

# The Confidence Trick

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Confidence counts for a lot, as tricksters know.

I was recently at an Asian university in a team of consultants led by Prof John Biggs of 'constructive alignment' fame. We were employed to help redesign their programmes according to Biggs' principles of 'outcome-based teaching and learning' (OBTL) (Biggs and Tang, 2007). Before arriving I had been invited to run a staff seminar for the department in which I would be based. It would be held on my first real working day there. The title I chose, *Do's and don'ts of OBTL*, was one of two suggested to me by the Head of Department.

How to tackle the topic? An orthodox approach would have been to give a PowerPoint presentation containing lots of tips, followed by a discussion. This was very much what departmental staff expected, as I discovered. In the twenty minutes before the seminar, no fewer than six people offered to help me set up a computer and data projector. Clearly, a classroom session must use PowerPoint! "No thanks. I'm fine", I kept saying with a smile, as politeness turned to amusement.

So what was the plan to which I clung resolutely? I had decided to interpret the title liberally and attempt a living demonstration of OBTL. The design was deliberately interactive and avoided the use of computers in the classroom, despite the fact that my special interest is in technology-enhanced learning. Conceptually, the 90-minute workshop was to be 'a wheel within a wheel' executed 'live', i.e. with nothing more than a skeleton plan and the intention of responding to the participants. Hence we would: discuss aims; negotiate session 'intended learning outcomes'; consider appropriate teaching and learning activities (TLAs); devise suitable assessment tasks and criteria; carry out the TLAs; assess demonstrations of achievement; reflect on our achievements; briefly air some implications for the future.

Ambitious, you might think, especially as I would still be jet-lagged and meeting (perhaps sceptical) strangers from a different culture. But I like a challenge, and these days I feel I can cope with most things at work. So, live demo it was, making it up as we went along.

The extra, unanticipated, twist was that shortly before the session John Biggs would ask me if he could attend. "Yes, of course". Hence I would be leading a largely unscripted workshop, with unfamiliar participants, demonstrating Biggs' approach *in his presence*. As we sarcastically say in the UK, 'No pressure there, then'.

How did it go? It wasn't perfect, but it went well. Actually, better than well. Indeed modesty forbids me to say just how well, or to repeat most of John's highly complimentary comments. But he did use the words "brave and effective".

The point of this tale is not to blow my own trumpet. It's to illustrate the importance of confidence in the classroom. A less confident person might have planned from the outset a conventional 'PowerPoint plus discussion'. One might, in the twenty minutes before the session, have hastily knocked together a few slides and scribbled down some questions for debate. One might have attempted to deflect an expert of world renown from witnessing a highly experimental treatment of his work – or feigned illness. A less confident person would have trimmed the sails when clouds of doubt loomed amongst the participants. Yet the 'trick' worked.

Where did my classroom confidence come from? Obviously, 31 years as a university teacher counts for something. However, had I received the same invitation after 'only' 25 years teaching, I wouldn't have opted for such a risky route, even if I had been as familiar as I now am with the subject material. Whence the difference? My UK National Teaching Fellowship, obtained six years ago. The award gave a huge boost to my confidence with learners. These days I'm more willing to try new activities and not worry about failure as much as I used to. Audiences are usually prepared to go along with me. The experiments don't always work, yet that's OK. Nobody dies, well not very often.

Long live teaching awards!

### **Reference**

Biggs, J. and Tang, C. (2007) *Teaching for Quality Learning at University* (3<sup>rd</sup> edition), Maidenhead, Open University Press.