

# **Like a pebble...**

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This presentation has multiple-focus areas. First, it seeks to give the English teacher a pat on the shoulder, pointing out the invaluable role the English teacher plays in education. The presentation points out what is on the English teacher's plate, the workload, and why it is important for the teacher to *hold on there against all odds*. We further highlight the importance of language as the key to learning, including the challenges experienced with the language of learning and teaching. The crucial leadership role in both the classroom and the school as a whole is highlighted to pronounce on the extent of the teacher's impact on the process of learning as well as the learning institution itself. The presentation also uplifts the role of a teacher which, *like a pebble*, should change the lives of all the learners in their care.



According to Cook (2016), the *pebble in the pond story* is 'just a metaphor about you finding and discovering your true and higher purpose in life.' The story relates and seeks to establish a response to the following questions:

- How far will the ripples of your life's mission expand throughout the pond of the universe?
- How many people will be inspired, touched, and changed for the better because you existed? ...and,
- How will the world be different after you've shared your talents and gifts with us all?

In what seems to be a response to the questions above, Cook (2016) quotes Neal Shusterman, who states that 'When you drop a pebble into a pond, ripples spread out, changing all the water in the pool. The ripples hit the shore and rebound, bumping into one another, breaking each other apart. In some small way, the pond is never the same again.'

The pebble metaphor speaks of the teacher (the pebble) in the classroom (pond). Upon entering the classroom, the teacher, like a pebble, should create *learning ripples* that touch all the learners in the classroom, and change their lives and the learning process. Making a change in learners' lives can only be achieved through leadership, through steering the *learning ship* in the right direction. Learners, who are part of the crew on the ship, should understand and believe in the direction taken by the ship. As stated in the TESOL International Association (2017: p3), 'The language teacher is not simply a transmitter of knowledge; like a coach, the language teacher needs to assist students in understanding the task before them, staying motivated, building discipline, and learning how to pursue the task on their own.' This is the change that will enable the learner to use the knowledge gained from the learning ripples even when the pebble has reached the bottom of the pond.

On the other hand, reference to ripples '...bumping into one another...' subtly foregrounds the involvement of learners in the learning process. By landing in the pond, the teacher leads the learning process (ripples) whose impact can be enhanced by learners being part of the learning process, and not mere recipients and consumers of what the teacher dishes out to them. If learners are not engaging with the subject taught, if they are not able to contextualise it and see it manifest in their own lives, then all efforts add to nothing. This view is succinctly supported in the observation that '...no teacher-designed, one-size-fits-all lesson or program will meet the needs or suit the styles of all of the students in a class. Instead, as much as possible, students need to take charge of their

own learning, choosing goals that fit their needs and strategies that work for them' (TESOL International Association, 2017: p4). To acquire good communication skills or to excel in communication skills, one has to acquire expertise in all the four language skills. Before a student acquires with all these skills, he/she has to develop interest towards the subject or language. In this regard, the English teacher should play a very prominent role in attracting the student's attention by creating interest among the students (Archana & Rani, 2016).

Ashley Lamb-Sinclair (2018)'s reflection on his early teaching years also teaches us against ignoring the learners' participation and input in their learning. According to him, '[T]eenagers like to rebel, be unique, try new things, and are highly impulsive. Because standardized methods of education often leave little room for deviation, teens can lose sight of this trait, or put it to use in less productive ways. I see this impulse that teens have as a hidden gem. It is our job as teachers to help them uncover it.' This suggests that our leadership of the learning process should consider the learners' contexts, their learning styles, and their interests, for the learning process to bear fruits. Our failure to acknowledge the world of the learner will hamper the learning process in a manner similar to a pebble dropped on the frozen pond. Nelson Mandela also advises that '[A] good leader can engage in a debate frankly and thoroughly, knowing that at the end he and the other side must be closer, and thus emerge stronger. You don't have that idea when you are arrogant, superficial, and uninformed.' Mandela teaches, in this quotation, that if we and learners cannot engage and thus come closer in the learning process, we will end up with a learning process in which the envisaged learner would not have learnt from the process.

According to Harrison and Killion (2007), the ways teachers can lead are as varied as teachers themselves. This view rings truer for the English teacher whose leadership includes support to school and student success. With English being the Language of Learning and Teaching (LoLT) for the majority of learners in South Africa, the English teachers not only lead learners in the classroom, but also serve as leaders among their peers. They are looked up to excite learners through debates, reading and writing, among others, in order to conquer the learning process. The English teacher is looked up to inspire learners to step up, to challenge issues, to develop the 4Cs, viz. critical thinking, creative thinking, collaboration and communication, among others, as envisaged of learners in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

## 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills



Brad Henry believes in us to carry the mandate of creating a spark and eagerness to learn, for according to him, 'a good teacher can inspire hope, ignite the imagination, and instil a love of learning.' This view is echoed in Albert Einstein's conviction that 'it is the supreme art of the teacher to awaken joy in creative expression and knowledge.'

In order to meet the expectations cited above, Tom Keller (2011) suggests the following roles for the English teacher:

- *Controller*: The teacher organises the classroom and is in full control of what is going on in the classroom.
- *Assessor*: The teacher assesses the students by subjecting them to tasks, correct them and give feedback on their performance and further development.
- *Manager*: Good organization is a key factor in planning. The teacher manages the learning process. Although the teacher is in control, learners may be brought in as collaborators in the learning process.
- *Resource*: The teacher provides additional information or simply talks to learners, providing the resource of spoken language. The teacher expands the resource materials beyond textbooks and prescribed network.
- *Participant*: To increase the effectiveness of learning it is sometimes necessary to act with the students on the same level as a participant.
- *Investigator*: In what could be seen as reflective development, the teacher analyses the way of teaching, observes what is going on in the classroom and investigates the ways students learn, with the aim to develop his/her methods of teaching.

The literature on teachers as leaders adds other roles, for example, a guide, a learner and a facilitator. Teachers are also expected to be catalysts for change, visionaries who are 'never content with the status quo but rather always looking for a better way' (Larner, 2004, p. 32). Teachers who take on the catalyst role feel secure in their own work and have a strong commitment to continual improvement. They pose questions to generate analysis of student learning and how it can be improved further all the time.

The learning community looks up to the English teacher to inspire learners to aspire greatness through their achievement in learning. Upon dropping into the pond, the ripples the teacher creates should touch and excite all the learners the teacher is entrusted, equally. In collaborating with learners in the learning pond, the learning ripples should bump into one another in a learning frenzy as the teacher, the pebble, wet the learners' appetite to learn more.

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