

The weight of words

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During the recent TESOL Greece convention I attended Scott Thornbury's and Julian Edge's plenary talks. I had a number of reasons for enjoying the talks, as it seemed to me that both speakers wanted to send positive messages to language teachers and help improve the quality of teaching and learning. Scott Thornbury related a heart-warming story of how the humanity and initiative of a teacher managed to lead to teacher and learner empowerment in the face of an oppressive educational establishment. I felt a great affinity with the story, not only because my mother is a recently retired language teacher, but also because of the reference to A. S. Neill. Actually, it was my mother who introduced me to Neill's books, and our discussions of his ideas and practices had a great influence on my views about teaching. Julian Edge stressed the need for teachers to develop their own methodologies rather than follow trends and jump on bandwagons. He presented teachers not as consumers, but as researchers and creators of contextualised theories and methodologies - an attitude I have argued for myself. I also appreciated his views on the contribution of English language teachers to the globalisation of English-speaking cultures.

However, I'd like to comment on statements made towards the end of each talk. Scott Thornbury presented as one of the conclusions to be drawn from his story that 'it's not what you teach, it's how you teach'; Julian Edge reassured the teachers in the audience that whatever they do is right. I found these statements disturbing. Still, what prompted my response was not only the statements themselves, but also the circumstances under which they were made. These were not comments made in passing, but main points which were stressed, messages which the speakers wanted to drive home. They were made in public, by professionals who were invited to speak on the basis of their expertise in the field. Consequently, they carry substantial weight and can easily influence the attitudes of teachers, even beyond the specific audience.

I thought Scott Thornbury's statement 'it's not what you teach, it's how you teach' was misleading. I also found it highly puzzling, as he has published a book on language awareness for English language teachers. Has he changed his mind? Does he no longer think that the selection and use of materials, and the guidance learners receive, depend to a large extent on the teachers' perception of the nature, structure and use of language? In the abstract of his plenary talk he argues that ELT has focused too much on the 'what' at the expense of the 'how'. If this is the case, shouldn't we try to redress the balance by paying *equal* attention to *both*, rather than moving to the other extreme? Doesn't Scott Thornbury agree that ELT has suffered enough from pendulum swings? Did he mean by his statement that teaching methodology can be developed independently of *what* is taught, that the procedures for teaching/learning a language are the same as those involved in, let's say, teaching/learning mathematics, geography, sculpting or sumo wrestling? Or did he mean that the content of language lessons is irrelevant as long as the teaching procedures are right? This, of course, begs the question of what the 'right' procedures might be.

Interestingly, Julian Edge seemed to provide an answer to this question. He said that rather than trying simply to copy external models, we should each accept that the best way to teach is just how we do teach, that whatever we do is right as long as we keep developing. Although the statement was made in the context of professional development and was followed by the explicit proviso that this is the case only if we are also involved in continuing development, I see a number of incongruities. The fact that someone is developing as a teacher is no guarantee of their *current* effectiveness. Also, if whatever we currently do is right, then why should we invest time, effort and money to develop? What is more, how can he possibly know what every teacher in the world (or even in the audience) actually does in his/her classroom? Finally, his statement seems to disregard the fact that in many countries the requirements for language teacher certification are less than rigorous. Julian Edge coined the term 'person-who-teaches' to stress the importance of personality. I'd like to shift the emphasis by proposing the term 'person-who-is-allowed-to-teach', and point out the existence of a sub-category, 'person-who-is-misguidedly-allowed-to-teach'. What I mean is that we have no way of knowing what all people-who-teach do in the classroom, whether they are committed to ongoing personal and professional development, what they understand by 'development', and whether they are in a position to develop. 'Developing as a teacher' presupposes 'being' one. Does Julian Edge believe that someone becomes a teacher just by announcing it to the world? Wouldn't it be wiser to distinguish between 'developing as a teacher' and 'developing *towards becoming* a teacher'? I'm well aware of the arbitrary nature of such a distinction, but it is one all professions make. If we choose to ignore the distinction, what will that imply for the status of ELT?

Were the two statements the result of an unfortunate choice of words, or were they meant as said? If the former is the case, I would welcome the speakers' clarifications; if the latter, I would be very interested in their arguments.