Creative recipes for planning lessons

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This article explores the way in which a creative task in primary teacher education can provide an opportunity for enjoyable and reflective discussion of planning lessons and establishing optimal conditions for effective teaching and learning. The task aims to encourage participants to think creatively and make imaginative use of metaphor in order to take them beyond prescribed pedagogical constructs of what a 'good lesson' might be.

Background and context of the Primary Teacher Training Course (PTTC)

The PTTC is an intensive, one week course designed for primary language teachers in France which we have run jointly at the British Council in Paris since 1994. The aim of the course is to develop practical classroom skills in teaching English to children in primary schools. It is designed to give experienced teachers an opportunity to learn new ideas and explore current issues in English Language Teaching to young learners. For teachers starting out or with less experience, it is designed to develop confidence and competence in working with children.

A creativity loop

At the outset of the course, through discussion of how children learn using the 'C-wheel' (Read 1998), creativity is identified as a key ingredient in establishing a positive learning environment in which children with different multiple intelligence profiles are likely to learn best.

The 'C' wheel

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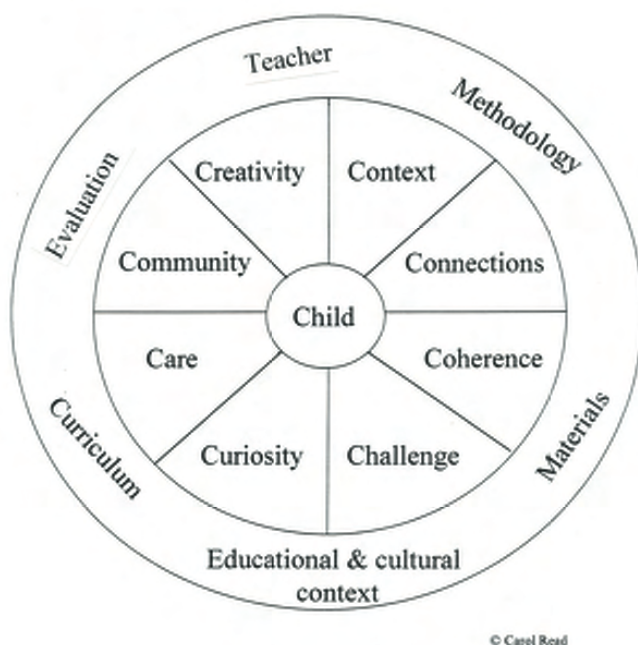
Throughout the course, participants are encouraged to identify ways of building on the creative potential that children bring to class and to integrate language development with a wide range of thinking skills in order to make learning memorable, personalised and enjoyable as well as to build on individual strengths. At the same time, as a kind of 'loop input' (Woodward 2003), many of the teacher education tasks on the course are designed to stimulate creative thinking in order to convey the value of this in teachers' own professional development and enhance their learning in a similar way. One such task we have developed recently builds on participants' elaboration of metaphor as a tool for discussing key issues in planning lessons.

Metaphor in teacher education

Metaphor – in other words, when we use a word or a phrase that means one thing to refer to another - is something that we use constantly in our everyday lives. In a teacher education context, metaphor can be a powerful vehicle for surfacing beliefs, exploring opinions and shaping ideas related to particular aspects of teaching and learning. Through the use of metaphor, discussion takes place at one remove from the issue itself and this often leads to less constraint in participating and expressing personal views. Similarly, through the free association of ideas and extended, often humorous, development of a metaphor, fresh perspectives on a topic or new insights may readily occur.

The use of metaphor in teacher education, and in relation to lesson planning in particular, is not new. Ur (1996) describes a group task in which participants are invited to explore given metaphors for a lesson, such as for example, a football game, climbing a mountain or consulting the doctor, and relate these to different concepts of a lesson which they seem to embody. Similarly, Thornbury (1999) describes an informal experiment in which students were invited to choose metaphors for good lessons from performance genres such as a symphony, a film, a poem or a dance and uses these to draw out features of lessons as aesthetic experiences, focussing in particular on plot, theme, rhythm, flow and the sense of an ending. Woodward (2001) regularly returns to an extensively developed metaphor of a garden and gardening at the end of chapters in order to summarise key features and processes in lesson planning which are described in terms of, for example, the influence of the weather, the soil, the size of garden, the type of plants and the choice of gardening tools. By using a metaphorical construct, the discussion of teaching and learning processes in lessons is immediately made less abstract and more accessible, as well as inviting

further elaboration and ideas (what about the weeds, the use of chemicals, how much to water, the layout of paths etc).

Problems of a lesson planning session

On the Paris PTTC there is no practical teaching component or classroom observation. This means that lesson planning cannot be applied to a real, timed context and can only be done in a hypotetical way. Furthermore, in everyday life, lesson planning is usually an individual activity shaped by the teacher's personal background, experience, beliefs and preferences as well as by their personality and relationship with a real group of children. With only a single session on lesson planning available on the course, there is also a lack of time. We have found this makes it both frustrating and unsatisfactory to use, for example, a group-based task where the final outcome is a written up lesson plan.

A structured approach

Our main objective in the session is to convey the value of a structured approach to lesson planning by providing a framework for organising teaching stages and tasks, which will support and encourage effective learning. In order to do this, we use the 'Plan, Do, Review' model (Brewster, Ellis and Girard, 2002) which can flexibly cater for individual teacher preferences and educational and cultural expectations, by accommodating different approaches to language teaching whether it be conventional PPP (Presentation, Practice, Production) procedures or a strong form of the task-based approach.
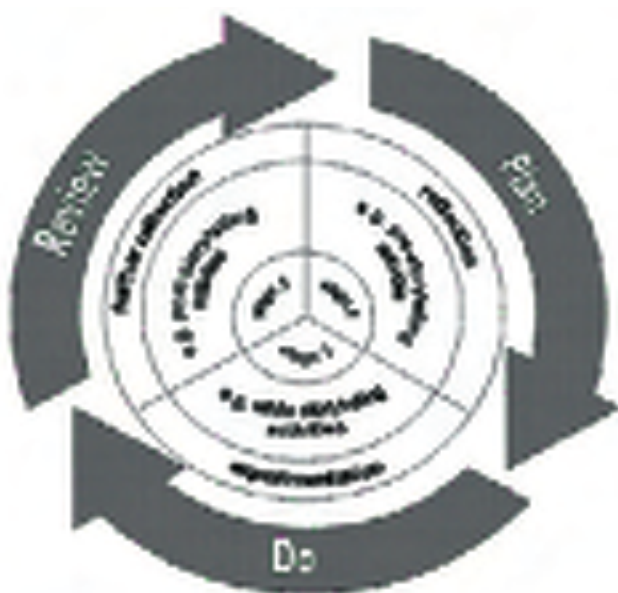
Our own sessions throughout the course are also based on this model so that participants are involved in experiencing the plan-do-review cycle as learners. This means that they can recognise the value of explicit and systematic staging in which they are prepared for, experiment and review and reflect on what they have done and how they have done it. This is another form of 'loop input' (Woodward, op cit) which runs through the course.

A good lesson needs a variety and balance of ingredients in terms of such things as activity types, materials and content, interaction patterns, development of language skills, tempo and pace, level of pupil responsibility, classroom arrangement and challenge. In June 2003, Robert Fisher, the invited guest lecturer for the PTTC that year, gave a talk entitled, Creative Minds. He had asked some 11 year-olds to use the metaphor of a recipe to reflect on the ingredients for a happy class and showed the following recipe from David (Fisher 2005: 152):

Happy Class recipe

My recipe for a Happy Class

Ingredients
- 1 pinch of sharing
- ½ cup of confidence
- 1tbsp of enjoyment
- 6 tsp of cheerfulness
- 5oz of communication
- ½ kg of good looks
- 250g of co-operation
- 10g of behaviour
- 1kg of discipline
- 1 really nice teacher (grated)
- 500ml of kindness

Method
- Mix the confidence, communication and co-operation together in a large bowl.
- Add the enjoyment, the cheerfulness and the good looks to the mixture.
- Beat together the behaviour, the discipline and add to the mixture.
- Bake the cake at 200 c in a round tin 15cm deep and 45cm in diameter for 1 week.
- Once the cake is baked, take it out of the oven and sprinkle the teacher on top.
- The cake makes 10 helpings.

David, aged 11

We were immediately struck by the insights of an eleven-year-old child into what constitutes a happy class and the weighting given to the different ingredients. Interestingly, David focuses very much on the characteristics, attitudes and values of a teacher of young learners (sharing, confidence, cheerfulness, co-operation, kindness) and aspects of classroom management (communication, behaviour, discipline). He recommends a whole kilo of discipline, for example, and in order for everyone to have equal attention from the teacher, he or she is 'grated' and spread over the whole dish.

Application of the recipe metaphor

As a result of thinking about David's cake, we recognised the potential of applying the recipe metaphor to our lesson planning session as a way of enabling participants to capture the essence of a good lesson in

the same way that David had captured the essence of a happy class. Given that the lesson planning session was on the last day of the course, it also seemed to provide an ideal opportunity to review many of the main general learning points which had been made. We therefore designed a task in which groups were asked to create their own recipes for a good lesson. We structured this by first asking participants to write their own definitions of a good lesson and comparing these with published ones such as Rivers (1981) and Ur (op cit). This was then followed by discussion of the plan-do-review framework (already familiar to participants from previous sessions) and possible formats for writing and recording lesson plans which in turn led into the group recipe-writing task.

Writing the recipes

The task generated a great deal of fervent discussion, particularly in relation to the choice of ingredients and quantities, and recipes for a wide range of dishes were produced. These included 'appéritifs' such as 'Successful Lesson Punch', starters such as 'Satisfaction paté en croute', main courses such as 'Lesson Stew,' salads such as 'Wonder Learning Salad' and desserts such as 'Scrumptious Lesson Pie.'

The task proved to be both creative and enjoyable in providing a stimulating context in which different views and beliefs could be discussed in an atmosphere of mutual respect and mixed together to produce a tangible final outcome. After writing the recipes (which in some cases, such as the 'Lesson trifle', also included illustrations) these were circulated and discussed in plenary, giving participants a chance to explain and justify their choice of ingredients, quantities and methods. It was interesting that, during this post-task discussion, explicit links naturally emerged between the processes of planning lessons and teacher education sessions, with participants drawing parallels in the role of the learner (irrespective of whether adult or child) in each context. After the course, the recipes were collated into a 'recipe book' and sent to participants as a memento.

Interpretation of the metaphors

Below are some selected examples of 'ingredients' from some of the recipes and their interpretations as revealed during the post-task discussion.

Ingredient metaphors	Post-task discussion/interpretations
one lesson plan – marinated overnight	reflects the need for careful, advance planning to ensure that everything goes as well as possible
one cup of natural enthusiasm	reflects the importance of the teacher's attitude and the crucial influence this has on children's response
a ladle of smiles	reflects the importance of the affective factor in the classroom and the need to create an encouraging and supportive learning environment
time management jelly	one participant explained that this was 'jelly' as time management was something she felt very 'wobbly' about in her own teaching.
five drops of concentrated concentration	reflects the importance of creating a stimulating and structured environment in which children learn how to focus and concentrate
hundreds and thousands of humour	reflects that learning needs to be enjoyable, with a light touch of laughter and fun
a bunch of stimuli	reflects the need to create a variety of ways to interest, challenge and engage children in learning
a good handful of plenary	reflects the importance of whole class work e.g. setting aims at the beginning of lessons, reviewing lessons at the end and giving children opportunities to share the outcomes of their work
one fresh teacher, chilled	reflects the importance of being relaxed and keeping cool at difficult times; alternatively, reflects being a figure of authority who makes it clear what is acceptable behaviour and can maintain discipline and an orderly learning environment
one cube of content bouillon	reflects the importance of including real content which goes beyond the mundane, utilitarian level of only basic dialogues and daily activities
a comforting custard of mutual respect, trust and security	reflects the importance of creating a non-threatening learning environment, respecting diversity, treating pupils consistently and fairly, demonstrating and promoting positive values, attitudes and behaviour and acknowledging influence as a role model
a bowl of patience seeds	reflects the importance of the need for patience – an important characteristic of a teacher of children
spices (energy, discipline, respect, smiles)	reflects four features which help to enhance and bring out the best in any lesson plan

Conclusion

The group recipe-writing task provided an enjoyable, reflective discussion and finale to the course. The use of metaphors in the recipes facilitated discussion of aspects of planning that went beyond prescribed pedagogical constructs and enabled participants to explore aspects of 'good lessons', such as the creation of appropriate affective conditions, which cannot be easily reflected in a lesson plan. The task also accommodated a variety of personal views and preferences in a harmonious way.

From a teacher education perspective, the participants' recipes provided a vehicle for us as trainers to reflect and evaluate whether our intended messages during the course had been effectively conveyed and assimilated. The inclusion and emphasis on aspects such as 'one cube of content bouillon', a 'comforting custard of mutual respect, trust and security', a 'bowl of patience seeds' and 'spices (energy, discipline, respect, smiles)' gave ample creative evidence of participants' awareness of how to plan for and establish optimal conditions for effective teaching and learning with children.

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For further information on the Paris PTTC

http://stagingweb2.britishcouncil.org/cms/france-english-ylc-teacher-training.htm

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