

English in 3-D: a fresh look at traditional tasks (dictation, drills & dialogs)

Marc Helgesen
Miyagi Gakuin Women's University
Sendai, Japan

This appeared in Mukundan, J.
ed. (2006) *Focus on ELT
Materials II*. Petaling Jaya:
Pearson Malaysia. pp. 116-129.

Reader reflection task:

The following are often considered to be traditional tasks for language learning. Which do you use? Which have you used either when teaching or when studying a language? Tick (✓) your answers.

- dictation drills dialogues translation oral reading
 grammar- translation comprehension questions
 rote learning (memorization) pronunciation repetition

Think of the one or two you use the most. What do you like about them?
Is there anything you don't like about them? Are there ways you could make them more engaging for learners?

These are traditional techniques and, as such, are often criticized. Bailey (2003) asserts that, "People don't learn the pieces of the language and then put them together to make conversations." Richards and Schmidt (2002), speaking of drills but making an argument that can be applied to many traditional techniques, suggest, "[they] are less commonly used in communicative methodologies since it is argued that they practice pseudo-communication and do not involve meaningful interaction."

Yet, if these traditional tasks share the quality of being criticized as out-of-date, they also share another attribute: They remain popular with many teachers all over the world. It could be argued that they are still with us because they deserve to be with us. They have, as Maley (2005) notes, "withstood the test of time" for many teachers.

The purpose of this chapter is to look closely at three of the techniques, exploring the options teachers and learners have when using them. Specifically, I will consider the first three on the above list, all of which begin with the letter "D": dictation, drills and dialogs. Of course, the title, "English is 3-D", has a second meaning: three dimensions. I will argue that these techniques are so standard that we often don't notice the options and variety we can apply when using them. Looking at different ways to work and play with the techniques can increase learner interest and thinking. A common criticism of the techniques is that they are boring. Howard (2000) points out that our brains need variety: "Our sensory receptors become aroused when a new stimulus begins, but if the new stimulus continues without variation in quality or quantity, our sensory receptors shut down from their aroused state." This "habituation" dulls brains and classes. By trying to look at traditional techniques "in 3-D", I hope we can create the depth and different point of view that keeps things fresh for the learners.

Dictation

We all know what dictation is, or at least what it usually is but let's start with a specific definition. Richards and Schmidt (2002) define "dictation" as "a technique used in both language teaching and language testing in which a passage is read aloud to students or test takers, with pauses during which they must try to write down what they have heard as accurately as possible.

Strengths and weaknesses

Teachers who use dictation often mention that it is good for accuracy-based, intensive listening. They also mention that it can be a useful test of spelling. Those who dislike it mention that it is boring, you don't have to understand what you are writing and that it is very "bottom-up" (based on processing the "separate parts" of language, rather than an overall meaning).

The strengths and criticisms may well be true. However before we look at the specifics, it is useful to consider our options. How do you do dictation? Tick (✓) the options you usually use.

Options for dictation

Option one: Who "gives the dictation" (i.e., Who speaks?), () the teacher or () the students?

Examples of dictation

Example one: click dictation.

Preparation: make copies of this text:

A road went _____ a forest.

A _____ was _____ down

the _____. Suddenly she _____ a

_____. He was _____

a , , and a

.

He _____ and _____



Procedure:

1. (optional but useful for this text). Tell the learners they will hear a story. Invite them to close their eyes. When they do, read the text in a slow, relaxed voice. Allow time for them to think. Ignore the dots (•) the first time you read it.

Text: A long road went through a • forest. A • woman was walking down the road. Suddenly she saw a man. He was wearing a • shirt, • pants and a • hat. He smiled and said something/•.

2. Hand out the copies. Read the text again. This time, learners write the missing words. When you come to a dot (•) make a clicking sound with your tongue, ring a bell or tap a desk. Learners write in any word they imagine.
3. Learners compare stories to check the dictated words and to see if what they imagined was similar or different. Some will have a dark, scary forest. For others, it will be a delightful fairy tale sort of place. Others will have a very different place in mind.

Example two: “Off the wall” dictation.

Preparation: Make copies of a short text. If your class is large, make several copies. You may want to enlarge the text on a photocopier.

Procedure:

1. Put the copies on the wall outside of the classroom. Divide the class into pair.
2. One student in each pair runs to the copy. That student reads and remembers as much of the text as possible. That learner runs back to the partner and dictates as much of the text as possible. The partner writes. Then the partner runs to the copy, reads, remembers and dictates the next part. They continue until they have recreated the whole text.

Options and reasons:

Option one: Who gives the dictation?

In our two examples, the teacher dictated once and the students did it as a peer dictation once. Naturally, the teacher speaking is what is normally expected and the teacher probably has better pronunciation. Students dictating to each other, however, means they get more speaking practice. It also individualizes speed and gives learners more responsibility and autonomy.

Option two: Do the students write exactly what they heard or do they change it?

Writing what is heard is what normal and expected. It may give the learner more control. However, when learners modify what they hear as they did in the click dictation, there is deeper thinking going on with the students. It also encourages a better balance between “top-down” (meaning-based) processing and “bottom-up” processing. And this is more interesting, and encourages learner creativity.

Definition revisited.

The definition given at the beginning of this section certainly explains the way dictation is usually done. However, as we have seen, the speaker is actually not predetermined. There is also no need to have the student write exactly what they

heard. So if we strip away the old assumptions, we are left with a simpler definition of dictation:

Someone or something (e.g., a tape player, a computer, etc.) says something. As a reaction, someone else writes something.

Note that this simplified definition leaves a lot more room for creativity and interest, simply because it allows more freedom.

Drills

Let us again start with a Richards and Schmidt (2002) definition.

Drills are “ technique commonly used in older methods of language teaching particularly the audiolingual method and used for practicing sounds or sentence patterns in a language, based on guided repetition or practice. A drill which practices some aspect of grammar or sentence formation is often known as pattern practice.

There are usually two parts to a drill:

- a. The teacher provides a word or sentence as a stimulus (the call-word or cue).
- b. Students make various types of responses based on repetition, substitution or transformation.”

Even in their fairly neutral dictionary definition, they associate it with “older methods.” Peter Viney (2004) is even more to the point when he purposely chooses the “wrong” dictionary definition and says “A drill is a tool for boring.”

Strengths and weaknesses

People who argue for drill cite advantages like “drills are focused practice” and “they help learned get over the physical difficulty of saying something for the first time.” Drills can, teachers often claim, be useful for pronunciation work. Even supporters though, have to admit that it is easy for drills to become mind-numbingly boring. In many cases, learners don’t even need to know what they are saying.

Again, consider your options. Which do you use in your own teaching and learning? Tick (✓) your answers.

Options for drills:

Option one: Do the students respond () immediately or () after a pause or () some other option?

Option two: In substitution drills, where do the substitution items come from, () the book/teacher or () the students themselves?

Option three: Do you precede more open activities like pairwork and groupwork with a drill of the structures the learners may need? () Yes or () no

Examples of drills

Example one: ABC drill

Preparation: none

Language focus: Various. Examples:

1st conditional (ABC picnic):

If you bring the (apples), I’ll bring the (bananas).

Going to future (Trip around the world.) *We're going to go to (Australia).
Then we're going to visit
Bangkok.*

Nouns: *I have an album. You have a baseball.*

Procedure: 1. Write the target structure on the board.

2. Explain the situation and the task. For example, for the first conditional, tell the students that they are going on a picnic. This is an "A BC picnic" which means they have to take one thing that starts with every letter of the alphabet -- one thing that starts with A, one that starts with B, etc. all the way to Z. Actually, you might want to leave out the letter "X". No one takes a xylophone to a picnic.

3. Students work in pairs. They stand and face each other. One partner holds his or her hands in front of him/her, palms up.

4. The other partner says the target sentence (*If you bring the apples, I'll bring the bananas.*) and slaps the first partner's hands.

5. The first partner says the next sentence. That sentence includes the second item from the previous sentence (bananas) and a new item that starts with next letter (*If you bring the bananas, I'll bring the chocolate.*) and slaps the partners' hands.

6. They continue until they get to Z.

Example two: Positive drill

Preparation: Make copies of the handout (Figure 1, next page)

Language focus: tag questions

Procedure:

1. Give out the handouts. Remind learners that saying positive things to themselves is good for self-image and learner confidence.
2. Demonstrate the activity by choosing 2-3 of the sentences. Say them. Have the class repeat them, changing "I" to "you." They also select the correct tag and say it:
 - I can learn quickly and easily. (*You can learn quickly and easily, can't you?*)
 - I am learning interesting new things everyday. (*You are learning interesting new things every day, aren't you?*)
3. Learners work in pairs. They read over their handout and choose the sentences they like. They say them and their partners repeat as indicated.

You're a great student, aren't you?

① Work with a partner.

One person reads any sentence.

Partner, repeat it.

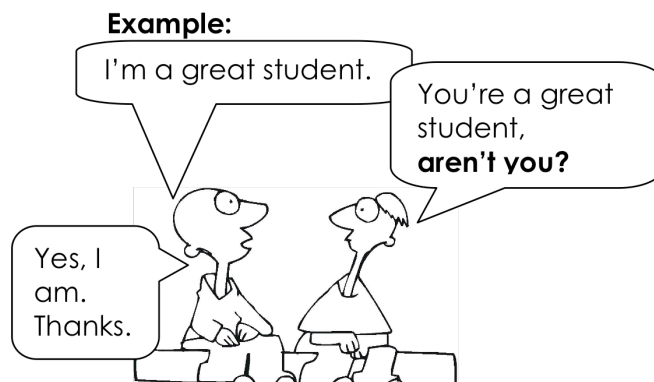
Change "I" to "You".

Add a tag:

- *aren't you?*
- *can't you?*
- *don't you?*

The first person answers:

- *Yes, I am. Thanks.*
- *Yes, I can. Thanks.*
- *Yes, I do. Thanks.*



I am very smart.
 I love learning English.
 I enjoy listening to English.
 I like to read English books and magazines.

I am an excellent student.
 I can learn quickly and easily.

I can learn from my mistakes.
 I think mistakes are interesting.

I like to try new things.
 I am learning interesting new things every day.

I learn more English when I work with my friends.
 I help my friends because they help me.
 I am learning more easily than ever before.

② Now change parts. The other partner reads the sentences.

③ Now put away the paper.

How many sentences can you remember together?

What we think, we become.
 - The Buddha

Figure 1: positive drill

Example three: Silent Listen and Repeat

Preparation: None

Language focus: any

Procedure:

1. Call the students attention to the “target language”. This often appears in a grammar box or language map near a task in a textbook.
2. Say each sentence. Have students repeat silently. Note that their mouths, tongues, etc. are moving. They are just not producing any sound.
3. (Optional) You may choose to follow this up with having them say the sentences aloud.

Options and reasons

Option one: When do the students respond? Immediately after hearing the cue is what students are used to and it does keep the class moving. There may be reasons for trying other ways. If learners respond instantly, weaker students may not have time to think of what they are supposed to say. If that happens, only the stronger students respond. The weaker learners don't get the practice they need.

In the positive drill, learners take a minute to look over the choices before they start. They choose the options they want to use. By taking that time and making choices, they need to actually process the meaning. They have to understand.

In the “Silent Listening and Repeat”, learners have a chance to focus mentally on the correct pronunciation and phrasing before they say it. As Gilbert (2005) points out, this can be a useful step. It is hard to explain exactly how this works but fairly easy to demonstrate, even to someone just reading this article. Please read the sentences below aloud.

Pronunciation doesn't begin in the mouth.
It begins in the mind.

Now try it as “Silent listen and repeat.” Say it with no sound. Your mouth is moving, just don't put sound behind it. Which time were you *aware of pronunciation*? Most people find the silent step allows them to focus on the mechanical aspects better. They notice their tongue, teeth, lips, etc. They are also able to focus mentally on what it should sound like. This is in contrast to the standard pronunciation work in which learners are just trying to get the sound out. Also note that if you follow-up a silent step with a “say it aloud” step, they are dealing with each item three times: they hear it, say it silently, then they say it aloud. That's extra practice.

Option two: *Where do substitution items come from?*

Naturally, it is quicker if they come from the book or teacher, students expect it and there are fewer mistakes. But of course, nothing is as simple as it first appears. For example, more mistakes happen when students are moving away for the “given script” and are trying to use language on their own. Teachers often point out that mistakes are good and are actually “learning steps.” Does our testing reflect this? How do we get students to believe it?

In the ABC drill, learners provided their own substitutions. That made the activity more interesting and challenging. It also activates necessary vocabulary related to topics they will

presumably use in the rest of the lesson. Note that it is not just a question of language level. The ABC drill is usually used with learners who are at a lower level than those dealing with tag questions (the positive drill). Yet in the ABC drill learners can provide their own substitutions while that would be more challenging with the positive drill.

Option three: Do you precede more open activities like pairwork and groupwork with a drill of the structures the learners may need? When we do so, for example, using Silent Listen and Repeat with the language map/grammar box before it task, it encourages *FonF* (Focus on Form) awareness before the task. It also lets learners know where in the target sentences/grammar box/language map the forms they need are. They can refer back during the task.

Some teachers disagree, saying that it is better to let the need for a form come up, then supply it. Perhaps. Or does that just increase learner dependency on the teacher? Others feel doing drills is wasting time that should be used for real communication. If you feel that way, fine. However, notice that in both example drills, learners did more than mechanically manipulate language. They had to listen and react to their partner. Does that constitute communication or not?

?Follow up question: Think of your own experience as a language learner. Did drills help in learning or not. Did you every find yourself doing “mental rehearsal” before going into a communicative situation. Was it a kind of drill or not?

Definition revisited.

As with the dialog definition, the explanation of “drills” at the beginning of this section is too limited. Of course, the people who wrote that definition wanted to explain the traditional usage and my purpose here is to challenge the accepted, standard limits. The next paragraph starts with my revised definition. Before you read it, you may want to look back that the definition at the beginning of this section and think about how you would revise it yourself.

Revised definition of drills: Someone or something provides a written or spoken stimulus. Learners say something, usually short, in response. Generally, there is repetition of target forms or vocabulary sets during the activity.

Dialogues

Again we start with a linguistic dictionary definition: “a model conversation, used to practise speaking and to provide examples of language usage. Dialogues are often specially written to practice language items, contain simplified grammar and vocabulary, and so may be rather different from real-life conversation” (Richards, J and Schmidt, R, 2002).

Strengths and weaknesses Dialogues appear in nearly every conversation textbook. And there are good reasons for them. They show accurate language in context, model discourse and sometimes are even interesting stories. At times, as the definition above shows, they don’t seem realistic. Further, when learners practice, they don’t get help developing the flexibility language learners need. And learners practicing dialogues don’t really need to pay attention to each other.

Again, look at the options. When you usually use?

Options for dialogs:

Option one: Do the students () sit down or () stand and/or move when they practice?

Option two: Do the students practice the dialog using () their regular voices (pitch, loudness, etc.) or () do they change their voices?

Option three: What happens after dialog practice (i.e., what is the goal of dialog work)? Students () memorize it or () close their book and have their own conversation or () go on to something else.

Option four: Do students focus on () what the characters are saying or () something else?

Examples of dialog variations

All of the following are meant to be flexible techniques that can be used with nearly any textbook (or other) dialog. They assume the dialog appears somewhere such as the textbook or on the chalkboard.

Example one: Voice work

Preparation: None

Procedure: 1. Brainstorm emotions and physical states that might be realistic for the characters in the dialog. Write them on the board.

2. Learners practice acting out the dialog with each other. Each chooses one (or more) of the emotions/states. They try to perform the dialog in a way that shows the emotion.

3. (Optional). When a learner thinks they know the emotion/state the partner is showing, they try to work the phrase “Gee, you sound _____.” into conversation. The other part either confirms it (“Yeah, I guess I am _____.”) or denies it.

Example two: Rhythm Chant

Preparation: Get an electronic keyboard or a digital drum machine. Listen to some of the available background rhythms and find one that generally works with the rhythm of the dialogue. That is, if the dialog was chanted, much like a Carolyn Graham Jazz Chant™, does it work with the rhythm?

Procedure: 1. In class, read the dialog or play the recording. (Optional: You may want to do a “Silent Listen and Repeat” step like suggested in the section on drills.).

2. Turn on the keyboard/drum machine rhythm. Adjust the speed to match the dialog.

3. Perform the chant as a “call and response.” That is, you chant the first line in rhythm, and gesture for the students to repeat the same line with to the rhythm. Do this with all the lines.

4. Have the students work in pairs or small groups to practice the dialog.

Note – You will probably want to invite the learners to stand up as they practice. Some are likely to naturally start moving with the rhythm. Standing makes the interaction easier.

Example three: Three-minute conversation task

Preparation: None

Procedure: 1. While they learners are practicing a conversation in whatever way they are used to, write the following on the board:

Three-minute conversation task:

Close your books.

Have your own conversation. English only
 Talk about _____ (the topic of the dialog).

2. As they finish practicing the dialog, introduce the task. Note that the “English only” rules is meant as a challenge. You may want to set the challenge for a longer time if your students can handle it.

Example four: Innervoice

Preparation: None, but some teachers like to photocopy a textbook dialog onto the middle of a larger (B4 or A3) sheet to allow more space for writing.

Procedure: 1. Point out that while we are having a conversation, we are usually talking to ourselves as well. That can be called an “innervoice.” The innervoice conversation is often quite different than what we are saying aloud.

2. Introduce the first part of the dialog. Ask, “What are the characters thinking? What are their innervoices saying?” Encourage students to make suggestions. Note that all suggestions are valid.

3. Once students understand the idea of innervoice, have them work in pairs or small groups. They write the innervoice for each character.

4. (Optional). You may want to have learners share their innervoice conversation. One way to do this is to have pairs combine into groups of four. One pair performs the textbook dialog. The other performs the corresponding characters’ innervoices. Then they change roles or change groups.

Options and reasons:

Option one: Do the students sit down or stand and/or move when they practice?

Sitting is what they normally do in class so that may be what they expect. At the same time, standing and moving can provide a useful chance of pace; the “breaking habituation” mentioned earlier. Some teachers feel having student move around makes classroom management more difficult. Others say the opposite: When learners are moving, they stay more interested and involved.

As a generalization, some teachers find they have students sit when they work on a dialog when they are looking at it “as language” – they are focused on linguistic elements/language forms. When they are standing and moving, they are treating it more as a script for drama or similar oral exploitation.

Teachers who argue in favor of standing and moving point out that eye contact and gesture – both important aspects of language, are easier when learners are standing. It is also full-body learning, much to TPR (Total Physical Response). This is especially useful for students with a kinesthetic learning style.

Option two: Do the students change their voices or not? Some learners would find changing voices childish. After all, when they really use English, they use the “real” voices. Others argue that, just as different situations call for different speaking styles, different dialogs do as well. The voice learners’ use in class is often an emotionless monotone. Focusing on the voice is a way to help learners express themselves better.

Option three: What happens after dialog practice? For certain types of language, it might be enough just to practice and learn dialogs. For example, “telephone English” is largely a set of standard routines. Often, however, we want to see dialogs as supported practice as preparation for having their own. The “three-minute conversation task” (Helgesen, Brown and Mandeville, 2004) is an example of moving them into their own conversation. Having

them created the scene just before or just after the dialog will get learners moving beyond the printed text.

Option four: Do students focus on what the characters are saying or something else? Of course, focusing of what the characters say is the most common way. However, working with innervoice (Tomlinson, 2001) can add a level of understanding that is much deeper – and more interesting – than what is usually done. It encourages (releases) learner creativity.

Follow-up question: For a day or two, notice your innervoice. Notice how often it is different than what you are saying aloud. This is not being dishonest. It is simple the normal “self-monitoring” we all do. If you are using a foreign or second language, notice which language your innervoice is in. See if you can say the same thing in the other language. Does it have the same nuance or not?

Definition revisited

Return to the definition of dialogues at the beginning of this section. How many aspects of the definition do you now find limited or unnecessary? The following is my revision of the definition. “A text of a conversation is used for practice, either of the same conversation or as a stimulus for conversation/interaction.”

An observation and the next step

Through out this chapter, I’ve be revising definitions of the three “traditional tasks” we are discussion. Each time, the revised definition is shorter and simpler. It is less bound and restricted than the earlier one. This is the “stripping away assumptions” mentioned earlier.

Perhaps one reason that traditional tasks are criticized is that we often only see the negative aspects that we feel go hand-in-hand with the tasks themselves. By looking at them “through new lenses” (in this case, our figurative 3-D glasses) we can see new ways to make use of them while keeping the qualities that made them useful in the first place.

In the “examples” part of each section, we looked at ways to experiment with the different tasks. There are meant as things readers can try in their own classes. More importantly, they represent a way to look at activities thorough a new lens. Just as stripping down definitions gives freedom and possibilities, stripping away tired assumptions can give new life to traditional tasks. The final page of this chapter is *Figure 2: Babies, bathwater and reinventing traditional tasks*. It asks you to rethink classroom activities. Consider trying this, either alone or with a colleague. It may give you more than a new classroom task. It may help you look at all tasks in new way, with new dimensions.

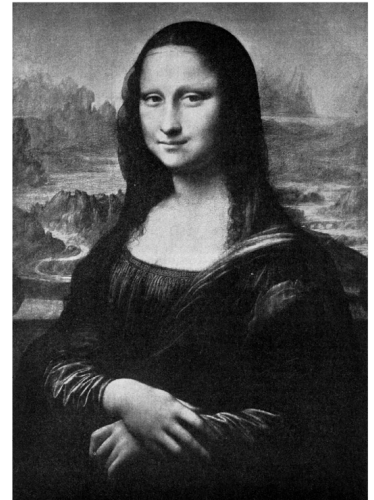
References

- Bailey, K. (2003). “Speaking” in Nunan, D. (Ed.) *Practical English Language Teaching*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Gilbert, J. (2005). *Clear Speech*. 3/ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Howard, P. (2000). *The Owner’s Manual for the Brain*. Atlanta, GA: Bard Press.
- Helgesen, M. and Brown, S. (1995) *Active Listening 1: Introducing Skills for Understanding*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Helgesen, M., Brown, S. and Mandeville, T. (2004) *English Firsthand 1*. Hong Kong: Longman Asia ELT/Pearson Education.
- Maley, A. (2005) “Doing Things with Texts.” Paper presented to The First International Conference on English Language Teaching Materials, April 29, 2005, Melaka, Malaysia.
- Richards, J. and Schmidt, R. (2002) *Longman dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics* 3/ed. Harlow: Longman/Pearson Education.
- Tomlinson, B. (2001) “The Inner Voice: A Critical Factor in L2 Learning” *Journal of the Imagination in Language Learning and Teaching*. Vol 6. 26-33 available on-line at www.njcu.edu/cill/journal-index.html
- Viney, P. (2004) “Communication Skills for the Classroom Teacher.” Paper presented to Conference of the Japan Association for Language Teaching, Nov.22, 2004. Nara, Japan.

Babies, bathwater and reinventing traditional tasks

Many “traditional techniques” are criticized as ineffective and out-of-date. And, certainly, just being traditional doesn’t make something good or bad. Many of the techniques, although criticized, continue to be used. Maybe instead of “throwing them out” we can look at ways to improve them by adding features of progressing language teaching.

Do you want to work alone or with a partner?



1. What “traditional” techniques do you use? (List things that are sometimes called “out-of-date”) What are your reasons? Why do you use them?

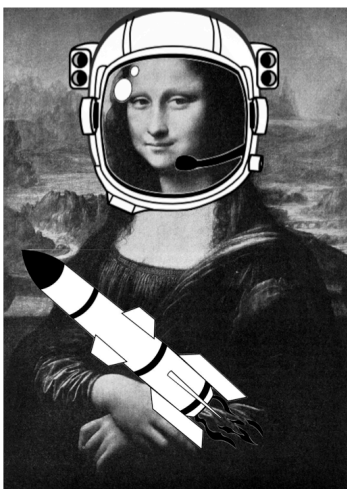
2. Choose one you want to work (play) with. Circle it.

3. When the technique is criticized, what (specifically) do people say is wrong with it? For each item, include a positive element.

Example: It is *x*. Tasks *should y*.

Dictation is completely bottom-up. Tasks should be more balanced.

Please really do state the suggestions positively and in ways people believe are valid. Otherwise, it is unlikely you are going to find the “useful element” in each idea.



4. (This step might be better with one or more partners so you can brainstorm.)

Go back to the idea you chose at step 2.

• What are the most essential elements of the technique?

Try to get to the core, basic parts. Example: For dictation, people might say, “*The teacher says sentences. Students write them.*” But actually the core of dictation is “Students hear something. They write.” This leaves us open to someone other than the teacher speaking, students writing something other than what they hear, students writing somewhere other than their notebooks, etc.

“Creative thinking may mean simply the realization that there is no particular virtue in doing things the way they have always been done.”

– Rudolf Flesch