

Inventing New Rules

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In 1987 John Fanselow brought out his long awaited magnum opus *Breaking Rules* (Longman, New York). One of his theses in the book is that we are all bound by a mass of behavioural and mostly unconscious rules from the moment we enter the classroom till the moment we leave it. "Examples of rules we all follow in our teaching are easy to think of. Who has trained us all to say: 'Okay now, we're going to have a test.'... I have looked in vain for classes where shifts are not usually marked by 'Okay now'".

His suggestion to the teaching profession is that we should hunt down and dig out the rules that govern our interactions with students. The way to explore the implications of our hidden rules is to break them, either by simply doing the opposite or by substituting outside classroom behaviour for normal in-class patterns. Here are some examples that Fanselow suggests as opposites to petty classroom rules :

<i>Rule</i>	<i>Opposite</i>
Ask students to produce correct language.	Encourage students to produce incorrect utterances, e.g., to parody their own accent in the target language. (The example is mine, not Fanselow's.)
Get students to underline words in a passage that they do not understand.	Tell students to blank out the words they don't understand or to outline the words they <i>do</i> know.

An example he gives of importing outside behaviour into the classroom is in the area of reading. Away from classrooms and libraries people lounge and put their feet up while reading, sometimes they listen to music and eat and drink while reading. Why not do exactly the same while reading in class?

Application of *Breaking Rules* to my own work

I found that the thoughts above started me thinking about how I use space when I am teaching. Whenever I enter a new room to work with a new group I mark one corner or part of the edge of the room as my base point. I will often put a bag there, or a piece of clothing or some books. This 'home' spot is usually the window nearest the official teacher-end of the room.

I will normally also establish a couple of square metres in front of the class to the left of the board as the group sees it as the place I mostly lead the group from.

The problem with these rules of mine is that, applied invariably to tens of different rooms and halls, they are very boring for *me*. They bring a sense of security, a feeling of having been there before even when I haven't, but they do not encourage me to think fresh thoughts or do new things. More seriously, my impoverished use of the space available is tedious for the participants. From their point of view, why should the teacher be screwed to the same bit of the floor?

My way of breaking these sterile rules has been to try and teach from all over the room and to observe participant interactions from low corners and high perches.

One result of this is that I can observe people from many different angles in different lights (I mean physical light). Another is that when I move to a different part of the room, it leads the participants to experience the space differently.

I wonder how *you* use space in the rooms you work in. One way to check on this is to draw a ground-plan of your room and to shade in the areas you use a lot heavily and the ones you use little lightly, leaving territory that is not yours unshaded. There may be good 'objective' reasons for the way you use the space available but these should be questioned too, if you want to follow the Fanselow insight.

When I read *Breaking Rules* it was easy for me to think about my own use of classroom space. At this point I have to be careful and wonder if there aren't other areas of my work which are less easy for me to get at. I have found two good ways to assess these hard-to-get-at areas in my own work: ask others about their rule systems and rules they might like to break; ask others about rules they have already broken. I think most teachers have favourite areas they like to look at - your favourite area might be one that I don't want to look at in my work but might be a real eye-opener for me.

Let us look at some of the rules that teachers have identified and broken.

The teacher must always be in the classroom during the lesson (Rudolf, a Studium teacher in a Polish university). Rudolf leaves the room while his lecturer students are doing a language exercise in pairs or small groups. Breaking the

'continual presence' rule had clearly been quite a step in Rudolf's practice. I remember being amazed when, in 1975, I first heard of a colleague doing this. At first I thought he was wicked, and then very daring. It took me some time to imitate him.

The teacher must play-act feeling fine even when she doesn't (three women colleagues from the Studia in Poland). One of these colleagues was teaching in Edinburgh - she had to supply-teach a secondary school class at 8:00 am, first period. The need to do this was sprung on her at the last moment. She just went in there and told the students what she felt. She described the feeling of liberation in doing this with great vigour in our training group.

The teacher opens lessons and closes them (Rudolf). Nowadays he busies himself with shuffling books and papers at the beginning of the lesson so that the participants start talking to each other.

A teacher sends notes to parents to complain about the bearer of the note or to announce a forthcoming event (an Austrian teacher). This colleague started sending notes home to parents praising their children's excellent work! Some parents reacted with astonishment. She really had broken a rule and invented a new one.

Always follow listening or reading in class with an exercise (Mike, Cambridge). He simply did no follow-up.

The native speaking EFL teacher speaks a reduced code in class (Paul, Cambridge). Even with post beginner groups Paul speaks at normal speed and level of distinctness. He does not falsify the language data he is offering his students. This is a major rule-breaking as it defies the habit of simplified code that parents often use with very small children. Many of his students complain bitterly over the first week or two of term. I wonder how many of native speaking teachers will pompously or colloquially 'enrich' their speech when working with very high level students in the hope of 'giving them more to chew on'.

Doubt over rule systems

Asking others about their rule systems does not always give one neat, clear answers. There is part of me that agrees with Paul's 'no concessions' approach to post-beginners - there is part of me that feels he is being steely unkind.

Another area of doubt lies in the area of timekeeping and time boundaries. People who I have great respect for as professionals say categorically that one must start and finish training sessions on time. This is certainly the rule imposed by the

DUET trainers (mostly from the University of East Anglia in Norwich). When they run their English literature-cum-therapy workshops the group leader simply leaves the room on the stroke of the hour when the session is meant to finish. The idea behind this is that firm time boundaries offer a secure frame for puzzling psychological work. Colleagues like Saxon Menne and Andrew Wright work to the same principle.

People whose teaching and psychodrama work I much appreciate feel that time is elastic and that sessions should end when the work is done. (They are, of course, working in residential situations in which the participants do not have to rush home to pick up children, etc).

I see strict timekeeping by the teacher/leader as a form of respect for the participants' outside-the-classroom lives and at the same time a form of disrespect for what is going on in the group in the classroom.

On this one I do not know where I stand. In practice I vacillate between the two rules.

Breaking the mould

Fanselow writes :

"Ultimately I break rules, and invite you to join me, to see more clearly what we each are capable of and how our preconceived ideas sometimes limit this capability. If we realise how much is within us it is more likely we will be able to aid our students in coming to the same realisation. Such conscious realisation, paradoxically, leads in my experience to more freedom, for as we become aware of a greater range of rules on a conscious level, we are able to use a greater range unconsciously..."

The need for Fanselow's approach is acute in a profession like teaching with its banes of predictability, déjà-vu, staleness and routine. My daughter Lola is four years older than my son Martin. They went to the same secondary school. I once heard them talking about a teacher of Martin's whom she had four years earlier. Martin retold a joke the teacher had cracked and Lola told him this same man had told the same joke at that point in the term (early November) four years earlier. Lola foretold some of his other November and December jokes. She turned out to be quite accurate! Maybe he should have read *Breaking Rules*.