

# Why Don't Teachers Learn What Learners Learn?

## Taking the Guesswork Out with Action Logging

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*By Tim Murphey*

### **Part I: Different Perceptions:: A Problem?**

In 1984 Dick Allwright wrote an article entitled “Why Don’t Learners Learn What Teachers Teach?-The Interaction Hypothesis.” He answered his question in part by showing that students have their own perceptions of what goes on in a classroom. That is, when asked after class what went on, most students usually gave different versions. So if different students, because of different perceptual filters, learn different things from the same communal experience and teachers cannot be too sure what they are actually learning, why don’t teachers try to learn what learners are learning?

In communicatively oriented classrooms especially, as Brumfit (1991) has pointed out, we can neither control nor know all the language that is being produced in pair work. Still, teachers tend to do a day-to-day guessing as to where students are and what they need. To find out if they have learned, we test them. This guesswork and testing often result in a frustrating inefficiency in classes that just don’t work. There are better ways than guessing to bridge the gap between the different perceptions and expectations of students and teachers. It would also be fairer, as well as more diversified and richly entertaining, if teachers took into account student perceptions (to the extent that students can give them and teachers can actually understand and respond to them). The simplest way to do this is to ask them.

### **Turning the Problem (Different Perceptions) into a Gold Mine**

So, if students don’t learn what teachers teach, let’s do the next best thing: learn what learners are learning. One powerful way to do this, at least in part, is through action logging. The procedure is simple: (a) Ask students, as homework after every class, to write down briefly in a notebook what they think they did in class and how they liked it, with a date for each entry. (b) Then collect and read them every few weeks, writing comments where appropriate. Note that this is not your normal diary in which students write about things totally unrelated to class. Rather, they are sharing their valuable perceptions of their learning and of what is happening in class. I’ve been pleasantly surprised for a year and a half with the gold mine that I have discovered in their logs.

## Advantages for the students

1. Having to write an account of what happens in class and a reaction to it makes students more attentive to what's going on, rather than simply passively existing in class.
2. When they write their reaction, they are reviewing what was covered and what they think was learned, thus deepening the learning process. They are recycling the content one more time and increasing their retention by again focusing on what happened in class.
3. With action logging, students consciously evaluate whether or not a certain activity is useful for them, thus increasing their awareness of the learning process.
4. By contributing their feedback, students will have an impact upon instruction that gives them an opportunity to feel involved in the running of the class.
5. When students read one another's logs, they are reading about something they all have in common-the class-and they can gain new perceptions of class activities. When they disagree and have widely different perceptions, there is the possibility of sociocognitive conflict (Bell et al. 1985). Sociocognitive conflict refers to simply a destabilizing of accepted beliefs and perceptions and the opportunity of trying on someone else's way of thinking for a moment.
6. When teachers make newsletters of student comments and innovative learning methods, the enthusiasm and energy snowballs.
7. Action logging also takes "insearch" one step further. Instead of continuously giving our students information, teachers go through the process of eliciting information from the students. Thus, what is already inside our students is the principal content for the input in a language course (Murphey 1991a). Asking them to provide their own perceptions of what is happening in the classroom is further giving value to their perceptions. If we also use these perceptions as the basis for making tests (Murphey 1990c), we strengthen the rapport and amount of learning immensely.

## Advantages for the teacher

1. Teachers can become aware of what works and what doesn't, what students find more or less useful, unrealistic, difficult, pleasurable, etc. (See action research below.)
2. Teachers can become aware of those points and activities that they deem important but that are not perceived or mentioned in the feedback. These then can be clarified or changed.
3. Individual students with particular desires, regrets, questions, or interests can sometimes express themselves more easily in writing than in speaking. Teachers have the opportunity to become aware of these many different perspectives. Teachers can then individualize the feedback and also attend to the emotional ups and downs in students' learning (Murphey 1991d).

4. With less guessing, teachers can feel more confident that what they are doing fits their particular students. From action logs, teachers can more or less know how things are working, and adjust appropriately. This cuts down on the before-class stress of wondering if what they have planned will work with this particular group. Through the logs, a rapport can be established that allows for less stress in a relaxed and exciting learning environment.

5. Because the log entries are short and only about the class and the assignments the teacher gives, they make for interesting reading for the teacher. They are about shared experiences but with unique perspectives.

## The class newsletter

In June of 1991 I took some of the student comments and printed them alongside short descriptions of the activities, so that other teachers might see how action logging worked and how I was receiving valuable feedback on my class activities. (See Part II for a few of these.) I printed enough copies of this internal publication (*The Daring Bear*, vol. 1, no. 4) so that I could give a copy to my students, because I thought they would be interested in it. Of course, I also asked them to write a comment about it in their logs. Here again I was amazed at the snowball that it produced. Students responded that now they understood better the reasons behind our (sometimes strange) activities. After reading comments about how some students were taking control of their learning and doing many things outside class, other students expressed new commitment to learning and striving more. The publication also gave my students a better feel for my commitment to them and how I perceived their education.

## Action research

Action logging can be seen as a type of action research (Kemmis and McTaggart 1981) that is easy for any teacher to do. Action research is an active ongoing attempt to be more informed and more efficient as a teacher through initiating changes in the learning environment and evaluating the impact of these changes. Action logging allows for this evaluation but is itself an experiment at changing the dynamics involved in pedagogical decision-making and in student involvement. Realizing the impact of change through feedback is essential if we are to continually improve and dynamically adjust to different student populations. With my students' logs, I can find out what they think they have been doing and what they think they are learning and what they think is important to them. Then I can use all this "what they think" to develop materials and activities more suited to their levels, ways of learning, and preferences. I can also give what they think back to them in the form of newsletters and let the snowball grow. And so the cycle goes on.

While I receive little that one could call negative feedback, I do get complaints and suggestions for changes, which further inform me of concerns and options (e.g., "More music!"). Of course, for the student newsletters, I intentionally select the comments of those who I think show positive enthusiasm and novel ways of learning, because I feel that these encourage others to do likewise and that the ideas spread contagiously. So the activities that are presented in Part II of this article are mostly positive. They also could be anything that you normally do. Most of them deal with my action research at the time, which was concerned with ways to have students take activities beyond the classroom through assigning the same activities as homework.

## PART II: Activity Descriptions and Student Comments Taken from the June Newsletter

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### RETELLING STORIES

### HOMEWORK

I tell many short stories, metaphorical and just for fun. I often tell students to tell these stories to two or three other people outside of class and to write in their logs about how the other people reacted to the stories. This retelling and writing encourages reformulation and appropriation of new information. It is basic repetition that deepens the learning of new material through actual use (and makes people smile).

*“Today, I felt pretty interested in Mr. Murphey’s story, which was about the doctor strike. It was assigned that we should tell two people what he had said to us, so I was planning to tell my friends at lunch. But I had little time. . . . Then, it occurred to me that I would let my student [that I tutor] listen to the good story when I went to her house to teach. When I asked her to save a minute for it, she said, ‘It sounds nice.’ Then I did my best to make myself understood in an easy English that was suitable for her. Though she looked a little puzzled, I was delighted that she made out what I wanted to say.”*

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### LEARNING FROM EACH OTHER

### HOMEWORK

I tell students at the beginning of the course that they have a lot to learn from each other. Some doubt the truth of this and tend to wait for the teacher to give them things to learn. If they can get deeply enough into interaction with each other, they soon realize the wealth of new things (not just language) that they can learn from each other, and soon they begin to take charge of their own learning. (This is well illustrated in their initiative with telephoning, lunching together in English, and using class activities with their clubs.)

*“When I was a Freshman I was always feeling sorry and disappointed to see that there was no foreign friend who talked with me in English, and I tried to seek the person. But recently I came to realize that I could come into contact with my Japanese friends in English. Then I set to work. It needs courage, for sometimes I feel a little ashamed of speaking English with Japanese friends in public. But I’ll try to speak to them in English as much as possible. I’m sure that courage is what we need most to study in college.”*

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## UPSIDE-DOWN WATCH

## HOMEWORK

Often on the first day of class, I ask students to conduct a little experiment with me. I ask them to take off their watches and to put them back on upside down and to keep them that way for at least a week. I tell them there are several things that I want them to observe. I bet them that not more than two people will even notice that their watches are upside down. Secondly, if they really do wear their watch upside down for a full week, by the end of the week they will have no trouble telling the time upside down and they will notice that they can read everyone else's watch in whatever position they hold their arm. They will be learning a useful new perspective and breaking the routine. Finally, I tell them that each time they look at their watch this week, they will notice that it is upside down and they will remember their crazy English teacher who always says that "Now is the best time to be happy." I have them repeat the sentence several times with me.

Usually, half the class forgets within a few days, but sometimes a few really like the idea and continue wearing their watches upside down long after the assignment. So if you see any happy English-speaking students with upside-down watches, they could have been in my class at one time.

*"It's a great idea to wear your watch upside down. I watch my watch many times every day, so I can be happy many times! [Now is the best time to be happy.] I'll keep wearing the English reminder watch!?"*

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## TICKLE

## HOMEWORK

In class students are asked to raise their hand if they know the word "tickle." Usually a few know the word, so then I tell them we are going to teach the rest of the class. "At the count of three, all those who know the word will tickle the others. One, two, three." The knowers and I tickle several people in close proximity. It gets lots of laughs. Then I say, "Is there anyone who still doesn't know what tickle means?" If there is, we tickle them again. Then I say, "Your homework is to ask at least three other people who are studying or have studied English if they know the word 'tickle.' If they don't, you show them, tickle them. If they happen to get angry, just tell

them you had to do it. It's your homework. I also want you to write about what happens in your log."

*"Today's homework was 'tickle.' After the class, I asked some of my friends if they knew the word 'tickle.' As none of them knew the word tickle, I showed the meaning of it to them; that is, I tickled them. They got angry so much and said, 'Why did you do such a thing!' I said, 'Homework!' and ran away. At night, one of them called me up and we talked much. At the end of the talking she said, 'Now, you can't tickle me because you can't touch me.' Then we laughed together. I was very happy at that time because she seemed to learn the word 'tickle'."*

*"I was surprised when I was tickled [in class]! After class I tickled three persons. They were very glad!"*

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## SONGS AND MUSIC

## IN CLASS

I use a lot of background music during interactive activities. It makes the environment more social and lively. With distance (loud) partners, the music makes them speak even louder and intensifies all the things they are practicing (selective listening, etc.). We also sing a lot of songs and try to do one at the end of every class. These are sometimes contributed by the students. (Murphey 1990a)

*"When I entered the classroom, I noticed a piece of music. I feel good when I listened to music."*

*"I don't want Mr. Murphey to miss song time. Please make time for song in every class. O.K."*

*"I listen to the cassette [of songs covered in the class] when I get up and dress myself and while I have nothing to do. I want to have more of the same!"*

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## TELEPHONE LISTS

## HOMEWORK

One of the first days of class, I pass around a list with their names and ask them to write their phone numbers beside their names. I then copy the lists and give one to each person with the instructions to call someone if they ever miss a class and need to know what to prepare for the next class and what we did. I also give them homework right away to call the person below their name (the last person calls the first) and to ask "How do you like class so far?" plus two more

questions (for them to think up), and then to write about their telephone conversations in their logs.

So, everyone will call someone and be called by someone, and talk about more or less the same things, and then they will write about it. Here again is the recycling of language and information so that learning may have a chance to reach the depth it needs to stay. In class a few days later, I may have them read each other's log entry about the telephoning or tell a partner about their phone calls. Thus, the information is recycled once or twice again. I do it about once a week. ("Call the second person below you . . . third person . . . etc.") Each time I have them ask a question or two that I want some feedback on ("Do you like the textbook? Are you going abroad?" etc.) plus a few that they have to make up.

*"Last night, about 10 p.m., I got a phone call from H. He apologized to me for having been late to call me since he went out with the member of his club and couldn't call me at the appointed time. After we spoke in Japanese a little, we decided to talk in English. At first, I thought it was hard to make myself understood but when he could make out what I wanted to say, I felt very delighted and satisfied. . . . We talked more than 15 minutes in English. I hope I have more opportunities as this."*

*"At first, I didn't like the homework which is 'call the person below you on the list,' because I didn't know my classmates well and I felt shy to telephone someone I didn't know well. Now, however, I like it and I think it is interesting homework."*

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SUPERCALIFRAGILISTIC-  
EXPIALIDOCIOUS

HOMEWORK

I write this word (from the film *Mary Poppins*) on the board and tell the students that I am going to teach them how to say it. Furthermore, that in the next class if they do not answer roll with this word when I call their name, I will count them as absent. I tell them that I am cruel. But I am also kind, because I will show them ways to learn the word and have fun with it. I teach them to say the word with choral repetition, backward formation, and chunking. Chunking means you divide up the word into just two- or three-syllable chunks. Back formation means you start saying those chunks at the end first, adding little bits to each other and then the last half and the front half separately, and finally the whole thing. After five minutes, everybody can usually say it. (Murphey 1991c)

In order to practice it more before the next class, I tell them that their homework is to answer with this word anytime someone asks how they are, in English or in Japanese. If they do that, they will have no problem answering the roll at the next class.

*"We memorized a very very long word. Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious. At first I thought that I could never memorize it, but as I repeated it after Mr. Murphey, I came to say it smoothly. I realized I can memorize any difficult words if I say them repeatedly. At lunchtime, I said the very*

*long word: super . . . to my American friend. He was a little surprised.”*

*“Supercali . . . was very difficult. After class I said this with [a classmate]. My friends looked at us strangely. Probably they thought we were crazy. Mr. Murphey’s class is a little strange, but I like it. My friends which aren’t members of Murphey’s class always say, ‘You are happy to be in Murphey’s class.’ I do think so!”*

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### LOUD PAIRS

### IN CLASS

Instead of giving each student the person next to them as their partner, I give them a person one seat away. Then I have them exchange some information. They can adjust their chairs so that they can have eye contact, but they must keep the distance (although I’m not too strict and let them inch closer if they feel the need). In order to be understood, they have to talk loudly and listen carefully. After loud pairs, if the close pairs share the information they have gathered, the language is recycled again. When they write about the class activity in the logs, it is once again used. This configuration has many advantages: selective listening, enunciation, non-verbal language, loud speech, fun, etc., and students love it. (Murphey forthcoming)

*“To be honest, in your first class I was a little surprised to know we had to talk with a classmate sitting far from us, because I was used to the class where we usually talked with a few classmates sitting next to us. But I found it helpful to me to speak in a loud voice, because it gives little time to be hesitant, though my pronunciation was so terrible. Today’s class was much fun. I hope we will learn a lot in such a pleasant atmosphere.”*

*“Yesterday’s class was enjoyable. We could talk with four partners about the homework by telephone and the three things we like and don’t like about school. We had a good practice telling another person what we heard from one person.” [recycling information]*

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### JUGGLING

### IN CLASS

I teach them how to juggle in English as well. This is an activity in which pairs of students also teach each other. Not only does the learning of juggling have parallel processes in language learning, but the activity involves students who may be very kinesthetic learners and has them teaching and learning from each other. (Murphey 1990b)

*“Today we learned juggling, but I’m not sure what Mr. Murphey wants us to do. It can’t be only*

*learning juggling. I thought it in two ways. First, Mr. Murphey wants us to learn English used in learning juggling. Second, he wants us to learn that there are also some steps in learning English. I don't know which of these or another Mr. Murphey wants us to learn, but it's good to get used to many things."*

## **Part III: Conclusion**

The many advantages of action logging are already noted in Part I. I think the student comments in Part II attest to the effectiveness of the activities, but this is secondary to the purpose of this article. The main point is to show the effectiveness of students reflecting about class activities in their logs, which in turn can affect the teacher's instruction. That my instruction was affected is not shown here, but I assure you it was. From their feedback, both positive and negative, I could better judge what was working and what wasn't, and then make more informed decisions. Or I could talk to them about their feedback. In fact, I suspect letting them know the variety of their many wishes in "feedback on feedback sessions" allows them to see the difficulty the teacher is faced with when there are many contradictory requests. Then they can accept doing what the majority finds most beneficial while still realizing they are having an impact upon the direction of the instruction. In such sessions, teachers can also put forth arguments in support of learning directions and methods in an attempt to convince students of what the teacher sees as valuable for them. Believing in the method of instruction, like believing in your doctor, has powerful effects on the ultimate level of efficacy.

The student comments further show that doing action logging allows students to take their learning beyond the classroom and influence their learning out of class (although this was partially due to the nature of the activities). And finally, and perhaps most importantly, action logging enriches the student- teacher rapport so vital to motivated learning (by both parties). (See also Murphey 1992.)

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