

Leading by example and giving teachers a voice: Alan Waters' contribution to ELT

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This tribute to Alan Waters who passed away in the summer of 2016 was written for the ELT Symposium in his honour that took place at Lancaster University on 24th February 2017.

I am very grateful to Judit Kormos for reading it on the day.

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Alan was special. I think everyone who was fortunate enough to get to know him would attest to that. When I was still at Lancaster, I often heard MA students chatting about him – admiring his knowledge, his skills as a teacher and, perhaps above all, his kindness. When shadowing him in his role of Director of the EAP programme in the summer of 2005, I was impressed by his seemingly boundless energy and good humour, as well as his ability to manage a very diverse group of teachers – ranging from nervous novices to highly experienced teachers who had seen it all before – and an even more diverse group of international students – representing different skill levels, expectations, fears, and attitudes.

The more I got to know Alan over the seven years that we worked together, the more features of his personality I became aware of, the more I realized what an incredible learning opportunity I and everyone lucky enough to encounter him at Lancaster had been given. Alan shaped people – by leading by example, by being truly passionate about issues he believed in or thought were problematic, and by being the kind, caring and genuine person that he was. He had a tremendous impact on my life, the way I interact with students, work with colleagues and manage staff. And although I left Lancaster in 2012, I feel that Alan and his influence have never left me.

Today, I would like to pay tribute to Alan by touching on several features of his personality that made him a good role model – as manager / team leader, a colleague, mentor, teacher, and scholar.

Being a good team leader

Thinking back to 2005 and my first impressions of Alan as Director of the EAP programme, I see him in the midst of a large group of EAP teachers that had arrived for their induction week, with Alan greeting every one of them warmly. I remember him joking with some returning teachers that he had known for a long time, enquiring after joint acquaintances or family members with others that had also worked on the course before, and making small talk with those that were working on the course for the first time. Back then, I was shadowing him – due to take over as Director in the coming summer – and I remember being in awe, as I observed him first making the rounds and then starting the meeting for the day. Everything seemed so effortless and the effect that he had on the teachers he was talking to was very obvious. People relaxed and the atmosphere in the room changed from nervous anticipation to calm concentration and focus.

In their edited volume on the psychology of coaching and mentoring, Passmore, Peterson, Freire (2013, p. 2) quote Whitworth et al's (1988) definition of coaching as "a form of conversation with unspoken ground rules of certain qualities that must be present: respect, openness, compassion, and rigour, our commitment to speaking the truth". Observing Alan over the summer of 2005, I saw all of these qualities.

Pre-sessional EAP courses are intense working and studying environments. Students may be suffering from home-sickness, struggling with the demands of the course and the new environment, while teachers need to acquaint themselves with new materials, meet and work with new teaching team members, find their feet in the bigger teaching community of the EAP programme and help students progress to the necessary level for university entry. The task of the person in overall charge of the programme is multifaceted: supporting novice or struggling teachers, who are experiencing problems with the materials or students; addressing issues arising in individual teaching teams; working closely with the course management team; liaising with other staff members in the university; and perhaps above all, setting the norms and keeping up morale.

I observed Alan in meetings with students who were struggling and where it was unclear whether they would be able to stay at Lancaster to begin their degrees or not. He was always very calm and compassionate, but also very clear, and my impression was that the students responded well to his way of handling these conversations.

The same was the case when he was talking to teachers about issues that they needed to work on. These conversations are never easy, but Alan had a way of addressing issues that could transform these conversations into learning and teacher development opportunities. Teacher development and teacher training were issues that were very close to Alan's heart.

In 2005, Alan wrote in a chapter on expertise on teacher education

the principal role of the teacher educator was identified as facilitating teacher learning. The core expertise needed by the teacher educator, it was therefore argued, was an understanding of the nature of teacher learning and an ability to translate this knowledge into practice in such a way as to maximize the potential for the uptake of teacher learning opportunities. (Waters, 2005, p. 226)

Alan took teacher education seriously. It informed his beliefs about how the course should be organized and managed, how materials should be developed and what strategies should be employed to share good practice and help teachers needing additional support.

That members of staff on the EAP programme should have ample opportunity for participation, and that their voices should be heard was another essential part of the EAP programme. And to Alan it was very important that teachers should be given plenty of both, formal and informal, opportunities to give feedback and participate in the design of the programme and materials. He was interested in hearing and reading what the teachers said or wrote in our Friday feedback sessions, but also believed it be very important to just go into the staffroom at certain times of the day or to set up get-togethers in pubs and restaurants.

Osterloh and Frey (2011, p. 310, my translation) argue that “in knowledge-intensive teamwork settings (...) granting autonomy, as well as opportunities for participation and communication is essential. Equally important is supportive and informative feedback from supervisors and team members (...).”

One opportunity to engage with all EAP staff and students – and to receive feedback from everyone in an informal atmosphere, was at the end of the EAP course, at the Course Ceilidh. This was when I encountered another of Alan’s numerous qualities: he was an excellent dancer – and a very popular one. I will come to the topic of enthusiasm a little later on, but to me, the image of Alan dancing with teachers and students alike in the well-lit barn will always remind me that an essential aspect of good management is: fun – experiencing enjoyable moments together.

Being a good mentor and colleague

Eby, Rhodes and Allen (2010, p. 10) write on mentoring “[it] reflects a unique relationship between individuals (Austin, 2002; Garvey and Alred, 2003; Jacobi, 1991). (...) [M]entoring is a learning partnership (...) the relationship changes over time (...) and the impact of mentoring increases with the passage of time (Grossman & Rhodes, 2002; Kram, 1985).” Alan was a wonderful mentor on the EAP programme and a kind and generous colleague.

When I shadowed Alan on the EAP programme I learned much about his team leading, teacher development and management philosophy by just observing him.

His qualities as a mentor I experienced in many one-to-one sessions when he talked me through the essentials of course management and administration, or in the many chats that we had about issues that I was grappling with as a new lecturer in the department or when I took over as Director of the EAP Programme. There are many things that I appreciated about Alan, but thinking back to our conversations, certain features stand out: his patience, his ability to listen, his kindness, his sound advice and his sense of humour.

What I have learned from Alan as a manager, mentor and colleague is to be available for others and how having someone that you can discuss your work concerns, but also successes with is an enormous gift. Eby, Rhodes and Allen said that “the impact of mentoring increases with the passage of time” and I can attest to that. When we were still working together, I immensely appreciated Alan’s advice and that he never seemed bothered when I knocked on his door hoping to have a brief chat about one thing or other. I also appreciated that he never looked at his watch when we were chatting or seemed impatient.

Even though I left Lancaster 5 years ago, Alan's attitude towards mentoring has stayed with me. It has shaped me and made me view interactions at work differently. By being Alan's mentee and experiencing him as a mentor, I realized how important kindness, listening and making time for someone else at work is. I also reflected on his careful use of language and how he offered advice and critique in a caring and at times humorous way. Whenever I feel a little impatient in interactions with colleagues or students, or find it difficult to understand someone else's point of view and may wish to react in a way that shows clear disapproval, I think of Alan and what he would have done in the same situation. That doesn't mean that I always manage to live up to his standards, but I try and perhaps some day, I will get close to his level of expertise.

Being a good teacher

When I was at Lancaster, there was a system called Peer Observation of Teaching (POT for short). I don't know if that system is still in place, but it offered colleagues the opportunity to attend one another's classes, discuss specific features of the session to be observed in advance, and to then have a discussion after the teaching event to exchange views on how the session went. Alan and I potted each other – as it was called – several times.

On teaching in higher education, Brown and Atkins (1988, p. 5) write

[a]lthough effective teaching is best estimated in relation to your goals, there are some features of teaching on which there is both a consensus among lecturers and evidence from studies of student learning. Generally speaking, effective teaching is systematic, stimulating, and caring (McKeachie and Kulik 1975; P.A. Cohen 1981; Marsh 1982). (...) Effective teaching is concerned not only with success but also with appropriate values.

Alan was a highly effective teacher. He had a genuine interest in his students, was systematic and caring, as well as very interested in his students' individual teaching contexts. I often passed him by standing in the corridor chatting to one of the MA students in the ELT subject area about their countries, their own experiences as pupils and students in the teaching environments they hoped to be working in. He also shared his own experiences working in various countries with them. I think the many conversations that he had with his students also influenced his thinking on ELT and his views as an academic – I will come back to that a little later, but I think that these interactions and chats with his students were very important to him. He really wanted to know about their teaching contexts, as insights into the future teaching realities of his students also helped him understand what may or may not work in their future classes. For example, if a teacher's class size is 60 students who have no books and the teacher is lucky to have a blackboard to write on, they are likely to be worried about other

issues than someone teaching in an environment where realia, technology and a wealth of textbook options are easily available and affordable.

On the impact of the teacher on their students, Dörnyei (2001, p. 34) notes

[i]n his/her position of group leader, the teacher embodies the class spirit. Broadly speaking, if you show commitment towards the students' learning and progress, there is a very good chance that they will do the same thing. It is important that everybody in the classroom should be aware that you care; that you are not just there for the salary; that it is important for you that your students succeed; that you are ready to work just as hard as the students towards this success.

Alan worked hard. It was important to him that his teaching input provided a good fit for the needs of his students. To achieve the best possible fit, he frequently critically reflected on and revised his courses. I don't know how many chats we had about the content of his courses, in his office when one of us or both had just finished teaching for the day, or in the communal staff area over lunch. Personally, I often thought that he was far too critical of himself and the materials – and told him so, but he would just shake his head, tear off another grape, and mutter that there must be a better way of conveying this issue, to make it easier for the students to see how the various components were connected or why a particular framework was important.

He was driven by his interest in ELT and his conviction that good teaching can inspire learners and open up opportunities for them.

Dörnyei (2001, p. 33) writes

enthusiasm for one's specialization area and the ability to make this enthusiasm public (...) is one of the most important ingredients of motivationally successful teaching. Projecting enthusiasm is related to the more general process of modelling, which is a very effective method of teaching various things by setting an example.

Alan was a very dedicated teacher – someone who believed in the importance of his field, someone who was very reflective and interested in the needs of learners and teachers alike, and someone who set an example by approaching teaching in the way that he did.

This section would not be complete without paying tribute to Alan as a PhD supervisor. Brown and Atkins (1988, p. 115) write

[r]esearch and project supervision is probably the most complex and subtle form of teaching in which we engage. It is not enough for us to be competent researchers ourselves – although

this is vital. We need to be able to reflect on research practices and analyse the knowledge, techniques and even methods which make them effective. But there is a step beyond this. We have to be skilled in enabling our research students to acquire those techniques and methods themselves without stultifying or warping their own intellectual development. In short, to be an effective research supervisor, you need to be an effective researcher and an effective supervisor.

Alan and I frequently talked about our PhD students and attended their respective talks in the departmental research group that focused on ELT and SLA whenever possible. He was also involved in various evaluations that PhD students at Lancaster had to complete. What impressed me when talking to him about supervision was his openness to the ideas put forward by his or other PhD students, and the space that he gave PhD students for their own individual development, never warping or stultifying. Whenever I saw him interacting with his PhD students, I saw tremendous affection from both sides and when talking to some of them about their research I remember thinking that their willingness and confidence in venturing down new avenues was based on their trust in him -that no matter where they went, he would be their safety net.

I was very moved by Sarah Mercer's tribute to Alan, which I think beautifully describes their relationship

I was incredibly fortunate to have had Alan as my PhD supervisor and then he became a treasured friend of myself and my family. He was the most special and kind supervisor – a truly great teacher. He was patient and dedicated, always finding time to share his wisdom, experience and wonderful critical insights – how I will miss his guidance as my mentor, helping keep my feet firmly on the ground. And all of this with his characteristic, wonderful sense of humour and exceptional kindness and generosity of spirit. My Dad and I have been lucky enough to have enjoyed several walks with him on the Lakeland fells – in true 'Herdwickian' fashion – no such thing as following the main paths, when challenging, uncharted routes trodden only by sheep were to be explored. Somehow words are woefully inadequate to express how terribly sad we are and how very much my family and I will miss him – he truly leaves a great hole in our lives as well as within the larger ELT community. Our heartfelt sympathies go out to his family. (<http://wp.lancs.ac.uk/alan-waters/tributes-and-memories/>)

Being a good scholar

In 1988, discussing the personal qualities of a course designer, Alan wrote

[a]lthough a course designer needs a thorough grasp of how to handle established course-design procedures, it is likely to be just as (or more) important for him or her to have the strengths of one's convictions, not panicking when things don't go according to plan, having a keen eye on capitalizing on fortunate turns, being willing to learn, especially from mistakes; being able to tolerate ambiguity, being creative and persevering. (Waters, 1988, p. 19)

I think this quote actually describes Alan as a researcher and scholar quite well. He had his convictions, wasn't prone to panicking, considered reflection to be very important, was keen to learn, open to new experiences, creative and was also happy to persevere with issues he considered important.

I think other talks will focus on various aspects of Alan as a scholar today, so my focus here will be on two memories that I have of conversations with him that I still think back to often.

The first conversation must have taken place sometime in 2008 or 2009. I remember walking down to Alan's office and seeing him blue tacking a colourful sheet of paper to his door with great precision. When he noticed me approaching, he smiled at me, pointed at that sheet of paper and told me that he had finally finished and printed off his map of Methodologia. I stared at the map, looked at him and we both started what should probably be called giggling.

Methodologia was introduced to the wider ELT reading community in Alan's ELT J article that was published in 2009 in which he described Methodologia as follows

Methodologia is an island in the ELT archipelago, surrounded by the Sea of TESOL. It is inhabited chiefly by large numbers of teachers and learners of EFL, who have migrated to it from all over the world. However, although each of these waves of settlers is familiar with its own part of the island, very few of them have visited the rest of it. (Waters, 2009, p. 108)

I thought the article and the map were wonderful. They were perfect examples of Alan's sense of humour and illustrated that humour does have its place in academia as well.

The second conversation took place later. Alan had started attending a German language course and was reflecting on how it felt to be a language learner again. We had long conversations about the benefits and disadvantages of deductive versus inductive teaching, different activities in the classroom and how he perceived what was going on. It was fascinating. Alan was so clear and articulate in his assessments and one point that emerged as central in our conversations was the necessity to never dis-engage from the frontline staff and authentic learning environments in ELT research. This has stayed with me.

As I said at the beginning, Alan shaped people. He had a tremendous impact on my life. I will never forget him and will forever be grateful to him for all the things he taught me and for being the kind, generous and caring person that he was.

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