

TESL NS Newsletter

January 2010

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Editorial: Fe Baculi

Hello everyone! Happy New Year!

We just had recently a TESL NS conference with an emphasis on testing. There were many interesting, informative, thought-provoking presentations, discussions, and activities during the session. We test for all kinds of reasons -- for the teacher, for the student, for the administration, for the government, and so forth.

This is not an editorial on test and measurement but I would like to share a few thoughts about testing, the whys and the hows of it. Teaching as we know it is not thinkable without testing as we know it. But testing has not always been an inseparable part of teaching. It is a relatively new thing in the Western history of Education.

Socrates whom the Oracle of Delphi declared the wisest of men, did not test; nor did Plato, his most famous pupil, Aristotle, or any of the Athenians that followed them though they were the people whose ideas shaped Western thought for the more than two millennia that separate them from us. They believed that all knowledge is innate in the human soul and all a teacher has to do is activate it through question-and-



answer interaction with the students rather than teach something new. Socrates himself said that he did not teach but rather acted like a midwife to truth – his mother was a midwife – that is already in us. A far cry from our philosophy of teaching which holds that the student's mind is a blank sheet that has to be filled by the teacher.

Through much of the Middle Ages, Education was largely the task of monasteries and there was little, if any, formal testing. At the end of a study course, a student would either join the ranks of the monks or be released unto the world, generally to do the bookkeeping for the rich of the day, most of whom could neither read nor write themselves.

In American Education, testing did not become a sine qua non till the 19th century. Students were tested to see if they had learned what they had been taught; if not, they were thrown out. Even teachers were tested, not so much as to whether they had enough knowledge to teach but to see whether they did not have any rebellious or heretic views. Once they were approved, they were safe. If students failed, it was their fault.

Testing as we know it did not come into its own till about a hundred years ago. But a new element was soon introduced – accountability; i.e., tests to show whether education was worth the money society spent on it. That tug-of-war is

still going on in much of the US, to a lesser extent in Canada.

So how do WE test today? I am afraid the purpose of much testing is not what I think it should be – to help the student understand where he stands rather than as a means to determine passing or failing.

A friend and former colleague of mine taught in high school without testing for a couple of years. Tests, yes, but not in the usual sense. He gave his students frequent tests to show them how well they were doing, but he did not record the results. Come report card time, the students would hand him little slips of paper indicating what sort of a mark they thought they deserved. It was understood that, if a suggested mark was unreasonably high, the teacher could veto it. He said he had to veto a mark only once or twice in two years but often raised a mark suggested by a student because he thought it was too low.

I have met and worked with colleagues who thought the best test was a tough test, one that separated the chaff from the wheat. I believe that the best test in one which helps the student understand what he failed to understand in the classroom, the issue of passing or failing being only of secondary importance. But the systems we work in expects us to administer tests mainly to determine who deserves to pass. So what am I / can I do? If I buck the system, I may lose my job. If I do obsequiously what the systems expects me to do, my conscience may chide me. Socrates himself held and “taught” that the dictates of conscience were above the law, a dangerous proposition then as now.

For people like me, a compromise may be the way out. Construct tests that do help the student understand what had

escaped him while they also weed out the worst of failures. Construct tests, that is, more with the student in mind than with the ego of the teacher that clamors to show how tough he is.

In conclusion, permit me to divert a little. This is new year. How about all the other tests in life which we as teachers and as human beings have had to go through? Did we pass? How much have we had to compromise our morals, our values, our beliefs and our principles in going after what we want?

I hope this year will be a better year for all of us.

Cheers!

Ms. Fe Baculi / SMU
Editor



President's Message: Julian Inglis

I want to extend my warmest greetings to all of you in our first newsletter of 2010, and wish everyone a happy New Year as we look forward to 2010 and beyond.

I'd like to thank Caroline Lodge, Denise Delong, and Alicia Daley who have served on the board this past year and are stepping down. The work that they've done is truly appreciated. I'd also like to welcome our new members at large Sharon Churchill and Hong Wang. We have a very enthusiastic and committed group continuing on and I'm

excited at the possibilities for the coming year. In particular though, I want to thank Ellen Pilon who will be moving from President to Membership Secretary this year. Under Ellen's leadership and guidance TESL Nova Scotia has had tremendous success and we will certainly be in a good position to build on that success in the coming years.

Our 2011 TESL Canada conference is a year and a half away, but that time will no doubt go by very quickly, and planning and preparation is already well underway. With Michael Swan and Dr. Roy Lyster booked as the plenary speakers it will no doubt prove to be a popular conference and a fantastic opportunity to come together and share ideas with all of our colleagues.

There are many changes on the horizon in Nova Scotia. There are new Language schools opening and expanding, new university English language programs starting up and services for newcomers continue to evolve and expand, all of these to keep pace with the growing number of students that find their way to Nova Scotia to learn English, to study, and to settle here. Now more than ever it's critical that TESL Nova Scotia supports its members in their professional development, that it encourages all English language instructors in the province to take advantage of membership, and to work together to share ideas that are of benefit to all of us.

Exactly how TESL Nova Scotia fulfills this mandate is up to all of us who have a stake in English language teaching in Nova Scotia. If anyone has ideas that they'd like to put into action that would benefit language teaching and language learning in Nova Scotia I strongly encourage you to come forward with them. Also if you feel that existing training sessions could benefit a wider

audience we can assist in providing or creating a forum for this to take place.

I'm very excited about the possibilities that lie ahead because I know that there is a wealth of ideas and potential for positive change among the TESL Nova Scotia members, and among potential members. Our primary function on the board is to ensure that this potential is realized.

Best Regards,
Julian Inglis
TESL NS
President



Past-President's Message: Ellen Pilon

I can't believe that my two year term is up! So soon! I feel like we just got started. During that time we worked hard on one national conference that we co-hosted with TESL NB, the TESL Canada 2008 Conference in May 2008 in Moncton. It was a stunning success. Now we've agreed to host the TELS Canada 2011 Conference in April 2011! Are we crazy or what? Maybe, but we just love organizing exciting events for TELS NS and feel strongly that we deserve another national conference out here on the East Coast. Luckily for me, I'm the conference coordinator so please email any time if you'd like to give a workshop or do something with us for this very exciting event. Our keynote speakers are Michael Swan – who will give a formal plenary and a workshop to the everyone – and Dr Roy Lyster of McGill University.

President's Report delivered at the 2009 AGM:

Throughout 2008/2009 the Board has been trying to offer interesting professional development opportunities for members. As a result we have committed TESL NS to hosting the TESL Canada 2011 Conference, which will be held at the end of April 2011. Everyone on the Board has agreed to be the Conference Committee and to commit time and energy throughout the next 18 months leading up to the conference. We will regularly post news and developments about the conference on the website, www.teslins.ca

Since we made such a large profit hosting the TESL Canada 2008 Conference with New Brunswick, we have been trying to find ways of using those funds to benefit the TESL NS membership as a whole. What better way than to offer inexpensive -- even free -- conferences! So last spring we held another successful Spring Mini-Conference, free for members and including bus transportation to and from Acadia and a wine tour at Domaine Grande Pre. Early on a bright sunny May Saturday morning we boarded the Valley-bound bus, enjoying scintillating conversation from both old friends and new. Teachers at Acadia, and a few non-Acadia teachers, put together an excellent program of workshops focused on the successes and agonies of teaching writing to our students. The mini-conference was so successful that we are looking forward to organizing something similar in the future.

Since we now have the funds, we also decided to return the fall conference to a hotel. The Citadel Halifax Hotel has been very accommodating and we are looking forward to this location. Our catchy title is *Testing the Limits and the Limits of Testing* and the focus is assessment and evaluation. Our keynote speaker is Dr Janna Fox of

Carleton University, an expert in the field. We are delighted to return to a hotel for our fall conference because it offers better space, better food, easier preparation, and space to accommodate publishers. This year we are delighted to have three publishers -- Pearson Longman, Oxford and Cambridge, plus CCLB.

Our membership has numbered about 100 for the past three years or so, and by October 31, 2009 was 105. Quite a few memberships are due to the TESL Canada certification requirement of membership.

Our website has a new look although it's main focus still is information and announcements. We try not to bombard you with email, and now TESL Canada will have a more active role in sending you email notices as well. We have been testing discussion groups to see how they might work with the membership, but we haven't been able to get beyond the testing stage. Please check the TESL NS and TESL Canada websites periodically to keep up-to-date.

I'd like to thank Alicia Daley and Caroline MacKinnon who are leaving the Board. Both have contributed to the success of our endeavours for several years. We will miss them. We would like to welcome Hong Wang and Sharon Churchill who have been nominated to the Board.

And further. . . .

I'm also excited to announce that I have been on the TESL Canada Board now since October 2004, first as the representative from TESL NS, then as Treasurer for three years, now as Vice-President with the likelihood of being elected TESL Canada President at the AGM in April 2010. What an exciting adventure this has been with TESL Canada! It has been such a rewarding experience to represent TESL NS and

the interests of TESL in Nova Scotia to the national Board. I have made many many friends across Canada, especially in BC and Manitoba. The networking, sharing and fun have been phenomenal. These TESL organizations – both TESL NS and TESL Canada – are well worth being involved in and supporting. Check out the TESL Canada website at www.tesl.ca and look at what the Testing Committee has prepared for you. Check out the Professional Development resources.

If you are interested in participating in TESL Canada, the first step is to gain experience on the local TESL NS Board. After that you should express an interest to TESLNS in being the TESL NS Representative to the TESL Canada Board. After a few years in that position, you are ready to express interest in an elected position, depending on your background and experience. It's wonderful networking and a great way to make the best of friends. So why not start soon and join us on the TESL NS Board? You can come to any of our meetings and join us, even if you aren't an official Board member. Just email the new President, Julian Inglis, that you want to participate. His email is: julian.inglis@acadiau.ca Or let me know: ellen.pilon@gmail.com

HAPPY★NEW★YEAR

TESL Canada's Teachers Resource Centre: Kent Fraser, TESL NS Rep on the TESL Canada Board

TESL Canada has recently added a great feature to its website which will be a definite asset for members. The Teachers Resource Centre presents a wide ranging selection of internet sites

to aid instructors. Although the sheer volume of links can be a bit overwhelming at first, spending a bit of time with the site will greatly add to your teaching toolbox.

Each link is accompanied with a brief description of its usefulness. Some of the sites have downloadable material with lessons and activities while others present opportunities for learner autonomy. Online books, podcasts, video links and news sites provide the opportunity for real world learning.

There are CLB and Link based activities focused in the different areas of grammar, reading, writing, and vocabulary. These are a bit limited in scope but are organized by CLB level to allow for faster access.

Discussion forums listed such as *Azar Grammar* present discussion forums which can be useful for tips or tricky grammar points. In addition links to professional journals, subscriptions sites and free graphics make this a treasure trove for any language instructor.

Please explore this great resource and share it with those around you.
www.tesl.ca



TESL NS Fall Conference 2009
Ellen Pilon

Hurrah! Another successful TESL NS conference, this time back at a hotel venue. It's been a while since we arranged to bring in a keynote speaker and booked a hotel. We enjoyed our Saturday November 7th at the Citadel Halifax Hotel with keynote speaker Dr Janna Fox from Carleton University,

Anne Senior from CCLB, and eight other presenters. Attendance was excellent with 95% of the membership registering.

The enthusiastic presenters included: Andrea Purchase on ongoing assessment of learners' needs; Andy de Champlain and Sharon Churchill with a roundtable on bridging programs; Chris vanden Broeck and Richard Herbert on the difficulties of working with rubrics; Denise DeLong on intercultural communication and diverse clients; Kathryn MacLean on an EAP project-based assignment; and Rebecca Stoffer on checklists and rubrics. Thank you to all of you for your time and energy in providing excellent professional development for our TESL NS members.

Dr Janna Fox's presentation was very interesting and thought-provoking. We didn't have enough time for questions or discussions following her talk because we started late. Next time we'll need to include more discussion time and question time at the end of our keynote speaker's presentation. Maybe we should invite Dr Fox to come back to us and speak again on another related topic.

Publishers were well represented, with Pearson Longman, Oxford and Cambridge attending. The publishers were very happy with the space and the location so near the main workshop rooms and lunch space. We thank them for attending and hope to see them again next year.

The cost of the location and expenses for the keynote speaker, about 50% of the total, were paid for with TESL NS funds. Other expenses such as the coffee breaks and lunch were paid for with the conference fees. The TESL NS Board has been trying to plan events that TESL NS subsidizes to some extent so that you can enjoy low fees. Keep

your eye on the website – www.teslins.ca – to see what we will be planning for you in 2010. And of course in April 2011 we have the TESL Canada 2011 Conference with Michael Swan and Dr Roy Lyster.



Happy New Year

Afternoon Roundtable at the TESL NS Conference with Andy de Champlain SMU and Sharon Churchill (Acadia).

Interview by Ellen Pilon

From other conference attendees, I heard that all the workshops were excellent, but one roundtable was somewhat different and quite popular. Curious, I interviewed the two roundtable facilitators to try to discover what they did that made the roundtable so successful, thinking that next year we should have similar roundtables.

The roundtable was called *A Bridge Too Far*, (title created by Andy). The synopsis in the program said: *The UBP (University Bridging Program) is a kind of program that allows students to take some credit courses while bringing their language skills up to par in a concurrent ESL program. This workshop will examine elements of UBP; specifically, the English skills needed for success in any academic program and the curriculum that delivers them.*

Both Sharon and Andy emailed me separately with answers to the eight questions below. Their answers suggest they both really enjoyed facilitating the workshop together even though they didn't know each other beforehand.

Their topic was of interest to many, they are experts, the participants were enthusiastic and experienced in bridging programs: all in all a recipe for an exciting successful discussion forum.

How did you introduce the topic of the roundtable?

At the beginning both facilitators introduced themselves and their teaching contexts. Then they explained what their own interests were in the bridging program.

How did you organize the session?

How did you divide up who did what?

The two facilitators communicated over email. They brainstormed discussion questions related to bridging programs. Because their jobs and workplaces are different, Andy focused more on assessment and curriculum issues in already established bridging programs whereas Sharon discussed more on the creation of a bridging program and the issues surrounding the program that she was starting up.

Andy thought up an idea of dividing the discussion questions into cards based on a theme. He sent his questions to Sharon and she created the cards. The cards are included here at the end of this interview. Participants were divided into two groups, each under the guidance of the one facilitator.

About how many people attended?

There were about 15 people, but certainly fewer than 20. Comments from those who attended the roundtable were that everyone was enthusiastic and contributed a lot to the discussions. Receptive participants and well-thought out informed content – what more could you want? Well, water to quench the thirst and more coffee to stimulate!

Did you have enough time?

Sharon mentioned that the length was

good and that the discussion could have gone on “for hours”. Andy added that they had the perfect amount of time, “but with the (great) participants, we probably could have kept going (especially if a *bouteil de vin* had been popped)”. Well, next time we’ll add a social time after roundtables so that conversations can keep going avec beaucoup de bouteilles de vins!

What did you present?

Sharon pointed out that they didn’t present per se, but that participants did most of the talking in discussions about the bridging programs.

What did you talk about?

Sharon mentioned that her group talked mainly about the best way to set up bridging programs, the number of hours of instruction, levels of proficiency required, partnering with academic institutions assessing the different parts of the bridging program, how to include authentic practice in the EAP class, etc. Andy’s group discussed, among other things, how bridging programs work.

What excited most interest?

Some of the exciting points included ways to improve the current Bridging Programs and critiquing what has already been established.

This was an extremely successful session. In your opinion, why?

Both agreed that the loose structure allowed participants to chat and share ideas on the topics and that the “wonderful group of eager participants” did indeed share lots of ideas. As interviewer, I would add that it was successful because the discussion points were well prepared, because there were two different, energetic facilitators with different experiences, and because the topic was of interest to many participants.

The discussion cards:

Creating a Bridging Program

EAP Model	Sheltered Model	Open Model
<ul style="list-style-type: none">o Academic skills taught using authentic academic materialso No credit courses are taken	<ul style="list-style-type: none">o Students take an academic credit course that has been specially designed for them and only offered to students in the Bridging Programo EAP classes are offered to complement the academic course	<ul style="list-style-type: none">o Students take an academic credit course that is offered to other students in the universityo A choice of courses may be includedo EAP classes are offered to help develop academic and language skills

1. What would the benefits and drawbacks be of each type of model?
2. Which model would be the most beneficial pedagogically? Which model would be the most realistic for your situation?
3. If you are allowing students to take credit courses, what kind of credit courses would be the best to offer?

Curriculum Design Issues

- What is the ultimate purpose of the University Bridging Program?
- Who can get in? What are the requirements?
- How much do you know about the links or gaps between your students' skills and university course requirements? How can we go about determining these gaps?
- What should we expect our students to be able to do by the time they finish the bridging program, and how do we assess this?
 - What are some of the *linguistic abilities* that are essential for all academic programs?
 - What are the *academic skills* that are essential for all academic programs?
- What challenges do teachers face in terms of improving the curriculum? How can teachers overcome those challenges?

Program Design Issues

- How should textbooks and other materials be selected for the program?
- How do you think the 'evaluation breakdown' should look for a 4-month course?
- How do we achieve a sense of standardization between teachers?
- The UBP is high stakes; how do we monitor and deal with cheaters?
- What help is available to students outside the ESL (teaching) department?

Academic Skills

- What are the challenges of teaching students to do "*RESEARCH*"?
- How do we meet these challenges?
- How badly should you punish students for sloppy formatting and citation errors?
- How do you promote academic integrity (preventing plagiarism, citing sources, etc.)?
- How can we promote critical thinking?
- How can we help students integrate better into university life?

Reading and Writing Skills

- Are multiple choice questions easy, fair or killer, when you have a reading test?
- What are some strategies in teaching students to *paraphrase*?
- What are some strategies in teaching students to *summarize*?
- What are some strategies in teaching students to *analyze*?
- What are the major problems in their work when they *try* to analyze?
- What are some different writing tasks students may face in university?
- What do you do when your students are making pungent low-level errors in grammar when you're supposed to be teaching the subjunctive or usage of the participle clause?

Listening Skills

How should we practice and/or test listening?

- Fill-in-the-blank, listen-for-details questions?
- Multiple choice questions?
- Give short answers to dictated questions (i.e., questions are audio only)?
- Long-answer, summary-and-analysis-type questions?
- Complete-the-outline questions?
- Teacher will mark your horrendous “notes”?

How many times should the teacher play the canned listening

Other than ‘in lectures’, what contexts at university demand strong listening skills?

- From this, can you concoct a listening activity that’s not just ‘listen to the CD, take notes and answer the questions’?
- How do you mark ‘note-taking skills’?

Speaking Skills

- How can you inspire discussion in students who are dealing with difficult academic concepts?

Give an example! E.g. “...Say the students are studying Freud's complexes...”

- When students only make a couple presentations a semester, how do you invoke improvement in:

Voice volume
Pronunciation
Organization
Visual aid choice
Research used

- Should an oral interview be used as part of their final grade? Why? Why not?
- How do you negotiate between students who consciously struggle with the material but speak little, and those who speak much but think little?