

Preface to the Second Printing of *Try the Opposite*

One definition of learning is a change in our lives. Whether we change our attitude, act differently, use new words in new ways in a letter, utter a phrase in a language that is new to us, see a sunset differently, we have changed. Ironically, there is a tension within the field of education between change and stability. On the one hand, as teachers, we want our students to change. And we want to change our teaching. On the other hand, we want some stability: we want to preserve some of the practices and ideas that we have found valuable. As Alexander Pope wrote in his *Essay on Man*, “Be not the first by whom the new are tried, nor yet the last to lay the old aside.”

For almost four decades, I have been exhilarated by this tension between change and stability. When should we change an activity that seems not to engage students? At what point should we keep doing the same thing we have done before because it seems to engage students but we are tired of the activity, or have decided that it does not lead to the types of learning we thought it did?

One of the most frequent questions that I am asked at workshops is why I am so keen to deal with change. While knowing why we are the way we are, is a complex question, some personal statements I hope will suggest at least possible reasons.

My first teaching position after practice teaching during my university studies was teaching English in Nigeria as member of the United States volunteer organization called the Peace Corps. Before I left to teach in Nigeria as a Peace Corps volunteers in 1961, the 30 others in the group and I had many training sessions devoted to learning how to cope with the many differences that we would experience. Should we adapt to the differences by changing our behaviour? Or, should we work to change the expectations and behaviour of those we taught and worked with? Should we support stability by clinging to the traditions we

observed or try to change the traditions?

In confronting these questions, we realized that we ourselves were as resistant to change and as trapped by some traditions as our hosts and students! The first time I switched on a light, for example, I was upset that I had to flick the wall switch down to turn the light on and up to turn it off. The way to switch a light on and off was different from the tradition I was used to. During summer vacations in my university studies, I did electrical work that required me to install hundreds of light switches around Chicago. We were used to thinking of down as being off, as when you turn down a wick in a lantern, for example, or when you turn the gas down in a stove. Down always meant weaker or off! But on reflection, I realised that while we can think of a rationale for many things we are used to, in fact much that we do is arbitrary, based on convention and tradition. As soon as I realised that it was easier for me to have my finger go down for on and up for off than to change all the light switches in my school by turning them all upside down, I began to try to look at everything from a perspective the exact opposite of my own. I began to think of myself as a teacher for change!

When I completed my two years in Nigeria, I trained Peace Corps volunteers bound for Nigeria. One of the books I found most exciting in my own training was Michael West's *Teaching English in Difficult Circumstances*. But applying the key lesson of my Nigerian experiences,

I determined to title materials I prepared from a perspective the exact opposite of what I had found positive. I titled the materials I prepared *Teaching English in Exhilarating Circumstances* to remind myself and the teachers I worked with of the value of taking an opposite perspective.

My title was not right and West's wrong any more than pushing toggle switches up to turn on a light is better than pushing toggle switches down

to turn on a light. Rather, teaching anywhere has a mixture of difficult moments and exhilarating moments.

I continued this same theme of trying to be a teacher for change, which requires looking at reality from different perspectives and without judgment, in an article called “Beyond *Rashomon*” published in the *TESOL Quarterly* in 1976 and reprinted in *Observation in the Language Classroom* edited by Richard Allwright (Longman, 1988). In *Breaking Rules* (Longman, 1987) I used a camera as a metaphor.

I invited teachers to look at their classes with a wide-angle lens, a close-up lens, etc., to focus on different moments in class, take long shots, sharp focus and soft focus shots. I introduced a system for observing classrooms called FOCUS to highlight the use of a camera as a metaphor. The camera does not judge but when adjusted can provide us with a wide range of pictures and thus different perspectives of our classes.

In 1992, in a book titled *Contrasting Conversations* (Longman), I used a mirror and a magnifying glass as metaphors. "I came to your class not only with a magnifying glass to look carefully at what was being done, but with a mirror so that I could see that what you were doing is a reflection of much of what I do."

In scores of articles and presentations at conferences for the last thirty years, and in my teaching in the Graduate Program of Teachers College, Columbia University both in New York and in its off-campus MA Program in TESOL in Tokyo, in cooperation with SIMUL Academy, I have tried to be a teacher for change. And in trying to be a teacher for change, I have tried to remind hundreds of teachers of how much more they are capable of than they had thought. I have tried to remind teachers to look at teaching with a camera, a magnifying glass and a mirror to free themselves.

In the book you are now holding, I have introduced still another optical metaphor: a kaleidoscope. As you can see, we have printed two

opposite designs from a kaleidoscope. The pieces of glass moved as I rotated the kaleidoscope.

The theme of this book is to change your teaching for the same reason: to see a new pattern, to change the activities we are trying in a small way in the same way that a slight turn of a kaleidoscope can alter the pieces of glass to produce a different pattern. Each piece of glass is the same as any element in our teaching. Changing one element, such as asking students to cross out a word with a pencil rather than to erase a word with an eraser, will result in a change in the pattern of our teaching.

Cameras, magnifying glasses, mirrors, kaleidoscopes are four optical metaphors. On the back cover of the book you are holding I have added a fifth optical metaphor: glasses. The large sunglasses that I am wearing on the back cover of this book are another metaphor that reflects

my ideas. By wearing different pairs of glasses, we can see the world in very different ways just as we can see the world differently by using a camera to take different shots and just as we can use a magnifying glass to see details we would miss using our naked eyes and just as we can use

a mirror to see how others reflect our own teaching and just as a slight turn of a kaleidoscope can produce an entirely new pattern with the same basic elements.

Henry David Thoreau, an American author from the 1800s, reminded us that the number of options we each have is as infinite as the

number of radii in a circle. The number of radii that we each are bound by and attached to though is quite finite in our teaching. To expand the range of activities, to be free to do different things, to see the value of stability as well as change, these are the key goals of this book and all my other writings and presentations. To be open to possibilities is the key goal I have had as a teacher for change.

The road less traveled—the classes where there are no teachers for change—might be more difficult, but an alternative road might also be more exhilarating. We cannot know what effects the less traveled road, or the opposite activities will have till we have tried them. As a teacher for change, I have relished the opportunity to be ready, to break rules, to have contrasting conversations, and to try the opposite.

I invite you to be a teacher for change and not only try the opposite, but break some rules and consider having some contrasting conversations! Put on a new pair of glasses, change the patterns of your teaching by rearranging the variables in your teaching just as turning a kaleidoscope rearranges the pieces of glass or produces different patterns.

Enjoy, enjoy.

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Preface to the First Printing of *Try the Opposite*

The purpose of this book is to provide ways to see your teaching differently—to provide you with a means to see teaching in a multifaceted way the same way we are able to see light and colors in a multifaceted way when we look through the lens of a kaleidoscope and simultaneously turn the barrel of the kaleidoscope so that the colored pieces of glass appear in a different way from when we look at them resting at the base of the barrel. As you engage in the analysis of teaching modeled in this book, I hope many facets of your teaching previously not seen will be revealed in the same way that new designs are revealed by turning the barrel of a kaleidoscope.

This book consists of a series of dialogs between the author and a range of teachers, which model a different way of discussing teaching. While the usual dialogs about teaching tend to be general and evaluative and aim to judge teaching practices, those in this book tend to be specific and descriptive and aim to analyze teaching practices. The usual dialogs are often engaged in to control teaching; the dialogs in this book are engaged in to explore our teaching, to free us from

control. Judgments such as “Your classes are boring” are replaced by analytical comments such as “Today, I defined ten words in Japanese and one in English; tomorrow, I will try to define seven in Japanese and four in English and see what happens.” Or, “The students said they failed to understand my directions today when I said them in English. Tomorrow, I will write them in English on the blackboard and see how many say they do not understand. When they specify what parts they do not understand by pointing to the words and phrases or reading them aloud, I will rephrase the parts they indicate.”

Another feature of the usual dialogs we engage in when discussing teaching is their definite nature. “If I am enthusiastic, the students will be interested” is not only definite, but suggests a one-to-one relationship between a practice and its effect. The dialogs in this book attempt to illustrate the tentative nature of our understanding of teaching.

And they illustrate that most effects are caused by a range of practices, not just one. “If we let students guess some words and ignore some and look up some in a bilingual dictionary, then may see a wider range of ways to increase their understanding of words” indicates that the separate practices influence the outcome—understanding. And the three separate practices are connected to the outcome not by a definite word such as *will* but a tentative *one-may*.

Underlying the types of dialogs in this book are a number of assumptions, each with its own implication.

Assumption 1: We don’t know what right teaching or wrong teaching is for all students in all settings with all teachers.

Implications: We cannot defend what we do or attack what others suggest, because that means we know what is always right and wrong to do in teaching. And because we cannot do that, we can experiment and play with our teaching. Being freed from the delusion that there is

something that all agree is right and wrong, we are free to analyze teaching to continue to discover the range of influences alternative practices have.

Assumption 2: Much of our teaching is ritualistic—governed by unconscious rules the same way much of our other behaviour in life is governed by unconscious rules or habits.

Implications: In order to change, we must not only deliberately try alternative practices, but we must also tape record or make videos of our teaching to see and hear what do. Then, we have to listen to the tapes or view them and compare what we did with what we set out to do. We cannot assume that we can change by deciding to try alternative practices, much less by simply reading about alternative practices.

Assumption 3: When we and others use the same word to refer to a practice, it is unlikely that we both have the same practice mind. Conversely, when we each use different words to refer to practices, we cannot assume that the practices are different. Dictation to one might be a listening test to another. Role-play to one may be recitation to another. Drill to some might refer to repetition and to others the memorization of grammar rules.

Implications: Unless we match the words we use with specific examples of the behaviour and practices we refer to with the words, it is unlikely that we will see anything differently. If we do not consider multiple meanings of the same events, we will not be able to see another person's point of view. If we think of a story as relevant to the experiences of our students, we must be able to see ways it may be outside of their interest and thus totally irrelevant.

Assumption 4: Each of us is capable of generating alternative practices

through the observation and analysis of our own teaching, through the observation and analysis of language use outside of classrooms, and through the employment of opposite practices in our own teaching.

Implications: Helpful as prescriptions from those in authority may be, we do not need to depend on others to vary our teaching. As we see and new facets of teaching, we and our peers can incorporate them into our teaching and analyze their consequences. Learning new ways to discuss our teaching can enable us to reshape our teaching based on the ideas we jointly create. A teacher-to-teacher model of teacher preparation can complement the hierarchical model of teacher preparation, so predominant in the world.

Assumption 5: Atrophy is a condition that applies to teaching practices just as it applies to our bodies and other things in nature.

Implications: Whatever practices we follow, over time their impact is reduced just as some medicines such as penicillin affect some bacteria less over time. Consequently, some amount of change in our ways of teaching needs always to be done just as some amount of exercise needs to be constantly performed to slow down atrophy in living things.

As noted earlier, this book consists of a series of dialogs between the author and several teachers. One purpose of the dialog format is to provide examples of alternative ways of discussing teaching. By reading dialogs that show teachers exploring multiple explanations of teaching practices, that show teachers providing examples of practices to match the labels used, that show multiple results of our practices, that are tentative, specific and descriptive rather than definite, general and evaluative, in short, by showing teachers analyzing teaching rather than judging, I hope more teachers will be engaged in alternative discussions of teaching.

Another purpose of the dialog format is to provide an alternative, to be a symbol of the title of the book: *Try the Opposite*. The bulk of the books about teaching, tennis, golf, are in expository format. The author speaks to the reader. You are used to expository writing about

teaching! You have experienced it a great deal already! In these dialogs, you the reader can actively take the part of the author or one of the teachers and actually engage in the types of analysis the book is dedicated to producing.

Notice that as you engage in the dialogs, you will be analyzing, looking at words we use in one way and seeing them mean different things and refer to different practices. Since we are used to being told what is right and wrong in much of the expository writing about teaching, you might forget that the participants in the dialogs in this book are not presenting information, not presenting the correct solutions to problems that are raised, not prescribing the right ways to teach. Rather, like Plato's Socratic dialogs, the participants are illustrating ways to analyze. The participants are modeling the exploration of teaching; they are modeling ways to analyze our teaching, to generate alternative practices so that we can re-analyze what we do. The alternative practices are not presented as better practices. The explanations are not presented as more perceptive explanations. Rather, they are presented as different practices, different explanations. One of the tasks for you as a reader, in fact, will be to generate still other alternative practices and explanations to expand the range discussed in the dialogs the participants engage in.

Still another purpose of the dialog format is to symbolize the fact that analysis and exploration need to be done with others. Rare individuals can of course assume the roles of many people and thus present multiple viewpoints alone. But most of us need to hear others state alternative viewpoints. Even if we assume two or more roles ourselves, though, without discussing with another we have no opportunity to listen to others. And it is through listening to others that we are able to move beyond disagreement to experimenting with another person's point of view. As you will see, the goal of the disagreements in the dialogs in this book is to understand another point of view, not to show how the other point of view is inadequate. Each of us in genuine listening can sometimes actually learn something we did not know before, see something we did not see before. The point of the

disagreements is to rearrange our practices in the same way that turning the barrel of a kaleidoscope rearranges the pieces of glass to form a new range of designs.

From time to time, you'll read comments made in the dialogs by Botchan, Sooseki's turn-of-the-century mathematics teacher. As you recall, Botchan, fresh from school in Tokyo, saw the world of Shikoku very differently from those who had been there for some time. He can be considered a symbol of a person who both sees a new arrangement of pieces of glass in a kaleidoscope and who throws in a few new pieces as well as one who turns the barrel in a range of different ways. In addition to being a symbol of a person ready to both be jarred by and jar the designs in a kaleidoscope, he reminds us of the spontaneity within us all which sometimes we ration more than we wish in our practices. His impulsive nature, reflected in many of his comments, serves as a foil the analytical comments made by the other speakers in the dialogs. Finally, his playful nature reminds us that if we normally discuss our teaching in a serious way, we might be able to see what we do differently and be freer to try alternatives if we sometimes discuss our teaching in a playful way, one of the many opportunities to try the opposite.

At the end of each dialog, you'll notice a request to write some reflections on the dialogs you have just completed and on any teaching practices or observation tasks you have been asked to do. Some of these reflections are totally free—OPEN REFLECTIONS. Others are prescribed—DIRECTED REFLECTIONS.

Those reflections are requested to remind you of the need to act and reflect upon the reading you do. Said another way, this book requires more than reading. It requires action—translating the suggestions in the dialogs into practice—and reflection—analysis and discussion of the practices. Reflection, in our minds or on paper, without action—actually trying the alternative practices or observation tasks—can prevent us from comparing present habitual practices with

alternative practices and applications. And action without reflection—comparing different meanings we attach to the words we use to discuss practices—can distort our perception rather than clarify it. In other words, deeper understanding of alternative practices can come only by reflection based on exploration of alternative meanings of words and on the actions required by alternative practices and observation tasks.

Consider the limited understanding of directions to break an egg if no eggs are actually broken. A parent says to a child “The egg should be hit gently on the bowl to break it.” The child might then say, “I understand. When I break an egg, I have to hit the shell gently.” But when a parent says to a child with an egg and a bowl, “Hit the egg gently on the side of the bowl,” the understanding will be on a different level. Usually, the child feels how hard the shell of the egg is. As the child hits the egg shell on the side of the bowl, often there is hard rather than gentle contact. After consciously hitting a number of eggs against the side of the bowl with different degrees of force, the child alters his/her first understanding of the word *gentle*. To learn how to break the egg gently, the child has to experience breaking the egg with different degrees of force, not just listen to the words. Said another way, the child can only understand the words by integrating the directions—suggested practices—with experience *and* by reflecting on multiple meanings of words. The child needs to act, alter his/her action, compare the consequences, and see the new meanings of words.

The dialogs are divided into three main categories: ATTITUDES, SKILLS, KNOWLEDGE. Language development, like all learning, consists of interaction between our feelings about what we are doing—

ATTITUDES, our ability to do something with what we learn—SKILLS, and the content we learn—KNOWLEDGE. Though the three are closely interrelated, treating them separately enables us to concentrate on each one at a time, which would not be possible if we dealt with them all together. Also, it enables us to realize the interrelationships among the three.

Each category—ATTITUDES, SKILLS, KNOWLEDGE—is in turn made up of dialogs that treat topics teachers frequently discuss, and that are constantly asked about at teacher conferences, and which people write about in books on teaching. For example, it is hard to be in a discussion among teachers without attitudes such as motivation being mentioned or skills such as communicative activities and knowledge such as vocabulary.

The dialogs in each category are further subdivided into segments divided from each other by the Reflections which you are to write either in a separate journal, or in the blank space as you work way through this book. Each segment is meant to be done over the space of a week or so. The reason for emphasizing the need to take at least a week per topic is so that you can do the observation activities suggested, try out the alternative practices and analyze them both, in your reflections, before you move to another segment on the same topic. Each dialog is more likely to have an effect on your view of teaching if done in this way than if read in the same way you read the daily newspaper.

Though the turning of the barrel of a kaleidoscope has been used as a symbol of the range of views of reality available to us, the quick turn of the wrist, which can alter the designs in a kaleidoscope instantaneously, is the exact opposite procedure which this book asks you to follow. To change your view of the reality of teaching, and thus of your life, requires multiple turns of your mind as it explores the multiple meanings of what you do in your teaching.

Perhaps turning our ideas around and changing our practices are more time-consuming than turning the barrel of a kaleidoscope around, but from both activities we are reminded of the fact that the potential variety in the world is not always tapped as much as it can be. The number of different shapes available to us in a kaleidoscope, like the number of different practices available to us, is as infinite as the number of radii in a circle. As a result of your working your way through this book, I hope that the number of radii you use becomes larger, that you are able to expand the practices you engage in, not only continuing to do what you are used to doing but starting to do many things you are not used to doing, and indeed are likely to be the exact opposite.

4274 words

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