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Has Humanistic Teaching had its day?

In his article [A new feeder field for EFL](#), Mario Rinvoluceri suggests the following as a lesson activity:

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Bring a dozen resonant objects to class. Before you lay them out, ask the students to close their eyes. Strike each and ask the students to describe the qualities of each sound and to guess the substances struck.

When I started teaching, the ideas of writers like Rinvoluceri were a breath of fresh air in a stale subject. My first ESL teaching position was in a language school using the Direct Method, where short answers were not allowed in the handbook because students had to practise the structure being taught. This led to students being forced to make unnatural answers and teachers, if they bothered to follow the guidelines, criticising perfectly correct and natural answers and demanding full mechanical sentences. In an environment where the language was bastardised and reduced to brutally simplistic formulas, books like *Grammar Games* were entertaining and refreshing.

In *A Methodologist's Goldmine* (teamagazine), Rinvoluceri describes coming across *On Love and Psychological Exercises*, by A R Orage, Samuel Weiser, 1998 (the book where he found this and other exercises) as akin to finding 'gleaming nuggets of near pure gold' after 'panning for gold in Alaska for three long, freezing years'. He says that they offer 'a marvellous sensation of something fresh, new and exhilaratingly different'. Sadly, they just strike me as rather dated and dull, with no relevance to my teaching environment. They leave me with the feeling that Humanistic language teaching has had its day. I cannot for the life of me see me going into class with a bag full resonant objects to discuss the quality of their pitch and timbre. Nor would I round the lesson off with this as a homework activity:

Between now and our next class, each time you switch a light on or off, please note your state of mind and what you are thinking about. Come to class ready to report.

Rinvolocri is well aware that his ideas might come in for some criticism:

*Perhaps some of you are by now scratching your head and wondering why this article should appear in a serious teacher's magazine. What weird, off-the-wall rubbish.
"I'd never use any of this stuff with my students- they'd think I'd gone barmy and anyway would ask 'what has this got to do with the test next Friday?'"
I sympathise with this viewpoint, in a way, since I am a person with very strong mental gestalten, and I do not like my thinking perturbed by strong, invasionary ideas. However, in my own case, I have often come round to seeing the point of teaching ideas I initially violently opposed.*

Though I respect Mr Rinvolocri and believe he has done much to be admired, and continues to do so; his online magazine [Humanising Language Teaching](#) magazine, which has a refreshingly broad perspective, labours to provide a healthy debate. I do not think of these ideas as wacky and invasionary, just not worth the time and trouble. However, I also find my attitude slightly troubling because the rise of the ESOL curriculum in the UK threatens to take teaching backwards in my opinion. Humanistic language teaching did once offer a bright alternative to drabness, but now that ESOL is sliding back to rigid platitudes, made worse by the ridiculous burden of bureaucracy and the [pseudo-science of its nonsensical labelling system](#), I see a need for something to counter the slide, but do not feel that humanism offers as much as it did fifteen years ago.

For me, teaching has become very exam oriented, which many lament, but I accept it as reflecting the society we live in. My students want to pass exams to get jobs and access higher education. Teaching has to be geared towards that- general English courses are a thing of the past for me, and with this change, I find that I have no enthusiasm for humanism.

I also worry about some of the claims made about it. In *The Jackendoff "Skeptic" on Humanistic Language Teaching* (IATEFL TT SIG Newsletter 3/2000), Jane Arnold looks at questions a critic of affective learning might raise, this being the one that worries me most:

But it is impossible to prove that affective learning is more effective. Humanistic teachers make extravagant claims that can't be backed up by empirical evidence.

A defence against this is that we are 'coming to conceive of research in a broader manner'. This is backed up with a quote from *Affect in the classroom: problems, politics and pragmatics.*(Reid, J. In J. Arnold (ed.) (1999): *Affect in Language Learning*, (Cambridge: CUP):

No longer do we confine the term to work with statistical analyses and empirical methods (although these can, of course, offer valuable insights and information). Instead, teachers are observing, making notes, identifying and testing hypotheses.using informal as well as formal survey instruments to collect information, keeping reflective journals, and sharing ideas orally.

At this point I despair. The scientific process of having a hypothesis, designing a test, with control, to test it, analysing the results and submitting them for peer review is a good one because it creates results that can be objectively verified. Affective learning has been around for a long time now; Moskowitz's *Caring and Sharing in the Foreign Language Class: A Sourcebook on Humanistic Techniques* was published in 1978. That gives enough time to design and test endless hypotheses. If the results are not forthcoming, then redefining the concept of research strikes me as little short of academic nonsense. Tried and tested methods are there because they work, and I am greatly troubled by glib attempts to redefine research to include subjective things that might help a case that cannot be substantiated by objective means.

In the eighties I trained in Suggestopedia with Lonny Gold. the course was electrifying and I tried much of what I learned on the course in my teaching and believe it was a positive influence on my teaching, yet I believe a lot of what Lozanov and others claim is not so much bad science as utter nonsense. The claim that pains me most is the comparison of the division of a suggestopedic lesson with the proportions of the pyramids as a proof as its superiority. When affective learning, and Lozanov is quoted in the text I have been looking at, and attempts to redefine assessment criteria to produce the results desired are made, it is alarming. Affective learning has been around long enough to be tested objectively; if the results are not there, then does it have that much to offer?

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