

Innovation Precipitating a Revival for Educational Survival: One South African Teacher's Perspective in English Home Language Education

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This paper/article highlights the constant need for innovation in the educational arena especially for the English Home language teacher. The paper presumes that the conformity to innovate is complex and dynamic. Innovation is at a certain moment in time and in a given situation, a composite configuration that may not always be understood. Innovation is context bound and is a product of many personal and professional factors that interact and influence each other. Innovation is often a process of trial and error.

Introduction: To Survive and Thrive in English Home Language Teaching

The truth is that our finest moments are most likely to occur when we are feeling deeply uncomfortable, unhappy, or unfulfilled. For it is only in such moments, propelled by our discomfort, that we are likely to step out of our ruts and start searching for different ways or truer answers.

M. Scott Peck, *The Road Less Travelled* (1978)

In this paper, I hope to convey the importance of innovation for English Home language teachers in South Africa. At the outset, I wish to assert that I am well aware that innovation is context specific. Furthermore, I hope to activate an awareness so that teachers can develop an appetite for innovation in the classroom in their own context. I hope that the content in this paper will stimulate further advancements on innovation.

When something unusual happens in class or a different method is used in teaching, the brain activity increases in the amygdala (Dutton, 2010). This is the brain's emotion centre and the 'novelty' detector. It is imperative that all South African teachers know that the brain longs for a novelty. The brain does not "pay attention to boring things" (Medina, 2008: 93). The condition of teaching in South Africa would change drastically if all teachers acted on this principle because teachers themselves do not like boring things.

In order to face the 21st century prospects, teachers in South Africa need to from time to time depart from the ideas and pedagogies of old and become bold promoters of a common frontier that develops the correct learning outlook needed for the learners of South Africa. Pink (2005) argued that the 21st century will be dominated by a different way of knowing, being, and doing, and right-brain capacities will come increasingly to the fore. Reeves (2004: 6) called for the accountability of teachers to look at their professional capacity and their role on student achievement. Changes are paramount and are a frontier of necessity—it is a frontier for innovation for teachers.

Innovation: The Heart of Evaluation

There are two kinds of people in the world: those who brighten the room when they enter, and those who brighten the room when they leave.

Unknown

Good teaching matters and teacher quality has enormous impact on the academic achievement of students (Hall et al. 2014: 101). The term 'innovation' received a lot of attention in the 1980s. The 1986 Ministerial Conference in Singapore entitled 'Innovation for Development' made particular references to the process of bringing about certain fundamental and pervasive transformations in motivations, attitudes, habits and modes of thought and work (Unesco, 1990: 12). Furthermore, Stoller's (1994: 200-327) study of innovation in language programmes provided a possible way of bridging the gap between the teacher and the learner. I hope this segment on innovation will bring a possible revival so that more researchers can highlight the need for innovation.

Innovation in this paper refers to the use of different (contemporary or forgotten) methods of teaching. Innovation also refers to the new ways of stimulating alternatives in teaching English Home Language. Miles (1964: 36) describes innovation as 'a deliberate, novel, specific change which is thought to be more efficacious in accomplishing the goals for a system'. Nicholls (1983 : 4) speaks of innovation as 'an idea, object or practice perceived as new by an individual or individuals, which is intended to bring about improvement in relation to desired objectives.' Innovative teaching methods can be new to a specific context that can meet the needs of struggling learners as well as also being fruitful for the entire class. The promotion of innovative methods of teaching can have a significant effect on altering the existing patterns of behaviour of a group or individual (Johnson, 2011). Innovative ideas often occur in response to particular problems in the classroom. This could include 'out-of-the box' teaching methods.

Innovation is an essential skill for sustaining the health of our global economy. Much of the blame for a lack of teacher creativity, and therefore innovation, can be traced to our traditional educational systems and its addiction to its unprogressively spirit and modalities. Many teachers rely on teaching to the correct answer comprehension method. Teaching in the classroom using chalk and talk is one method that can hinder certain aspects in the learning process. Teachers often continuously talk for long periods without calling for students' response and feedback.

Innovation and Out of the Box Teaching Methods: There is Always Room for Creativity

We are each given the same twenty-four hours each day. How we choose to spend our time makes the difference between success and failure.

Kenneth Brodeur

Creativity does not always have to be something big. Simple methods like seating of the learners can be innovative (Johnson, 2011: 52). Classrooms are complex, tightly populated social structures (Hall et al. 2014: 367). Teachers should strive to make education a personal experience for each student. A teacher must be able to show the learners why the content of their work is relevant to their lives. This skill is a necessity and as teachers, we must develop it. Developing a definitive skill allows a teacher to be creative and innovative.

As Scholes echoes that “there is always room for creativity in any discursive order but it is attained by mastering the practice of the discourse to a degree that enables new utterances to be formed, which in turn become a part of the body of discursive models and finally effect changes in the code itself” (Scholes, 1985). Role-play and drama provide a great opportunity to be creative and innovative. Teaching strategies using drama and role-play can allow students to experience tough real-life problems in a controlled environment (Hall et al. 2014: 397).

Covering the curriculum is not the only form of teaching. A teacher can bring many other creative aspects into the classroom. This level of teaching could refer to some unusual methods of teaching in a given context. Doing some things differently can help learners overcome traditional boredom. What students take away from a successful education usually centres on a personal connection with a teacher who instilled passion and inspiration for their particular subject.

Innovation and the English Home Language Classroom

The greatest discovery of my generation is that a human being can alter his life by altering his attitude.

William James

I am always intrigued to explore the practical connections between teachers’ pedagogy (method of innovation) and students’ performance as well as their response to different creative methods of teaching in the classroom. It is what teachers think, what teachers believe, and what teachers do at the level of their classroom that ultimately shapes the kind of learning that young people attempt (Hargreaves, 1994). Self-reflective teachers continually examine their sociocultural and linguistic attitudes rooted in their own personal experiences (Glasgow, McNary and Hicks, 2006). In doing this, they see themselves as lifelong learners and on that basis, they will continually search for innovative ways to meet their learner needs and difficulties. The innovative teaching methods then will serve as a catalyst for revamping teaching methods and serve as an invitation for new classroom experience whether it is in or out of the classroom. This, I believe can lay the groundwork for using the methodologies in the service of nation building and promotion of educational empowerment via the teaching of English in the new South Africa.

When we change a learner's thinking pattern, we change their behaviour as well as their brain in effect (Jenkins, 2012). Just as generational poverty can change a child's life and brain (Jensen, 2009: 6) so can a more stimulating method of teaching transform a learner (Thurston, 2009). New teaching strategies for quality teaching and learning can become easily understandable criteria for a changing world.

Innovations and Blueprints from the Past: Looking Forward Understanding Backwards

There is no doubt that creativity is the most important human resource of all. Without creativity, there would be no progress, and we would be forever repeating the same patterns.

Edward de Bono

There are many aspects that are wrong with teaching in South Africa (Jansen, 2014: 9). However, there is another side to our educational crisis and that is the ability of some teachers to be so creative as to grab the 'students' by their brains. Often those teachers are overshadowed/engulfed by the problematic areas in the education system of South Africa. This paper therefore highlights some individual attempts by teachers who demonstrate the power of their creativity and teaching method within the classroom.

In his book entitled, "Great South African Teachers", Jansen (2014) paints a vivid picture of the power of teachers and their everlasting impact on learners' lives through their creative capacity in and out of the classroom. Quite a few teachers surface in the book that emphasizes the fact that English Home Language teachers have an avenue for innovation and creativity.

Innovation and Professional Development: An Important Commodity

I shall become a master in this art only after a great deal of practice.

Erich Fromm

According to Richards & Renandya (2003: 388), a professional is someone whose work involves performing a certain function with some degree of expertise (skill). The National Education Evaluation and Unit (Needu) report of 2013 recommended that programmes should be urgently developed for reading, literacy, and English Language proficiency

(Needu, 2012: 24). In principle, the NEEDU report calls for different pedagogical techniques for particular topics, especially the teaching of reading (Needu, 2012: 24). This signalled the need for innovation and creativity. The teacher support and development programme is envisioned to recover the capability of teachers to ensure successful teaching and learning of language (Western Cape Education Department, 2006).

Hargreaves & Fullan (1992: ix), affirm that the teacher is the ultimate key to educational change and school improvement. Therefore, it is important that professional development become a top priority for South African teachers.

Historically the majority of teachers currently teaching in underprivileged classrooms were themselves the victims of inferior training at both school and tertiary level (WCED, 2006). South African teachers should constantly develop their knowledge of their subject matter and their knowledge of pedagogy and learner environment in order to be ready to ‘switch’ to something different (innovative) to help their learners. I would now like to address a fundamental question, which in my opinion has been given little attention.

Innovation: Threat or Treat

I can't understand why people are frightened of new ideas. I'm frightened of the old ones.

John Cage

Prabhu (1987: 105) demonstrates the threatening dilemma of innovation when he states that a new perception in pedagogy, implies a different pattern of classroom activity and this results as an intruder into teachers' mental frames—a threat to prevailing routines. As humans, we love to remain in our own little ‘comfort zones’ but often pressure is the driving force to deliver some wonderful innovative ideas.

However, the success of an innovation will also depend on the personality and qualities of individual teachers (Candlin & Mercer, 2001: 61). Innovation can be a ‘medicinal treatment’ for individual problems that are present within the English language curriculum. Innovation shows the beauty and the art of teaching. Teachers are therefore the intermediary between changes and innovations. Therefore, a thorough understanding of the bases of teaching and the functionality of the teacher is essential as a prelude to innovation.

Teaching: An Art that Must not be Lost

The quality of a country's education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers.

Michael Barber and Mona Morshed (2007)

Today many teachers do not teach; they merely earn a salary. South African children, on average, receive instruction for only about 40% of their time in the classroom (Jansen & Blank, 2014: 31). However many teachers need to realize that they have so much potential. Ironically, often the people who have the title of the term 'teacher' do not really know what a 'teacher' is or should be. Surprisingly, even dictionaries offer a rather low-key definition. The Oxford South School Dictionary (2011) says that a teacher is "a person whose job is to teach." The Cambridge International Dictionary of English (2006) says, "teaching means to give knowledge or to instruct or train someone." These two views are rather limited (weak) and do not express the beauty of being a teacher.

If South Africa is ever going to improve in the educational arena then the art of teaching must never be lost. As Wiliam (2010) states schools should get teachers to think their way into new ways of acting in the classroom. The following segment highlights some important principles of teaching.

Teaching: A Miracle in Your Hands: You are the Innovator

Some people use things; they destroy. You're a creator, a builder.

Amelia Atwater

Teaching multiplies the scope and stimulation needed by learners (Cassiem, 2015: 123). It is important to be reminded that the quality of a country's education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers (Beere, 2014: 1). The power of a teacher we cannot undervalue in the life of a learner. Teaching is wonderful, influential, and above all miraculous. Johnson (2011: 7) asserts, "teaching is the most wonderful profession in the world. As a teacher, you make a direct, tangible contribution to the future of our country and the world by helping young people acquire knowledge and skills. You know that you are spending your life in an

honourable pursuit and that your life has a purpose.” In a traditional high school, a language teacher is a purveyor of subject matter but the teacher is also a transmitter of love, ethics, and a motivator of souls.

Teaching: Forgotten or Neglected Components

To live a creative life, we must lose our fear of being wrong.

Joseph Chilton Pierce

I am aware that there are many good teachers in South Africa and they love their profession. They follow a set of principles to maximize their passion and take their students to the highest peak. Sadly, there are also teachers who do the exact opposite and many of them forget or neglect certain components of being a teacher.

The teacher is a creation of her/his own assiduousness in seeking fresh ideas, examining them for implementation, and applying them to their own condition or situation. Often teachers just need a push and a helping hand to start a process that could inject a ‘new’ vision and purpose.

Innovations and Buried Components

A man may die, nations may rise and fall, but an idea lives on.

John F. Kennedy

The innovative nature of teacher productivity lends itself to critique. However, the creative nature of a teacher should be viewed as evolutionary because during the process of teacher’s career you discover the components that work or do not work in the classroom. Innovation lends itself to a number of components in the education arena. In order to look forward we often have to look back. These components can allow us to realize the different levels of problematic areas that can contribute to levels of improvements. There will always be a need for schools to ensure that learners receive an exciting curriculum filled with a range of variety to captivate the students. It is therefore significant to identify some components as a measure in order to improve and enhance learner capability in and out of the classroom.

I believe that four components are often overlooked because they appear to be so simple or hidden right in front of our eyes. The value of components in education can either expose or complement the process of learning for the learner. This can be helpful in channelling a path to follow for new discoveries in teaching.

Component One: Developing learning that is Irresistible

The difficulty lies not so much in developing new ideas as in escaping from old ones.

John Maynard Keynes

Schools that find laughter typically succeed (Waters, 2013: 328). A major challenge for the 21st century schools in South Africa is to make “learning irresistible” (Waters, 2013: 290). It is often said “anyone who knows his subject can teach it” (Shipley, 1964: 20).

This however can be misleading, as I have seen on a number of occasions in various schools. It is important that we include subject matter that the learners appreciate and enjoy. It is not something we must do all the time but it will lighten the burden of the attention span of the learner in or out of the classroom. Some student-centred activities in your arsenal will give learners ownership of their own creative expression when sharing with their friends in class.

At this stage, I will like to reiterate what I said at the beginning because it does deserve repeating. We must remember when something unusual happens in class or a different method is used in teaching, the brain activity increases in the amygdala (Dutton, 2010). This is the brain’s emotion centre and the ‘novelty’ detector. It is imperative that all South African teachers know that the brain longs for a novelty. The brain does not “pay attention to boring things” (Medina, 2008: 93). The condition of teaching in South Africa would change drastically if all teachers acted on this principle because teachers themselves do not like boring things.

Component Two: The Possible Danger of a 50-minute Period

A truly creative person rids him or herself of all self-imposed limitations.

Gerald G. Jampolsky

It is hardly thought of but if the 50-minute period is not utilised correctly then you can lose the learners' attention span after 10 minutes in the lesson already. It is my informed opinion that often at high schools many learners learn for 25 minutes in a 50-minute period. Audiences check out after 10 minutes but you can keep grabbing them back by telling narratives or creating events rich in emotion (Medina, 2008: 94). The above opinion is context-bound.

You can create your own 'attention grabbers' in the classroom which can range from soccer, music, and certain movies. I refer this to as a 'hook' in order to pull your learners back into work mode. I have found this very important in the language classroom. What you choose to grab your students' brains with will depend on your subject, your personality, and your students (Johnson, 2011: 98). As part of your practice, it is helpful to understand how emotion, stress, rewards and movement affect memory, attention, motivation and learning (Jensen, 1998).

Component Three: Infiltration through Motivation

Pressure can burst a pipe, or pressure can make a diamond.

Robert Horry

It is accepted for most fields of learning that motivation is essential to success (Harmer, 2003: 51). It is important that we know and believe that every child has the potential to succeed—if only we can find the right way—is the principle that will help you make the most difference (Beere, 2014: 54). Effective motivation is achieved through children's interest, problems and their deep passions. Brown (2000: 160-166) defines motivation as the need for exploration, activity, stimulation, new knowledge, and ego enhancement. It is important for the teacher to know how to 'sell' their learning area (English Home Language) because many teachers do not know how to look after their subject. Many learners in the 21st century in the South African classroom are multi-lingual so it is vital to present the learning area in a way that is appealing and caring. Candlin & Mercer (2001: 34) stress that motivation is affected by the social dynamic or power relationship between the languages.

It is the general assumption that motivated students are the ones who participate actively in the classroom and study a great deal but for the researcher this is not the whole truth. There are A number of learners who do not necessarily show their inclination in the subject openly but silently they are moved to strive for their own glory in the learning area because they were motivated. Often at the start of a lesson, the aspect of motivation can be crucial. Twenty-seven years ago Crookes and Schmidt (1991: 469) pointed to the fact that at “the opening stages of lessons (and within transitions), it has been observed that remarks teachers make about forthcoming activities can lead to higher levels of interest on the parts of students.” The art of motivation is practiced in South African schools. However, it is time that we widen the scope to reach every school.

Component Four: The Wealth of your Health

Health helps mental wealth.

Mark Frank

Irony abounds when you see so many police officers who instil the law but are overweight. This analogy is comparable with/to teaching. South Africa has the highest overweight and obesity rate in sub-Saharan Africa (iol.co.za). Fifty-six percentage of adult women and 29% of adult men are either overweight or obese (South African Journal of Education, 2014).

Teaching can deliver immense satisfaction. However, it is also hard work. As a teacher, you are always accountable and the teaching profession is always subjected to new demands. In the South African context teachers really eat a lot and this affects overall life. Many teachers are overweight and this has a direct impact on their performance in the classroom. Furthermore of interest is the fact the *Daily Mail* in the United Kingdom reported that new research has revealed that receptionist and teachers are the most likely to be overweight (www.technogym.com).

Often as teachers, we criticise our learners for their health and weight, however, they neglect their own health. South African teachers need to consider the health, which will be a benefit to their teaching practice concerning good productive teaching. In 2014, the Newspaper of the Western Cape Education Department published an article entitled, ‘Commit to your

health in 2014' signalling the Departments awareness of the possible dangers of overweight teachers.

Implications: The Need for Flexibility

According to Maxwell (2017: 128) flexibility is the ability to produce many different ideas so that there is an abundance of possible solutions. Therefore, this paper brings out an awareness of the importance of innovation. Innovation does have the potential to bring out the various teaching classroom activities that would highlight the spirit of creativity. Changes in the educational arena do create a vacuum, which can introduce innovations that can lead to some solutions to potential problems in the English Home language classroom.

It is important to note that the synergy between difficulties, changes and innovations present the flow of progression in almost any sphere and particularly in the arena of education.

Conclusion: Moving Forward

Resolve to be a master of change rather than a victim of change.

Brian Tracy, best-selling author, speaker

In South Africa, the barriers that high school learners face will shift literacy practices and create the opportunity for new or forgotten methods of teaching to appear or develop. With the continuing development of innovations by various teachers in South Africa, it keeps this a rich field of inquiry. By adding the theoretical lens of new or forgotten teaching practices to this study of innovation in the classroom, we can harness a level of experiments to see the impact of different innovations in different communities or different classrooms. This could pave a path so that we can move forward in our attempt to improve the outcomes of learners input in the classroom and therefore to give them as much as they need to face the world when they leave school.

Hattie (2009) believes quality classroom teaching has the most influence on fruitful outcomes for learners. Therefore, it is important to investigate teachers' experiences. For the research community it will help us gain a deeper understanding of the ways to teach learners in South

Africa in the 21st century. The following lines echo the innovative nature that exists in all of us:

A bird sitting on a tree is never afraid of the branch breaking because her trust is not on the branch but on its wings. Always believe in yourself.

Unknown

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