

Got problems? Congratulations!

When depression strikes, **Cecilia Cuello** looks on the bright side.

It's eight am. You gulp breakfast, grab some books, hurry to school, give a first lesson, a second, a third and a fourth and who knows how many more day after day, week after week, term after term. Amongst an endless heap of homework and term papers to mark, on the brink of a nervous breakdown and utterly frustrated, you no longer enjoy what you once cherished so much. Worst of all, you no longer seem to know exactly where you are heading. Is this how you have been feeling lately? Well, why not do something about it?

Where to start?

Stop complaining! Wake up all your senses: awareness is the first step to success. A crisis is a sign of some kind of underlying developmental process, so instead of fretting about your present underachievement, be glad you have at last become aware of some of the shortcomings in your overall performance. Congratulations! This is your chance to become a learner again.

Looking at the past

Any training course you did was not the finishing line of your teaching career, but just the starting point, where there is no room for frustration, guilt or blame. There's no such thing as a perfect lesson, a perfect class, a perfect coursebook, a perfect teacher. If there was, why, after so many years in the teaching profession, would you still feel the need to keep adapting and adjusting your classroom dynamics and material to each particular group of students?

The internal drive to shape and re-shape your lessons means that you are subconsciously testing all your teaching tools. It means you are looking for alternative pathways to disclose the teacher inside you. Gaining insight into your own teaching will bring about a change of direction to your professional development.

Looking at the present

Be brave and look closely at your teaching style. Analysing your strengths and weaknesses objectively is easier said than done, but once you have done it, you may be surprised to find that, after all, your teaching is less chaotic than you thought. This discovery will certainly encourage you to reflect more positively on issues you may have completely overlooked in your early teaching practice – simply because you lacked the necessary experience, or because you have never spared the time to stop and think about the whys and the wherefores of your own teaching performance. In short, by periodically unlocking your classroom door to yourself or perhaps to a colleague as an external observer, you will be able to delineate your own 'articles of faith', that is your own beliefs and principles in teaching.

Looking at the future

However strong the temptation to improve all your teaching skills at once, avoid frustration by prioritising your needs sensibly and be realistic in your appraisal of your teaching environment. If your teaching is not yet quite what you would like it to be, don't despair. Teaching is like steering a submarine in the middle of the ocean. Your sonar is not only the way your students respond to your teaching, but also how *you* respond to and perceive whatever exchanges occur within your classes. Both your lessons (and the submarine!) will face expected and unexpected perils. Still, both of you have all the necessary equipment to avoid them, or else to minimise risk.

Remember that neither a submarine captain nor a teacher can change basic things like the relief of the bottom of the sea, or the personal traits of a class. This means that you will have to make a conscious effort to establish good communication channels with your students in order to deal with the

unexpected more flexibly and efficiently. You have to get to know their learning preferences, and show genuine interest in their individual and group contributions.

How to continue?

All you need is a set of truly attainable short-term aims. Basically, you should frame these aims in terms of your own teacher self-image, emphasising the positive over the negative.

Map out your present teaching profile and set your own professional priorities realistically: skills to develop further, skills to acquire, bad habits to discard. In turn, pick a maximum of three items from this mind map. Devote all your energy to their improvement by reading methodology books, discussing your ideas with colleagues, observing lessons and taking short development courses in these areas. Once you notice that there has been an advancement, choose another item to work on.

Turn your classroom into a teaching lab. Every time you try out something new, reflect on it and ask for the students' feedback, too. Keep a mental or written record of what worked, what went wrong, how you would change it in a future lesson, and above all how you felt while giving the lesson. Though this might sound obvious, believe me, routine can sometimes kill this healthy practice.

Remember what kind of professional you have decided to become. Being loyal to your own articles of faith will enhance your freedom of choice. This will also pervade your professional role inside and outside the classroom and will, in time, boost your self-esteem and creativeness.

Finally, reflect on what kind of lessons would be most useful and motivating for your students within your school curriculum.

The more you give your students, the more you will receive in return. It all depends on whether or not you take the initiative to cause meaningful changes to happen in your classroom. The answer is in your hands. **P**



Cecilia Cuello is a teacher who loves learning from experience. She is the coordinator of the English Department at Colegio Secundario Puerto Madryn and IPADE Srl., Argentina, where she teaches ESP to adults. Her other interests include SLA and classroom dynamics.

mccuello@hotmail.com