

## Ring Things

I was doing potty patrol outside in the hallway in deference to my smoke allergy, when the youngest Grafton boy tossed me a pair of those metal rings that magicians take apart and put back together. They sort of look like twisted polished nails. He bet me I couldn't get the pieces untangled. His best time was six seconds. As he left he said a Capuchin monkey had done it in fifteen.

I hate these things. I remember getting them as Christmas presents and deliberately losing them before New Years. I'd twist and tug and pull and then get mad at myself for not being strong enough to just bend them apart. I was sure that was how they did it on TV.

I muttered something about how I was much smarter than the average primate, and worked upstream through the crowded hallway to my classroom. I wasn't really paying attention to the ring things when they came apart: my left hand held one piece and my right the other. A kid brushed past me trying to get into the room and my hands put the pieces back together as I got out of his way. I looked into my hands and saw the loops intertwined.

The bell rang and I started into my usual patter about them getting their homework out, finding their grading pens, writing the date in their notebooks, just getting the class settled down so we could get to work. As I circled the room and spoke, I took the rings apart and put them back together several times. In between messages, I showed the class the rings together and the rings apart. I even noticed a twist and a turn that my right hand made to separate and then rejoin the pieces. The kids wanted to try it themselves, but it was time to start the class. I sat down in the circle with them and we continued speaking German.

Twice during the class I consciously tried to take the pieces apart and couldn't do it. I held the ring things up, announced what I was doing and just couldn't. I made a joke about it and resumed the class.

The period ran long as usual and I was rushing to explain the homework assignment before the bell rang, when I looked down and saw the rings were apart. The kids who were watching laughed and one applauded saying he hadn't thought I could do it. I covered it with some smart remark, repeated the page number of the assignment, and noticed that the rings were together again.

The bell rang, they filed out, and I was happy to return the rings when young Grafton walked in for his class. I tried to show him how well I could do it, but couldn't. He grabbed the rings from my hand and showed me his three-step method. Set it up, turn it, twist it through. I did it his way a couple of times and then started the next class.

Doing the ring things is a lot like writing out lesson plans. I hate doing lesson plans, and I'm always getting in trouble with the administration for not doing them. Part of it is because I don't like taking time from my job to write about how I'm going to do my job.

The other part of it is like Grafton showing me how to do the rings. When I saw how he did it, I could copy it. But I had to start from his point of view; I had to see the problem the way he saw it. If I did, the turn and twist-off were easy. Getting 30 kids to see a problem the way I see it, or vice versa, is much harder.

The thing that really gets me is, I could take the damn rings apart when I wasn't thinking about taking the rings apart. When I was settling the class down, I did it three or four times. Quickly. But when I tried to demonstrate that to the class, when I was thinking about it, I couldn't. Some part of me was getting in the way.

A couple times I've been able to explain it to a class like this. Kids come in thinking foreign language is all about memorizing vocabulary and rules. I've told them everyone can memorize. Even monkeys. It's not putting the information into their heads that's the problem, it's getting the information out. If they've participated in the class and paid attention, the words and the rules are in there; they just can't always get them out when they need them.

It's like a bottle. The neck is narrow and constricts the flow. Practice makes the neck larger and allows more information to get in and out. That's why I give them drills and have them do homework.

I don't always know how this happens inside my own head, and to predict how it will happen for the 30 kids in my class is impossible. On Fridays I sit in my office and write on the lesson plan sheet, "The student will read the selection in German and answer plot questions pertaining to it," or "The student will change present tense sentences into the present perfect tense," or "The student will describe his/her vacation in spoken German," or any of the hundreds of student objectives from the curriculum guide. I know these work, I know they have worked, and I know that they will work again, but I don't know if they'll work this time, for these kids, on these specific dates.

Then it is my job to assess the results. If these objectives work, will I know it? Will I recognize it, if it does? Will I be able to see the learning taking place? Will each of those 30 kids get a chance to demonstrate for me that he can read, or manipulate the grammar, or speak? I don't even know for sure how I did the ring things, and when I tried to demonstrate it, I couldn't.

Part of the problem is the scale. One on one I have a chance, like the kid showing me his way of doing the rings. But these sections of German III have 25 or 30 kids in them. I don't get enough chances to work with each kid; they all need more opportunities to speak. I'm spending too much time slowing down the aggressive kids and trying to encourage the shy ones.

Another part has to do with the unconscious. When I focused on it, I couldn't do it; when I was consciously doing something else, I could do it. So right here in the classroom, in front of 30 other people, the teacher expects the student to perform? That works for some of the kids on some of the days, but how can that work for all of them all the time? How many lesson plans would I need to write?

When I was a student, the hardest thing for me to do in German was to speak it. I always felt like a juggler, trying to keep seventeen balls in the air at the same time. I couldn't speak very well then, but I can now. My German improved by using it, by having to stand up in front of a class and actually speaking German every day. That's how I enlarged the neck of my bottle.

In college we experimented with another method involving bottles. When I drank beer, I could easily speak German. When my buddies and I sat around a table and drank beer, German or American, things seemed clearer and we communicated in German. It must have something to do with releasing tension, or reducing fear, or relaxing. I know it doesn't have much to do with academic ability; I've seen it work for a whole range of people.

Putting these two ideas together I write on the lesson plan sheet, "The student will demonstrate his/her ability to speak German on a variety of topics." One, I figure they have to actually make the words come out of their mouths, and two, I allow them to choose the topics as a way of reducing tension. It's easier to talk about a subject you're interested in.

Sometimes the students plan what they're going to say; some even write it down in the notebook. They say it, and then I quickly ask a follow up question. Usually they blurt out an answer

before they even think about it. Like my hands doing the rings, they somehow flip from their conscious to their sub-conscious and the words just come out.

When that happens I can see it and be confident that learning has taken place. When they realize what they've done, their confidence soars and they really start improving. All of them don't participate at the same rate, they don't realize it at the same rate, and they all have different bottlenecks, but when it works, the light bulb goes on over their heads just like in the comics. My frustration comes from knowing how much better the whole process works when the class is smaller.

My problem as a teacher is how to predict it for each kid, how to promote it for each kid, and how to fit it into the little boxes on the lesson plan sheet. When magicians do the ring things on stage, you never see how they do it because they divert you. You're always looking at the wrong thing at the wrong time. When they do it, it's an illusion, it's an art, it's magic.

When I do it, it's a lesson plan.

DAVID ALLENEDMOND