In search of the coral lagoon

I had seen photos of it on social media for a number of months; it was especially popular with tourists visiting the island in search of places off the beaten track. In the 35 years I had spent living in Malta, I had never visited the place nor got to know where it was found. Apart from the fact that it was situated in the north of the island close to Armier Bay, I was aware of very little about its exact location. What I was sure of, was the fact that I had to explore the Coral Lagoon and experience it first-hand. Without ever having been there, I felt captivated by its beauty. The photos showed a chasm in the rocky shore, in which the sea roiled as it rushed through a narrow...
cleft. People were perched on the ledge or poised mid-air as they dove into the water. How was it possible that I had never discovered this unique place on an island that is no more than 27km long by 14.5km wide?

One wintry Sunday morning I left home early and drove north, determined to finally see this lagoon with my own eyes. Once I arrived at L-Aħrax tal-Mellieħa, a peninsula jutting out into the sea, I followed a long straight road that cut across its length. Multiple tracks branched off into the garigue and without knowing which one led to my destination there was nothing to do but to trust my instincts. I turned into a bumpy track that passed by a campsite before disappearing into the rock of the shore. I proceeded on foot up an incline beyond which I could hear the roar of the sea. I soon passed by some fishermen who had risen even earlier than I had and were bundling their stuff into their cars. I did not know whether this was the right direction but forged ahead anyway, seemingly propelled by something urging me to explore what lay beyond the top of the rocky hill. As soon as my line of vision had passed the brim, I knew I had found the Coral Lagoon; I jogged down to it and walked all around the edge. I spent the next hour watching the sea surge through the slit in the rock face, churning the water within. I had happened upon the place I was looking for, but what had guided me to it so effortlessly? Was it merely chance or was something else at play? I can never know for sure, but deep down I suspect that it was thanks to my intuition that I had found what I was searching for.

Understanding intuition

Intuition is defined as the ability to comprehend something without relying on conscious reasoning. It is the capacity to instinctively understand what one needs to do in a specific situation or sense what is most likely about to happen at a particular moment in time. According to Koch:

"Intuition is the name we give to the uncanny ability to quickly and effortlessly know the answer, unconsciously, either without or well before knowing why. The conscious explanation comes later, if at all, and involves a much more deliberate process." (Koch, 2015)

The origins of intuition are still in the process of being understood and this is because the brain's mysteries have not yet been entirely unravelled. In fact, a Spanish neuroscientist

Follow your intuition
and Nobel laureate, Santiago Ramón y Cajal is reported as saying that “The brain is a world consisting of a number of unexplored continents and great stretches of unknown territory.” Ongoing research shows that intuition is closely linked to an area of the brain called the caudate nucleus, which forms part of the basal ganglia and is linked to but apart from the cortex. It seems that

“The cortex is associated with conscious perception and the deliberate and conscious analysis of any given situation, novel or familiar, whereas the caudate nucleus is the site where highly specialized expertise resides that allows you to come up with an appropriate answer without conscious thought.” (Koch, 2015)

Science shows that besides the fact that intuition is measurable and can be improved over time, it can be used to make better, faster, and more confident decisions (Luftiyanto, Donkin, and Pearson, 2016). Reflecting on my discovery of the Coral Lagoon, I realised that this had not been the first time in my life that I had made decisions based on intuition. Most often my use of intuition involves highly mundane things, but on other occasions I have used it to make important decisions, especially if there was a surfeit or dearth of information concerning something that might seriously affect my future. For example, I have been in situations where different people have provided me with conflicting advice and despite weighing the pros and cons of different courses of action I still could not reach a decision. It was then that I found myself distancing myself from the process of reasoning things out and merely trusting my gut instinct. For some reason, I have rarely regretted the outcomes of such decisions.

However, success on the basis of intuition is not always guaranteed. According to Locke (2015), intuition is only helpful if three important conditions are met, namely, an individual possesses domain-specific expertise, the problem to be solved is unstructured, and the amount of time to make a decision is limited. It takes around 10 years for an individual to develop the necessary expertise to rely on their intuition successfully and in this period repetition and feedback are crucial. In fact, Koch (2015) claims that “Intuition arises within a circumscribed cognitive domain. It may take years of training to develop, and it does not easily transfer from one domain of expertise to another.” Moreover, intuition is best used to address problems for which decisions are not guided by clear rules or objective criteria. If there is abundant data on which to base one’s decision, it is best to rely on analysis rather than intuition. However, if there is no time in which to analyse a problem effectively then intuition might be a helpful heuristic. This is especially true if the amount of available information with which to make a decision is scarce.

Teacher intuition

Perhaps one of the most common situations where I have relied on my intuition has been in my teaching; I surmise that this might be true for many teachers. Despite how thorough our lesson plans are, we can never pre-empt all the possible scenarios that might unfold during a lesson. Hence, sometimes we find ourselves having to think on the spot, making quick decisions without fully knowing whether we have chosen the right way of handling an issue. Ideally, our training should kick in at exactly this time and allow us to choose from the best set of options. However, despite how comprehensive and effective our training has been, there will still be times when it fails us and that is when we are left with only our professional instincts to rely on. It is in such moments that we need to trust our teacher intuition, confident in the knowledge that it is extremely unlikely for it to let us down. Of course that might still happen. But unless we trust our intuition in those moments when we most need it, we will just remain paralysed and lose control of the situation or fail to capitalise on something that would enhance our students’ learning experience.

Teacher intuition is not only useful for unforeseen circumstances and this is why it might require further cultivation. Vaughan (1979:4) believes that “It is... possible for everyone to awaken his or her own intuition and to use it both helpfully and profitably in everyday life.” This implies that intuition is a psychological function that can be nurtured. In fact, focusing on students in higher education, Burke and Sadler-Smith (2011) provide a series of research-based ideas for
educating and developing intuition. Most of these are transferable to teacher development. Just as teacher education needs to give more importance to pre-service teachers’ ability to engage in disciplined improvisation (Xerri, 2016), it might be necessary for in-service training to develop teachers’ confidence in their professional intuition. Without that confidence, they will be reluctant to take risks and experiment with techniques and materials, methods and approaches. A lack of trust in one’s intuition as a teacher probably contributes to the stagnation of one’s professional practices, as well as hindering one from dealing with unexpected situations in the classroom. The building of trust in their intuition might need to become something that more teachers are willing to engage in. It could be that in certain cases it might make all the difference.

Nonetheless, the cultivation of teacher intuition is not just dependent on individual practitioners. The environment in which they operate makes a huge difference to how likely they are to trust their professional intuition. For example, one of my MA TESOL students described how at her school all teachers use the same course book and digital resources, and follow the same scheme of work in such a way that if a teacher is absent on a specific day someone else can easily replace him or her. Moreover, classrooms are made of glass partitions so that anyone can see what is happening inside. While this system has its advantages because continuity, transparency and accountability are ensured, there are also massive problems with it. In such an environment, teachers run the risk of becoming mere cogs in the wheel and an extreme form of standardisation has the power to eclipse their individuality and personality. Can teachers follow their instincts in such an environment? Most probably not. Is there any mystery in a glass box, where you are under constant surveillance and expected to conform to a set plan? Do we want a system where everything is prescribed for teachers and they are never allowed to rely on what their gut feeling tells them about effective teaching and learning? Perhaps the golden mean is to equip teachers with the knowledge, skills and beliefs needed for them to teach effectively but not stripping them of the autonomy to follow their intuition about critical moments in a lesson. Standardising what teachers do to the extent that they become interchangeable automatons that lack the freedom to adapt lesson events to what they feel works is perhaps tantamount to subjecting teachers and learners to a gross injustice.

References: