



Dossers' Laws: Problem Solving for Directors of Studies

Dave Russell looks at how thinking clearly may be a better approach to solving 'problems' than being seen to be clearly thinking.

This article, based on a workshop, investigates whether there are generalisable approaches to solving 'problems' which can be identified by focusing on real rather than imagined events. (The term 'problem' appears from here on in inverted commas for reasons which will become clear.)

The Approach

There are many approaches to 'problem' solving - from inter-personal counselling to the cutting edge of management science. The approach taken here is:

- 1 Remind ourselves of the basics of reasoning.
 - 2 Define the terms - What *is* a 'problem'?
 - 3 Find generalisable events.
 - 4 Draw principles for action.
- In other words, it is an exercise in ratiocination.

Four Rules Worth Considering:

Rule 1 The Pale Blue Dot

The sure-fire way to fail to solve a problem intelligently is to lose a sense of perspective. It may help to remember that, viewed from outside the orbit of Neptune, the Earth is a pale blue dot circling a nondescript star on the edge of an ordinary galaxy in an observable universe of millions of

galaxies each containing roughly 100 billion stars. This is not to counsel giving up and going back to bed when 'problems' arise but it may help us to relax and take a rational, unemotional view of their real importance.

Rule 2 The Monk's Tale

Stand back and consider the picture as a whole. Consider the old question of the Monk's Tale. A monk goes on a pilgrimage from his village to the temple at the top of the hill. The journey takes him exactly twelve hours (from 6 am to 6 pm). He sleeps in the temple and sets off the next morning at 6 am to retrace his steps exactly down to the village, where he arrives at 6 pm.

Question: Barring the top and the bottom of the trail, is there a time when he is in exactly the same place on the path at exactly the same time? (Try considering the 'problem' as two monks setting off from opposite ends.)

Rule 3 The Camarina Parable

Consider all the consequences of any action. Camarina was a village in Sicily in 5th Century BC plagued by the proximity of a malarial swamp (even then the connection was known if not the vector). The villagers consulted the ageing oracle (as DoSs were then known) and decided *against his advice* to drain the swamp. All was well and public health improved until their neighbours, the Etruscans, spotting that the erstwhile

swamp was dry, proceeded to invade, slaughter every man, woman and child *including the oracle* and raze the village.

Some actions, it seems, are far worse than no action at all.

Rule 4 Jessie's Dilemma

Wait for all the information to accumulate before you act. My dog, because she doesn't know which of two available paths I am going to take on a favourite walk, will exhaust herself bouncing with witless enthusiasm from one to the other until I arrive and release her by stepping towards one path or the other. At which point she hares off without a backward glance. I find a source of inexhaustible amusement in promptly switching to the other path and obliging her to hurtle back again but that's my 'problem'. Her misfortune is that she hasn't the spare mental capacity to realise a) that not all the evidence is yet in and b) this has happened before. We have, and we should use it.

Defining Terms

There is a tendency to use the word 'problem' to describe any nasty event. A comparison with the word 'error' may exemplify what I mean (these are, of course, real ones):

"He my brother today going London."

"She rushed to the unconscious man and gave him the kiss of life."

While both are (probably) errors, the

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first seems to be a sign of deep structural confusion but the second is merely a snag.

I suspect we may use the term 'problem' in rather the same way - for example, we might conflate these as 'problems':

A 65-odd million years ago, the dinosaurs suddenly became extinct.

B The washing machine has flooded the kitchen.

C The video has chewed up another tape.

or even these:

1 A teacher was 10 minutes late today.

2 A class delegation complains their teacher doesn't like them.

3 George turns up five minutes late every morning.

What we seem to have is three distinct types: Mysteries (A and 2), Snags (B and 1) and what I will term Problems (C and 3) and now at last we can get rid of the inverted commas.

But the difference is not only in problem type, it is inherent in how we deal with them. For Mysteries we need to find an answer - if we don't, they may turn into Problems. With Snags we cope - if they happen repeatedly, they may turn into Problems. Problems, however, need Solutions.

So, when someone says: "We have a problem.", perhaps the wise response is: "Do we? Really? - What kind of incident are you referring to?"

Problems as Symptoms:

What we have so far is not enough because it doesn't lead to solutions. Dropping toast marmalade side down is not a serious problem (maybe) but we know which law is operating. Most of Sod's Laws apply to all human activity but some apply to being a DoS or a teacher in particular.

The Main Law is usually stated as: *If there's any way to do it wrong, that's how it will be done.*

There are a number of others:

Drazen's Law of Restitution:

The time it takes to rectify a situation is inversely proportional to the time it took to do the damage.

Gumperson's Law:

The probability of anything happening is in inverse ratio to its desirability.

The Law of Probable Dispersion:

Whatever hits the fan will not be evenly distributed.

And so on. But this is fatalism - organisations aren't necessarily subject to immutable and unsympathetic laws. What we need to do is to try to identify which laws are operating in our own institutions and neutralise them; head them off at the pass, so to speak. Of course, each institution is different but there are identifiable patterns. The EFL classroom seems a logical place to start to find examples. After all, one of *all DoSs'* many jobs is to solve problems for other teachers. Here are some common, real incidents and the laws I think they exemplify - I've called them Green Teacher's Laws:

- When the teacher reaches the feedback stage from a group activity it transpires that one group of students has completely misunderstood a perfectly simple instruction and cannot contribute at all.

Green's Law: *If an instruction can be misunderstood, it usually will. The corollary of this is that only crucial instructions will always be misunderstood.*

- The teacher was forced to spend the whole of a pair-work exercise doing the task with one student because there were 9 in the class instead of the expected 10.

Green's Law: *If you plan pairwork with a class of ten, one student will be absent.*

- At the end of a lesson on 'making polite requests', the class are asked to construct a dialogue using them. What we get is:

Learner A: I wonder if you could lend me £2000.

Learner B: Yes, here are they.

Green's Law: *Whatever you teach won't be enough.*

- The teacher starts the lesson by brainstorming to the white board everything the students know about The Beatles. Only one student admits to ever having heard of The Beatles.

Green's Law: *Any information critical to the completion of a task will not be present.*

These laws are, of course, couched in an overstated fashion - the incidents which led to their formulation are real enough, however. When this happens to inexperienced teachers it seems more productive to point out the general principles which are operating than to say something like "I rather think you should have checked the second instruction for the role play, don't you?". The reason these incidents occur much less frequently with experienced teachers is because they can, consciously or not, recognised the laws which are waiting to pounce and adjust their behaviour to neutralise them.

Can we do the same thing with our own problems?

Here are examples of what I mean. The solutions will vary with the opportunity you have to affect the operations of the laws.

- The leader of a group of students believes that two students are wrongly graded. You and both the teachers of the class disagree. The group leader has, however, promised they will be in a new class tomorrow.

Paola's Law: *All group leaders, regardless of their background, know what is best for their students.*

Solutions you might try to head off Paola's Law: write to each group leader if possible and make time to meet them early on to 'make things clear' and then make a mutually beneficial 'contract'.

- Right in the middle of course a student turns up who, despite being declared as 'Elementary', is a total beginner. The student's agent had

recommended he put 'Elementary' on the booking form because the school wouldn't accept a beginner at that time, or ...Two students who declare themselves at Proficiency level turn out to be barely up to FCE. However, they insist on taking CPE.

Data's Law: *The information you have is insufficient or corrupt; the information you give is ignored.* Solutions you might try to neutralise Data's Law: get more involved in meeting agents, write to the agent directly explaining the awful consequences, get involved in designing registration forms to get the information you want, extend or develop a barrier testing system.

Here are a few more Dossers' laws for your consideration. These come without solutions but I am prepared to wager that most DoSs could find examples of them without looking too hard. But, if you know they are likely to operate, you may just be able to head them off.

The Absolute Law of Placement: *If you have n places in a class at any particular level, $n+1$ of the arrivals on Monday will be at that level.*

Press' Law: *If a newly published book is ideal for a group, the teacher's book will not be available. The corollary of this is that if the teacher's book is available, the cassette will not be. And if both the teacher's book and the cassette are available, the student's book will be out of stock.*

loom's Law: *Requests for special courses will be for times when you are busiest.*

Newton's New Law: *For every action there is an equal and opposite criticism.*

Dave Russell has been DOS at Eastbourne School of English for ten years, before which he taught in Britain, Germany, India the Middle East and Greece for 15 years. He has particular interests in Teacher Training, dog walking and palaeoanthropology.

ELT Management Talks IATEFL Conference at Brighton, 2-5 April 1997

Wednesday 2 April

- 1150-1240 Chomsky Park - a management white knuckle ride
Hall A2 *Paul Menniss (Eurocentres, London)*
- 1400-1450 So you think you're a competent manager
Hall A2 *Arthur McKeown (University of Ulster, Newtown Abbey)*
- 1510-1600 NLP for managers
Hall A2 *George Pickering (Churchill House, Ramsgate)*
- 1740-1830 Sustainability in curriculum development projects
Elm *Rama Mathew (Central Institute of English and Foreign Languages, Hyderabad)*

Thursday 3 April

- 0900-0950 Management training in language schools
TDR *Joanna Strange (Bell Language Centre, London) & Martyn Ellis (Eurocentre London)*
- 1145-1235 Painless staff appraisals - myth or reality?
Hall A2 *Helen Mattacott (ARELS, London)*
- 1255-1315 Personal investment plans
Hall A2 *Jane Panahy (Oxford House College, London)*
- 1740-1830 The role of award-bearing management courses
Hall A2 *Rosemary Wilson (UCLES, Cambridge)*

Friday 4 April

- 0900-0950 EQUALS: a Europe-wide framework for quality assurance in language training
Hall A2 *Richard Rossner (Bell Educational Trust, Cambridge)*
- 1010-1100 ELT Management SIG Open Forum
Hall A2
- 1145-1315 School self-review: a reflective management tool
Hall A1 *(Malcolm Hebden (Bell Language School, Norwich)*
- 2000 Pub Quiz

Saturday 5 April

- 0900-0950 A learner-centred curriculum in a test-based course
Sunrise *Susan Holzman (Levinsky Teachers College, Tel Aviv, Israel)*
- 0900-0950 "They neither prosper nor perish" - the ELT profession reviewed
Beech *Trevor Doble (Nelson English School, Tenerife, Spain)*
- 1145-1315 Panel Discussion: Teaching qualifications
Hall A2 *Nic Underhill (Sheffield Hallam University), Allan Kelsall (Churchill House, Ramsgate), Glenn Fulcher (University of Surrey), Cherry Gough (British Council), John Brown (freelance) & Chris Burdett (English Worldwide)*
- 1145-1315 Mastering program/project evaluation: effective training for novices
Lounge Bar *Ronald Mackay (Concordia University, Montreal, Canada) & Sally Wellesley (ODA ECSCS Project, Indonesia)*
- 1430-1520 Cross-cultural issues in ELT management training
Hall A2 *Eryl Griffiths (Eurocentre Cambridge)*