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Teacher Development

Building rapport

- <Georgina> Why don't we start by looking at some of the questions that came in from some of our subscribers. This first one is from Elena in Romania:
Jeremy, what is the most important skill for a teacher to develop?
- <jeremy_harmer> My answer to that is, I think, the skill of creating and maintaining rapport with students - the interpersonal side of teaching. If teachers work on that (if they find ways of judging how well that T-SS rapport is working) they are already on their way to developing as classroom practitioners.
- <Susanna> Hello. I'm in London, but I'm going out to start teaching in Spain from August.
- <Georgina> If you have any questions for Jeremy, please send them in.
- <Georgina> Will that be your first job?
- <Susanna> Yes. I've just completed my Certificate course.
- <jeremy_harmer> Congratulations! Did you enjoy it?
- <Susanna> Yes, it was really interesting, but very exhausting.
- <Georgina> Jeremy, going back to what you said about building rapport, do you have any tips? Especially for new teachers like Susanna.
- <jeremy_harmer> Well, it ends up being very general advice - but no less important because of that and the advice is to listen, watch, observe students all the time, concentrating as much as possible on what they do and not just on what the teacher does. It is one of the most difficult things for teachers in training to achieve, of course, but it's what marks out experienced teachers. Of course some people have this ability right from the beginning!
- <Shaun> Sorry I'm late. I'm in Brasilia and we have just had the Brazilian Team come down the road so things have been a bit hectic. Hello
- <jeremy_harmer> Wow! That must have been something.
- <Georgina> At the moment, we're just talking about building rapport with students, do you have any suggestions?
- <Susanna> Jeremy, I don't feel my training course looked at this enough. Do you have any suggestions for what I can do during my first few weeks?
- <jeremy_harmer> Susanna, yes I do have some suggestions, though a lot depends on what kind of a person you are but I'd start by saying that it's worth having students write comments at the end of, say, a fortnight simple things like 'what I liked best/what I liked least' or even 'what was your favourite lesson? What were your favourite new words?' Then the students start to see that you're interested in how they feel.
- <Georgina> Yes, Susanna - a good way is doing what Jeremy suggests and getting feedback from the students - though this works better with adults.
- <jeremy_harmer> but I do think it's shortsighted of schools to cut training costs. A solution which I really favour
- <jeremy_harmer> and which is just as appropriate for Susanna as anyone else, is for a group of teachers in a school to organise their own sessions, quite apart from whether or not the school management does this too. Then teachers can talk about absolutely anything they want/need to.
- <Shaun> What I would like to discuss with Jeremy is the role of conferences and seminars in Teacher Development. I'll remind Jeremy he will be here in a few weeks. I'm the local President of my TESOL chapter and am always looking for ways to value our work. For me it is great to meet speakers and talk with them but for the novice teacher. How do you see the seminars role when many schools are cutting costs and leaving teacher training/development to one side.
- <Georgina> Shaun, what sort of development schemes do you organise with your teachers?
- <jeremy_harmer> This kind of autonomous Ts' support group is very empowering, and doesn't have to be too formal.

Developing online

- <Radu> I am a member of a newsgroup that discusses teaching issues. It's very interesting but you get lots of emails sometime.

- <Georgina> Radu - that's interesting. Do you thin it is as good as sessions where you are with other teachers?
- <jeremy_harmer> Yes, Radu, you have to be quite dedicated to follow/read everything! Nevertheless it's a great way to stay in touch with teachers from all over the place. I always find it comforting that many people share the same problems and the same successes.
- <Radu> Yes, it is good, but I think personal is better. But where I am it is not always possible and we get to talk about a lot of topics.
- <Georgina> Yes, some newsgroups now have a moderator who keeps the discussions on track - and of course you can have the messages digested if you don't want the all in your inbox.
- <Radu> I'm from Poland.
- <Shaun> I liked the development pack I was reading the other day about Teaching development in groups and it helped me to start one which I will be starting in the next few weeks
- <Susanna> Shaun, how do you get involved in local groups? Is it easy?
- <jeremy_harmer> Shaun, that's fantastic! Exactly the kind of thing this site hopes to provoke!!
- <Shaun> I have also have been developing my own work on the lines of vocabulary however I have found I do need input from other teachers. Working in a big school naturally leads to sharing with others when they see what you are doing. No man is an island even in teaching don' you think?
- <jeremy_harmer> I think there's something profound about the 'island' comment. Sometimes all teachers feel a bit lonely as the classroom door closes behind them and the students sit there just waiting! We do all need support from colleagues. But I wanted to answer Susanna's question about groups in Spain there are lots of teachers' groups.
- <Shaun> Sorry for the corny line at the end but sometimes we need our peers and I have found this so necessary in developing my own career/way of teaching
- <Georgina> Very much so. The best thing you can do as a teacher is to share your ideas and develop with other people's help.
- <Shaun> I have been working on my own lexical notebook for the past year to enhance my students but it is coming to a phase where you need alternative input and teacher development groups in the pack gave me the idea to involve the others in my school much more. So I feel we naturally go from personal work to evolving others
- <jeremy_harmer> That sounds very interesting, Shaun. Hope we get a chance to talk about it. I certainly agree that showing it to other people, getting their feedback adding that and then having them give you/us ideas is the way to do it.
- <jeremy_harmer> Susanna, there are lots of language teachers in Madrid. Go to any of the big centres and see if there are announcements about talks etc. You can make contact with publishers and ask them if they are organising any workshops etc. Sometimes, of course, they will be promoting books but there'll be lots of teachers there to get to know and talk to/associate with etc. Because, returning to a question Shaun raised a few minutes ago, I think presentations/conference workshops etc can be really useful for our own development. I've never been to a session yet which hasn't taught me something, however large or small!
- <Susanna> thank you - I will try

Observations

- <Georgina> We had another question in from a teacher in Paraguay:
Should observations make us feel as nervous as they do? How effective are they and how can they be made better? What do you think? How do you feel about observations? are they n effective tool for development?
- <jeremy_harmer> Susanna's just been observed daily in teaching practice! How did that feel Susanna?
- <Susanna> Oh, I was very nervous all the time! I hated them even though I knew they were to help me.
- <Georgina> Did you find them constructive?
- <jeremy_harmer> No one likes being observed, especially by their trainers or superiors. But if we can encourage colleagues to come and watch us - and then watch them - that can be really useful. e.g. 2 teachers plan a class together one of them teaches, the other watches. Next time they do it the other way round. If they trust each other it's great!
- <radu> I don't really get observed, my boss doesn't have the time. But I think it is useful.
- <jeremy_harmer> Radu, I agree, especially if the person being observed has some input into the process
- <jeremy_harmer> before they're observed. An observer can always see things about us that we haven't noticed!



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- <Georgina> Yes, that's a good idea Jeremy, but it also goes back to what you were saying earlier - some schools don't or can't allow it as they don't have the resourcing.
- <Susanna> Does being observed get any easier?
- <jeremy_harmer> Susanna sorry, sorry, not really! Well, actually, that's not quite true. The more comfortable you feel in front of a group the less threatening a visitor feels.
- <Shaun> In our school we have to be observed twice, each semester for our evaluation. Trust is the key don't you think as well as time
- <Georgina> I think it depends on how you view the observation. You need to think of it less as a trial and more as a way of helping you develop. Some teachers I trained thought they might lose their job if they gave a bad lesson but really, it's all about developing the teacher that you are.
- <jeremy_harmer> I quite agree, G. Provided the observer is there to help us develop (rather than just be judge and executioner. Shaun, can you explain 'trust'?
- <Shaun> OK, I'll try and explain trust hang on a moment.
- <Georgina> Definitely - and Susanna - remember that the observer is only one point of view. Justifying your actions also helps you to develop. Your observers see isolated classes and often don't know the needs/skills of a class. You maybe plan a certain activity because of a previous class or needs of the student, or you choose to overlook something in that class to deal with at a later date. The observer may pick you up for that, but you can show that your planning a series of classes, not just those 'special one of classes' to wow the observer
- <Shaun> Trust can be accepting and listening to feedback. Being open to constructive criticism and use that to help you in your work.
- <Susanna> Thank you. This has been really useful. I hope I can get connected from Madrid. It will really help me to develop if all sessions are this helpful.
- <jeremy_harmer> Shaun, that's a really good comment. I guess if we trust the observer (and if they come into the class in a spirit of 'helping' then we have to be open to what they have to tell us. Being open to new possibilities is, after all, what teacher development is really all about.
- <Shaun> I agree completely
- <Georgina> I agree Shaun - constructive criticism is what we all need. I think that's all we have time for now. Any last comments? Susanna - good luck in Madrid and we hope you'll be able to get online.

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