

Who has influenced my pedagogical thinking?

Professor John Cowan



John is an extraordinary teacher whose higher education career spans over 50 years during which he has championed and practiced student-centred learning. His writings, including his book, 'On becoming an innovative university teacher: reflection in action' have influenced many teachers including the editor of this magazine.

As an engineer, I suppose I have always expressed theories and particular ideas in diagrams. But the influences in and the components of my personal pedagogy are stored and recalled in what I can only describe as “memory videos.”

After 70 years, I can still picture and hear the influential personality of the teacher whose almost languid tones infected me with his love for mathematics, and endeared to me the very mathematical concept of an “elegant” proof. I have clear video snippets in my mind from the evening conversations after dinner at the UMIST Summer School with the eminently facilitative Bill Morton, whose questions led me, and many lecturers at an early point in our careers, to think in terms of learning instead of teaching.

I often quote the eloquent Tyrrell Burgess from an occasion when he was asserting firmly to an audience, which included me, that: “I always tell my first-year students that, during their course, they must *never* read a technical book.” And, after a shocked pause: “They must *use* books.” I can hear him and see him, whenever I quote him.



I never met or heard Carl Rogers, but as someone for who *Freedom to Learn* had become my pedagogical bible, I recall being caught up short when I was privately reviewing plans I had made with a Third-Year Design class for student-directed learning in this important subject - “provided you do the assessing, JC”. Suddenly a challenging thought struck me. What would the great man think of me, if he heard I was going to assess student-directed learning?” And of course, I knew immediately that he would have been ashamed of me. So, I went back next morning and re-negotiated for my first venture into truly and fully self-assessed learning. I can and often do play back that Damascus Road experience, almost second by second.



My memory videos do not only feature teachers. I have a moving memory of sitting alongside an excellent student in that self-assessed class. She had been extremely upset by certain fraught events in the sometimes-tense group inter-relationships. As she let the tears flow, in a gesture which was acceptable in those days, I put an arm round her

shoulder and said comfortingly: “I know how you feel, Helen.” Even as I key this description, I have a vivid memory picture of an upturned, tear-stained face, and eyes almost spitting fire, as she sternly told me: Don’t you *ever* tell me that *you* know how *I* feel.” Since that day, I have had occasion to comfort students, colleagues and friends who have experienced disasters or tragic bereavements. Helen’s face and words often flash across my memory. Even when someone has just lost a child, the echo of her passionate words means that I never tell anyone that I know how they feel - although I may tell them how *I* myself felt, when we lost our newly married son to cancer.

the influences in and components of my personal pedagogy are stored in what I can only describe as “memory videos.” I can picture and hear the influential personality of the teacher who infected me with a love for mathematics; of Bill Morton who led me to think of learning instead of teaching; and many memories of my admired colleague, Alan Harding. I find it difficult to describe them in words, but I can see and hear them in my mind and memory.

In particular, I have many significant memory videos of conversations with the charismatic Alan Harding, as we engaged with a range of difficult challenges in staff development in various countries in the Middle East. These are the keener in my memory because, on many later occasions when I was working on my own in Latin America, and wrestling with the emerging challenges there, suddenly I heard and saw part of a conversation from an occasion when Alan and I had gone for a walk in which to work out our plans. And that playback immediately made me realise: “That’s what Alan would have said”.

I find it difficult to describe any of these influences in words, but I can see and hear many powerful personalities, and their messages for me, in my mind and in my memory - as vital components of my personal pedagogy. It’s interesting that they feature wonderful people even more strongly than the important messages which I have taken from them - and often that those messages were expressed in one sentence, and sometimes as questions.

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