

## English Through Digital Thinking

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### Introduction:

On April 5, 2007, Dr. John Fanselow gave a workshop, entitled “English Through Digital Thinking” as part of the English Language Program Faculty Development Seminar series, held in Tachikawa Hall. Professor Fanselow recently retired from his position at International Pacific College in New Zealand, where he spent the last ten years serving as president. John is Professor Emeritus at Teachers College, Columbia University, where he taught for thirty years; had a scholarship established in his name in 1997; and received a distinguished alumni award from his alma mata in 2005, from which he received his PhD in 1971. John also served as past president and second vice president of TESOL International; past president of the New York State TESOL chapter; has been listed as one of the 30 ESL pioneers by *TESOL* magazine in 1999; was a Peace Corps volunteer; and is the author of three books: *Breaking Rules*, *Contrasting Conversations*, and *Try the Opposite*. John is currently affiliated with the International Pacific University in Japan and continues to lecture widely. He is in the process of writing another book, the content of which he drew

upon for his workshop.

### Context:

John’s interest in teacher training began as a Peace Corps volunteer in Africa, where he developed a keen interest in observation. Inspired by John Dewey and others who believe that we learn best by doing, John has incorporated this philosophy into his teaching. But how do we know what to learn, how to learn, and how can we sustain this process? This topic formed the focus of John’s workshop, where he challenged teachers to consider their roles as teachers. What follows are some highlights from the workshop, based on the main themes of John’s talk.

### The role of the teacher:

Teachers often discourage and sometimes even prevent learning autonomy. John suggests that teachers sometimes need to get out of the way so that students can learn. John likens teaching to tour guiding, where the same set of information is given over and over again without any significant input from those it is directed to. John suggests that the role of the teacher is to elicit rather

than solicit information from the students. John notes, "Usually our role as teachers is to make people feel helpless; we take their tongues away. And then we say that our students are shy and can't express themselves in English." John suggests that from a student's perspective, this might be interpreted as, "What does the teacher want us to say?" Teachers need find ways to empower students. One way to do this is for the teacher to explain less; to let the students create meaning on their own. Yet as John notes, "We feel that we have to teach something to the students." What role does information play in the process of learning?

#### **Information:**

Information itself is neutral; it is the learner who assigns meaning to the information. John reminds us of the need to personalize information or to contextualize it through the use of real world knowledge, including previous associations. He used the example of common associations made about Chicago, based on age, gender and other factors. John noted that boys often associate this city with the Chicago Bulls; girls often associate it with the musical "Chicago" and their parents might associate it with gangster movies. John points out that the learner has to depend on his or her experience when interpreting information or when responding to a

task set by the teacher. What do these associations mean?

#### **Miss-takes:**

John doesn't allow his students to use erasers. Why? Because he wants them to learn from their "miss-takes" and to use them to gauge their progress. John refers to "miss-takes" as predictions, educated guesses that reveal what the learner knows and what he or she is trying to find out. John likes to have students work together in pairs or in triplets to foster the exchange of information, or to contextualize the learning process in a community setting. Associations are contingent upon experience, but what is the role of information in this process?

#### **Digital bits:**

John uses the term "digital bits" to refer to units of knowledge. He favors this term because for him it is neutral and can be used to represent groupings and amounts of information in a way that letters and words can't. He extends the metaphor to include "external" and "internal" bits, the first of which refers to information currently beyond our knowledge; the latter of which refers to information that we have internalized, personalized through our own experience. John suggests that for students, too many external bits (or information) is "noise" and should therefore be reduced if learning it is to

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take place. John suggested that if students seem to be suffering from information overload, that the teacher seek alternative approaches that allow students to respond in other ways, such as by drawing. John spoke of the value of categorizing, grouping and coding information as ways to encourage the individualization and conceptualization of information. Personalizing information serves to activate students and influences their attitudes about learning, including the satisfaction they derive from the process. Many students feel that learning English is too difficult, that it is simply beyond their ability. John notes, "Of course it is difficult if you do it that way!" John suggests that it is what people know that makes a difference, rather than what they don't know. The question is how to tap into this reservoir of knowledge. John suggests once again that teachers have to explore ways of encouraging students to personalize information, and encourage them to use what they already know. John further extends his metaphor of digital bits by making a distinction between what he calls "Ah" and "Oh" bits, with the former generally referring to inquiry, the question in the student's mind, and the latter as revelation, when the student discovers the answer.

Thank you, John, for the many insights that you shared with us!