

THE ELT WORKER



Grafton College Update by John Whipple

What happened next to the Irish teachers thrown onto the dole before Christmas?

Life after Grafton

The teachers have had little relief. They've been campaigning hard, but also dealing with the fall out: scrambling to cover rent, bills, and day-to-day expenses.

Bear in mind that for some this was their second snap closure—Infinity College being another school that shut last year. In terms of public trust, language schools now lie below second-hand car dealers, double glazing salesman, and bankers—'grafting into infinity' perhaps a good motto for these Irish ELT entrepreneurs.

The response

Moving quickly into gear, the ELT branch of Unite the Union (Ireland) welcomed Grafton teachers into the union on 10 December, voting to hold a fundraiser for the 33 staff affected, union and non-union alike.

And let's face it they've had plenty of practice.

Earlier in 2018 they held a similar fundraiser after the closure of Lanlearn in Limerick. Perhaps language schools could learn from this well-oiled machine? I'm sure training could be arranged ...

Twenty-eight tables were filled at the Club na Múinteoirí, the Teachers' Club, and €1205 raised in a night of solidarity and a welcome break from the uncertainty in the air. *The ELT Worker* was on every table along with the latest Unite ELT bulletin, and over 6000 euro collected via an impromptu [GoFundMe](#) appeal disbursed. Unite members among Grafton's Staff also received donations from sister branches that make up Unite's 1.2 million membership.

'€1205 raised in a night of solidarity'

Teachers and students

Gisele and Rob Dunlop, the young couple [married on the day of Grafton's closure](#), are both fine. Their baby boy is healthy; their extended family making sure they have all they need. Students left high and dry are also covered, starting their studies at Marketing English in Ireland (MEI) affiliate schools. But doubts remain. The same schools they are now attending are also MEI members—as both Grafton and Infinity were before going bust.

Not all Grafton teachers have been as fortunate. Out of work and with her rent due, one has left the country, while others have sworn never to work in the sector again. Most have needed loans from friends or family to tide them over the winter period.

Change in the air

Yet there's been progress as well. On 5 December Grafton Teachers attended the Irish Senate where Unite's recommendations for a Fair Employment Mark passed into the bill for the 'Quality and Qualifications Assurance Amendment' by one dramatic vote.

They also heard Mary Mitchell-O'Connor (FG), the Minister of State for Higher Education, call for a Sectoral Employment Order, or SEO, to regulate terms and conditions for the ELT sector. This would mean pay and conditions regulated to a national standard, as they are in Australia, and is a huge step forward for the union's legislative campaign. A former union official from the Association of Secondary Teachers (ASTI) will conduct an investigation to see if an SEO is suitable.

'pay and conditions regulated to a national standard'

More support

What has been the response to the #SupportGraftonTeachers campaign that's exploded on social media? ELT Ireland donated to the campaign, and as Ireland's IATEFL affiliate their action is a welcome move away from the poisonous neutrality that plagues our sector.

Teachers have asked that MEI's 66 member schools donate

€1000, a suggestion that's gathered traction, especially as the Grafton liquidation process seems unpromising at present. The story really hits home when you consider that, in the end, Irish tax payers will probably end up footing the bill for the owners' negligence.

Now and the future

What are Grafton teachers doing for work? Some have picked up short-term contracts. Some are getting by on substitution work. The 'ELT is just a gap year thing' stereotype continually weighs down efforts to lift the sector out of the 'graft' or dodgy economy. We might speak of two distinct groups: those for whom ELT is their main gig, and those who use ELT to support themselves as they train for work in another sector. Although the latter want to leave and never look back, it's the former who make up most of the ELT sector workers in Ireland.

We spoke to one worker at a Unite education event for ELT, and asked what advice he had for teachers in a similar situation. He said that in a crisis closure always maintain a teacher-only space. With Grafton managers were always trying to 'manage the closure': holding partial meetings with 'onside' teachers, reducing coverage of meetings, and abstaining from meetings that could help workers. During the chaotic closure process many teachers were glad to have some of the managers around, but much of the advice they gave was for another time and place. Words and not deeds.

The final lesson? 'It's washed the rose tint out of my glasses,' one worker said. 'That's for sure.'

Five Steps to Leave ELT

by Aileen Bowe

Even that rarest of creatures – a contented English language teacher – has thought about leaving the industry. The quietest teacher who spends hours preparing lessons has, during a frenzied 15-minute break, asked herself: *Why am I doing this? How long can I keep it up? I deserve better.* But how easy is it to leave when the time comes? This article gives you the Five Steps to Leave ELT.

1. Keep calm and carry on? Not a good idea.

The sunk cost fallacy is the idea that because a person has invested so much time, effort or money into something, no matter how unfulfilling it becomes, they won't alter their course of action. It's a self-destructive instinct. So ask yourself: What is it that prevents you from leaving? For me it was the thought of being 'stuck' in an office chair from 9 to 5 and not interacting with people in a classroom. That thought stuck in my mind and stopped me from considering other careers. Ask yourself: what's *my* anchor?

2. Consider your skills you have.

The industry has beaten you down over the years and eroded your self-confidence. We compare ourselves to peers in more profitable careers and devalue our own abilities. Yet the most in-demand soft skills are creativity, persuasion, collaboration, adaptability and time management. And if you've been given a rowdy Pre-Intermediate class at five minutes to the hour and told to "just revise what they did yesterday and do the next bit in the book" and you excelled at it, you'll have these skills

down-pat. If you've held down a teaching job while navigating life abroad, you're resilient and unafraid to take risks. You're highly skilled, so say a giant 'Fuck You' to any language school that's ever diminished your professional self-worth.

3. Map your life.

Map your situation. Where do you want to be like in 15 years' time? Are you on the right track? Brainstorm your skills, values and interests. Consider your financial situation—see an accountant if you're bad with money! Ask yourself: Can you take time off to study? How far can you travel to a course or new job? What do you want to achieve in the next 10 to 30 years?

4. Choose a job.

After putting this information together, you should now be able to identify a career interest and a specific job. Next, check the job profile. Ask yourself: Could I do this? Would I be happy doing this? Can I achieve my goals doing this?

Next, do some fact-finding to get a sense of the industry. The job aggregate sites are good to start with (Indeed, Monster etc.). Look up recruitment agencies. Talk to a friend in the sector. Find out the average wage, typical responsibilities, skills and experience needed. Identify areas you have experience in, areas where you need to retrain and eliminate those that aren't be feasible.

In terms of training, look at the wider context. Does this country/ industry emphasise experience over qualifications? We all know that having a master's degree in TESOL or a DELTA doesn't automatically lead to better pay or job

conditions, so will a master's degree or other qualification help your prospects, and by how much?

If you've decided on an industry, write out some generalised CVs and cover letters, using the skills listed in job adverts as a template. Tempting as it is, don't block-send applications. Tailor each one. This shows you're treating it as a unique application. It's tortuous but worth it.

5. Start today.

A doctor tells a patient that an operation has an 80% likelihood of success, another doctor that an operation has a 20% likelihood of failure. Statistically, patients will react differently based on the doctor's prognosis, despite there being no difference. We are irrational creatures—so don't be hard on yourself for making bad decisions in the past!

The lure of the English language classroom is one that keeps pulling us in despite endemic employment abuses. Being in that classroom can lift you up so high, make you feel like you're doing what you were meant to do, inspire wonderful people and open your mind. But when you leave the room and see your boss, it can all come crashing down again. If you get to the stage where the highs can no longer hide the scars of the lows, then perhaps you've reached the end of this career. Reframe your mindset to be thankful for the skills and life lessons gained in ELT but resolve to do yourself justice from now on.

Be truthful about what you want and start planning a better future today.

Have you left ELT? Tell us your story by emailing the editor at: theeltworker@gmail.com

Purple Precarious

by Neil Scarth

Everything is purple here. It's the brand. I don't work directly for the brand. I'm agency. The agency has a name like a medicine or an abbreviation of 'Proctologist'. I'm down in the guts of the college: along the long lilac corridors courses are 'delivered' and feedback is 'provided'. I'm on an assignment with an 8-digit code. After twenty years abroad, I'm back to teach English in Scotland, the land of rain.

'We in the Community Learning department are a reactive unit. You may be sent to fish factories to teach a short course to the workers, you may be asked to do a five-day Health and Safety English course at a firm. You're part-time but our part-time staff are fully integrated into the college staff as a whole'

'Everything is purple here'

I don't feel very integrated. From the factories there's been a fishy silence, probably a Polish one: the lingua franca of fisheries, an African student complains. Firms can clearly live without Health and Safety English so I'm left with this, one late-night all-comers Beginners class that no-one else wants. Does it clash with yoga or Eastenders? I sometimes see the full-time staff, putting on bicycle clips, grabbing empty lunch boxes, switching off computers. But mostly I don't. After 5 o'clock it's me and the cleaners and the night security guard. He makes conversation: *'How are we today, Sir? All OK? Well ... enjoy your lesson then!'* The same intonation for fifteen weeks. The same thumbs up sign.

I come in two and a half hours early to pretend I have a proper job, not just an eighth of one. Empty purple tunnels. Mostly I just hear the rain. Somewhere in faraway classrooms there are lessons. 5.15 to 7.15. The 'twilight slot'. I only hear them when I go to the toilet. I'm later: 'The No Light Slot'? Sometimes there'll be a flurry of Polish cleaning ladies, rushing from room to room like their dusters are on fire. After 13 weeks I see why: they have been issued with a smartphone app and have a madly measly time to finish each room then check it off live. They're polite, they've been taught to say 'Hi-ya!' in Scottish, but their faces are anxious. They clean in panic.

'I come in two and a half hours early to pretend I have a proper job'

I check the internal mail on the laptop, on the lookout all day for messages from women I've never met. The admin staff: an army of Sarahs. They're not all called Sarah, but I imagine they are. I haven't ever seen them so it doesn't really matter. They use lots of abbreviations. I have to write back and ask questions, which they usually bat on to someone else. *'Neil, Sarah said you had a problem with ... I've passed your enquiry on to Sarah. Regards, Sarah.'* Sometimes I get what's called an 'Obligatory Read' which insists on attention and a box ticked. The drive to dispose of out-of-date IT equipment. A warning not to show the register in class: students mustn't see each other's marks and absences. Data Confidentiality. How to proceed if a student changes their gender mid-course. Most of my students do two jobs a day or twelve-hour shifts. They don't have time to

change their clothes let alone their gender.

I like the students. They have hard lives but rarely moan. They don't use words like 'revenues' or 'heads up' or 'touch base'. Not yet. We often wear the same shoes and trousers: Prim*rk. Perhaps we eat the same 'reduced' bread? I show them the e-textbook, 'Portfolio UK: Level Zero', on the screen. It's not bad. Nice format. But it's still the grammar syllabus. They learn *it's AN umbrella*, *it's watchES not watchS* ... a dozen weeks before they're allowed to say the simplest things about their lives. Jobs, for example: 'I work in a factory in the

morning and in the afternoon I am a cleaner and then I come to English.'

'I like the students. They have hard lives but rarely moan'

It's not just me that's bobbing down the tunnel of HR peristalsis. Near my house cars pulse around a traffic island: on it the council have put up a big new sign. It says one word: 'EXCELLENCE'. HR is everywhere in Brexit Britain. Soon chip shops will hand out feedback forms. Chip rankings. Vinegar Quality Control. When I was young, the only feedback in Scotland came from the Jesus and Mary Chain and their Beach-Boys-through-a-hair-dryer-

sound. Some said it was just to disguise that they couldn't play their guitars. Others said it was a beautiful sea of noise. For me, this newer feedback, like Quality Control and Self-Appraisal, Continual Innovation and Measurable Goals, is still largely noise. I have no doubt that this noise, far more than the Jesus and Mary Chain, has a lot to hide.

Cartoon time

