

Feedback Loops

Orla Ní Cheallacháin

‘Your teaching style suits me perfectly so I’m really happy with the module. I do think you deserve to lecture with more confidence though.’

As I read the form I can hear the self-assured voice of the twenty year old who wrote it. She sits in the front of the class, she is always the first to respond. She appears to have no self-doubt. No one else in the class would have thought to write something like that. They are mostly concerned with what will be on the exam. The words cut through me, made me indignant for a whole afternoon. Who did this teenager (hear the venom of the word) think she was, I heard myself say as my feathers ruffled. She had touched a nerve, of course. I felt uneasy in the role of ‘expert’: the vision of fifty expectant faces looking at me with pens poised gnawed at me almost from the moment I was given the opportunity to teach. Once I began though, I felt confident in that space, I even felt empowered after some particularly good classes. The fear of daring to speak with authority receded, and I felt my feet on the ground again, I felt supported and embodied. But in a moment that feeling was gone. I had only managed to fool myself, I chided, it was an illusion that didn’t fool anybody, not even this self-assured twenty-year old who likes my under-confident teaching style perfectly.

But as three memories returned to me I stopped and thought, perhaps she’s misinterpreting this.

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When I was seven I had a teacher called James Murphy. Seamus Ó Murchú was his school name, translated as all our names were into the Irish language. He used to give us spelling and maths tests every Friday. I remember the classroom precisely, a clarity that usually does not accompany my childhood memories. He used to play his Game Boy with his two index fingers (why not your thumbs, Seamus?!) while we did our tests. During break he would correct them, giving marks out of ten. Anybody who got ‘an-mhaith’ (very good), was given a

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Rowntree Fruit Pastille. We were a small group, less than 10. We queued up one by one in front of his desk, as if going for Holy Communion. If there were ever any Rowntree Fruit Pastilles left, he would squash them all together with his long fingers, topped with even longer finger nails, and he would eat them himself in one go. The image has always stayed with me; disgusting me slightly.

I was a shy person, but a sponge: I soaked up facts. I found comfort in them. I believed in them. I remember two occasions when we were reading stories, practising comprehension. One was about a group of dolphins. Seamus Ó Murchú called them a school of dolphins. I knew he was wrong, I even knew it was a common mistake: a false fact. I put up my hand. ‘Schools are for fish,’ I said. ‘And dolphins, even though they live in the sea, are mammals so they *can’t* be called schools,’ I concluded with the delight I reserved for the delivery of particularly enticing facts. The next day I brought in my encyclopaedia and showed him. Pods: pods of dolphins. There was no boldness in the gesture, just a love of knowledge, one I thought he too must share.

‘Sit down, Orla’.

A self-assured seven-year-old, with no apparent self-doubt.

The second comprehension was a story about the instruments of a symphony orchestra. My father is a conductor. I learnt about symphonies in my mother’s arms as an infant and running around my father’s ankles on Saturday evenings, as he taught young musicians Elgar, Rachmaninoff, Shostakovich. Seamus Ó Murchú said there were three string instruments in an orchestra: the violin, the viola and the cello. I raised my hand, despite myself.

‘Máistir, máistir?!’ I strained in my seat, my hand in the air.

‘Yes, Orla?’ he sighed.

‘You’re forgetting the double bass.’

‘No, Orla, there is no such thing as a double bass.’

‘But my Dad *plays* the double bass,’ I protested. ‘We have one at home.’

‘Sit down, Orla.’

He took my homework notebook and wrote a note to my mother.

Orla is being disruptive, come and see me.

Suddenly, I was bold.

Lesson Number One whispered itself onto my consciousness that day. Authority can be wrong.

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When I was fifteen I had a dramatic horse riding accident. The horse, called Hercules of all things, stumbled over his own feet, threw me, tripped over me and then fell on top of me. I was unconscious for several minutes, and my sister, who witnessed the acrobatics, thought I had died. I was brought to hospital in an ambulance, suffering from a concussion. All I

remember from that night is vomiting violently, and a drunken man in the emergency room leering over me before my mother pushed him away. The following week I was due to take practice tests for my first state exams. I only managed my French exam. I remember I could understand the paper for about ten minutes and then I couldn't remember how to spell diary (or was it dairy?) in either English or French. I failed that exam. I got an F. It was the only F of my life (leaving aside the real Fs, the ones that matter). The effects of the concussion lasted until the real state exams. I could have done better. I got a C.

The following September, I started the senior cycle. In our first French class we were immediately separated into different rooms depending on our grades. My combined F and C had me in the bottom pile. I was in uncharted territory in this room with the so-called bold girls – girls who smoked and didn't give a damn: the hopeless cases. Mrs. Decourcy, a squat woman with tight, short curly hair and big bulging eyes, was in charge of dividing us. We were each given the opportunity to present our case as to why we should be 'allowed' to attend the 'higher' level French class: for the girls who brimmed with potential. I needed higher level French for my university plans. I had no intention of letting a horse called Hercules get in my way. I approached the bench. I had never met Mrs. Decourcy before, so all she knew about me was that I was at the bottom of the pile. She sneered at me down her nose as I came within her line of sight. I told her about my concussion, how my results were an aberration. I was jovial with her about how there had been some terrible mistake. She looked at me and said: 'It's up to you. I'll give you all the rope you wish to hang yourself with.' Years later, after I got a distinction in my language degree, I thought of writing to Mrs. Decourcy to tell where that rope had taken me. Although it wasn't really about her, she did teach me something.

Lesson Number Two: alchemy is surely a better pedagogical aspiration than gate keeping.

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From the age of five to sixteen I was the piano student of Ann Jones. She was considered one of the best teachers in the music school. She got results. I showed musical potential at an early age and so she took me in. Ann Jones had her room at the top of a three storey building. There were only three rooms up there and the head office, which itself had an air of foreboding. None of the energy of the lower floors, energy created by people passing through, made its way up here. Four closed doors down a long empty corridor. I was on my own up there. By the time I got to the top of the stairs, my heart was always pounding. For years I thought I had a defective heart. There were nine flights of stairs to get up to the third floor, but the pounding in my chest was at odds with the physical effort. I had to knock, wait to be let in, and then sit in a chair while the previous student finished up. The room was always full of dusty sunshine which fell across the two grand pianos. Ann Jones always sat to the right of her student, close enough to be almost touching. With a hammering heart and sweaty palms, it was my turn; a battery of commands:

‘Scales first: B-flat minor melodic... No, I said B-flat minor melodic. That was harmonic. Melodic, I said melodic! Hopefully your arpeggios will be better...’

Silence.

‘Chromatic scales: hands together, contrary motion beginning on F-sharp. Octaves: hands together, E-flat major. Together, Orla! Play together!’ she roared, all the while, furiously scribbling in my notebook, filling it with double-underlined words, in caps. It was often worse when we moved on to pieces of music.

‘Count... COUNT! 123 123, 123 123, 123 123! It’s twos against threes, Orla. How many times do we have to go over this? Why aren’t you practising?! Why don’t you ever do enough practice?!’

I cried many times in that room, tears met with a wall of silent fury. I was a child. Other days it would go differently. It was all sweetness, praise. ‘You’re so musical, Orla. That’s beautiful, try it again but this time feel the music more. Imagine you’re in an old cathedral in France, can you imagine the sound of that silence, that reverie. Now draw that silvery light with your tone... good.’

Those days it was wonderful, gold stars replaced the screaming CAPS. I always did the same amount of practice though, on average. Ann Jones did get results, and in the process gave me a beautiful gift. I can play almost anything on the piano now, not perfectly, but well enough to reset myself for another day, but it came with a high cost. Years later, Ann Jones told me that she got results from her students because she used a particular method.

‘You scream enough to be frightening’, she said, ‘on the bad days and the good, but add just enough sweetness to motivate students to want to work to please you.’

I was getting those double-underlined words, those walls of silent fury no matter how hard I worked: the gold stars were a ruse. The faint shadow of the anxiety she cultivated in me for over a decade follows me still up the stairs to my supervisor, who also lives on the third floor, down another long, empty corridor. She never asks me why I haven’t done enough practice, but I hear the voice all the same, accusing me.

Lesson Number Three: Coercion has no role in pedagogy.

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And so, my bright student, my self-assured, committed scholar, in the end you were right. You did see a lack of confidence: not in myself, in my knowledge or in my expertise as I supposed you meant. Rather you saw someone untangling her past, disentangling from it, attempting to save you from the injuries she sustained on her journey from pupil to teacher. You saw someone tentatively, cautiously, risking a reimagining of what a teacher could be. And so, I tried not to give definitive answers because I wanted you to find your own. I refused to silence your ambition with the authority of my position because risk is creative. And I refused to bully you into working hard because I wanted to encourage not coerce you. Perhaps your pedagogical models are more like mine and so you saw my openness as uncertainty, my

gentleness as shyness, my rejection of that kind of authorial voice as insecurity. All I was trying to do, imperfectly, was to step aside so you could shine through.