

Live and Unplugged - a Dogme Lesson and Discussion' **Report by Scott Sherriff**

Luke Meddings is co-author of the book 'Teaching Unplugged: Dogme in English Language Teaching' which won a 2010 British Council award for Innovation. Earlier this year he delivered a seminar entitled '[20 Steps to Teaching Unplugged](#)'. Returning to Spring Gardens, he sought to demonstrate how the principles of Dogme and Teaching Unplugged that he had presented back in April can be put into practice. With the gracious assistance of thirteen students from the Wimbledon School of English, the evening would see Meddings deliver a 'live' Dogme session in front of over a hundred 'observers'.

Meddings began by outlining what he hoped to achieve during the seminar. He wanted the audience to take part in a shared experience that would help demystify not only teaching unplugged and Dogme but also the process of watching fellow professionals teach.

Meddings described the dichotomy in how people learn to teach and how that process takes place both publically and privately. Observed teaching sessions have become exclusively associated with feelings of anxiety and strain, in which a successful outcome might well determine the securing of employment or the extension of an existing contract. Meddings advocated a new approach to observations that attempts to wrestle it from the clutches of apprehension and fear toward one which sees teachers opening their classroom doors to colleagues wherever and whenever possible, engendering an environment where tutors feel at ease sitting in on one another.

So, to the live session. The 'classroom' was very small, the stage space just managing to accommodate Meddings, a small flip-chart and his group of learners, who were seated in two rows.

He began by giving each of his students a Post-it note on which he invited them to write the answer to the following question - "How do you feel right now". The laughter that this generated helped dissipate the palpable tension emanating from the stage! Students began writing their responses before returning their Post-it-note to Meddings, who attached them to the board and then determined the most popular responses. 'Nervous' was the clear winner!

Meddings explored the replies in more detail, looking at the exact nature of how they were expressed - "I'm sooo nervous", "A little bit nervous", "I'm a little bit nervous but I think it will be interesting". One very positive student exclaimed "good, beautiful, nice, super, wonderful".

Meddings expanded on this by forming two columns on the board...

I'm feeling embarra
I'm feeling excit
I'm feeling interest

...and eliciting from learners the correct ending to each of the words.

Students were then invited to talk to the person next to them and find out other times in their life when they had also encountered these feelings. The learners threw themselves into the activity wholeheartedly, having clearly engaged with the topic. Meddings monitored throughout. At times this would be discreet; on other occasions he would contribute to the discussions and pose further questions to the pairs. This process lasted for about five minutes, before more Post-it-notes were issued and students asked to write down the situations mentioned.

Writing the question "I get nervous when...." on the flip-chart, Meddings again collected and displayed the Post-it-notes and extrapolated the information. Circumstances included job interviews, taking exams, speaking English, starting a first job, playing in a match, playing in a concert, when facing a problem, singing in public and meeting a boyfriend's family for the first time.

Based on the ideas that had emerged and drawing on the vocabulary that had been presented, Meddings attempted to refine students' understanding of these scenarios. It was established, for instance, that a 'match' is generally considered to be more important than a 'game' and that singing in public will provoke different emotions than when singing at home in front of family and friends. Meddings was responding here to the language that had been supplied by his learners, evidencing the fluidity of a Dogme approach to language learning.

The class was then split into two groups. Meddings drew a five-pointed star on the board and invited learners to do the same in their notebooks. They were asked to reach agreement within their groups on the five occasions that make them feel most nervous, logging each one beside a point of the star. Again, Meddings monitored this activity adroitly, responding to questions as they were asked and facilitating discussions when needed.

Once agreement over their list was reached, Meddings invited the learners, individually, to go out into the crowd, speak to a member of the audience and ascertain which they would personally choose as the situation most likely to induce nerves from the list of five that they were shown.

Having mingled very confidently, students were called to return to their seats and present their findings. Group 1 had chosen a top five that consisted of 'talking in front of people', 'taking an exam', 'a job interview', 'making a big, big mistake' and 'making/taking a decision'. Group 2 concluded that 'playing in a concert', 'taking an exam', 'speaking English with a native speaker', 'anything in public' and 'a job interview' were incidents most likely to prompt nerves.

Learners then recounted the discussions they had with members of the audience, the selections the questioned individuals had made and the according reasons they gave for that choice.

The lesson was then brought to a close.

Providing an immediate self-evaluation of the session, Meddings described how the very open question that began the lesson served as a positive springboard. In asking his students how they felt at that moment, it was predicted that 'nervous' would feature as a response. Consequently, Meddings could confidently embark on further exercises, certain that he would be able to link this emotion to a number of other contexts. Meddings reasoned that it was important to choose a question you expect students to be able to respond to, one that everyone can engage with and that is also relevant to that particular day; central tenets of Teaching Unplugged.

However, Meddings also advised having a 'back-pocket' question in the event of the original not generating what was hoped. He averred that teachers should be open to what might be useable on a given day but not to enter the classroom with nothing planned as an alternative.

Meddings then fielded questions, both from the floor and via Twitter.

What did you feel or hope the students would get out of the session?

Meddings wanted to ensure learners received feedback based on their language and that they felt the classroom granted them freedom to communicate, safe in the knowledge that they had a tutor who would be attentive to their needs.

Can you comment on the fact that there was reformation of answers but no specific error correction?

Meddings stated that he has faith in patterns and believes that if they are repeated over a number of days they do become 'noticed'. Yet he was also keen to stress that he is not against explicit grammar correction.

How do you get students with different learning styles to be with you in your approach?

Meddings referenced the work of Madeline Elizabeth Ehrman and her research that established two different types of learners. The first is a 'Synoptic' learner who is 'happy to go with the flow' during classroom discussion and general learning. The second is an 'Ectenic' learner who is more preoccupied with the form and construction of a language, for instance relying heavily on a dictionary. One audience member described this as encapsulating the debate on fluency versus accuracy in language learning.

There is a dynamic inherent in Teaching Unplugged, Meddings attested, that enables it to cater to both of these learning styles. Indeed, another audience member noted that in the course of the lesson there was paired and larger group work where learners had to listen to each other, periods where they had to think on their own and a final exercise that saw them going out into the audience, forming questions and gathering responses. This was testament of Teaching Unplugged's inclusive approach.

Furthermore, Dogme can be effectively deployed at all levels of learning due to the intrinsic emphasis in its methodology on the building of language alongside the communicative needs of learners.

How would you envisage this working as a course?

This would depend, Meddings replied, on how you frame the course you are teaching. Dogme 'course design' is informed by the fact that most students already arrive at class with some English. Once this existing knowledge/ language is recorded, the Dogme teacher can start to work with it. This gives the tutor space to proceed organically in a more student responsive and learner-centred way.

Broadening discussions to accommodate debates over the efficacy of Dogme practice, Meddings drew the audiences' attention to two prominent names in the ELT blogosphere.

Anthony Gaughan is a trainer and a Cambridge appointed ESOL assessor for the CELTA award, currently working in Germany. He posts self-reflective accounts of his experiences of unplugged teaching at <http://teachertrainingunplugged.wordpress.com/>

The writing of Dale Coulter can be found at 'Language Moments - Reflections on Language and Teaching' <http://languagemoments.wordpress.com/>. In his first ELT appointment, Coulter was given two classes. He taught one group exclusively unplugged and the other in a more conventional style. His blog documents the findings of this intriguing experiment.

Additionally, ESOL teachers Mike Harrison and Sue Lyon-Jones both use Teaching Unplugged methodology. Harrison's musings can be found at www.mjharrison.com and a selection of Lyon-Jones' articles can be found at <http://the-pln-staff-lounge.blogspot.com/> www.esolcourses.com

This is just a small sample of the action research projects that practitioners are undertaking in relation to Dogme and Teaching Unplugged.

What is the definition of Dogme and why do you feel this was a Dogme lesson?

Dogme, Meddings described, is based on the lives and language of the learners in its class. It is a teaching style that is mediated by fewer materials than alternative methodologies and characterised, therefore, as materials light and conversation driven. It starts with 'real' emotions and focuses on emergent language. One contributor from the audience mourned how, within ESOL, the quality of teaching and learning is often judged by the number of handouts distributed in a given session. Meddings stated that if you took the modest output from the class we had just witnessed, a handout/worksheet could be produced for the next morning/session or form the basis of homework tasks. Some of the mental time and space that the Dogme teacher saves before a class can be used for the recording of achievements and output after the class. Indeed, there is a responsibility, Meddings asserted, to record that output.

In response to an opinion expressed via Twitter that new teachers should not “unplug too often”, Meddings referred those with such concerns to the reflections of Coulter, mentioned earlier. However, Meddings also asserted that Teaching Unplugged is not interested in throwing the baby out with the bathwater. Teachers who deliver accredited courses must tailor classroom tasks with an eye on the exam and inexperienced teachers ultimately have to respond to the context in which they are teaching.

Just as he had succeeded in doing earlier this year, Meddings conveyed his passion for Dogme and his belief in the benefits to be derived from a more organic approach to teaching and learning. It is unlikely that every tutor in the audience will have rushed home to tear up their course books and ‘unplug’ but that was not the seminar’s raison d’être. In introducing Meddings, Melissa Cudmore (curator of the British Council’s Seminar Series) recalled a quote he had given that described unplugged teaching as “laughter and learning in equal part”. Though levels of language acquisition are difficult to gauge, scientific measurements were not necessary to prove that the students thoroughly enjoyed this session. Perhaps the challenge Meddings presented to those assembled at Spring Gardens was to re-examine their practice to ascertain whether they might heighten the ‘fun’ quotient in their classroom to facilitate increased learning, listening to students’ narratives in the process and allowing them to take hold of the reins wherever possible to enhance their ownership of the learning experience as a whole.