

Teachers need to join the teenage fan club

By Herbert Puchta

Adults should seek to understand the emotional challenges that young people face and bring their students' heroes into class



Stars in their eyes ... pop singer Lady Gaga is mobbed by fans in Paris.
Photograph: Marc Piasecki/FilmMagic

Most teachers of teenage students have been there more often than not – another lesson, carefully planned, is dying on its feet. Students take turns glancing at their watches every 20 seconds, and their faces all too clearly reveal what's in their minds: another boring lesson to be sat through.

Are they learning anything? No. Learning requires emotional engagement. Only then do certain chemicals, such as dopamine

and adrenaline, get released in our brains, and initiate chemical processes that lead to the modification of synapses. Without modification of synapses, no learning takes place, hence there is no learning without emotional engagement.

So no wonder that teachers creating their own materials, and course book writers in search of motivating content for teens, frequently produce materials that look like teen magazines with no shortage of glossy photos of the stars from the world of pop, cinema and show business. And yet, it is these very materials that once used in classrooms often get even more yawns from the students.

Why should this be so? Some surprising answers and clear suggestions of what could be done instead to engage teens better come from educational theory. In his book *Romantic Understanding*, [Kieran Egan](#), professor of education at Simon Fraser University in British Columbia, offers fascinating insights that lead to a fundamentally different understanding of the teenage world and an alternative model of teaching teens.

According to those insights, teens – as cool as they may seem on the surface – often feel, deep down, threatened by the world. One reason for their insecurity is caused by the fact that they ask themselves questions that are of an existentially threatening nature, because teens cannot find any answers to them: Will I be successful in life? Will I be able to find a good job and earn good money one day? When will my parents die? When will I die? What happens when I do? Who will miss me when I die? etc.

Although the world of teens is basically a contact culture, they hardly ever share their real fears with others, and this often leads to a feeling of loneliness and the assumption that they are the only ones in the world suffering from such problems. The only way out of this situation seems to lie in trying not to be an individual – not an easy task given the particular phase in their lives is also about developing their sense of self, their identity – and so they engage in copying each other: wearing the same brands of T-shirts and trainers, adoring the same kind of heroes and heroines, and finding the same kind of things either "awesome" or "gross" (current UK teen expressions for good and bad).

Such behaviour, together with their choice of heroes, often seems to suggest superficiality to the adult observer. But it's anything but

that. When teens choose their idols – the likes of Lady Gaga and Jay-Z maybe – they do so because they intuitively feel connected with what they perceive as the best human qualities through their heroes, whereas for adults every single one of those stars may well be representative of a tinsel world.

Why the difference? Teens project on to their heroes the qualities they believe are needed in order to successfully master the challenges of a threatening world, and whereas it may be true that some of those heroes are pretty scandalous and superficial people themselves, the qualities teens see in them are important human values: love, courage, creativity, tolerance, endurance, engagement, solidarity, passion and especially the ability to have got themselves into a place where they are admired and approved of by a great number of other people, something that many teens seek for themselves.

It is through projection and identification that teens get in contact with those apparently superhuman qualities, and gradually discover that they themselves have some of those qualities within themselves.

Taking such processes seriously and selecting content in the form of stories that support teenagers' natural search for positive human qualities and values will not only lead to more emotional engagement and hence higher levels of motivation in otherwise reluctant students. It also helps develop the students own cognitive tools by helping them to understand that all human knowledge and achievement was once just a dream in someone's mind.

Imagine a class where a teacher is working on first if-clauses with her students. The teacher gets her class to read or listen to the true story about "The Subway Hero", American [Wesley Autrey](#). He is standing one day on a subway platform in New York City with his two daughters aged four and six, when suddenly, a man suffering from an epileptic fit falls from the platform and lands between the rail tracks. The train is about to arrive.

Autrey estimates the distance between the ground and the lower edge of the train as maybe 65cm. (And this is your chance to get the key language in) "If nobody does anything, the young man will get killed! But if I jump down and lie on top of him, maybe I can hold him down and save his life!" These may be the thoughts in Autrey's mind. A split second later Autrey jumps off the platform

and holds the young man firmly down on the ground, while the train rolls into the station. Both men survive unhurt.

Content like this is far more likely to grab students' attention than pop stuff. It is emotionally engaging and more memorable. So students will not only remember the content better, but also the language itself. And finally, stories such as this one are far more likely to trigger responses from students. When asked what she liked about the Autrey story, a 14-year-old student said, "This has made me think!"

Herbert Puchta is co-author of methodology and course books, including English in Mind (CUP) and is currently president of the International Association of Teachers of English as a foreign Language