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# Teaching and learning issues

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## Reflecting on learning

**Pressing the 'pause button' so that learners can consider their progress.**

Last year, an external expert on teaching and learning visited over 400 classes at City Lit as part of a training exercise for our observation team.

So we asked her for any thoughts on our strengths and weaknesses. She was very complimentary about much of what she observed: *Learners supporting each other really well; great teamwork; high levels of interest and enthusiasm; genuine learner appreciation for their courses; some great progress being made, learners being challenged well, and often, very productive classes.*

However she did ask a question about our classes based on most of the classes she visited:

*When do our learners reflect upon and evaluate their learning and progress? To what extent do our learners have Dedicated Improvement and Reflection Time (DIRT) to accelerate, punctuate and consolidate their learning in class?*

DIRT (sic) is an acronym for a growing practice in schools that we could perhaps adapt for adults. School teachers give their pupils space each week to review any feedback they have had on their work, ask questions and set goals for themselves. As a result, its advocates say, pupils make more use of the feedback they receive from their



teacher, embed their learning better and improve faster.

As teachers of adults, how can we adapt this strategy for our learners? Do we regularly plan time on our courses to enable learners to reflect on their progress and set goals for improvement? Would this enable them to fully take on board our feedback? Would this lead to more accelerated learning?

In this issue, we will look at some ideas to encourage reflection, both during the course and at the end.

### **Fostering reflection during a course**

Obviously the time we can spend on reflection will depend on our subject. If we have 40 learners on a lecture course we will need a different strategy to those of us teaching a language class of 12. Below are a range of ideas from teachers at City Lit on things to do during a course:

## What's the theory?

You may remember Kolb's experiential learning cycle from your time in teacher training. The cycle is below. Kolb said that in order to learn we need to go through each stage of this cycle.



The cycle starts with an experience - this can be a task, some input and discussion, or a project. The learner then reflects on their learning, and on any feedback, concludes how to adjust, then plans to repeat the task or activity taking on board what they have learned. The next time they do the task they improve. They go on getting better and better as they go round the cycle.

The most common difficulty is that learners get stuck at the concrete experience stage. They fail to pause for review and reflection on what they have learned, or plan how they will improve next time. They repeat the same mistakes over and over again without learning, or take longer to learn than they need.

Supposing you are learning an aspect of garden design. You have to do a layout for a garden. You arrive at a planting you like - it's great! The teacher points out that you have not considered sufficiently the problems of the impact of a tree in your garden. It's going to mean the ground is shaded and dry underneath. So you need to choose different plants that will survive these conditions. You go on to design another garden. You get carried away again and forget to adjust for trees.

The difficulty is that you have not fully reflected on your experience of the first garden design and reached conclusions on what to try next time. You have got stuck at the 'experience' stage of the cycle. You have not gone round all the stages and you have not yet learned.

### 3 question reflection

This can be a simple exercise set by the tutor at the end of a session every 2 or 3 weeks. What have learners learned? What questions do they have? What would they like to practise more or get right next time?

Learners can tell this to a partner, or write on

post it notes and put on the wall. Or, the tutor could regularly provide a standard sheet to complete with prompt questions.

### Other regular ways of reflecting and setting goals

In some subjects, it is standard practice to have a **closing circle at the end of a session** where

students reflect on their learning. (This does not have to be every week.)

On stammering courses, students, in pairs, **set SMART goals for themselves at the end of a session** for a strategy they will try that week, then there is a **check in at the start of the next session** where they feedback on how it went.

In drama courses, it is standard to give **peer feedback** on performances. In some arts subjects, tutors use '**group crits**' regularly: students show their work and the class and tutor help them reflect on what they have done.

### **Write your own exercise**

Louisa Piccirillo-Kadri asks her ESOL students to write their own exercises. They first choose a target - a particular grammar point they want to improve. Then, she says, '*..they create their own grammar tasksheet - as if for another student to complete. They become the teacher devising the task.*' The students are given example exercises to help, and first they have to understand they are being given a **model**, not a worksheet they need to complete themselves! However, '*once they've got the idea that THEY are the ones who have to CREATE the tasksheet then it works well. I've done it with every level - from beginner to advanced.*'

### **Reflecting back to the start**

Another strategy is to ask learners to consider with their peer what they are able to do in Week 6, say, that they couldn't do in Week 1. This is much enhanced if the tutor reminds the learners what they have covered in that time. A version of this is to give learners a list of all the outcomes covered so far on the course. They then have to self assess themselves against each one on a scale (eg) of 1 -5 according to their confidence, and write an action plan for what to practise further.

### **Write me a letter (or send me an email...)**

Ian Wollington asks his ESOL students to write him a letter at different points of the course. He gives them questions eg Which tense is the most

difficult? What do they like about writing, or find difficult? How do they feel about the course? What are their goals for improvement? Obviously, an email would be an alternative (to your City Lit email address, of course.)

### **Do it again and this time....**

If your learners do regular written homework, a simple task is to give them time to correct errors in class. Estelle Hérouin does this with oral activities too. In her French classes, once learners have done an activity, she offers a list of areas to improve. She then asks learners to reflect on their performance and choose one aspect to practise further eg using the right tense. They then repeat the task focusing on this aspect.

### **Written dialogue with learners**

This is quite time intensive for the tutor but is excellent on courses where learners are engaged in challenging learning. The tutor keeps a diary or log book with a page for each learner. The tutor writes a message to each learner on their progress. The learner replies with reflections, questions or concerns and the tutor writes a reply.

### **Presentations**

An excellent way of embedding learning and encouraging reflection is to ask learners to research an aspect of the subject and then present their findings to the rest of the class.

### **3 things you learned about.....**

This task, created by Dale Mineshima Lowe, is useful for learners who are listening to a large amount of information. The tutor puts learners in small groups for 5/10 minutes and asks them to share 3 key things they have learned about a particular topic and something they would like to research further. They can consult each other and ask the tutor questions.

### **Draw a mind map**

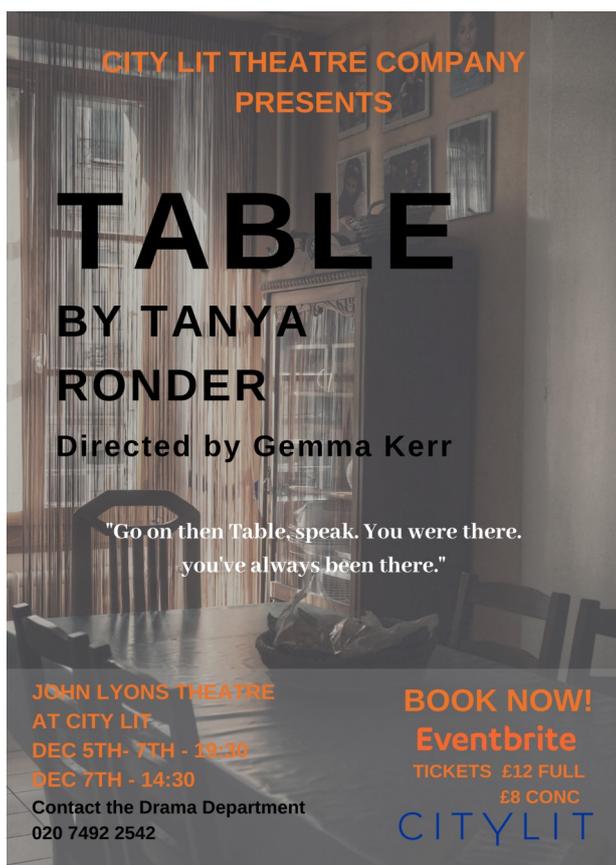
A very useful activity where new concepts are introduced. The tutor asks learners to try and represent what they have understood in a mind

map which they produce in small groups.

### Try it for 2 weeks and let me know how it goes..

This strategy can work for learners who are reluctant to respond to a particular piece of feedback. The tutor simply invites them to give it a try and reassure them they don't have to continue if it doesn't work.

## End of course Review and Celebration



Publicity for a combined end of course production for *City Lit Theatre Company* and *Stage Management and Technical Theatre Production*

It can be very tempting to fill the last session of a course with new material so learners get 'value for money'. However, the last session should always include space for learners to revisit what they have learned across the whole course. In the same way an essay or speech ends with a conclusion, so our courses should include a final summing up so learners can leave confident in what they have learned.

In adult learning, this typically includes an activity

which asks learners to draw on everything the course has covered. It might be a final performance or exhibition, student presentations, an exercise where learners use all their new skills eg a full body massage, or a final quiz or role play. Any of these will enable learners to review and consolidate their learning and recognize and celebrate what they have achieved

### Individual Record of Learning (IRL)

The Individual Record of Learning asks students to consider their key achievements in the course. It is best done after a review so learners actually experience what they have learned. The more input learners have to help them reflect, the more useful the IRL will be.

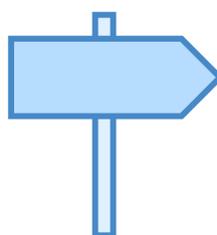
### Give learners a gift

The IRL also asks learners to set themselves challenges for the future. At the end of her French course, Nathalie Augé gives each of her learners a postcard with a personal challenge from her. This is a great gift.

### Write yourself a letter

On more substantial courses, it is a lovely idea to ask students to write themselves a letter, outlining what they would like to achieve in the future. Get them to put these in a self addressed envelope and post it to them, say in 6 months time.

## Finally advise on what next...



Helping learners identify the next stage in the subject is so important for both our learners and for the college. If there is an obvious progression route then tutors should make sure learners are aware of this. If it is not so clear, give some options that may suit their interests. Many departments produce leaflets and/or send emails to help, but learners will particularly value the support and advice of their tutor.

*Teaching and Learning Issues is edited by Wendy Moss - with thanks to all tutors who contributed.*