



Dogme Style

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David's English Teaching World

One topic that's been causing some heated debate over on the teacher training forum is the methodology of *Dogme*. This has been an issue that's divided people since it was first mentioned by Scott Thornbury in the 1990s. Many, myself included, question the practicability of a teaching style based entirely on spontaneity. As nice as it may sound theoretically to go into a classroom and say, 'hey, what do you feel like learning today,' there are too many drawbacks surely to taking such an approach. Clearly, from the replies this topic has been receiving over on the forum, a lot of you agree.

What is Dogme?

Dogme '95 is an avant-garde film-making movement, started in 1995 by the Danish directors Lars von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg with the signing of the Dogme 95 Manifesto and the *Vow of Chastity*. They were later joined by fellow Danish directors Kristian Levring and Søren Kragh-Jacobsen, to form a group sometimes known as the *Dogme Brethren*.

The goal of the Dogme collective is to *purify* filmmaking by refusing expensive and spectacular special effects, postproduction modifications and other gimmicks. The emphasis on purity forces the filmmakers to focus on the actual story and on the actors' performances. The audience may also be more engaged as they do not have overproduction to alienate them from the narrative, themes, and mood. To this end, Lars von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg produced rules to which any Dogme film must conform. These rules, the Vow of Chastity, are as follows:

- Filming must be done on location. Props and sets must not be brought in (if a particular prop is necessary for the story, a location must be chosen where this prop is to be found).
- The sound must never be produced apart from the images or vice versa. (Music must not be used unless it occurs within the scene being filmed, i.e., diegetic).
- The camera must be a hand-held camera. Any movement or immobility attainable in the hand is permitted. (The film must not take place where the camera is standing; filming must take place where the action takes place.)
- The film must not contain superficial action. (Murders, weapons, etc. must not occur.)
- Temporal and geographical alienation are forbidden. (That is to say that the film takes place here and now.)
- Genre movies are not acceptable.
- The director must not be credited.

(Several other 'rules' also apply)

How does this apply to teaching?

This concept of Dogme, as set out in these rules, has been turned into a teaching philosophy centered on purity and authenticity. As such, it clearly goes beyond the standard pedagogical methods that we are so often used to hearing about. The concept behind it is that students learn when they feel involved and interested in the subject: if the material they use isn't relevant to them then the likelihood they'll retain any information is slim. The solution within Dogme basically consists of removing all irrelevant material to enhance learning. It involves in fact removing all material. A Dogme classroom is, therefore, ostensibly a textbook-free zone.

Scott Thornbury remains the main force behind this revolutionary movement. He, along with colleagues, realized that too many classes were being overrun *by lesson plans, textbooks, workbooks, tapes, transparencies, flashcards, Cuisenaire rods, tapes* and other such gimmicks that the students themselves were no longer the focus

of the lesson. By inventing Dogme they appear to be trying to put the learner back into the learning.

So, how do the rules of film Dogme apply to the teaching of languages? There are Dogme rules for teaching that can be *followed*, but in true Dogme style they are there to be carefully applied to your own teaching context. Here are some of the main ones:

- Resources should be provided by the students or whatever you happen to come across. If you're doing a lesson on books then go to the library.
- All listening material should be student produced.
- The teacher should always put himself at the level of the students.
- All language used should be 'real' language and so have a communicative purpose.
- Grammar work should arise naturally during the lesson and should not be the driving force behind it.
- Students should not be placed into different level groups.

Sounds scary? Many of you seem to think so. *'Of all the utter claptrap I've ever come across in the world of TEFL, I don't think anything can top dogme,'* suggests kalgukshi's dominatrix on the teacher training forum. Golightly elaborates, *'I was interested in the Dogme approach for all of four seconds, and was entirely put off by the self-important pontificating and complete lack of underlying theory.'* Justme considers the practicalities of employing this methodology, *'I thought dogme was just what you called it to sound smart when you're too hungover to see what chapter you're on before class, so you walk into your 4 hour lesson Saturday morning and somehow teach a no-materials, no-plan lesson. It's really dogme when the board marker thief has recently struck, or worse, when the idiot on the night before used a permanent marker all over the whiteboard...'* Leprofdanglais is also among those who question the validity of dogme's adoption as a teaching method, *'this strikes me as putting the cart before the horse: "That's a good way of making films, what if we taught in the same way?" Er, right.... If someone said "I know a great way of*

growing tomatoes, I think you can apply the principles to language teaching" they'd be locked up,' he notes.

Dogme is not without its advocates, however. ET365 notes, *'have you dogme-knockers never had a class in which a student asks and intelligent question and you build the class around it? That's what dogme's about, in essence, and I have no shame in saying it has a definite place on the EFL syllabus.'* Considering dogme from this perspective, we may feel that we've all adopted Dogme at some point in our teaching careers. Never the less, would we want to make Dogme the central tool around which we build our teaching? Leprofdanglais comments:

'Of course there have been times when I've torn up the lesson plan because a student asked an intelligent question which made the class take a different direction from the one I'd envisaged. Good teachers can think on their feet and cope with precisely the situation you describe. On the other hand, if you're not careful you can end up teaching one-to-one with the questioner while everyone else watches and rolls their eyes. Dogme seems to bank on the students having intelligent questions, which, unfortunately, doesn't always happen. In any case, if you're just going to gather in a room and see what emerges from the lesson, how is that different from just taking them down the pub?'

Along with relying on students asking the right questions, would you also want to rely on them to always prepare listening or reading resources? However, while it would be unlikely that anyone would base their entire teaching around Dogme, it's equally unlikely that any of us would only ever teach using task based learning, for example. Dogme, I feel, has a place in the world of ELT methodology. Look at the list of rules, they don't look entirely unreasonable, however unlikely you are to see such methodology on a CELTA course in the near future. Caution should be taken, however. Golightly sums this up:



'Dogme has a series of aims and a stated ethos: what it does not have is a structure, methodology or underlying theory to support it. It is potentially lazy and irresponsible. Any good teacher can take an intelligent question and fashion a lesson from that: That is not Dogme, nor anything new, it is just good teaching. However, without a lot of preparation, sweat, research and analysis of student needs, walking into a classroom and waiting to see 'what will happen' is just plain crap.'

The discussion on dogme can be found in the ELT world teacher training forum:

<http://eltworld.net/forums/viewtopic.php?t=127>