Lesson art and design

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*Novice teachers find lesson planning difficult because of the lack of ex-
perientially-derived lesson schemata. As a substitute—and as a way of
encouraging experienced teachers to re-think lesson design unconstrained
by narrow methodological prescriptions—I suggest that teachers look to
the expressive arts for principles and structures for lesson design. Such a
perspective may harmonize with their learners' expectations, as borne out
by a student survey of lesson metaphors. Good lessons, I conclude, share
features with, among other art forms, good films. They have plot, theme,
rhythm, flow, and the sense of an ending.*

Lesson schemata,
scripts, and images

Novice teachers frequently admit to having difficulties planning lessons.
These quotes from the diaries of pre-service trainees are typical:

> 'For reasons I'm still not sure I understand, I had a real difficult time
> preparing this lesson . . .'

> 'Still don't feel absolutely comfortable planning strategy for my own
> lessons.'

> 'Went home and spent five hours planning Tuesday's lesson . . .'

(Thornbury 1991a)

What is it that teachers in training don't know, or can't do, which makes
lesson planning such a chore? A likely source of difficulty is their lack of
a lesson *blueprint*—that is, an internalized representation of a lesson's
overall shape that acts as an exemplar for the generation of individually-
tailored lessons. It has been shown that, when planning, experienced
teachers draw on lesson schemata, or *mental scripts* (Shavelson and
Stern 1981), and that these provide a kind of template on which to map
lower-order planning decisions. These mental scripts are often con-
ceived in visual terms as *lesson images*. Westerman (1991: 298), quotes
one experienced teacher as saying, when asked to describe his planning
decisions: 'I have a vision. I sort of know exactly how it's going to go.
I've imagined what will happen.'

Such 'visions' are derived from the cumulative experience of having
planned and taught a lot of lessons. In the absence of such
experientially-gathered lesson blueprints, trainee and novice teachers
need to import them. But when it comes to providing ready-made
blueprints, the literature on lesson planning is curiously tight-lipped.
While there exists an ever-expanding bank of texts and activity types for
teachers to draw on, there is little explicit advice as to how these texts
and activities might usefully be fashioned into a coherent lesson.

It may be that the reluctance to recommend lesson structures owes a lot to the view that the endorsement of such structures, or models, implies allegiance to a specific methodological paradigm. Thus, the Presentation–Practice–Production (PPP) model is considered suspect by virtue of being associated with a transmission-style view of teaching. Such models, it has been argued, are unnecessarily constraining, and if predicated on discredited learning theory, may perpetuate bad practice. But models, like cooking recipes or route maps, embody the good practice of experienced practitioners, and offer novices shortcuts to professional decision-making. The issue is not whether models *per se* are good or bad, but which models to choose from. That is, how do you provide the kind of recipes that might be generative without committing trainee teachers to a specific method? What design principles, for example, are generalizable across methods? And, if it is true that *images* generate lessons, what images for lessons might be accessible to trainees with little or no experience in lesson design?

Lessons as performance events
I have had the opportunity to observe many different teachers in many different contexts over a period of time that has embraced at least one paradigm shift, i.e. from a largely audiolingual methodology to one that is at least nominally communicative. The experience has persuaded me that good lessons share characteristics that are independent of the teacher, the context, and the teacher's allegiance to any particular method. My stronger claim is that, from the point of view of the learners, at least, these 'good characteristics' are largely *aesthetic* and, as such, are not peculiar to the culture of the classroom, but are shared by other expressive art forms. Further, these design features may provide teachers in training with non-specialist criteria for making sound planning decisions.

Lakoff and Johnson (1980: 236) suggest that 'aesthetic experience is . . . not limited to the official art world. It can occur in any aspect of our everyday lives'. This is certainly true of teaching, which Widdowson has suggested should be considered less a science than an art, because teachers 'are not scientists seeking to eliminate variety in the interest of establishing generalities . . . [Rather,] as artists, they react to variety and give shape and meaning to it.' (Nunan 1996: 13) It follows, then, that the basic unit of teaching—the lesson—may justifiably be described, prescribed, and evaluated according to aesthetic criteria.

A teaching event, after all, has many of the contextual characteristics of other public performance activity types. Like a sports match, a piano recital, a play, a rodeo, or a sermon, a classroom lesson is a scheduled, bounded, deliberately-constituted, and purposeful event, happening in real-time and in a specially appointed space. Moreover, it involves two distinct sets of participants, each with mutually accepted codes of behaviour that determine the nature and extent of their participation, and interaction. It should not be surprising, therefore, if teaching events set up expectations similar to those of other performance genres. After all, from the learner's point of view, the success or not of a lesson

probably depends less on exclusively classroom-specific factors, such as whether it was a PPP lesson or a task-based lesson, than on much more broadly applied, cross-generic criteria to do with whether it was interesting or boring. And even if such connections are not expressed explicitly, it is nevertheless likely that they may be formulated metaphorically, and it is metaphors, according to Lakoff and Johnson (op. cit.), that both embody and shape our view of the world, and hence our view of both teaching and learning.

Metaphors for lessons

To investigate this hypothesis, a representative sample of EFL students at International House, Barcelona, was asked to complete a questionnaire, ostensibly about metaphors (see Appendix). By asking students to draw comparisons between classroom lessons and other performance genres, it was hoped that at least some respondents would make reference to shared formal features of the genres, as opposed to, for example, similarities in the roles of the participants or in the ways they interact. Of the 39 responses, 13 made reference to formal features, with the most popular metaphor being 'A lesson is a film'. Since the study was by nature small-scale and exploratory, no attempt has been made to analyse the data statistically, nor to correlate the findings with other factors, such as level, age, gender, or ability. The study was intended solely to capture some of 'the metaphors we teach by' (Thornbury 1991b).[1]

Lessons as aesthetic experience

Characteristics of the aesthetic experience mentioned or implied by respondents, and on which I wish to focus, are plot, theme, rhythm, flow, and the sense of an ending.

Plot

A good lesson is like a film 'because it has a plot like in the movies and you have to be caught up in it so you don't lose the thread'.

'It is like the different parts of a jigsaw or a film which add up to a whole which has its own sense.'

That learning is fundamentally narrative by nature is a view that has been argued by Bruner (1985: 97–115), among others, and, at the level of the lesson, story-type structures, such as beginning-middle-end, are easily identifiable.

However, more than being simply stories, good lessons have plots. Forster, in his *Aspects of the Novel* (1990: 87), distinguishes plots from stories thus:

'The king died and then the queen died', is a story. 'The king died, and then the queen died of grief', is a plot. The time sequence is preserved but the sense of causality overshadows it . . . Consider the death of the queen. If it is in a story we say: 'And then?' If it is in a plot we ask 'Why?'

In pedagogical terms, this suggests an analogous distinction between story-type lessons and plot-type ones. Some lessons are simply the

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cumulative layering of only notionally-related activities, whereas the activities in others have a certain inevitability, in which each stage serves to develop an argument: the difference between sequential staging, on the one hand, and consequential staging, on the other.

In Forster's terms, plots are not only cohesive, but coherent as well: they have an internal consistency. Aristotle (1965: 43), on the epic poem, describes plot unity in these terms: 'Its various incidents must be so arranged that if any one of them is differently placed or taken away, the effect of wholeness will be seriously disrupted. For if the absence or presence of something makes no apparent difference, it is no real part of the whole.' These characteristics would seem to apply equally to well-designed lessons.

Another essential plot feature is the complication. Complications and their resolutions have been identified as obligatory generic features of spoken narratives (Labov 1972). By analogy, good lessons have complications, which typically take the form of problem-setting tasks, be they the induction of a rule, the comprehension of a challenging text, or the production of language beyond the learner's current level of competence. Through collaborative classroom work, the complication is satisfactorally resolved. Lessons in which learning is not problematized, i.e. in which there are no complications, may be perceived by learners as being deficient in plot.

Theme   A lesson is like a symphony 'because a symphony has an introduction and a conclusion, and different ongoing parts . . . which at the same time vary, giving a range of ideas and developments on a limited number of musical ideas'.

The theme is, essentially what the lesson is about. In discourse terms, it is the topic, and van Lier's (1988: 148) definition serves well: 'In a classroom ethnography, topic is . . . a sustained focusing of attention, through the talk and across a stretch of talk, on some single issue or set of closely related issues.'

No other single factor contributes as much to the sense of the wholeness of a lesson as thematic, or topic, consistency. Nevertheless, less experienced teachers, often overly fixated on grammatical objectives, tend to make the grammar the theme, and to marshall a repertoire of thematically unrelated activities to present and practise it. Learners may be hard-pressed to offer any simple answer to the question 'What was the lesson about?', apart from 'We did the present perfect.' Van Lier would describe this kind of lesson as activity-oriented rather than topic-oriented (*op.cit.*). In terms of retention, I suspect that this may have negative effects since, over time, lessons are remembered less for their grammatical content than for the salience, relevance, and inherent interest of their themes, with the best themes of all being volunteered by the learners themselves.

Rhythm   A lesson is like a film 'because in a good class there have to be changes of rhythm, it has to be agreeable, amusing, and it has to take place without you realizing it'.

A lesson is like a poem, 'because a poem should have . . . a good rhythm, and meaningful content'.

'Whenever we transcribe and analyse lessons we get the strong feeling that they all have a sense of rhythm to them, or some form of cyclical progression' (van Lier 1988: 162). Doyle (1986: 403) elaborates: 'Time does not simply pass in classrooms. Rather, there is rhythmic movement toward the accomplishment of academic and socio-interactional ends.' This rhythmic movement is achieved through basic 'to-and-fro' sequences, such as question-and-answer routines and prompt-response drills, but also by alternating between teacher-fronted activities and pair or group work, between form-focused activities and meaning-focused ones, between a receptive skill focus and productive skill focus, and between activities demanding a high degree of concentration and activities that don't.

Flow   A lesson is like a play, 'because one moment you can be enjoying yourself and then at another you have to pay attention to how the play is developing'.

Flow is less a planning strategy than the procedure by which planned elements such as plot, theme, and rhythm are operationalized. Shavelson and Stern (1981: 484) have noted that 'the teachers' main concern during interactive teaching is to maintain the flow of the activity'.

Flow is essential if a sense of the whole is not to be lost through a concentration on the parts. Lévi-Strauss (1978: 49), writing on the parallels between myth and music, says:

'A symphony has a beginning, has a middle, it has an end, but nevertheless I would not understand anything of the symphony, and I would not get any musical pleasure out of it, if I were not able, at each moment, to muster what I have listened to before, and what I am listening to now, and to remain conscious of the totality of the music . . . Thus, there is a kind of continuous reconstruction taking place in the mind of the listener to music or the listener to a mythical story . . .'

Of course, the reconstruction may be taking place in the mind of the learner in the lesson. Lessons that flow facilitate this process of continuous mental reconstruction.

Flow is achieved principally through the deployment of largely automated routines. Experienced teachers have a fairly limited number of these routines, but they are usually fluidly automated. They free teachers' attentional resources, allowing them to attend to the 'cut-and-thrust' of learner interactions, where, arguably, opportunities for learning are optimally situated. New teachers, like novice drivers, have to think themselves through every stage of a classroom procedure,

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which is why their lessons often lack flow.

More problematically, without automated routines, novices have little attention in reserve to deal with the unexpected: unsolicited questions, for example, or learner errors. From a training perspective, rather than encouraging novice teachers to experiment with a wide gamut of techniques, it may be more helpful to provide as many opportunities as possible, in the practicum, for example, to become proficient at executing, and automating, a limited repertoire of multi-purpose classroom procedures.

The sense of an ending

A lesson is like a story, because, 'like an English class, it has a beginning, a development, and an end, and it always has a happy ending'.

A lesson is like a meal, 'because in a good class there's the first course which is the presentation of the new topic, after which comes the practice of what has been learnt, during which you're allowed a break, and afterwards there's the dessert, which should be a little bit more amusing and original. At times, however, the dessert is the most boring bit of all.'

A lesson is like a film, 'because in a good film you are feeling more and more interested along all the time it lasts and at the end you feel convinced about the story and happy about the hours you have spent'.

Kermode (1967: 46) coined the term 'a sense of an ending' to describe the impetus that drives narrative fiction forward, the expectation on the part of the reader that complications will be resolved, that 'tock' will follow 'tick', and the 'sense that however remote tock may be, all that happens, happens as if tock were certainly following'. Do lessons have endings? And if so, what constitutes a 'happy' one?

The conventional wisdom on lesson design is that, consistent with a techno-rational approach to instruction, the 'end' of a lesson is the demonstrated achievement of a pre-selected learning objective, usually the 'learning' of a discrete item of grammar. This is a fundamental tenet of the PPP model of instruction; teachers in training are constantly exhorted to articulate linguistic aims when planning lessons, and are criticized when they fail to achieve them.

Paradoxically, the aims-driven model of lesson planning does not, it seems, reflect the processes by which experienced teachers plan their lessons. Freeman (1996: 97) summarizes the research findings: 'Teachers [tend] to plan lessons as ways of doing things for given groups of students, rather than to meet particular objectives.' In other words, rather than adopt a means–ends model of planning, it seems that teachers start with a general notion of 'fit', i.e. an understanding of what kind of lesson will fit a particular class. Harmer's (1991: 266) advice more accurately reflects the process: 'Teachers should make decisions about activities independently of what language or language skills they have to teach. Their first planning thought should centre round what

kind of class would be appropriate for the particular group of students on a particular day.'

How, then, can teachers provide a sense of an ending in a lesson whose primary focus is not a discrete item of grammar? Kermode's 'tick-tock' principle would seem to apply just as well to lessons as it does to novels: the tension and momentum of the lesson is sustained by a sense of expectancy—the expectation, for example, that all complications will be resolved. This expectation of closure, as opposed to drift, serves to structure the learning experience, and make it purposeful, but without imposing on it the techno-rational 'achievement of aims' scenario so beloved by examining bodies.

The expectation of resolution assumes, of course, the presence of complications to start with. The PPP model is designed to pre-empt complications. A more reactive and problematizing approach is the test–teach–test cycle: learners are first set a communicative task, on the basis of which their task-specific language needs are diagnosed. Some form of instruction is then provided, after which the initial task (or one similar) is repeated. The 'happy ending' is one in which there is a perceptible improvement in the performance of the repeated task. More-over, if this task is to be performed to the class, anticipation of the public phase to come may provide a washback effect, concentrating the minds of the learners, and reinforcing the sense of an outcome—the sense of an ending.

Conclusion While this attempt to draw connections between classroom lessons and expressive art forms may seem far-fetched, experience suggests that, when pedagogical practices are construed in metaphorical terms, these practices are often rendered less opaque to trainee teachers. On pre-service courses, tasks, involving matching the unfamiliar (teaching) with the familiar (the expressive arts), offer accessible criteria for designing and evaluating lessons. After all, every trainee teacher will have an opinion as to what makes a good film or story, but they may feel less confident about voicing criteria for good lesson design. One such task might be simply to brainstorm onto a poster statements of the form: 'A good lesson is like a . . . because . . .' On in-service courses, where trainee teachers may be finding it difficult to see the wood for the methodological trees, performance 'universals' such as flow, rhythm, theme, etc., offer criteria for lesson design that, unlike presentation and practice, or task-based frameworks, are free from ideological associa-tions. Certainly, the experience of using metaphorical constructs, such as 'Lesson is a film', 'Lesson is a meal', has added a dimension to the practicum that strictly pedagogical constructs do not usually deliver. To quote just one (uncorrected) example from a Japanese trainee's diary:

> 'I liked the way you [the tutor] said about the lesson, 'a full-course meal'. Considering my lesson from that point of view, the appetizer and desert were nice, but main course needed another side dish to accompanied with it and a sprinkle of spice. Bon appetite!'

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Note

1 In a similar but more extensive survey of teenage EFL learners in Greece, Prodromou found that of 100 respondents, 31% chose a game as their metaphor for a good lesson, followed by a play (22%), a film (13%), music (10%), a story (9%), and a meal (6%). (Prodromou, personal communication)

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Appendix
Questionnaire: Metaphors

1 In your opinion, what should a good English class be like? Choose one of the following:

a a story	**e** a song	**i** a play
b a symphony	**f** a poem	**j** a sonata
c a film	**g** a football/tennis/basketball match, etc.	**k** or . . .?
d a meal	**h** a dance	

2 Why? What does your choice have in common with a good class?

For example: (if you chose a football match) 'Because in a good class there's a break . . .'