

## “Smile, you’re on *Candid Camera*”\*

John F. Fanselow, Teachers College, Columbia University

When I used to watch a program called *Candid Camera* on television, I sometimes felt sorry for the people who were being filmed because they were captured on video in unguarded moments after something rather strange had just happened. I remember one sequence in which each person who tried to open a door saw the door fall down in front of them as soon as they touched the door handle. As soon as the incident was over, a voice would announce to each person holding a door handle, or caught in some other seemingly embarrassing situation, “Smile, you’re on *Candid Camera*.” Most did! In fact, most people laughed, perhaps out of relief, realizing that a joke had been played on them.

One reason some of us who teach are at first reluctant to video tape ourselves might be that we unconsciously fear that something embarrassing will happen that will be captured on the tape. In our mind, we might wonder “Wouldn’t we look stupid if the door handle came off?” But the people who did not know they were being video taped on *Candid Camera* never had time to wonder about feeling stupid since they were not told they were being video taped until after the incident was over.

Two possible lessons useful to those who want to explore their teaching might be learned from those who were video taped on *Candid Camera*. One is that most viewers were completely sympathetic to those taped in seemingly embarrassing situations. Each viewer seemed to identify with the person on the tape. “Gee, that could happen to me,” and “I would probably act in a similar way.” Another lesson is that those who had been taped seemed unconcerned about however they reacted. They simply seemed to realize that they reacted the way they did, without any pretense or planning. Their reactions were spontaneous and genuine; there were no correct or incorrect ways to act.

If you are keen on trying to understand your teaching and see the degree to which what you do is in tune with what you want to do, seeing and hearing your classes is imperative. And, if you have been putting off audio or video taping your classes for fear of what you might discover, consider the lessons from those who were taped on *Candid Camera*, and other programs of this nature. One, there is no need to judge what we do, either positively or negatively. And, two there are no absolutely right ways or absolutely wrong ways to do most things we do.

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Suspending judgment and moving beyond absolutes (*i.e.*, stop thinking of practices as good/bad or right/wrong) can allow us to begin to see our teaching differently, and thus free us to alter the proportion of different activities we do and generate new activities which we had not previously tried. In the following paragraphs, I will outline some steps that I have found useful in understanding my teaching and seeing the extent to which some practices are in and out of tune with my beliefs.

### **Using Video for Reflection**

First, you have to make a video. To both take pressure off of you and to provide more useful information, place the video camera on a tripod or a desk facing one group of students in the class. The resulting tape will show the same group of students during the entire lesson so that you can compare their reactions, responses and attention during the entire lesson. By focusing on the students, you can study the *effects* of what you do rather than simply what you image happened. Your voice will be loud enough so that even though your face and body are never seen on the video tape, you can see the various consequences of your teaching practices on a small number of students in your class. Over time, you could point the camera at different clusters of students so that you can see how different individuals act in relationship to different practices you use and various types of feedback you provide.

After you produce your video, resist the temptation to watch the entire video from beginning to end. If you do this first, it is likely that you will make judgments (in the form of labels like “boring” or “exciting”) and absolute statements such as “Their faces look like they are confused by the question” or “Calling on students can make them reluctant to speak” about what was good/bad and right/wrong. An alternative way to use the video is to fast-forward for some amount of time and then look at the part of the lesson where you stop. As you look at the segment which you have randomly selected, write down what you say and the students say. In order to transcribe even a few exchanges, and describe gestures and movements, you will have to stop the tape every few seconds and replay it to re-listen to what is being said and look at what is being done.

After a dozen lines have been transcribed—about six exchanges—replay the segment again and add some notes to the transcript which reflect your interpretation of how the students and you were acting. “At this point, each student moved forward in his desk so he seemed to be very interested” or “Her face look as if she is confused by my question.”

Your interpretive notes will of course contain some judgments, and perhaps even a few one dimensional, absolute statements. But the judgments and interpretations made after you first transcribe are different from initial judgments and interpretations in two ways. First, they are made after you have changed some of the spoken and visual information into written language by transcribing the lines and writing your comments. Second, the purpose of judgments and one-dimensional interpretations is different, as I will explain next.

The usual conversations between teachers and observers contain a number of judgments and one-dimensional interpretations which are stated as final and complete. “The class was exciting; the way you had the students define the words in pairs showed how engaged students can become; calling on students makes them reluctant to speak.” If we imply accept our impression as we write them, it is unlikely that we will be able to learn anything new from our viewing of tapes of our teaching. But if we use the initial impressions as a starting point rather than as an ending point, we might see some new features of our teaching practices or those of others we observe.

### **Steps to Follow**

Here are some steps that I go through in order to make use of my initial judgments and one-dimensional interpretations and yet not be trapped by them. First, I divide a piece of paper into two, either by folding it or drawing a line down the middle, vertically. Then I write down my initial judgment on the top of the left column of the paper. I ask a partner to suggest a word that is the exact opposite of the one I wrote. For example, if I use the word *exciting* my partner might suggest the words *boring*, *uninteresting*, *lacking in challenge* as opposites. I then write their words at the top of the right column. Together, we then look at the transcript and find examples of communications by either the teacher or students that fit in either the right or left column. If we cannot find any to fit in the right column from the transcript, we play the video until we find a few examples.

After we have examples of what we each consider to be *exciting* and *boring* activities we try to list characteristics of each type of activity so that we are able to describe them to each other. The exciting activities could turn out to be centered on topics related to the experience of the students rather than to language for its own sake or instances of students speaking to each other rather than to the entire class or to the teacher.

## Figure 1 Looking at Initial Judgments

### Step 1 Initial Judgment

Your judgment	An opposite judgment
exciting	boring, uninteresting, lacking in challenge

### Step 2 Examples

### Step 3 Characteristics

Those looking at the tape must generate the characteristics that seem to fit; there is no set of prescribed characteristics that you are asked to apply.

After at least two characteristics of say, *exciting activities* are noted, then two characteristics of what are judged to be *boring activities* have to be noted. If we want to increase the frequency of say, exciting activities in our next class, we simply have to change the activities we wrote in the boring column so that they have the features of the exciting activities.

The same steps need to be followed with the one-dimensional interpretations. After writing a comment such as “Their faces look like they are confused by the question” on top of the left column, you need to write an example of an opposite comment in the right column. In this case, “Their faces look like they understand the question” would be an example of an opposite comment.

With your partner, you then need to write communications from the video that you think are in tune with the interpretation in both the right and left columns as before. If no examples can be found from the transcribed segment, you can watch the video to find some examples from other segments of the lesson.

As soon as you have a few examples in each column, write down characteristics of the examples. For example, the questions they seem to understand might be in their own language in contrast to questions in the target language. Also, the questions might be about the meaning of the directions of how to do an activity rather than about the language they are learning. Also, the questions they seem to understand might be those that are frequently used in class on a regular basis, or some that they have read in their textbook and are familiar with.

## **Figure 2 Looking at Initial One-dimensional Interpretations**

### **Step 1 Initial Interpretation**

Your initial one-dimensional Interpretation	An opposite interpretation
Their faces look like they are confused by the question.	Their faces look like they understand the question.

### **Step 2 Examples**

## **Step 3 Characteristics**

### **What We Can Learn**

Each time we write a column for a title that is the exact opposite of the original title, we are forcing ourselves to realize that whatever judgment or interpretation we made applied to only some of what we saw. Each time we write down an additional characteristic of the judgments and interpretations we made, we realize that every communication has multiple characteristics, not just the one we originally noticed.

Writing opposite judgments and interpretations also alerts us to the fact that others might well have a totally different perspective from us. Though it seems obvious that different teachers and students have different perspectives, writing down different ones and trying to fit examples from our teaching into a different perspective has the potential for enabling us to see what we might take for granted. Furthermore, if we write the titles for the columns as well as the examples and multiple characteristics, we will see that items we think fit in the left column might be considered examples that belong in the right column to our colleagues or our students.

After the preceding steps are followed a number of times, a different level of perception can be reached by switching the titles in the columns. By copying the title we first write on top of the left column on to the top of the right column and copying the title we first put on top of the right column on to the left column, we are perhaps able to realize

more concretely and strongly that what we perceive is not reality but our initial perception of reality, filtered by our values and beliefs. By trying to match examples we considered exciting with a label such as boring, we have to deliberately and consciously reexamine our beliefs and the characteristics of teaching practices which we think match our beliefs.

The steps just listed lead to analysis. Here are some characteristics of the conversations that will emerge from following the steps. Comments will begin to be more description and specific—less judgmental and general. Multiple characteristics of teaching practices, students, and materials will replace single characteristics of these phenomena.

The type of single causation comments so prevalent in our lives—“If we smile more, students will be happy”—will be replaced by comments which show that there are multiple causes for many consequences in our class. Maybe when we smile we also tend to move around more, ask more questions and give more feedback. In short, a combination of characteristics will start to be seen in relationship to various consequences rather than single characteristics. We will realize that waiting a little more for student responses and moving away from a student and showing appreciation might together increase the rate and loudness of student responses more than changing textbooks or totally altering the type of questions we ask. Though we will of course continue to make judgments and interpretations, the purpose of these will be to explore, to open up possibilities.

### **Small Time Investment**

A key feature of this type of analysis is that it should not take a lot of time. Since only one short segment of a lesson is analyzed simply to see some new characteristics to change, a fifteen-minute discussion, perhaps over lunch or during a break, provides enough time to start the analysis. Spending fifteen minutes twice a week for one term adds up to a lot of time but each single exploration takes little time. If one considers that one purpose of the discussion is to plan a change in our teaching part of the time used to analyze becomes planning time.

But the planning is based on examples of what we actually did in our teaching, not on our narration from memory or our mental images. This planning is intended to change something of what we do so that we can compare practices over time and thus gain more control over our teaching. Also, since we must compare our beliefs without practices in this type of conversation about teaching, our planning is likely to become more in tune with our beliefs, goals and widened perception of the capabilities of our students and ourselves.

If we can keep in mind the unselfconscious freedom of those who were video taped for *Candid Camera*, it is likely that we will be able to see new things about our students and our teaching practices. If we think in terms of right and wrong, however, we are unlikely to be able neither to understand what we do any better nor to see things we have not seen before. Using judgments to explore rather than to praise or condemn can be surprisingly exciting but the only way to discover this is to pretend you have been on *Candid Camera*.

### Notes

An expanded version of these suggestions was published in the *TESOL Quarterly* in an article called "Let's See: Contrasting Conversations about Teaching. (Volume 22, Number 1, March 1988.) The article was reprinted in *Second Language Teacher Education*, edited by Jack Richards and David Nunan, published by Cambridge University Press in 1990. It was also reprinted in *Enriching ESOL Pedagogy--readings and activities for engagement, reflection and inquiry* edited by Vivian Zamel and Ruth Spack. 2002. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum.) *Contrasting Conversations* (Longman 1992) is an expanded version of the article

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