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# (Wo)man the barricades!

Tessa Woodward learns from a new kind of professional development.

Over the many years I have worked in the lovely profession of ELT, I have learnt masses of things in many different ways: by attending training courses, by observing and being observed, by reading and writing, by listening to language students telling me what works best for them, by going to conferences, and by bringing my outside interests, like music and drama, into class with me. But this last year I actually got started on some new learning, mainly because I became irritated by a recurrent unfairness! Let me explain.

## Getting a fair balance

When I was lucky enough, back in the 1980s, to be invited onto speaker panels and to give plenary and keynote speeches at events for teachers, I often found myself to be the only woman on the podium. I noticed and minded, but I had the feeling, back then, that things were improving. Pretty soon, I thought, I would have women companions up there with me. So I ploughed on over the years, just trying to make my own contributions to the field.

Last year, I was still lucky enough to be invited to share my thoughts publicly as a plenary speaker on a number of occasions. And, several times again, I found myself, as a woman speaker, in a very small minority – sometimes a minority of one.

'Hang on!' I thought to myself. 'It's 2012. The profession is stuffed full of women teachers. There are, I think, more women academic directors than there used to be. Lots of people who select speakers for conferences are women. So, how come, at plenary or keynote speaker level, in the UK, I am still looking around for female chums to join me up on the podium?'

I sent an exploratory email around to some colleagues, explaining how I felt and why I thought it important to have a good gender balance of presenters at ELT events in the UK. I got a lot of supportive messages back. So then I decided to do something about it.

## Getting on the campaign trail

I have never actually started any kind of campaign before. Maybe, gentle readers, you have? Perhaps you have been active in trying to improve the lot of teachers whose mother tongue is not English, or of students with dyslexia or a visual impairment. Maybe you have strong feelings that in ELT we could all do something about globalisation, the use of plastics or climate change, and have been doing your bit to raise awareness. If so, then you may already have been learning the sorts of things listed here as advice for those interested in starting any kind of campaign:

- Analyse why you feel the way you do. Then think of a single, positive, simple, doable step you can take to ameliorate the situation you feel is unfair or unfortunate.
- Give it a catchy name.
- Explore the idea with as many friends and colleagues as you can so that it becomes clearer and more realistic.
- Build an email list of those interested and keep in contact with your support group as you go along. They will keep you 'real'.
- Read on the topic and on parallel topics to learn more, to see it from more angles and also to see if anybody is already doing what you want to do.
- Meet people working on parallel campaigns. They will have learnt the hard way how to start and can help you with short cuts. (*The Disabled Access Friendly* team are my early mentors.)
- Build an ever broader and more inclusive coalition of individuals and groups.
- From the thinking, discussing, reading and learning so far, start to develop the clear, positive language you need to talk about your concern (without hectoring or whining!).
- Talk about your own experience and be clear about why it matters.
- Set up an email address.
- Register a domain for a website.
- Design a logo.

- Plan a website. Make sure it is completely ready before you launch it as people will probably only visit it once (especially if it has blank pages with 'Coming soon' written on them!).
- Make sure people interested in your website or campaign can take away something free that is useful to them (whether this is a lesson plan, a reading list or a T-shirt!).
- Record in text, audio or visual means everything you do, including events, talks, articles and meetings so that you can capitalise on it all.
- Write information pieces for newsletters and websites, but check first what length and type of offering the editor or web host is prepared to accept.
- Work out what would help your cause: A free meeting room at an upcoming teachers' conference? A link on a website? The cost of hosting your own website?
- Contact groups you think may be interested in sponsoring you and suggest a few easy ways they can help you. What can you do to help them too?

This is what I have been learning how to do since March 2013, when I set about creating *The Fair List UK*, an award for excellence of gender balance in presenters at ELT events in the UK. Will all this help my teaching, teacher training, writing and editing? Well, I believe that if you do something you feel is right and which energises you, it will spill over into all kinds of areas of life, including work. And the most important thing, perhaps, for someone in education is that I'm learning!



Tessa Woodward is a teacher, teacher trainer, writer and editor. She has been involved in ELT for over 30 years. She is currently a freelance writer and editor. She is also a member of the British Association of Professional Teachers (BAPT).

thefairlist@vlast.co.uk