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Social Psychology and ELT: The IKEA Effect [1]

‘The Pleasures of DIY’

The egg theory: The late 1940s saw the advent of ready-made baking mixes in the American kitchen. Yet while housewives were happy to use these for biscuits and piecrusts, they shunned the ones for cakes. But why should this be so? Manufacturers pondered this problem a lot before the answer finally dawned on them: *piecrusts and biscuits were not self-contained courses, but cakes were!* That meant that a housewife could use such products for, say, a pie and still feel that the end product was her own, but this was impossible in the case of the cakes! The solution to the problem was ingenious – somehow they would have to find a way to allow people to claim ‘ownership’ of the cake they baked. Marketing expert E. Dichter suggested that they left out the eggs from the mixture, so that housewives would have to add fresh ones together with milk and oil. Sales soared! Brilliant!! ¹ (Ariely 2010)

Origami Artists 1: How much do we value our own creations – just because WE were the ones who created them? Dan Ariely (2010) set himself the task of finding out. He gave some students a sheet of paper together with some instructions of how to construct a paper frog or a paper crane. He explained to them that their creations would belong to him, but that they could buy them back afterwards if they so desired. So the students tried their hand at origami and after some time managed to produce an animal of sorts (whether scientists would recognize the species is a different matter... ☺). Ariely then asked them to say how much they would be prepared to pay for it so they could keep it. On average they offered 25 cents.

Yet was this a reasonable offer given how much the creature was worth – or had the creators overvalued it because they had made it themselves? There was one way of finding out. Ariely showed his subjects some perfect paper frogs and cranes made by true origami experts. How much would they be prepared to pay for these? Amazingly, the answer was...around 5 cents! The results speak loud and clear: The students valued their deformed, mutant specimens about 5 times as highly as the others!! *We value our work not because of its inherent qualities, but because it's ours!*

Applications in the field of ELT: The implications of this discovery for ELT are far-reaching. Obviously, we want students (ss) to take pride in what they are doing as this will seriously affect their level of motivation (Dornyei 2001). A number of principles immediately suggest themselves:

Get ss to create something: If Ariely's subjects had been asked to simply fold a piece of paper and then buy it they would have laughed in his face. The reason they were prepared to fork out 25 cents is because they had created something recognisable (albeit sometimes only vaguely!) as a frog or a crane. Similarly, asking ss to transform endless columns of sentences is a recipe for boredom. Instead, we should focus more on activities which yield a tangible end-product. For instance, we could ask them to

write a poem (e.g. a haiku!) or a ghost story perhaps. Maybe they could give a short talk about the history of their favourite team, or write an ad for an imaginary product (for more ideas see for example Hadfield & Hadfield 1990 or Wicks 2000).

Do not make it too easy for ss: Many of the activities we ask our ss to do, require too little of them. All too often we give them a cloze text together with the words and they simply have to slot them in. Educationally sound though this may be, it is the equivalent of the ready-made cake mixture. I shudder to think what would happen if we asked our ss how much they would be prepared to pay for such a completed paragraph!! ☺ Even if we do need to keep using such techniques for reasons of face-validity or perceived usefulness, I believe they should make up a smaller part of our ss' 'classroom diet'...²

Get the balance right: So what is the right balance? What is the point beyond which ss feel that what they have made is their own creation? In the kitchen Sandra Lee came up with the winning '70/30 Semi-Homemade' formula! (Ariely 2010). She argued that cooks would be happy to use 70% ready-made materials, provided the rest was their own personal contribution. Ariely wanted to test this and in another experiment he asked his subjects to work with Lego bricks. Sure enough they fell in love with their Lego creations, despite the fact that they were identical to everyone else's! (ibid) So this is the challenge facing us! Think of the appeal of jig-saw puzzles or modelling – perhaps we could give ss the 'skeleton' of an essay and ask them to flesh it out; maybe we could give them the drab outline of a short story and ask them to add descriptions and adjectives.

Origami and article-writing: Ariely also discovered something else: not only did people overvalue their own creations, but they were unaware that they were alone in doing so!³ Another experiment showed they genuinely believed others viewed their misshapen animals in the same, positive light! This is not always the case of course... There are people like myself who, such experiments notwithstanding, remain absolutely objective in their appraisal of their own work. It is true, I am slightly miffed by the fact that my articles still have not received any 'Duke of Edinburgh' awards or indeed that my name has not yet made it to the 'Honours List' for my services to the ELT world. Still, I am sure it is only a matter of time... Till then I carry my articles around wherever I go, especially when I travel, since as Oscar Wilde put it 'One should always have something sensational to read in the train...' ☺

¹ It is not hard to fool one's brain – esp if in doing so we appear in a more positive light! (Fine 2005)

² There are reward mechanisms in our brains which gives us a dopamine boost every time we solve a problem; the harder the problem, the bigger the boost (Nettle 2005).

³ In fact, this is true of almost all of our cognitive biases (Sutherland 1999).

References

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