

Personal Statement of Beverly Ingram Sladek, 2008 TexTESOL III TexTESOLer of the Year

The summer I discovered tiny rocks with black “hieroglyphics” in my family’s driveway, I wanted to be an archaeologist. The summer the Olympics were first broadcast consistently on TV, I wanted to be an Olympic athlete. The rest of the time, though, I wanted to be a teacher. I liked learning even when my teachers were *not* good, and I loved the classes and learned best when my teachers *were* good, that is, engaged with both their subject matter and their students *and* committed to helping their students absorb and handle material well. My goal was to become a person who knew her subject, related well to students, and conducted engaging, effective classes. The only problem was I didn’t know what I really wanted to teach. It took two years of teaching four classes of geometry and one class of French daily in a public high school followed by just two days in an interdisciplinary master’s program in foreign language education to “discover” ESL/EFL. From the moment 36 years ago when I met my first intensive English class of students from Italy to Saudi Arabia, I was hooked. Right then, I decided to get my MA in TEFL. That momentous epiphany, the ensuing development of my beliefs about teaching ESL/EFL, and the rewards from this field have been milestones in my efforts to become the teacher I envisioned while growing up.

My core belief about teaching is hardly novel or sophisticated. In short, I don’t teach ESL as much as I teach *people* ESL. While I’m endlessly fascinated by learning about my language and culture, my fascination becomes a passion when it comes to helping people grasp and use the linguistic and cultural knowledge they need. Over time, I’ve found that a fundamental principle in the process is to demonstrate respect. I usually teach young adults and adults (for example, the age range in a recent class was 17 to 72) in university-based intensive English programs. These students frequently have many accomplishments, wide experience, and much insight even though they may still be “toddlers” in English. Thus, to communicate my basic respect for them, I shake every student’s hand after the first class and say, “Welcome to my class! I’m looking forward to working with you.” Likewise, the last day I shake each person’s hand and say thank you for the particular way s/he enriched the class. Of course, to do this, I must be alert for individual contributions along the way.

Another fundamental principle is to foster a community in which bonds are strengthened between students as well as between teacher and students. Thus, a standard feature in my classes, whether in oral skills, writing, reading, or grammar, is an assignment early in the course for students to share with the class a story from their personal life experience; I share a story, too. By sharing stories, either orally or in writing depending on the class objectives, students not only practice language skills, but also begin to build a community. Furthermore, these stories become a repository of shared information I can draw on when giving examples throughout the course. If the stories are presented orally, the listeners must take notes and ask questions to give each other post-presentation Q&A practice. In the next class, I give a “quiz” over story content. If the stories are written, I write a question about each story or elicit a question from a student reader. Then we display the stories on the wall. The students and I circulate and read to answer the questions and find in each story a phrase or sentence that we really like. It’s a

powerful moment when volunteers read aloud, not the errors they found in the stories, but the things that touched or pleased them.

An important corollary to belief in people-oriented teaching is, in Stephen Covey's words in *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, "Efficient with things; effective with people." In other words, I must be willing to go some extra miles and put in extra time for extra results. Of course, I'm as interested as the next teacher in things that are both efficient *and* effective, things such as one-word conversation starters, ten-second memory games that create a simple info gap from almost anything in a textbook, and shift-a-partner chat circles for building oral fluency. However, tremendously effective are time-consuming practices such as thoughtful feedback on essays and half-hour individual follow-up appointments after videotaping students' presentations. Even when my schedule is tight, I try really hard to use such practices as often as possible.

Another corollary is two-pronged: interested students are more receptive than disinterested ones, and I have a better chance to get my students interested if I'm genuinely engaged in what I'm doing. When bored or detached, I have little possibility of reaching them. Thus, it's an essential part of my job to find a way to keep myself interested in each class. Maybe it's a different method of forming groups or arranging the room to facilitate the dynamic I want; maybe it's a new mini-lecture that I'll give for notetaking practice or a new way to hold my hands to show how to pronounce an /l/ or /r/. My engagement is necessary.

Rewards? Let me number just a few: 1) working and/or giving workshops in Algeria, Mexico, New York City, Japan, and Germany; 2) excellent colleagues who have their hearts and heads attuned to cross-cultural understanding and form TESOL, which has consistently stimulated my professional development; 3) the opportunity to write and publish a textbook with an outstanding colleague, and 4) motivated, courageous, intriguing students who, sappy as it may sound, bring the world to my classroom. Recently, a lawyer who has volunteered at night in an ESL program and wants to become a professional ESL teacher invited me for coffee to pick my brain. At one point in the conversation, she sighed, "What an interesting profession you've had. You are so lucky!" My response: "Yes, I am!"