

## Learning Matters

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**W**hat you see may be what you get.

My father was telling me about someone he knows who was entered in a spelling competition. Part of it was conducted by post,

and in due course he received a letter telling him, "You have made 14 mistakes."

Such information will never communicate much without the context it definitively depends on. We need to know the scale of the operation. And what a mistake is. Teachers are often required to use a code of some kind when marking – assessing or evaluating – students' work. "WO" might mean the word order is wrong, or "VT" might mean the same thing about a verb tense. Students often think and perform with a broader scope than these atomised reactions, however, and so the teacher often resorts to writing "unclear" in the margin. This creates ambiguity. Does the teacher mean, "I am unclear about what you mean here", or is it a self-reflexive remark, a kind of challenge to the student to work out what this self-defining comment signifies?

A Pass result sounds good, unless you find out that everybody who takes the test passes, or that there are layers above called things like Distinction. Getting 50% may not sound very good unless you find out (will you?) that few people get more than that. And none of this means much if you lack the relevant degree of competitiveness.

Teachers and students tend to internalise, materialise and literalise things like grades. I've heard a teacher say, without a shade of irony and any inkling that the comment might release other meanings, of a student, "Oh, she thinks she's a D, but really she's just a C," as if the particular alphabetical grades for class levels the school in question used were somehow real. Students in self-access centres used to say things to me like, "What's my level?" (or "What my level?"), as if I could perhaps say by measuring their height against their mother tongue.

Well, actually, the letter my father's friend received went like this: "Congratulations! You've made 14 mistakes."

There's a thought-provoking reminiscence by the Secretary-General of the UN in a collection of memoirs called *When We Were Young*. In his spoken

English class at school in Ghana, Kofi Annan says, "the professor put a large sheet of white paper on the wall. The paper had a little black dot on the right-hand corner. When the professor asked, 'Boys, what do you see?' we all shouted together: 'A black dot!' The professor stepped back and said, 'So, not a single one of you saw the white sheet of paper. You only saw the black dot. This is the awful thing about human nature. People never see the goodness of things and the broader picture.'"

How often do teachers suggest students read through a text and underline all the words that they do know and understand, rather than the more usual reverse?

What happens when we move from the particular dot to the general sheet (and vice versa)?

The basic idea of research is that you look at a black dot and as a result of doing so enable a deeper understanding of the white sheet. The tricky bit is doing it in such a way that the deeper understanding is also broader – that it can be understood by people who aren't just working on the adjacent dot. Research is structured as the testing of hypotheses, and based on the assertion that if your idea holds true in one situation then it can be trusted to also hold true in others with characteristic similarity. The edifice of testing (in which I am often to be found wandering and wondering around) is built on the same principle. Candidates are asked to do things that are indicative of knowledge and abilities that (would) apply elsewhere. If you can use phrasal verb X correctly in situation Y then it will be assumed that you can use lots of other phrasal verbs in plots of other situations. It gets trickier when you want to generalise further than this, but statistics are amazing things, and, as long as candidates don't mess up the game by cramming excessively and twisting the test into a test of taking the test, then a great deal of general information about ability can be interpreted from particular performances.

This is in keeping with our strong tendency to latch onto the black dots. We all do things like make judgments about someone we're meeting for the first time according to the way they shake hands. We firmly believe that it doesn't matter where we dip a spoon into a bowl of soup – it will taste the same throughout. If someone wants to paint a wall, they may put a very small amount, hardly bigger than a dot, of the paint they want to test somewhere on the wall, and trust the hypothesis that this sample will generalise to the whole population of dots that make up the wall.

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Learning and teaching and materials writing and test production and so on are all dotty. But if done with a proper degree of self-consciousness and modesty about their size and pride in their pretensions then they can make meaningful links to the sheet.

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