

Reflection on the seminar 'Live and unplugged'

By Luke Meddings

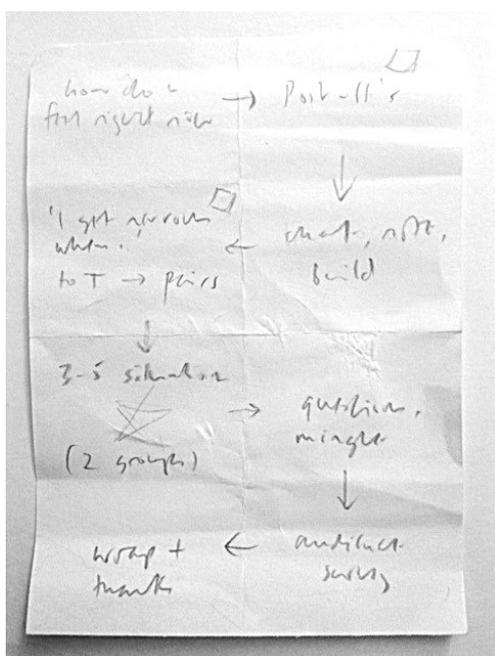
A November evening at the British Council in London saw over a hundred people gather for a 'live' lesson - not a perfect name, because all lessons are live, but one that conveys something of the atmosphere when a lesson takes place in front of an audience.

Perhaps the word I'm really looking for is a 'shared' lesson. Because if there were two aims that evening, the first being to show a dogme lesson in practice, and the second to make a case for sharing our classroom practice more often, achieving the second gave me as much satisfaction as the first.

It was a second attempt at a live lesson, because I'd already taught one [with Scott Thornbury at the Unplugged conference in Barcelona in May](#) and I say 'attempt' because teaching a lesson in public like that can only yield a version of a lesson, one shaped by the special circumstances in which it takes place.

So I introduced the session by saying that no one would come away thinking they'd seen the most amazing lesson, let alone the best teaching, ever. I said that I hoped to show how much can be derived from minimal stimulus via a sequence of task-light activities, and I suggested that - if I could teach a lesson in front of a hundred people - we might all consider opening our classroom doors to one another a bit more often.

For teaching is oddly private, despite the fact that it takes place in public. We learn our profession in front of our students, but we do it behind closed doors - and we are rarely observed by our peers except when there is some formal outcome to be negotiated or achieved. This outcome often relates to a key moment in our career, such as getting a qualification, job or promotion. No wonder we associate being observed with pressure.



A question

What steps can we take as teachers and teacher managers to reduce this pressure? How can we move away from the 'observation' model and move towards one that feels more informal, more like 'sitting in'? What if the 'outcome' of watching someone else teach was simply having a conversation afterwards?

The pressure was certainly on for the learners. Unlike the students in Barcelona, who had their backs to the conference delegates, my London 'class' of thirteen found themselves sideways on to the audience and illuminated by film lighting. But it's amazing how quickly a group of people can bond. We met 15 minutes before the start, and may only meet again to watch the

video footage together, but it felt like as much like a real class as the set-up allowed.

The picture shows the lesson 'plan' I used on the night - more of a lesson flow, perhaps, given that it lacks language exponents or timings, but still a plan in as much as it outlines a coherent sequence of related tasks.

I made numerous redrafts of this minimal plan in the hours leading up to the lesson, anticipating how the unusual circumstances of the lesson might be exploited and developed.

In the end I decided that a simple question relating to how they felt would probably be enough to get us started. But I was rather banking on them feeling nervous!

I needn't have worried. Most people *were* feeling nervous, though there was some nice variation in their initial answers ('quite nervous', 'sooo nervous' and so on).

The lesson was sequenced, and progressed, as follows; at each stage I helped with feedback or suggestions, depending on what people wanted to say and how they had said it (for a full and objective account of the lesson see Scott Sherriff's report, *Live and Unplugged - a Dogme Lesson and Discussion*).

- I handed out sticky notes and asked everyone to write down their own answer to the question: 'How do you feel right now?'
- I stuck the notes to a flip-chart and we spoke both about our feelings, and about the language we had used to describe them
- Working in pairs, the class discussed other situations in life that make them nervous, before noting them down using the model: 'I get nervous when ...'
- The class worked in two groups, choosing the five situations that made them most nervous as a group
- The learners asked people in the audience which scenarios made *them* most nervous, before feeding back to one another (this could have been homework in a regular class)

Activity thus moved sequentially from the immediate to the general, from our own experience (and language) to that of others.

Questions followed, and I was asked if I felt it had been a 'dogme' lesson. I said that if one defined such a lesson as one based on the lives and language of the learners, then yes, it had been.

Granted, it was more teacher-centred than a lesson with a regular class might have been - but there was a need both to reassure the learners and to manage a complex dynamic that included the audience. As learners become more familiar with task types over time, greater autonomy can be achieved. However, I can't help thinking that the independence of teacher and learners as a *group* from pre-determined content represents its own kind of autonomy.

Reflecting on this lesson, it occurs to me how fond I am of including a short writing stage in one or more phases of an unplugged lesson. It allows everyone some processing time –

helping to manage variation in the 'response time' for more or less outgoing and confident learners. It yields evidence of the language learners already have at their disposal, as the written texts frequently embody the strengths and weaknesses of their spoken English. And it integrates writing within a genuinely communicative context.

There was some focus on form, but as I acknowledged in answer to a question later on, not as much as there might have been in a less exposed environment. Additionally, some of the focus on form was done quietly and close-up via gesture, echoing and recasting - and this kind of feedback is quite hard to convey in a live lesson.

Are 'live lessons' more than a novelty? I hope so. Whatever novelty value there is now will wear off if more are taught by more people, and although the learners here felt less able to contribute to the discussion that followed than their counterparts in Barcelona, I still think the notion of including learners in a training setting is a hugely positive one.

Everyday classes can be a training setting too, if we open our classroom doors to one another. We can do this both face-to-face and online. Watching someone else teaching can both focus and relax us, taking some of the pressure off as we pursue our unique public-private profession.

Inspiration doesn't have to come as a blinding flash. It can be quite incremental, promoting any or all of the following reactions:

'Ah - I do that.'

'Oh - I haven't done that for ages.'

'Hmm - I'm not sure about that.'

'Yep - I'll definitely try this!'

A challenge

Will you take up my 'live lesson challenge' by inviting a colleague to sit in on your class one day soon? Of course, the deal is that they have to let you do the same! You don't need to see a lesson plan in advance - maybe it's better if you experience the class like a learner. It's sitting in, not 'observing'. The feedback sheet is a cup of coffee. And the outcome is sharing.

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Suggested reading

For some interesting thoughts on 'visualising' lessons in terms of activity flow rather than target input/output, see Scott Thornbury's blog post here <http://scottthornbury.wordpress.com/2011/12/26/v-is-for-visualization/>

For some reflections on peer feedback and informal personal development, see Phil Wade's blog post here <http://eflthoughtsandreflections.wordpress.com/2011/12/28/summary-of-efl-experiments-1-help-me/>

Scott Sherriff's report, *Live and Unplugged - a Dogme Lesson and Discussion* includes links to the following blogs mentioned in the talk:

<http://languagemoments.wordpress.com/>

<http://teachertrainingunplugged.wordpress.com/>

<http://www.mikejharrison.com/>

<http://the-pln-staff-lounge.blogspot.com/> www.esolcourses.com

In addition to these, the following links - all of which explore the benefits and challenges of implementing Dogme across a sequence or course of lessons - are well worth investigating:

Adam Beale

<http://fiveagainstone.wordpress.com/>

Oil Beddall

<http://olibeddall.wordpress.com/>

Chia Suan Chong

<http://chiasuanchong.wordpress.com/iatefl-2010-presentation>

Chris Ozog

<http://eltreflection.wordpress.com/>