

What's Your Sentence?

Much of what we do is on autopilot. But when we question and understand why we are doing what we do, everything changes for the better.



By Ron Piper

Retirement brings with it the opportunity to reflect, to take account and above all to ask the question, *So, what was that all about?* I retired from a career in education that included working as a classroom English teacher, heading up a large department, working as a senior leader and, finally, training teachers. In all that time – nearly 40 years – I worked passionately, with great conviction and ever driven by what I see and understand now to have been an unconscious but unarticulated pro-social intent. However, whether because of lack of time (I'm sure many teachers can understand this one) or just knowing that I was just good at my job, I never took the opportunity to fully explain to myself my mission or purpose. The weeks leading to my retirement, though, prompted me to focus on this question.

Clare Boothe Luce, an adviser to J F Kennedy, once said to him that *A great man is one sentence*. Without a single sentence to shape thinking and behaviour, the greater the chances of becoming distracted, confused and being less impactful. So, what was my single, unarticulated sentence? What was the single sentence that had lain dormant, nestling beneath a vague

pro-social intent that had got me out of bed every morning to suffer inept political interference and to work with some very challenging and often unappreciative students? After some reflection it came down to this: *I'm here to help people to find – or re-discover – their voice*. Once I repeated this to myself, my career made perfect sense. This is what I had been doing. And formulating this sentence was very timely and important to my new career as a coach and trainer. Clarity around mission and purpose is an essential part not only of business success but also to personal well-being. In my case, helping people to find or re-discover their voices will guide and shape the ethos of my business and make me a very happy person at the same time.

I didn't of course manage to crystallise my one sentence unaided. I am indebted to Robert Dilts and the logical levels. Looking back on my career, I must confess to spending far too much time concerning myself with the lower skills and behaviour levels at the expense of looking upward. Schools, after all, work on a medical model of diagnosing teachers' skills deficits and then remediating them. But without looking upwards to see who we are and what it is we are doing, and for what purpose, we can so easily become disillusioned and frustrated, which can have hugely detrimental consequences in the classroom. Perhaps schools need to pay equal attention to up-thinking as well as upskilling? And what better way to do this than by using NLP tools in a coaching-styled learning environment?

Using your sentence to save time

Teacher education and teacher support need to take this thinking into account. I think I was fortunate in that for all my career I had

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embraced a pro-social intent, albeit unconsciously, which served as a driver. But I tend to think now how much better I would have been had I planned every lesson, designed every scheme of work and trained every teacher with *I am here to help people to find – or re-discover – their voice* at the very forefront of my thinking; written at the top of every planning page. I could then have evaluated the plan far more easily: *Does this lesson plan help pupils to find their voice? No ... then throw it out.* The time that could have been saved!

Come the autumn I will again be training school mentors with responsibility for trainee teachers on teaching practice. My belief is that a trainee teacher's experience of their PGCE course is only as good as the relationship they have with their mentor. But that relationship is largely influenced by the mentor's sense of mission and identity: *What is it that I'm doing and for what purpose? And what is my single sentence?* The mentor's thinking around, and the answer to these questions, will have a direct bearing on the success and well-being of the trainee teacher. Thoughts prompt emotions that create actions that get responses. Everything starts and ends with what you think. But for some mentors attending my trainings, my focus on the mentor / trainee relationships comes as something of a surprise. There is often an expectation that I will guide them through a handbook brim-full of administrative details covering the frequency of lesson observations, assignment requirements and report deadlines

that can so easily eclipse the teacher consciousness forming conversations.

Thinking of my own 'sentence,' I often begin a mentor training meeting by asking *Who are you when you are mentoring your trainee teacher?* The range of responses is interesting and fully explains the variation in trainees' experiences of their PGCE courses. For some mentors, the job is seen as *overseeing the progress and development of trainees using the Teachers' Standards as a framework for reference.* For others, the job is about *creating the next generation of teachers and passing on a little bit of my teaching DNA. Opportunity for professional immortality!* If Alexander Pope was right in saying that *language is the dress of thought*, then clearly with these two examples, it is possible to see the huge divergence of thinking around identity and how, of course, this would impact a mentor / trainee relationship.

I often bemused trainees at the beginning of their PGCE courses by asking *What do you want pupils to say about you when you retire or How do you want pupils to remember you in years to come when they have long left school?* After the shock of thinking about their retirement at the beginning of their training course, trainees responded in very similar ways. No trainees ever said they wanted to be remembered for their outstanding differentiation and neither did they want to hear a pupil say that their assessment for learning was awesome. And yet how much of a premium do PGCE courses and the Teachers' Standards place on these aspects of teacher education? Most trainees wanted to hear things such as *Mr Smith always had time to explain* or *Ms Smith never made me feel like an idiot in class.* My next question to the trainees was: *So, if you know what you want to hear at the end of your career, what will you do on a daily, lesson-by-lesson basis to make it happen?* It is this question that provides the starting point for thinking about *What's my sentence?* ■

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