establishing the teacher’s role as an educator was a particularly sensitive one, and the project members and myself decided we would work as best we could, not taking into consideration issues related to school policy.
connected for a brief while, and I wish I could hear your thoughts, questions, and impressions. I hope there has been something here that might drive you, as I was driven, to new discovery. We have so much still left to learn. Thank you.
APPENDIX
APPENDIX ONE

IPP Proposal for Alumni

Proposal for Project:

Purpose:
To work on Teacher Development of teachers teaching teens where class management is concerned, with a focus on addressing student motivation and discipline problems.

Process:
This project starts out with a small group of teachers – tentatively four. The duration of this project is for one semester, with the possibility of repeating itself during the second semester, according to the success and usefulness of this project in helping teachers, and the possibility of collecting further relevant data.

The first phase of the project is recruiting and meeting with volunteer teachers who are teaching teens. We would work on a “Needs Assessment” for this group of teachers, with a focus on class management problems. I foresee the theme of motivation and discipline as the two focal points, but may need to change my focus depending on the outcome of teachers’ needs. From this starting point, Class Observations and Group Meetings (workshops/“swapshops”) would be scheduled. The goal is to have three class observations of teachers, and five group meetings spread out during the semester.

Class observation would be bilateral. I would be involved in observing teachers, and they would be invited to observe my classes with teens. If feasible, I would also like to have volunteers videotaped in their classes for further own-class observation. This could be accomplished through a buddy system and peer feedback sessions.

In the class observation process, I would be working with aspects of active listening and peer mentoring when talking to teachers, in addition to posing my own observations and questions concerning a chosen course of action.

The exchange of feedback would bring up points that would then be investigated further in two domains: published research and self-reflection. I would research problem areas in published material, and the feedback sessions would also be treated as a springboard for self-reflection. The main idea would be for teachers to take the time and invest in developing further self-awareness and knowing themselves as teachers (through self-reflection), and learning more about the age group they are teaching (through published research).

I would be researching published material for supplementary information on observed problems and further knowledge on class management of adolescent groups. I would also be researching the social and psychological implications of dealing with this
developmental stage, as I believe it would be a catalyst for deeper insights into classroom management issues.

On the self-reflective portion of the project, the bilateral feedback sessions on class observation would be a stimulus for self-reflection (as we become more aware of the experiential learning cycle in our evolution as language teachers). I would keep a journal and require that the volunteer teachers do the same. Dialog journals may be considered here. This process would vary from teacher to teacher, but I believe that having a debate forum in the group meetings – “swapshops” of sorts – may also activate this process further.

The Group Meeting portion of this project is meant as both a way to host a creative think tank, and a way to offer the teachers a support system of sorts. By identifying with other teachers, and sharing their knowledge of different issues, we would keep teachers encouraged, motivated, and fresh as far as their outlook on their own teaching. Giving the opportunity to teachers to share their insights and questions not only further validates their experiences, it can also create a forum for new and creative thought to emerge.

This project is based largely on the teacher development of a small group of teachers, and working with the issues these teachers bring to bat about teaching teens. I hope this way will contribute new insights and raise new questions about both the content of what is seen, and the merit of working with a group of teachers in this manner.

At this time, this is what I envision. I appreciate thoughts, questions, and concerns about the proposed project. Below is a tentative calendar:

**Tentative Calendar for IPP Project:**

Week of March 8 – Approval of project by Academic Department, and recruiting of teachers for the project

Week of March 15 – First group meeting on March 19: Needs Assessment

Weeks of March 22 and 29 – First Class Observation of each teacher; follow-up sessions with each

Weeks of April 5, 12, and 19 – Time for Experimenting in Class; teachers come to observe my class too

Weeks of April 26, May 3 and 10 – Videotaping Teachers’ Classes and follow-up sessions on those.

Weeks of the May 17 and 24 – Time for Experimenting in Class

Weeks of May 31 and June 7 – Final Class Observation and Individual Feedback sessions; Final Group Meeting on June 25

**Group Meeting Dates:** March 19, April 16, May 7, May 28, June 25
APPENDIX TWO

OPPORTUNITY FOR TEACHER DEVELOPMENT

If you are a teacher teaching teens, and are interested in further teacher development, or if you are a teacher teaching teens, and would like to learn more about dealing with motivation and discipline – please consider this:

Dear Colleagues,
As part of my Master’s Degree Program, I will be conducting a study focusing on Teacher Development of Teachers who Teach Teens. I am looking for teachers who are interested in further teacher development to volunteer for this project.

**The Aim of the Project:** To offer a support group and further classroom awareness and professional development for teachers who teach teens. The main focus of the project is class management – specifically the areas of Motivation and Discipline.

**The Duration of the Project:** The first semester of 2004 – approximately 25 hours distributed throughout the semester

**What the Project Entails:**

- 5 group meetings during the semester (on Fridays – time to be determined w/group members)
- 3 class observations of one of your teen classes during the semester (one is videotaped)
- Observation of another teacher’s teen class
- Reading texts
- Keeping a journal

This is a project of discovery, and I would value very much anything you can contribute to enriching our discussions and learning.

Below is a sign-up list if you are interested. For more details, come and talk to me: I’ll be happy to talk to you about the project.

1. ______________________________________
2. ______________________________________
3. ______________________________________
4. ______________________________________
5. ______________________________________
6. ______________________________________
APPENDIX THREE

GROUP MEETING ONE

Meeting Outline:

1. Warm-up (What were you like as a teen?) – guided imagery, draw, and discuss
2. Talk about your experiences teaching teens (transparency).
   A. Content of the transparency:
      a. How does who you were as a teen compare to the teens you teach? Does it help you connect with them?
      b. How did you become a teacher? Why did you choose to teach teens?
      c. How long have you been teaching teens? How much experience do you feel you have dealing with them?
      d. What is the best experience you ever had with a teen group?
      e. What was the worst?
      f. Why did you decide to join this project?
3. Brown paper posters – “The Challenges of Teaching Teens” – 2 groups of teachers created posters considering all their unanswered questions into the dynamics of teaching teens, their biggest fears and frustrations in the teen classroom. “All that I would like to know about teens but still do not.” – joke in session.
4. Talk about Expectations – While going over posters together, we underlined that which had to do with “motivation” and “discipline”; we discussed what we hoped to learn more about in ourselves and our subject; I asked teachers what they expected out of me and the project specifically.
5. Discuss the Project – Distributed calendars, went over class observation proposal, and set up buddy system for second observation – peer observation with video. Talked about journal writing, and asked teachers to write about the first session. Suggested reading of Parker Palmer’s “The Courage to Teach”, Chapter 1.
6. Answer Questions – Answered questions that remained.
7. Wrap-up – Asked participants to think silently (with eyes shut) of that which had most impressed them in their first discussion session.
Appendix Four

Class Observation Procedures - Notes

Class Observation sessions should be divided into three parts:

1. Pre-Observation Meeting and Discussion

Observer and observed meet ahead of time to discuss the observation session. The pre-observation meeting is meant for observer and observed to discuss concerns and share doubts. The observed person may want the observer to pay special attention to some aspect of the class – this would be the time to let the observer know about this.

During the pre-observation meeting, the teachers decide upon what will be the observer’s task. This task can be more or less specific, or a combination of both – for example: “How many times was L1 used by the students in class?” (more specific), or “How did the teacher react to the student’s use of L1?” (more general)

During the pre-observation meeting, the teachers also go over the observed person’s task. This task is three-fold:
   1. The pre-observation meeting will establish what the observed teacher has chosen to work on, and this teacher will later have to prepare for the class taking this choice into consideration.
   2. The observed teacher may discuss with the observer ways to maintain his/her awareness of the focused area during the class in question.
   3. The observed teacher should go over the “Self-evaluation Sheet” with the observer at this pre-meeting, and make fitting alterations if necessary.

The teacher who is being observed must fill in a form, the “Self-Evaluation Sheet”, as soon as possible after the observed class takes place to help this teacher keep the class experience fresh in his/her mind. This sheet can be altered as much as the participants like during the pre-observation meeting to adapt to whatever needs are discussed between the observer and observed.

2. During-Observation Tasks and Note-Taking

During the class observation itself, the observer focuses on the task discussed in the pre-meeting, but also keeps open to whatever else presents itself in the situation.

Right after the class is taught, the teacher being observed will need to find some quiet time to sit down and write down some immediate ideas and feelings in regard to the class. This can follow the “Self-Evaluation Sheet” or not – according to previous discussion and alterations in the pre-meeting. The teacher will decide whether and how to fill in the form according to the situation. However, I highly recommended using Items 1, 2, and 3 of the self-evaluation handout – even if modified.
3. One-on-One Post-Observation Meeting and Feedback Session

Observer and observed meet to discuss the class: The observer brings in his/her notes on the class, and the observed brings in his/her self-evaluation form, and / or personal notes. I suggest the person who was observed go first and talk first about how this person felt about the experience, but this is again open for discussion and may vary according to the situation.
APPENDIX FIVE

Self-Evaluation Sheet – Class Observation

Please fill in the following items in the order that best appeals to you.

1. Briefly write down all of the activities that took place in your class and the order in which they took place.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity:</th>
<th>Notes (General Feelings &amp; Reasons for These)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

2. What is the general feeling you left your class with? Why?

______________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________

3. What did you like about your class? What did you like best? Why?

______________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________

4. What did you not like about your class? Why?

______________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________

5. Think of the following items – do you have any comments on any of these aspects?
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rapport with Students</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Types of Interaction in class (pair work,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>group work, class discussions)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of Portuguese in class</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation of Students</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation of Teacher</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discipline Issues</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class Plan Usefulness – used/not used,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>helpful/not helpful, appropriate, timing,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sequencing, etc.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher’s General Feelings</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Dear Teachers,

Please observe the following guidelines while viewing your tapes. I hope this is a profitable session for you. I will be in after 10:30 AM, and will come by and check in on you. See you then.

**Guidelines:** Please attempt to go through the following steps below if convenient for your process. Make sure to go through all the steps for one person before/while viewing her tape, and then for the other teacher before/while viewing hers. Try to keep the focus on the person that will be showing their tape each time you discuss the questions below. Thank you. 😊

**Pre-Viewing:**

1. Before viewing your tapes, take a minute to think back to your class. Think of what the experience was with your group – how you felt, your concerns, and what you think went well. Please share with your partner your experience of being videotaped.
2. Discuss with your partner what this group in particular is like – what you like about them, what you find particularly challenging, what has changed so far during the semester, and what you still feel you have hopes for changing.
3. Take a minute to think about what you might ask your partner to pay particular attention to while viewing your tape. Is there anything you are concerned about that you would appreciate a second opinion on?

**While-Viewing (your own tape):**

In the space below, take notes on the following items if you observe them. Make sure to write all your observations without censure – positive ones, negative ones, and just “feelings”. (continues on the next page)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feeling / Thoughts in General</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Specific Incidents and Reactions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Part Two – Specific Areas

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher’s Posture</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student’s Posture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Types of Interaction (student-student: pair work, group work; teacher-student: individual help, class discussions)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of Portuguese in class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discipline Issues</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling of Safety for Students in general</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Participation (equal participation, quality of participation, level of motivation)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greatest Achievement &amp; Strong Points / Activities that worked best (good moments)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greatest Challenge &amp; Areas that need further development / Activities that didn’t work so well (odd moments)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Teacher / Student Rapport

### While-Viewing (your partner’s tape):

In the space below, take notes on the following items if you observe them. Make sure to write all of your observations without censure (but of course, be mindful of how you issue your feedback) – positive ones, negative ones, and just “feelings” (continues on the next page)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feeling / Thoughts in General</th>
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<tbody>
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</table>

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Specific Incidents and Reactions</th>
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<tr>
<td>Use of Portuguese in class</td>
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<tr>
<td>Discipline Issues</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greatest Challenge &amp; Areas that need further development / activities that didn’t work so well (odd moments)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Post-Viewing Discussion:**

1. Please compare your charts in the following manner: Allow the person who was on tape to speak first. The observer will simply comment on what the teacher on tape has to say first. At the end, the observer may include further questions or observations as she sees fit.
2. What was the most striking thing about watching yourself on video?
3. Does this affect your self-image as a teacher? If so, how so?
4. What discoveries did you make about your students?
5. With your partner, select one or two things you would still like to work on, and brainstorm strategies to work on them with this group.
APPENDIX SEVEN

List of Suggested Reading / Research for Teachers:

Suggested Reading:

1. Parker Palmer, The Courage to Teach, Chapters I, II, & III
4. H. D. Brown, Teaching by Principles, Chapter 5 – “Intrinsic Motivation in the Classroom”, p. 73 - 83
APPENDIX EIGHT

BAG OF TRICKS – CLASS CONTRACT

Below are some activities that were mentioned in this paper, or that we used during our project, which were useful to us. We share them here with you.

CLASS CONTRACT

“Class Contracts” can be done in a variety of different ways. I am going to share here with you three different common ways of dealing with class contracts.

Class Contract 1

Step One:

The teacher asks students to get into groups, and decide in their groups what they would like from their teacher, and from their classmates, this semester in order to have a productive and fun semester that meets their needs.

Step Two:

The teacher divides the board in two with a vertical line down the middle. The teacher then opens this discussion to the class, collecting all the student demands and wishes on the left side of the board. When every student/group has had a chance to express their every demand, the teacher goes over the list of wishes on the board and discusses with the students that which the teacher can/cannot do, and that which the teacher can only do in part, or needs to adapt.

Step Three:

The teacher then asks students to get into groups again, and decide in their groups what they think their teacher will ask of them – what they will most probably be asked to do.
**Step Four:**

The teacher again opens the class to a group discussion, and writes everything the students mention on the right side of the board. The teacher must then circle among the items on the right side three things that this teacher absolutely needs. These are the teacher’s “non-negotiables”. I recommend that these be thought about and decided on before class. Ideally, the students will mention the three non-negotiables of the teacher, but if they do not, then the teacher can include her non-negotiables, or comment on one of the comments made by the students in order to reach her three non-negotiables. One way or another – using the students’ comments, or having to introduce your own if they haven’t been mentioned – the teacher must then make clear to the students what the three things the teacher needs are, and why these three things are needed.

**Step Five:**

The teacher negotiates with the students the fine points of their contract – the teacher exchanges the commitment of the students to abide by the teacher’s three non-negotiables for the teacher’s commitment to listen to the students, and keep his side of the bargain by keeping to the doable wishes on the students’ part.

**Step Six:**

The contract is given a name – “Teen 7 Declaration of Class Behavior”, “Teen 7 Manifesto”, “Teen & Teacher Agreement” – whatever the students decide.

**Step Seven:**

The contract is written out on a paper poster and the students sign it. The contract goes up on the wall.
Variations: A group of students can get extra credit by working on a nice poster for the contract; a student may volunteer to type it, rather than put it on a poster; etc.

**Class Contract 2**

**Step One:**

The teacher divides the group into three subgroups. One group has to do a poster session on “The Ideal Student”, another one has to do a poster on “The Ideal Teacher”, and the third group has to do a poster on “The Ideal Class”.

**Step Two:**

The students put up their posters at the front of the class, and the teacher leads the discussion of these in the big group so as to discuss students’ expectations and the teacher’s expectations of the class.

**Step Three:**

The teacher proposes, based on a discussion, the concept of the contract, and goes directly to a new poster and brainstorms with the students the points of this contract following the points the teacher is concerned with, making sure to include the teacher’s three non-negotiable points.

**Step Four:**

The students give the contract a name – “Teen 7 Declaration of Class Behavior”, “Teen 7 Manifesto”, “Teen & Teacher Agreement” – whatever the students decide.

**Step Five:**

The students come up and sign the contract, and the contract is left on the wall for the next classes.
Class Contract 3

Step One:

The teacher divides the group into smaller groups of threes and fours, and puts up a transparency with key questions to work on, bringing out student expectations of the course, the teacher, and themselves. Students are asked who the best teacher they have ever had was, and why this teacher was good. Students are asked when they felt they learned the most English and why, and when they think they gave the most of themselves in class and why – or other questions the teacher would like to hear their voice on.

Step Two:

The teacher opens the group to a larger discussion and proposes the concept of a class contract whereby the teacher has three non-negotiable elements that he really needs, and the teacher is willing to hear all the needs of the students and address them all – explaining what this teacher can do, can’t do, can adapt, or do partially. Students are also invited to guess what the three non-negotiables of the teacher are.

Step Three:

The contract gets negotiated between students and teacher. It is very important that students understand why certain things are being asked, and why certain things cannot be given. Fine points of understanding of demands are also discussed.

Step Four:

The teacher can ask for volunteers to write out the contract later, or he can write the contract out as they come to agreement on certain points, on the spot, on a separate piece of poster paper.
Step Five:

Students are asked to sign the contract.

Class Contract Considerations:

There are other variations of the Class Contract procedures. The main thing is that the teacher should listen to her students and be able to negotiate so as to include her three non-negotiable items. It is important that the teacher put a lot of thought into what those three non-negotiables are so as to make the most of them.

In my case I ask for: (1.) Respect, (2.) Speaking only English in Class, and (3.) Be Present. I explain exactly what I mean by those three. I find that many times what I understand by “respect” is not always the same as what the students understand as respect, so I make sure that they know exactly what I expect.

The same goes for the other items. In fact, on Item Number 2, because I know it is so difficult for them to speak English only in class all the time, I often propose an L1-controlling game (coming up next). If the students reject the idea of a game, I often tell them, “Fine, then prove to me you don’t need my help with this. If you can remain for the extension of the class without speaking L1 five times – as a group – then we really don’t need a game.” Nine out of ten times, they’ll lose this, and we’ll have a game.

Then, of course, we need to negotiate the game. All of this occurs in the negotiating phase of the class contract. Make sure that when you negotiate items with students, you make these items clear and concrete.

If students want songs and movies, make sure you tell them truthfully how often and how much you can bring into class. If you tell students you want them to “Be
Present, Body and Soul”, make sure they understand what you consider acceptable in terms of tardiness, absences, and daydreaming.
APPENDIX NINE

BAG OF TRICKS - L1-CONTROLLING GAMES

Below are some activities that were mentioned in this paper, or that we used during our project, which were useful to us. We share them here with you.

The Apple Tree Game

In the “Apple Tree Game”, the teacher draws an apple tree on the corner of the board. This apple tree has five apples on it, and every time a student speaks their L1 in class, an apple falls from the tree (the teacher erases an apple). A student can only speak his L1 in class if he asks the teacher for a time-out, and the teacher grants this student the time-out. Teachers can also decide whether translated words for comprehension are allowed. For example: The teacher is teaching a new vocabulary word, and in an “ah-ha” moment where the student gets the new word, he says it in the L1.

The teacher needs to decide with the group before they begin this game when and where L1 will be allowed (like a “time-out”) – in any other situation, the students lose an apple. Every apple is worth one point. In other words, the students start out every day with five points, and need to end the class with as many points as possible.

If the students deplete the apple tree, a previously decided penalty is enforced (i.e.-an extra homework exercise is given, or students get a half-point off their class grade\(^\text{11}\), whatever was agreed upon). If the students lose no points, they get a previously agreed upon prize (i.e.-a song, half a positive point on their class grade, less homework). If the students get somewhere between zero and five points, the points for that day (the

\(^{11}\) The students have a class grade at Alumni which is a subjective grade the teacher awards students based on their performance in class. This grade is worth about a sixth of their final grade, and could mean the difference between passing and flunking for a borderline student.
number of apples) are counted up and added to the number of points of the previous classes.

At the end of the semester, if the students can get “x” number of points – an average of three points per class – the group gets something special like a party or something else that they very much would like, but that cannot be done very often.

Though I realize that intrinsic motivation is better than extrinsic, and positive reinforcement better than negative, this game has proven very effective when discussed with the kids, and the rules agreed upon together. Personally, I do not like the punishment aspect of this game, and tend to not include it or downplay it as much as possible. The group will end up determining this more than me; sometimes a group will ask about the punishment, and I’ll include this as part of the rules but not mention it again while playing the game. I find that if we focus on the prize more, the students’ general attitude is more positive and cooperative (particularly with teens). I have never had to use a Portuguese-controlling punishment with a group, and I’ve been working with these games and strategies now with multiple groups for five years. Keeping the focus on the reward has been more motivating, and in time as they produce more and more English, the motivation to speak that was extrinsic can become intrinsic in their pride of what they can produce, and their desire to explore it further. This is a transformation that the teacher can be an integral part of.

**Variations**

**Class vs. Class:** During the semester of this project, I played my teen group against my adult basic group (who were very young at heart, and liked the spirit of the game). I
promised the winner a party where I would bring the cake. This particularly stimulated the kids who were always asking me how well the other groups were doing – two other teachers in this project also managed to play the Apple Tree Game in their classes, and my group was often curious to know how well they did in comparison to others. When I told them they did well, they became even more attentive to the game so that at the end of the semester they never lost any apples – as English became a natural medium in the class – and I had to change the rules of the game or bring them something special every class for two months because they almost never used the L1 in class anymore.

With a “Wish Box”: One teacher who had used this game before, but found it hard to keep track of all of the points, suggested an adaptation of this game. He included on the very first day a “wish box” – a shoebox that was nicely wrapped, and had a little slot for papers to be put into it. On that very first day, all the students were allowed a wish for something special in class, and were allowed to put their wish in the wish box. The teacher then told them that for every class they managed to keep at least three apples up on the tree, they would get one point; for classes where they would get one-two points on the tree, they would get a half a point. After they reached four points altogether (four classes keeping at least three apples, eight classes keeping one-two apples, or somewhere between the two), they could take a wish from the box, and the teacher would grant them this wish if it were doable or adapt it to the best of his capabilities. The students were eager to have their wishes chosen, and started to make sure that L1 was not used by the group more than twice in a class so they could get the full point for that day’s work, and in four classes get a wish from the wish box.
Hangman

Hangman is similar to the Apple Tree Game, but for older teens it may be more efficient in the sense that saving someone from sure death is more to teens’ liking than keeping apples on a tree (apparently too childish). In this game, we often ask the group to decide on a character first, and I work on the build-up of the character first. I ask students to decide if the character: is male/female, married/single, what age, has children/no children, what hobbies, what weaknesses, and then give this character a name. The last groups I had named their guys “Johnny Peu”, “Jonathan Kleavis Jr.”, and “Felipa”.

Then I tell the students they are going to have to “Save Felipa!” and I write this right over a hangman I also draw on the corner of my board. Every time one of them speaks the L1 outside of a granted “time-out”, the character in question dies “a little”.

The same point system goes for this as for the Apple Tree Game, except that in saving a “human”, the students get six points: One for the head, another for the torso, two for the arms, and two for the legs (no eyes, ears, mouth, hat, or bowtie!). At the end of the class, the teacher counts up the points remaining (how many were needed to kill the character), and tallies up those points with points earned in previous classes towards a final prize at the end of the semester.

Here too there is a punishment for “hanging the man”, and there is a reward if the students can save the guy completely. I prefer to play this game focusing only on the prize while downplaying the “punishment” element, if including it at all. Again, the specific rules of the game are determined by and then negotiated with the students in order to get them to “own” the game.
Variations

Class vs. Class: Here too, I used the hangman point system to promote a competition between my teen class students – I did this the semester following the one in which I worked with the Apple Tree Game. Here too students were curious as to who was “winning” the game. The end prize was also a party where I’d bring the cake.

Boys vs. Girls: One teacher drew two hangmen in her class – one on each side of the board – one for the girls and one for the boys, and played this game in a “boys vs. girls” competition within her class. Every class at the end, they would establish who had won – girls or boys – and at the end of the semester, whichever team lost would have to bring the other team something special. This teacher was quite successful in her classes with this variation of the game.

Student vs. Student: Another teacher drew on the side of the board a mini-hangman for each student in class – whereby each student had to save himself or herself. As a rule, I prefer games where students play as a team rather than against each other, but here they weren’t playing against each other really, they were all just trying to save their own skins as much as possible. All students who could earn five or six points at the end of the class would get half a positive point on their class grades, and all students who got two or fewer points on that day would get a half a negative point on their class grades.

Soccer Referee Cards

This game can be particularly successful in places where soccer is largely popular, but may need some adapting for other cultures.
In this game, the teacher has two cards in her pocket, a red one and a yellow one – just like soccer referees in real games do. In a real soccer game, when a player commits a serious foul, he receives a yellow card. If this player gets two yellow cards in a game, he then gets a red card and is sent out of the game. In the classroom, we were kind enough to allow the students to get two yellow cards (collectively) before they got a red one. If the teacher issues three red cards during the class, the class gets punished as a whole. If the teacher issues no red cards during the class, the teacher rewards the group as a whole.

At the end of the class, depending on the number of red cards, the students can get zero points (three red cards), one point (two red cards), two points (one red card), or three points (no red cards) for that class. When the students hit ten points, they are granted a special request.
APPENDIX TEN

BAG OF TRICKS - GAMES FOR CHANGING SEATS / PARTNERS

These games are often useful when you want to separate students who have been chatting too much, and would benefit from interacting with another partner, but you don’t want to put those students on the spot. It is also a good idea to change partners for other reasons, so these are some fun ways to do this in class.

The “Change Seats If…” Game

In this game, you ask your students to put all their belongings under their chairs. For this activity, you need to make sure that the students are sitting in a semi-circle or circle, and that any empty chairs between students are removed.

As soon as the desks are cleared, also make sure there is nothing in front of the students’ feet, or right in front of their chairs, because they are going to have to move around.

When everything is ready, the teacher then asks all of the students to change seats if (for example) “You were born in Brazil.” Students then stand up and change places, and the teacher quickly sits down in a student’s place before they all find new seats. What then happens is that one of the students will be lacking a chair. This new student then is “It” and she will have to ask the students to change seats if “You are wearing jeans”, “You like chocolate”, or “You root for the São Paulo soccer team.” and try to sit down quickly as others stand up so that another student is then “It”. He then needs to instruct the students in yet another round of “Change Places If…”.
When the teacher finds that the group has been shuffled around appropriately, the teacher can voluntarily lose, and then ask students to pair up with their new partners – whomever they are sitting next to.

**The String Game**

The teacher brings to class a meter-long section of string – one section of string per two students in class. In a class of twelve students, the teacher would need six one-meter long sections of string. If there is an odd number of students in class, the teacher should bring one extra section of string.

The teacher then puts all these pieces of string together – holding them all by one end, and then folds the strings in half, grabbing the strings in their middle at the folded point.

The teacher then twists the strings in her hand so students don’t know what end of string goes with what. Then the teacher offers the strings to the group, asking each student to take one end of a piece of string, and hold on to it. When the students all have their ends of a string section (and there is one extra one hanging out if you have an odd number of students), the teacher lets the students know that they cannot, under any circumstance, let go of their piece of string. The teacher then lets go of the middle point of the strings.

The students need to find the person holding on to the other end of their string – this person is their new partner. They need also need to get unhooked from the bunch of other string, and go off with their new partners, without ever letting go of the string. The
odd person who does not have a partner at the end of his/her string gets his/her pick of any other pair in the class.

This activity is fun and very kinesthetic. The teacher has no way of arbitrarily selecting the partners, and this has its positive and downside to it. The teacher in question should factor this point in when choosing this game to pair students up.

**Romantic Partners, Superheroes, and Sidekicks Game**

This is perhaps the most common of the “new pair” games, but it is still fun and effective nonetheless. In this game, each person gets a card with the name of a famous character or person on it. The person then needs to find the natural partner of this person – be it a romantic partner or a sidekick.

For example: Batman and Robin, Romeo and Juliet, Tom and Jerry, Shrek and Fiona. If a student gets a card with “Roadrunner” on it, she will have to look for the “Coyote” in the class, and then pair up with the person who has this card.

There are many thematic variations of pairing students up through cards – they could be animals, colors, or elements. Another variation would be to answer a short questionnaire to practice a grammar point or recently learned vocabulary, and then finding who you have the most in common with in the class to form a new partner.
As we discussed before in this paper, in Brazil in particular, the problem of turn-taking in conversation can present a bit of a challenge for a teacher who is trying to work on the language. Below are some games to work on student awareness of turn-taking in conversation. In all of the games, the teacher must preside over the group discussions with much tact and care, for people may gain awareness of themselves, and feel a bit unsure and possibly even fearful of how this may be interpreted. The teacher must be the guiding and welcoming force in the class discussions, making sure the students understand that the awareness of how they communicate is not threatening and means no harm as to who they see themselves as.

**Beans Games**

In this game the teacher brings to class a bag of beans and a paper cup for each student in class. In a given conversation activity, the teacher splits the group up into smaller groups of four students or so, and gives each group one paper cup with twenty beans inside. The teacher then tells the students that every time they speak they have to take a bean from the paper cup, and if they continue speaking nonstop for more than one minute, then they have to take another bean out. The conversation only ends when there are no beans in the cup.

When the activity ends, the teacher then asks students to see how many beans each one took, and ask them what they think this means. The teacher can then use this to lead into a group discussion.
The teacher can then give each student a paper cup with seven beans, give the students a polemic topic to be discussed, and tell the students that the rule now applies backward. Every time they speak (or spend more than one minute speaking without interruption), they need to put a bean in the cup, and when they have no more beans they cannot speak.

This latter activity seems to be even more difficult, for students will sometimes even attempt to borrow beans from other students to speak after they have used up all of their own. Again, the teacher can open this up to the bigger group for discussion as to what kind of awareness this brings us.

If the teacher is so inclined, the teacher can also use this to address the topic of “polychronic” vs. “monochronic” cultural communication.

**The Pen Game**

The pen game is often useful in debates or discussing controversial issues. In this game, students are divided into smaller groups (of three to five students) and given a topic to discuss. The students can only speak though when they have a designated red marker (the teacher brings this to class) in their hands. People can request the marker, and the person who has the marker can decide who to give the marker to.

The group discussion of the dynamics of these smaller group interactions can also be very fruitful.
Fishbowl

With either one of the two activities mentioned before, or yet with another simple class discussion, you can propose a fishbowl activity. In a fishbowl activity, you have one group “within” another. You have two groups – the inner group, and the outer group. The outer group sits outside the inner group, holding it like a “fishbowl”.

The inner group participates in an activity, while the outer group observes the participation of the inner group. The teacher in the case of fishbowl activities sits with the outer group and has the specific task of observing and later mediating the talk about turn-taking and communication.

The inner group will be given a controversial topic to discuss, and the fishbowl (outer) group will be asked to mark how often different people participated, for how long, how many times someone may have tried to be heard but had not been able to, body language, and what allows the more vocal students to be heard over the shier ones. In other words, the fishbowl group will be given “observation” tasks to talk about “how” the inner group communicated.

As soon as the inner group finishes its discussion, we open the activity up as a group and discuss how we communicate, what kind of awareness we get from this, and how this can help us.
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