

Coral Gardens and Classroom Ecology

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In the context of the “post-method condition” (Kumaravadivelu, 1994) open season has been declared on our conceptions of the language classroom and its processes, with metaphors drawn from ecological discussion and even chaos theory coming to prominence (Kramsch, 2002). I have been interested for a while in the question of what new spaces this discussion might open up for examination of the role of spirituality in the language classroom. A recent conference presentation drew my attention back to an influential 1985 article by Michael Breen in which he proposes that we think of classrooms as *coral gardens*.

Breen begins by identifying the dominant metaphors for the classroom in mainstream second language acquisition research. He says that these have been twofold: the classroom as laboratory and the classroom as discourse (Breen 1985). The first is clearly rooted in the technical tradition identified above and implies, in Breen’s words, the “teacher as surrogate experimental psychologist and learners as subject to particular input treatments or behavioural reinforcement” (Breen 1985, p.137). The second focuses on classroom discourse, studying transcripts of the utterances of teachers and learners in order to arrive at conclusions concerning the nature of classroom interactions. This image appears more socially oriented, but Breen argues that it is still overly reliant on externally observable data and neglects what he calls the “existential and experiential significance” of classroom events for those taking part (Breen 1985, p.140). A brief example may help to make his point clear: what shows up in a transcript of classroom discourse may be a request for information on the part of a student and an answer from the teacher providing the information. These utterances may, however, have been experienced by the student as a diversionary tactic, an attempt to waste time by getting the teacher off track, and by the teacher as a bluff, an uncomfortable glossing over of difficult aspects of a question concerning which the teacher does not feel

competent by providing limited information to keep the student quiet. Thus, Breen argues, a focus on discourse may promote the same deterministic view of learning as a focus on technique if we assume that discourse straightforwardly reflects or controls the learning that is happening. (Breen 1985, p.141)

Breen proposes as an addition and corrective to these two dominant metaphors the metaphor of the classroom as a *coral garden* (a suggestion picked up by others: Burns 1992; de Courcey 2003). We could easily take this as another Romantic appeal to nature imagery and the call of the wild as a way of expressing reactionary resistance to technological reductionism—but Breen explicitly urges that such is not his intent (Breen, 1985, p.153). In fact, Breen’s suggested metaphor is a conscious allusion to a prior text, and this prior text shapes its meaning. It appeals to social anthropology and is rooted specifically in Malinowski’s classic studies of Trobriand island cultures as described in his two volume work *Coral Gardens and their Magic* (Malinowski 1935). Malinowski sought to describe complex Trobriand gardening practices and the role that they played in social organization in a way that reflected the islanders’ own insider understandings of these practices. He therefore devoted considerable attention to the various spells and incantations associated with various aspects of gardening in an attempt to understand the gardening practices not simply in economic terms as a means of food production but in terms of their subjective meaning for those participating. As Malinowski himself put it, he was concerned with tracing the relationship between “rationally founded and technically effective work on the one hand, and magic on the other” (Malinowski 1935 vol. 1, p. x). He emphasized the need to take into account not only abstract and observable social structures but also the subjective dynamics of islander practices, what he calls their “spiritual preoccupations.” He cautioned specifically that not even linguistic evidence can be assumed to offer a direct reflection of mental states (Malinowski 1935 vol. 1, p. x; vol 2, p. 7)—the verbal content of an incantation may, for instance, be at variance with an islander’s account of why it works.

To view the classroom as a coral garden is therefore, in Breen’s sense, to view it as an exotic culture co-constructed by its participants and calling for a form of investigation rooted in anthropological humility. The classroom is to be approached as a culture that is unfamiliar and cannot be adequately understood by outside behavioral observation—we should not assume that we understand what we are seeing when we observe classroom events. Teaching and learning, like gardening, are social practices bound

up with a complex web of perceptions, beliefs and values that are often hard to decipher from surface appearances, and participants may not understand events in the same way as observers. It is, Breen notes, “a truism of social anthropology that no human social institutions or relationships can be adequately understood unless account is taken of the expectations, values, and beliefs that they engage.” (136) The language classroom, he argues, will not be understood without similar sensitivity to expectations, values and beliefs as they enter into the formation of a particular classroom culture. Input, output and linguistic processing are therefore not an adequate basis for understanding language education.

Breen illustrates his contention by outlining various relevant features of classroom culture, including the ways in which teacher and learner expectations affect the negotiation of teacher-student relationships in the classroom, the making of judgments about “good” and “bad” teachers and learners, the formation of a particular group psyche in a particular class, the related resistance to innovation in a particular class once social equilibrium is established, and varying individual interpretations of classroom events. In keeping with his social anthropological model, Breen presents his account as purely descriptive, not entering into value judgments concerning the classroom culture but seeking simply to describe its dynamics (Breen 1985, p.149).

Like more recent discussions of classroom ecology, the coral gardens metaphor implies open-ended attentiveness to a wide and unpredictable range of human factors. Another point of commonality between Breen’s account and more recent discussion is that the possibility that specifically spiritual and ethical aspects of teacher and student experience and identity might play a relevant role is present in principle, but is not explicitly explored. This would seem to invite further exploration: perhaps teachers and students, like Trobriand islanders, have “spiritual preoccupations” that affect their negotiation of classroom processes, their judgments about good and bad teachers, their resistance to certain aspects of teaching and learning, and so on.

A few years ago, in an intermediate German class, I had my students read the passage from Deuteronomy that begins “Hear, O Israel” in German (Deut. 6:4). I commented briefly that hearing is the opposite of autonomy and basic to Israel’s identity, and that one of my aims for my German students was that they should learn to *hear* others who do not speak their language. There has been a big emphasis on speaking and getting your message across, I told my students, in recent language education, but you are not in my class just so that you can bless more of the world

with your opinions. You are here to learn to hear what others want and need to say to you. I said this, moved on, and forgot all about it. Over a year later I received a phone call from Matthew, a student who had been in that class and was now bursting with excitement. He was in Germany, studying for a semester in Marburg. That morning he had boarded a bus, sat down next to a German man, and noticed that he seemed dejected. He started a conversation and discovered that the man had just lost his job. "I remembered what you said in class," Matthew said (What did I say in class? I wondered), "about hearing people instead of just speaking, and I just listened to him for three quarters of an hour. By the end he seemed really relieved to have been able to talk to someone about it. I offered some words of encouragement, and he thanked me for listening. I just got home and I had to call you."

There are, perhaps, more pedagogically interesting examples, but this simple instance of saying something one day in class that had effects in a different year and on a different continent illustrates some of Breen's points. This is not a case of repeatable technique—I don't know of any teaching trick that will consistently cause American students to go to Germany and choose to listen to and console unemployed Germans. The result did, however, follow from a conscious choice of text, carefully chosen words to my class, and indirectly from long reflection on the spiritual and moral dimensions of language learning. As Breen noted, observation of classroom behavior would have offered few clues to what was going on in Matthew (I have no recollection of any unusually eager posture or specific comment), as he took a particular teacher utterance to heart and made it part of his own discipleship.

This seems like a classic example of the kind of thing that technological approaches to teaching (teaching as efficient method) will miss and that ecological approaches could allow for. If a language classroom is a particular ecology in which beliefs, values and relational ethics have their effects in the co-construction of a culture that mediates the significance of learning, then issues are raised that take us beyond the bounds of Breen's coral gardens. Breen's picture is doggedly descriptive, inheriting the anthropologist's reluctance to make normative judgments—the classroom ecology just is what it is. But if our teaching is interacting with students' beliefs, spiritual preoccupations, and sense of self, then normative questions cannot be far away: what kinds of formation are going on amid the language acquisition? Changing our images of classrooms might help us to see such questions, and the realities to which they point us, more clearly.