

A Preliminary Profile of an Emergent Master Teacher

Jeffra Flaitz

Al compartir su experiencia en la preparación de futuros profesores en la Universidad de South Florida, la autora presenta las principales características que constituyen el perfil de un buen maestro en lenguas extranjeras. Además, destaca la importancia de considerar el desarrollo integral de los futuros profesores y no sólo el entrenamiento en habilidades específicas relacionadas con la enseñanza de lenguas extranjeras.

Palabras claves: desarrollo profesional, profesor(a) en lenguas extranjeras, reflexión, autoanálisis.

A partir de son expérience en tant que formatrice à l'Université de South Florida, l'auteure présente les principales qualités d'un enseignant. Elle souligne surtout le besoin de développer à la fois les qualités individuelles de chaque aspirant à l'enseignement et les savoirs-faire liés à l'enseignement des langues étrangères.

Mots-clefs: développement professionnel, professeur(e) en langues étrangères, réflexion, autoanalyse.

Based on the insights gained from her experience as a teacher trainer at the University of South Florida, the author presents the traits that characterize an emergent master teacher. She also highlights the importance of trainee teacher's all-round development, as opposed to just developing those skills directly related to foreign language teaching.

Key words: teacher development, foreign language teacher, reflexion, self-awareness.



Sit back, close your eyes, and try to recall the best teacher you ever had—not necessarily your favorite teacher, but the BEST one, the one that embodies the ideal, or close to it. Try to see that teacher through the eyes of you-the-student. Watch him or her. Pay attention to what that teacher is doing. What is it about that teacher that sets him or her apart from all the rest? Why is that person unique?

Now you can open your eyes. I'm going to take a guess about the person you were thinking about just now. See if your candidate for BEST teacher meets these criteria:

- this person loved the subject he or she taught
- s/he motivated you to love the subject, too
- s/he had high expectations of you and your classmates
- s/he had a good command of the subject
- s/he cared about you and your classmates
- s/he was well-organized in class
- you learned what s/he taught
- s/he presented the subject clearly; s/he was a good communicator
- his/her classes were easy

- s/he was funny
- s/he was your best friend
- s/he was always trying something new

No doubt, as you read the last few items on the list you stopped nodding your head in recognition and agreement. In other words, it's not difficult to list the characteristics of an outstanding teacher. We know what the essential ingredients are, and many of the qualities of an outstanding teacher are fairly universal. Enthusiasm, creativity, and humor are often cited as belonging to the good teacher, but we know, as well, that it is far more important that the teacher be well-organized than for him/her to be funny.

Surprisingly enough, students do NOT rate expertise in the subject as the most highly valued characteristic of a good teacher, but time and time again, they DO cite the teacher's ability to clearly convey what s/he knows as absolutely essential to good teaching.

The second most important quality of a good teacher, according to students, is the student-teacher relationship. Students want to feel that the teacher regards them with respect, understanding, and sympathy, and that

she recognizes their intellectual AND emotional needs. This is not to say that students want or expect the teacher to be easy, lenient, or openly affectionate. An understanding and caring teacher is fair, responsible, values student learning, and is able to produce the desired results. After all, that wonderful teacher that we remembered when we closed our eyes a few minutes ago is precious to us because of the impact he or she made on us, not for that teacher's skill alone. When all is said and done, students are not really able to evaluate the extent of a teacher's expertise, but only if the teacher was able to teach them anything.

Of course, some characteristics are more highly valued in one culture than in another. The stereotype of the ideal teacher in China, for example, is one of a "virtuoso." Teaching is art, and there is little variation in methodology. In England, the best teacher might be a person who not only has an exceptional command of the subject but is a model of personal conduct as well. In the U.S. we see teachers as performers. They should be full of imagination and able to improvise when the need arises. Other differences, too, such as your age and personal experience will influence your perception of what a good teacher is. The truth is that there is

little proof that one way of teaching is any better than another. As radical as it may sound, especially at a conference where Methodology is spelled with a capital M, good teaching transcends methodology. There is a great deal to be learned from the words of the little boy who said, "I forgot what I was taught. I only remember what I learned." On the other hand, good teaching is not a matter of magic. The mystery of a person who is a "born teacher" can be explained. The question is: *Can it be taught?*

I have a memory of a day several years back. I was sitting in my office with Tony, one of the students in the teacher preparation program at the University of South Florida where I teach. I had just returned from observing Tony's class, and I felt that terrible discomfort that you experience when you have to deliver criticism, really harsh criticism. Now, Tony was one of the best students in our graduate program. He was what we call "scary smart." And he was a nice guy, too—full of energy and humor. He was disciplined, he was organized, he was good-looking, he was "cool." So why was his class a disaster? Why were Tony's students groaning with frustration? Why wasn't he a good teacher? And why did I have so little hope for his future



as a teacher? My responsibility was to help him. After all, I had been taught in graduate school, "If the student hasn't learned, the teacher hasn't taught." I was terrified that I hadn't taught him, but, what's more, that couldn't teach him; that maybe he was unteachable. Was this unfair of me? Was I pre-judging him? Yes, I was being unfair, and yes, I was pre-judging him.

Tony and I began to talk, and although I was not able to revise my opinion of his teaching or his chances for being an outstanding teacher, I learned a lot from reflecting on the situation. What I learned was that Tony truly hadn't a clue! He was unable, or perhaps just unwilling, to break down the elements of teaching and to try to understand them. I asked him how, in his opinion, the class had gone.- he responded, "Great!" - . I asked if there were anything he would change about his teaching. He answered, "No. I like the way I teach." I wondered aloud if he had

ever attempted such-and-such a strategy or thought about such-and-such a concept. -His answer: "Yes, but..." How different were our perceptions! I thought he was clueless; he thought he knew it all. That's youth for you - you don't realize that what counts most in life

is what you know AFTER you know it all. Tony was not defensive, sarcastic, or angry; he wasn't even curious. But I was. I began to realize that I knew intuitively which of my students had potential for excellence in the classroom and which would be solid but not necessarily stellar teachers. I knew, too, that they didn't need me as much as students like Tony did. Now my job was to begin to identify how these groups of student teachers

differed, to discover if there were any behaviors and strategies one group used better or in addition to those used by the other group. The end-goal, of course, was to attempt to answer the question: *Can Tony be taught to be a good teacher?*

We have already cited the elements of good teaching—ability to communicate clearly, respect and

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understanding of students' intellectual and emotional needs, commitment to success, a high degree of organization, love of the subject matter, a good command of the subject matter, and ability to motivate others. These, it must be remembered, are PERCEPTIONS, students' opinions about what makes a good teacher good. But we all know that perception may be quite different from reality. If we really want to discover the truth, we have to find ways to determine if perception can be supported empirically through sound research-based practices. That sounds great, doesn't it? But research in the social sciences is a messy business. People are too big to put under microscopes. In experimental research in education we divide students into separate groups. One group gets a special treatment, the other nothing. We give them a test afterwards. Nine times out of ten we discover that there is no difference between the two groups because there were too many other variables that interfered with the results—lack of random assignment, small sample size, a flaw in the treatment, and so on. There are so many important truths to discover that are vital to our profession, such as how students learn foreign languages best, but the tools for uncovering those truths are somewhat fragile, as are we, the researchers.

I'm reminded of the joke about the researcher who dedicated his life to studying the common household fly. He was a colleague of B.F. Skinner, and a devout behaviorist. It is told that he taught one of his flies to jump on command. Every time he shouted "jump," the fly would jump. One day, the researcher decided to remove one of the fly's wings. He then commanded the fly to jump, and, sure enough, the fly jumped - even though he was a little unsteady. Next, the researcher removed the fly's other wing, and he said, "Jump, fly!" The fly jumped, just as he was told. The researcher then removed one of the fly's legs, commanded the fly to jump, and without fail, the fly jumped, and then fell to the ground. One after the other, the researcher removed the second, third, fourth, and fifth legs of the poor little fly. Each time, the fly jumped as he was ordered. Finally, the researcher removed the fly's very last leg. "Jump, fly," he commanded, but the little fly did nothing. "Jump, I said 'jump,'" commanded the researcher again. Nothing. Now, at each stage of the experiment, the researcher had been recording the fly's behavior on his laptop computer. At this final stage, the researcher wrote in his notes: "Fly loses ability to hear when sixth leg is removed."

The difference between perception and reality, you see, is difficult to



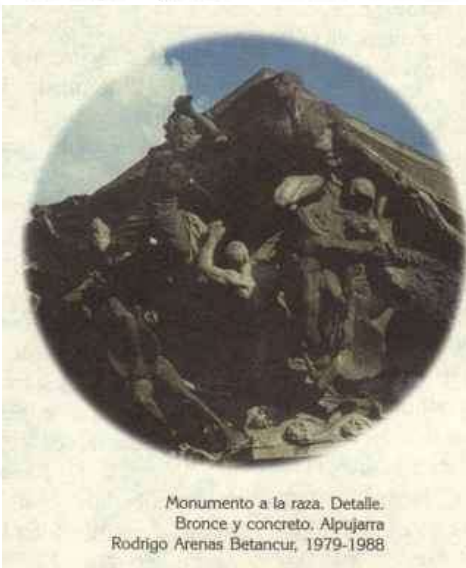
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distinguish even when you're engaged in scientific research. What I will be sharing with you today with regard to the characteristics of the emergent master teacher are my perceptions. My colleagues and I at the University of South Florida in Tampa are engaged in a more empirically-based

study of this same topic, but our findings are not yet complete. We're studying the reflective journals of our student teachers, their lesson plans, written teaching goals and strategies, and other

materials that they are required to generate as they proceed through their student teaching experience. We have a battery of tests to administer to them and hours and hours of videotape to watch before we make our report. In the meantime, I will share with you what I have observed.

First, let me define the term "emergent master teacher." This is a person who has the potential to excel in the classroom, whose impact on his or her students holds the promise of being considerable, enduring, and cherished, like the unforgettable teacher we envisioned earlier. The



Monumento a la raza. Detalle.
Bronce y concreto, Alpujarra
Rodrigo Arenas Betancur, 1979-1988

emergent master teacher hasn't arrived at mastery yet, and may make as many mistakes as his or her counterparts, the ones who will be adequate teachers or less-than-adequate teachers. In other words, the skills and com-

petencies of the emergent master teacher may be no more developed than those of his or her peers. She may be as "green" as they are. She is still a learner. She may lack confidence. Her English may be in need of improvement. She may not have learned about all the

techniques and strategies that are current in her field. But there is likely to be general consensus among those who are responsible for the development of this individual that he or she will most certainly succeed as a teacher. Like Joan Rubin (1975, 1981, 1994) and Irene Thompson (1994) who examined the characteristics, behaviors, and strategies of language learners and identified the ones that distinguished good language learners in particular, it is possible to begin to draw a profile of the student teacher who is most likely to succeed.

Let me share another memory with you. This time I was sitting with a young woman whom we'll call Maria, surely one of my very favorite students and though she was inexperienced in the classroom, I was very excited about her future as a teacher. She and I were taking a look at a videotape made several days earlier of her in front of her class. During videotape feedback sessions, I usually hold the remote control for part of the session, and start and stop the tape whenever I see something that I'd like to focus on in our discussion. Then I often pass the remote to the student teacher, and have him or her take control of the session. During this particular

episode, two "problems" emerged with my usual procedure. The first was that Maria was writing notes so furiously that she had a hard time taking notes and working the remote at the same time. Maria never came to my office without her notepad, and she would typically leave with pages and pages of scribbled ideas. It never occurred to me, until I saw her struggle with the remote control in one hand and her pen in the other, that she paid such close attention to everything I said. The second little "problem" that emerged was that, once I was able to convince Maria to stop taking notes, she wanted to stop the videotape every few seconds. As a result, we had a very long feedback session, and we were not able to proceed very far through the tape.

It must be remembered, are PERCEPTIONS, students' opinions about what makes a good teacher good. But we all know that perception may be quite different from reality. If we really want to discover the truth, we have to find ways to determine if perception can be supported empirically through sound research-based practices.



However, our discussion was lively, substantive, and satisfying to both of us.

I couldn't help but draw a comparison between her and my happy-go-lucky student, Tony. Both had the same amount of experience in the classroom, and both were good graduate students. However, one showed an eagerness to improve, the other was complacent. María was willing to recognize her limitations; Tony was blind to them. María could see the distinct elements of her lesson; Tony took a much more global view. As far as their classroom performance was concerned, María was by far the more effective of the two. Interestingly enough, she was also a non-native speaker of English, whereas Tony was a native speaker of English, was articulate, and a superb writer.

So, here are my first three elements of the profile of an emergent master teacher. She is one who is (1) willing to reflect, and, once willing, is (2) able to analyze the discrete components of his or her performance. These two characteristics combine to form the third essential trait of the emergent master teacher, namely (3) awareness. They say that once your consciousness is raised, it can't be lowered. Like the outline of the

Roman ruins we see in Europe, awareness is an asset that is not only fundamental but enduring.

Number (4) is willingness to take risks. We hear a lot about risk-taking in language learning. We tell our students that it's okay to make mistakes, that you have to look and feel foolish sometimes in order to grow, but how willing are WE to do the same, especially in front of a class of people to whom we feel we owe our best? One of my favorite teacher preparation exercises is what I call "A Walk on the Wild Side." I ask our student teachers to prepare a lesson in which they experiment with a strategy or approach that makes them feel decidedly uncomfortable, that stretches their limits as a teacher, but from which they learn that experimentation is good. They have to take a risk, in other words. In fact, if they propose an activity that I believe they can handle without any discomfort, I reject it as "mild, not wild." For example, many teachers have heard of the "jazz chants" developed by Carolyn Graham, but have never tried them in class. For those of you who are unfamiliar with jazz chants, they are rhythmic, repetitive groups of phrases, sort of like jazz poems, that help students of English develop better intonation

patterns, among other things. The teacher models the jazz chant and the students imitate together in chorus. "Sh! Sh! Baby's Sleeping!" is one of the more popular jazz chants (Graham, 1978). Unfortunately, many teachers would rather bore their students to tears than experiment with jazz chants, so it makes an excellent Walk on the Wild Side activity. I believe that every semester at least one of my student teachers chooses to try jazz chants as his or her Walk on the Wild Side, and without fail, they predict that the exercise will destroy whatever shred of respect their students had for them, and without fail, they've come back to me saying, yes, they did feel foolish, but the students begged for more jazz chants.

Emergent master teacher María decided that for her Walk on the Wild Side she would deliver a lesson using Suggestopedia, the "superlearning" method developed by Georgi Lazonov. The technique calls for soft Baroque music playing in the background, dim lighting, pillows on the floor, a visualization of a peaceful beach scene, and so forth. María's experiment with Suggestopedia failed miserably. Her students that morning had received their mid-term progress reports, and they were anything but happy and relaxed and ready for a pic-

nic on the beach. She kept trying to calm them down, get their minds off their report cards, but they kept asking her why in the world they were all sitting on the floor and could they please turn the lights back on and have class. I think we could all understand how discouraged María felt about taking risks. But guess what. During her second semester of student teaching when it came time for the practicing teachers to take another Walk on the Wild Side, she decided to make another attempt at Suggestopedia. Imagine that. There is a saying that "you can't blame a person for trying to cross a fence where it's lowest," and we certainly couldn't blame María if chose a safer activity. She didn't, though, and Wild Side activity number 2 was a rip-roaring success. What made this decision even more impressive was that María was a shy, reserved, sensitive young woman—a non-native speaker of English, remember. The first time she attempted Suggestopedia, I was tempted to tell her it was too consistent with her mellow personality, too "mild." But I approved it anyway. The second time around, it was definitely "wild" for her. We can all benefit from María's example. John Gardner, the former U.S. Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare, is said to have once observed that mature



people stop learning because they become less and less willing to fail.

Now in addition to placing “risk-taking”—or better “courage”—on our list of characteristics that make up the profile of the emergent master teacher, we can contribute another that goes hand-in-hand with risk-taking, namely (5) effort. I remember another teacher that I supervised years ago. He claimed that he didn’t need to prepare for class because he was best when he was spontaneous. His classes were very fast-paced and entertaining, and he used to leave class dripping with perspiration. I know that Thomas Edison was to have said, “Genius is 1% inspiration and 99% perspiration,” but this was not what most would have called genius. The teacher actually stood on his head in class once while I was observing. The students laughed, of course, but to me they looked like they were on some kind of wild ride at an amusement park. They also complained about their teacher after a while. So, I helped him put together a lesson plan, and when he tried to implement it, said his class was a failure because he kept having to look at his notes for what was supposed to come next. Good teaching requires careful planning, which means “work”—hours of time spent thinking about how to best present information,

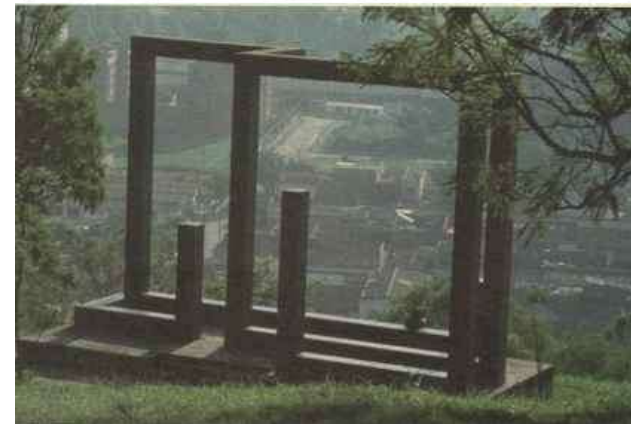
diagnosing your students’ weaknesses, designing activities, thinking about your objectives. Most good teachers report that it’s difficult for them to STOP thinking about their students, no matter where they are. Emergent master teachers report that if they’re not in class, they’re preparing for class—nights, weekends, it doesn’t matter.

They’re working, and one of the reasons they work so hard and so long is that they have a strong need for achievement and success, which brings us to characteristic number (6). It should come as no surprise that the best teachers were often good learners themselves. Some research has shown that university grade point average correlates positively with teaching success as measured by supervisors’ ratings. I realize that success and achievement are defined somewhat narrowly in education, and many measurement experts point to the fact that some tests assess a student’s test-taking ability rather than their content knowledge. Some students have a wealth of knowledge that traditional tests simply aren’t designed to reveal. Emergent master teachers have such a strong desire to succeed that they find ways to master the system, not just the content. They are also tend to be goal-oriented and results-oriented, not just for

themselves, but for their students. They link their own success to their students’ success.

Another trait of the emergent master teacher is (7) ego displacement, the ability to “get outside of yourself,” to put aside your own feelings to concentrate on what others feel or need. It’s often the case that teachers who worry about themselves aren’t helping the students, but those who worry about the students are helping themselves. One of the things that I see emergent master teachers do is to put their concerns about their students’ learning above their own feelings of insecurity and fear of failure. These are the teachers who write their lesson objectives before they begin to plan, not as an afterthought.

But good teachers must also think of themselves, and good English teachers usually have spent time thinking about the kind of language learner they were. This is characteristic number (8), to have a real understanding of their own preferences, styles, shortcomings, and strengths as learners. Teachers who have gone to the trouble of analyzing these traits usually gain insights that extend far beyond their own learning experience to broader and more universal insights about learning and learners. But even more, they try to apply what they have learned from this introspection so they will not simply teach as they were taught. Do you realize that by the time we finish university, we have accumulated over 3,000 days of watching teachers teach? This is a very powerful, if



Sin título.
Concreto y
hierro.
Cerro Nutibara.
Carlos Rojas,
1983



subtle, indoctrination into the world of teaching, and there is no doubt that our beliefs about teaching are based on how we ourselves were taught. Teacher preparation programs are supposed to disrupt that pattern, but it takes a special effort to make deep and enduring changes. A refined sense of self-knowledge is often observed among emergent master teachers.

So is being able to recognize and take advantage of an opportunity, characteristic number (9). There's a story about an old man whose house was filled

with water during a great rainstorm and flood. The man was standing up to his waist in water when a rescue boat appeared. One of the rescue workers yelled, "Get in the boat. We'll save you." But the old man simply said, "God will take care of me." The water rose in the house so that the old man had to go to the second floor. He was standing at the window on the second floor when the rescue boat appeared again. "Get in the boat, and we'll take you to a safe place," the rescuers yelled, but the old man repeated, "The good Lord will

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take care of me." The rain continued, and finally the man was seen on the roof of his house clinging to the chimney. Again, the rescue boat arrived, but the old man refused to be taken away. "God will take care of me," he said as he rejected attempts to rescue him from the flood. Finally, the water rose so high that the old man drowned. When he reached heaven, he said to God, "I'm very dis-appointed in you. I believed that you would take care of me, but you let me drown." To this, God answered, "Well, I tried. I sent that rescue boat to you three times!"

Emergent master teachers know an opportunity when they see it. In fact, what I've observed is that they jump at an opportunity to practice and to learn. They volunteer to have their videotape viewed by the whole class. They ask if they can do more. They ask to borrow books and articles. They show up for optional in-service workshops. If a supervisor asks, "Do you have any questions," they will have one. If the supervisor says, "Feel free to show me a draft of your Statement of Teaching Philosophy," they surely will. They will even invi-

te criticism, and when it's delivered, they will try not to take it personally. In other words, they value experience, and understand that there is no time like the present. Unlike the old man who refused to get in the life boat, emergent master teachers act on their belief that many opportunities only come around once. Goodness knows there are dangers in seizing opportunities; the life boat could have capsized and all aboard could have perished. But a special energy is generated when people embrace opportunity as well as the possibility of failure. Some believe that special energy is creativity, that the prospect of failure actually motivates people to reach far beyond their comfort zones. On the other hand, consider the young lady who sat near the wall during a party. Everyone assumed she couldn't dance. She could. The problem was, nobody asked her. Somehow, those of us who work with novice teachers need to find a way to encourage them to assume responsibility for recognizing and taking opportunities to grow and learn.

So now we have nine major characteristics of the emergent master teacher:

1. willingness to reflect
2. ability to analyze

3. a desire for awareness
4. willingness to take risks
5. effort
6. a strong need for achievement and success
7. ego displacement
8. understanding oneself as a language learner, and
9. recognizing and taking advantage of opportunities.

Surely there are others: compassion, humor, a high regard for the English language, an overall maturity with regard to life. But for now, let's turn to the issue of whether or not these traits can be taught.

First, we'll have to revise our concept of what has for years been called in English "teacher training." It rests on the premise that teaching involves a discrete set of micro-skills that can be described or demonstrated by experienced teachers and then practiced by novice teachers. This is in direct opposition to the notion of "teaching by the seat of your pants," or doing what seems natural but without any real formal preparation. The term "teacher training" also implies that the experienced teacher has command of the information needed by the novice teacher, and that



all she has to do is follow the natural human urge to tell another person how to do something. When you think about it, though, my colleague at Florida State University, Pete Brooks, is right: You train seals, not people. McIntyre (1980), another teacher preparation expert in our field, has written:

“We cannot hope to train student teachers; whatever one’s criteria of effectiveness, the components of effective teaching cannot be spelled out in operational terms, but are crucially dependent on the teacher’s qualities.”

This view is more consistent with those who believe novice teachers need to be “enabled” not “equipped.” It’s the difference between their learning techniques and developing their own potential. For basically the same reasons, many in our field prefer the term “teacher development” rather than “teacher training.”

One of the things that our field is notorious for is swinging like a pendulum from one conviction to another which is its exact opposite. First we say errors are bad, then we say they’re good, very good. Grammar is out, but comes back into fashion two decades later. Communicative competence is all the

rage until we realize that accuracy has been sacrificed for fluency. Why are we so prone to extremes? And why do we always throw the baby out with the bathwater? We can debate that in another forum. For now, let us agree that the acquisition of discrete skills in the teaching of foreign languages is indeed necessary and definitely not to be ignored. Skills training must simply share the stage with development of more personal qualities such as the ones mentioned earlier as part of the profile of an emergent master teacher. In other words, teaching, while very public, is a very personal endeavor, too, and the classroom is an extremely complex interpersonal arena. A teacher’s repertoire of strategies and techniques is only as useful as his or her judgment about when and how to use them. Moreover, without an understanding of why they do or do not work, there is little possibility for evolution, let alone sustained success. Too many teacher preparation programs fail to recognize the need to involve the whole person. Often the curriculum is already too full, and many times those who prepare teachers haven’t developed the tools for leading their students through an exploration of the complex personal issues that are linked to teaching. Perhaps, too, we need to articulate our own Statement

of Teaching Philosophy before we can ask our student teachers to do the same. Certainly, we need to be requiring our students to conduct their own action research, to observe master teachers, peers, and themselves, and to engage in reflective dialog about the why’s of teaching, not just the how’s. It’s important to bear in mind that pre-service teachers are typically young people. They’re in a state of transition from adolescence to adulthood, and the process of maturing as a human being is happening simultaneously with the process of learning to be a good teacher. If we don’t allow them the opportunity to reflect on models of integrity and success and to try them out themselves, well...the rescue boat may never come back.

We need to develop more awareness-raising materials and activities for teacher development, and to determine if their use by pre-professionals changes the quality of their performance in the classroom. We still need lots more research into the characteristics of the emergent master teacher, and we also need to examine whether these characteristics actually result in higher levels of student achievement. So, can Tony be taught to be a master teacher? Or perhaps the better question is “Can we

The term “teacher training” also implies that the experienced teacher has command of the information needed by the novice teacher, and that all she has to do is follow the natural human urge to tell another person how to do something. Pete Brooks, is right: You train seals, not people novice teachers need to be “enabled” not “equipped.” It’s the difference between their learning techniques and developing their own potential

help Tony become a master teacher?”
¿Que piensan Ustedes?

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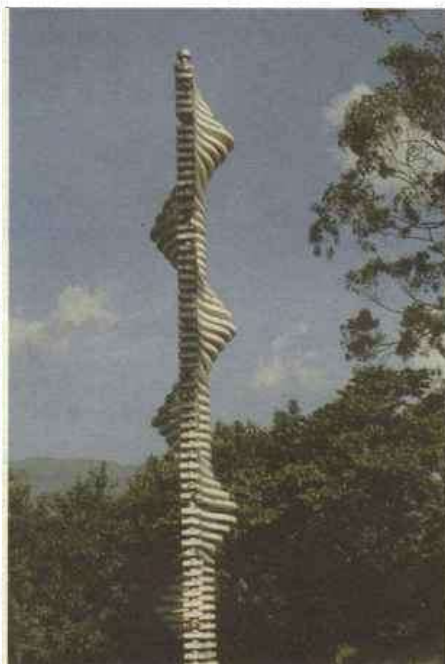
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NOTAS SOBRE LA AUTORA

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Sin título. Fibra de vidrio y aluminio.
Cerro Nutibara.
Julio Le Parc, 1983

