An Irreverent Fable

For the most part, the use of technology in foreign and second language teaching and learning reminds me of an irreverent fable by R.A. Kaufman:

Once upon a time, there were two pigs (a third one had gone into marketing and disappeared) who were faced with the problem of protecting themselves from a wolf.

One pig was an old-timer in the wolf-fending business, and he saw the problem right away—just build a house strong enough to resist the huffing and puffing he had experienced from the wolf before. So, the first pig built his wolf-resistant house right away out of genuine, reliable lath and plaster.

The second pig was green at this wolf business, but he was thoughtful. He decided he would analyze the wolf business a bit. He sat down and drew up a matrix (which, of course, is pig latin for a big, blank sheet of paper) and listed the problem, analyzed the problem into components and possibilities of wolf strategies, listed design objectives of his wolf-proof methodology, determined the functions his fortress should perform, designed and built his house, and waited to see how well it would work.

All this time, the old-timer pig was laughing at the planner pig and vehemently declined to enter into this kind of folly. He had built wolf-proof houses before, and he had lived and prospered, hadn't he? He said to the planner pig, "If you know what you are doing, you don't have to go through all that jazz." And with this, he went fishing, or rooting, or whatever it is that pigs do in their idle hours.

The second pig worked his system anyway, and went about designing and building for contingencies.

One day, the mean old wolf passed the two houses . . . He thought that a pig dinner was just what he wanted. He walked up to the first pig's house and uttered a warning to the old timer, which was soundly rejected as usual. With this, the wolf, instead of huffing and puffing, pulled out a sledge hammer, knocked the door down, and ate the old-timer for dinner.

Still not satiated, the wolf walked to the planner pig's house and repeated his act. Suddenly, a trap door in front of the house opened, the wolf dropped neatly into a deep, dark pit never to be heard from again.

Morals: 1) They are not making wolves like they used to; 2) it's hard to teach old-timers new tricks; and, 3) if you want to devise effective ways to do anything well (including keeping wolves from your door), **you better plan ahead.**

MORAL 1: THEY ARE NOT MAKING WOLVES LIKE THEY USED TO

We can easily view this fable as a thinly-disguised docu-drama of what is happening in education today. They may indeed not be making wolves like they used to, but neither are the wolves of education, the critics, merely huffing and puffing as usual to blow down the house that education built.

Armed with one educational exposé after another, the critics are trying to force those of us in education to march to the beat of the Information Age—the world of the 1980's and beyond. They have judged our teaching methods as "arid" and our curriculums as "self-serving."

MORAL 2: IT'S HARD TO TEACH OLD-TIMERS NEW TRICKS

Foreign and second language teaching and learning have not been spared the critics' axe. Communicative competence is the buzzword at foreign and second language conferences but communicative incompetence is the rule in the

classroom. "I've taken four years of French and can't speak a word," is as true today as it has always been.

Our response to criticism has been a kind of academic shell game: we talk a lot about improving our teaching methods, about integrating technology, about passionate commitments to teaching and students, but in reality we are still trucking out the reliable "lath and plaster" of the ancient lecture method—albeit a pruned and stronger one, jazzed up with a film here, a video there. When all is said and done, the more things change, the more they stay the same (to quote the French).

MORAL 3: IF YOU WANT TO DO ANYTHING WELL (INCLUDING KEEPING WOLVES AT BAY), YOU MUST PLAN AHEAD

As director of a facility that supports foreign and second language learning by providing technology in a laboratory setting, I have found the prevalent attitude of foreign and second language faculty to be one of "technology as afterthought."

The use of any technology in the classroom is rarely a case of instant success. Each technology does some things very well, some not so well, and some not at all. Misuse of technology is abuse of teaching and learning methodology, and the most blatant misuse is to use technology without having carefully planned it into the fabric of the course *from the very beginning*. Ten minutes before class is not the time to ask to have it videotaped. If we are going to use technology in our language classes for something other than to "liven things up" (television, video arcades, and movies do a much better job at that than we ever will), we must carefully plan integration of the technology far ahead of time; we must know precisely how the properties and limitations of the technology in question help or hinder us in achieving our pedagogical objectives. Just because we have at our disposal a cornucopia of technological plenty, does not mean we can use the existing and emerging technologies haphazardly and hope that they will, somehow, improve language learning.

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