

Trust your instincts: the virtues of spontaneity and personalisation

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This practical article aims to encourage you to trust your instincts and be more spontaneous in class. In it, I will argue the case for greater recognition of the role of both intuition and spontaneity in ELT. We should be trying to train teachers both to recognise, learn from, cherish and be proud of their own intuitive decisions. Indeed, I believe that cultivating intuition is an important part of becoming a more effective teacher and that it both can and should be trained. I will justify and illustrate this with eight practical, easy-to-implement techniques from my own teaching experience.

Why is that the best lessons are so often the ones you would least expect to go well? For example, the days when things 'go wrong', you have to improvise because you've lost (or didn't make!) a plan, you couldn't find a tape or somebody else is using the DVD, there's a power cut, you run out of chalk or just fall over and split your trousers! And why is that the best moments in class are so often those where you abandon your lesson plan (potentially at the risk of losing your job sometimes!) and follow your 'teacher's nose' to try to make what's really happening – or going wrong – work?

I believe that this type of teaching 'works' because on these occasions we are really alert, thinking and responding naturally to what is happening, working intuitively as much as drawing from experience, rather than following a rigid prescription or formula. Raw, reactive teaching like this, is in many ways, teaching at its best.

Intuition is hard to define. It's a bundle of uncertain competencies but its existence is undeniable. Here are 3 definitions which together combine the range of attributes generally ascribed to intuition:

1. A feeling, a kind of inner auto pilot. You're in control but there is no deliberate decision-making process, eg when a driver brakes, accelerates or changes gear. This is tacit or implicit knowledge which we draw on for much of our lives. A useful handle for this is 'compressed knowledge'.
2. A brainwave from the subconscious or a dream. For example, the day you wake up, look over at your partner and say to yourself: *'Enough is enough, I'm off!'*
3. An impulse that you should or shouldn't do something. For example, a feeling that a certain strategy is ill-advised, or that someone can't be trusted, or you

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should avoid a certain journey. Or, conversely, when you feel enthusiastic but don't know why. This feeling often starts in the throat or stomach.

I don't believe this is coincidental – it's a real, physical phenomenon. Did you know that you have 100 million nerve endings in your digestive tract, which is more than you have in your entire spine? It's a genuine natural physiological response as illustrated by the following expressions from English: *I have ... a hunch / a gut feeling / a feeling in my bones ... I'm thinking on my feet / playing it by ear ... My gut reaction is ...* It's interesting how in many languages – certainly the ones I know, Spanish, French and Portuguese – most of these don't exist and we ascribe these feelings to our hearts!

More often than not these sudden discernments are accurate and seem to pop into our consciousnesses from nowhere. Yet, on many occasions, expressions such as these are used negatively and we're trained to be suspicious of them, or to minimise the experience as being just a "good guess". Actually, we're casually dismissing a remarkable mental faculty, one that often apprehends truth directly, without deduction or reasoning. Thomas Aquinas defines instinct as "immediate knowledge". According to Frank Capra "a hunch is creativity trying to tell something." Or, as an American friend of mine says, 'In your guts doesn't mean it's nuts!'

We all rely on intuition to some extent. We don't question it in our private lives but in professional contexts like business or teaching it is often frowned upon as somehow irrational or unprofessional. I believe this is wrong: we need to both understand and cultivate it. Intuition is a core component now on management training courses. Many agencies and consultancies specialize in it. We are all ever more aware of the importance of 'noticing' in ELT. Well, I believe we need to notice, analyse and record these intuitive decisions too. So, try to notice the decisions and choices you make in class and work out where they come from? Are they conscious subjective preferences, choices made purely from experience, or examples of your intuition at work? If we begin to monitor our use of intuition, it becomes possible to develop it too.

Some questions to ask yourself:

How spontaneous are you? Do you trust your instincts?

1. Do you often decide to do things spontaneously, eg when shopping, choosing gifts, cooking, at the hairdresser's, in your social life?
2. Do you improvise a lot in class? Are these spontaneous ideas usually good, appropriate, successful?
3. How intuitive are you in judging new people or foreseeing problems? Are you a good guesser?
4. Roget's Thesaurus describes intuition as 'feminine logic'. Do you think women are more intuitive than men?

Incidentally, as a man, I find the latter description offensively sexist! Intuition is a human competence – not limited to one sex. Women may well be more observant

and better planners but I both resent and reject the idea that they are more intuitive than me! However, it's interesting to note that when intuition was frowned upon and mocked (until very recently) as something irrational and trivial, it was identified as a female quality and was used too often as an easy put down of women's views. Now that intuition is seen to be of value and worth, men are, understandably, keen to identify this competence in themselves (although, hopefully, not commandeer it!).

Let me give you a practical example of being guided by intuition from my own experience. From 1985 to 1990 I was ADOS at the British Council in Valencia. Whilst that may sound glamorous, in fact I was mainly a glorified substitute, constantly having to replace colleagues who were sick or couldn't get to class on time. I regularly had to run into class, look at a new group and make up a lesson on the spot, depending on how many were there, their level, the time of day, etc. Perhaps the best lesson I came up with was the following.

1. Walk into class and write on the board – *Come up to the board and draw something you like or like (doing)*, which would produce something like this:



Figure 1: A lesson on the spot

2. From the pictures, put students into pairs to ask some or all of these questions: *What is this/that (on the left/next to the people singing?)* to identify all the words in English and add in anything that they want to say but can't.
3. Intensive question/answer pairwork practice of, eg *Which object is (next to the teapot and above the book)?*

Do you like (sailing)?
How often do you (sail)?
Have you (sailed) recently?
Did you (sail) last summer?
Are you going to (sail) soon?
Did you use to (sail) when you were younger?
Is/Was there a (car) on the board? Where is/was it?.

Make up a story using 3 of the pictures
Find a verb phrase for each picture
Find a different adjective/noun/verb which collocates with each noun, item, or activity
Write an alphabetical dictionary of the words you can see, etc.

The list is almost endless. You can do a complete revision of basic pre-intermediate tenses and language without any preparation and the idea came purely from desperation to give the students something to do in class! Furthermore, because the pictures came from the students themselves they should obviously be more motivated to talk about them.

Below I list 8 things which I've learned from teaching to encourage greater spontaneity and, I think, better teaching:

1 Begin with the students whenever you can

Use board drawing activity as above, their day, journey to school, impressions of the news, their stories, plans, etc. Rather than a pre-fabricated warmer, work with what you see and feel as that's more likely to come from them, and so be more relevant.

2 Use pairwork as much as possible

Before, during and after any activity, during reading, checking answers to any exercise in pairs before checking as a class. Virtually any activity can be done in pairs and, when teaching speaking, it's by far the most efficient formation. At least 60% of my own classes involve pairwork. Encourage a culture of students speaking as much as possible in class. Even if a lot is in L1, students will naturally feel there is more space for them to ask intelligent questions, and it then leaves you freer to monitor, help and interact more with more individuals as things come up.

Think for a minute!

Cover the list below and ask yourself : *When do you depart from your lesson plan?*
List three occasions when you regularly move away from your plan.

Now uncover and compare with the list below

- students lose interest, are bored, or find something too hard
- things take longer than expected

- something feels like a waste of time
- a question takes you somewhere else
- an opportunity arises or something 'better' comes along
- the plan itself was clearly a fantasy (as is any 'fixed' lesson plan really because we're dealing with people)!

I'm sure you came up with many more. The key point is that we never intentionally leave our plans to make the lesson worse, do we?! Can you imagine: *This lesson plan is going far too well – we must change it to make it worse!* It's always an effort to try to improve things and accommodate students' needs and wants, even if we don't always succeed. So suggestion number 3 is:

3 Plan (to be flexible)

This does not mean don't plan! It's essential to have a basic plan of aims, imagine the lesson before it happens, familiarize yourself with language points, predict possible problems, have plenty of ideas and material and be as prepared as is realistically possible. I'm not saying that I'm against recipes but I am against sticking to recipes come what may! Of course we have to cover our syllabuses, but try to build flexibility into your plans and prioritise the class itself over any fixed lesson procedure/programme.

I used to try to rush through my plan. Now I prepare fully but plan less. Leave space in your plan for spontaneous moments. More experienced teachers teach like this naturally but we should be encouraging newer ones to make more space in their plans too. So, if you're a newer teacher, keep a 5 to 10 minute final activity in your back pocket so you feel fully prepared, but don't expect to use it. Instead, try to work with the class in a more natural way and make more windows for student questions, so teaching becomes more of a dialogue than a monologue. And, get out of the textbook and into their words and their worlds as soon as possible. Ultimately, I believe that spontaneity turns a lesson plan into a lesson. As Peter Wilberg says "The teacher's primary responsibility is ... *'response ability'*."

4 If you're bored, you can usually bet they are too, so change something!

If the class is bored, whose fault is it? And, who can do anything about it? The answer to both questions is obvious. You can and should be changing something every 5 minutes or so – activity, focus, pace, skill, partner(s), volume, mood, degree of urgency, your/their physical position, voice, etc. Don't be trapped by a plan or textbook. Use the pause button on cassettes, stop mid-reading to reflect/give up on texts rather than always plough on to the end, move around the class so students have to look for you and so exercise their necks, make students stand up halfway through

an exercise, etc. Abandon ship/change course as soon as you think something isn't worthwhile, eg a long or over-difficult listening/reading text. Set it to finish at home – and just hope they do it! The choice is theirs! Teaching is so kinaesthetic. Feel it – feel when it's time – and then do it! So often as a lesson observer you're praying for the teachers to make a change but so often they don't. Teachers are aware of this too but feel obliged to 'stick to the script'. Surely this is unwise – to teach against our instincts?

Here's a quote from a friend who teaches in-house courses (and will remain nameless for obvious reasons!): 'The company I work for insists I deliver the course pretty much word for word (even the jokes). All to do with standardization and reliability. But for several courses I felt like a robot – always making sure I was in the right place and saying the right thing. It was mindless because I was saying words that weren't mine and so I didn't have to think what I was saying. All very lifeless. Concentrating on what I had to say turned off the spontaneous/creative part of my brain. Anyway, now I've gone 'off piste' (well, no one's observing me) and feel much more comfortable and confident. The course has become mine and now, rather than seeing the students 'through a glass dimly', I'm seeing them 'face to face' – fully engaging and responding to them.'

5 Truly prioritise fluency/successful communication

Try to help and push students to really get across what they're trying to express however broken their English – as they would in real life if using their English. Neither students nor teachers can be intuitive if solely focusing on accuracy – don't always wait until everyone's finished before checking answers. For example, ask them to talk about what they did yesterday and are doing tomorrow *before* you teach the past and future tenses. They will make lots of mistakes but should understand each other fine, and so begin to believe that they are learning to communicate in English, even in a mono-lingual class.

6 Teach/practise in shorter bursts

Scatter language across classes rather than ramming it home all at once for a whole lesson. 5 minutes practice in 2 different classes is almost certainly more effective than 10 minutes in one and none in the next. Remember Oscar Wilde: 'The best time to leave a party is when you're having the most fun'. For too long teachers have planned their lessons in big blocks – a 20 minute listening, then 20 minute reading and 10 minute speaking. We often do the same things for too long, trying to finish a coursebook page or to avoid starting a new one. I'd prefer us to think smaller, introduce more of the changes suggested in 4 above and spread language across several lessons. I know this runs counter to the instructions in our teaching material but surely we should match our teaching behaviour to our beliefs about the true nature of teaching and learning? When we teach, we try to be systematic, linear and additive whereas learning is messy, non-linear and holistic. So, in a way we are trying

to match two very different creatures. One solution to this is to drip, drip, drip language across lessons rather than doing things to death and then moving on without having sufficient time or opportunity to come back, re-cycle and extend later.

7 Make students do more/most of the work

Let them make their own tongue twisters, sometimes operate the cassette, research language for themselves, teach each other new words via dictionaries, etc. Get off stage as fast as you can. Explain/instruct less and exemplify more, use pair and small groupwork for instant practice of new language, thus taking the pressure off you to perform and allowing you to listen, observe and help more appropriately. Train students to listen to each other too, not just to you, refuse to echo.

8 Train students to be spontaneous too

Correct in different ways on different days and negotiate pedagogy with students, give choices of homework, etc. Seek feedback on any/everything. Encourage prediction, guessing answers/pronunciation of new words and self-evaluation. Encourage laughter/play. Laugh at yourself to encourage others to do the same (not just laugh at you!). When you stop being just 'another teacher', students talk to you in a different way, for example, when they're telling you about a new toy/website/place you don't know, etc.

Ever more people now recognize that "Intuition is not some magical and mysterious property that arises unbidden from the depths of our mind. It is a product of long hours and intelligent design, of meaningful work environments and particular rules and principles. For too long we have thought of intuition as a kind of black box at the very core of who we are and why we act the way we do. We can hone our instinctive ability to know in an instant, helping us to bring out the best in our thinking and become better decision-makers in our homes, offices and in everyday life." (Malcolm Gladwell, 2005)

So, make space for spontaneity in your teaching, try to notice your intuition at work and don't carry on teaching against your instincts. In short, trust your intuitive feelings, follow your 'teacher's nose', share your spontaneous successes and failures with colleagues and try to work out why you made them and why they did/didn't work. As Goethe said "What you can do or dream you can do, begin it; boldness has genius, power and magic in it" and remember "If you say you can or if you say you can't ... you're right!" Thank you for reading this article and enjoy your teaching. After all, if you don't, who will?