

A Year 7 English class in a South London girls' comprehensive school. There are only twelve students in the class. This is the bottom set, the eighth of eight: it is, I assume, a small class so that students who are struggling can be given extra attention. The lesson is being taught by my student, David, a capable and enthusiastic beginning teacher, nearing the end of his first period of practical teaching experience. He is following the scheme of work and lesson plans devised by the class's regular teacher, who is present in the lesson. There is also a classroom assistant, who is there primarily to work with Helen, a white monolingual girl who has a statement of Special Educational Need.

The lesson is structured around Ted Hughes's (1963) "How the Whale Became," a knowing creation myth written in a tradition owing much to Kipling's *Just-so Stories*, in which the whale begins life as a whale-wort, an aubergine-like plant in god's garden that just couldn't stop growing. David reads the first part of the story to the class. He reads expressively and with animation; the students follow, attentive to the story that is being told even as they struggle to keep up with the text that is in front of them. Then David stops. The rest of the story, he explains, is to be read by the students. The way that this happens clearly follows a well-worn routine. The class is sitting in two groups. Within each group, students take turns to read aloud a part of the story. One group is supervised by the classroom assistant, the other by the class's regular teacher, while David moves from group to group. The justification for this practice, as David explains it to me after the lesson, is that the students, who are not very good at reading, are given plenty of practice at it, while being supervised and supported by the adult within their small group.

The reading within the teacher's group, which I am observing, is slow. Students use a range of strategies: they recognise some words, and sound out others, using their knowledge of grapho-phonetic correspondences in English (always a hazardous business). With all their effort going into the business of making the right sounds, I wonder whether the story will make any sense to them. To me, it already seems that "How the Whale Became" has become, in Carole Edelsky's terms, a reading exercise: the activity is about "doing reading", not about reading (Edelsky 1996).

Then Lenka interrupts the reading. "Miss!" she demands, "What god is this?" Lenka is a girl from the Czech Republic who has been in England for about three years. The teacher responds to Lenka's question with the assertion that the god in the story is God with a capital G – it's *the* God, not *a* god, she says. The reading continues. When they reach the end of the story, the girls are given a worksheet to complete. There are low-level comprehension questions, but no-one, as far as I am aware, reaches them during the lesson: the first task, which absorbs the class for the time that remains, requires the students to draw and label a picture of God's garden.

In Lenka's group there are at least three girls who are Muslim - two Somali girls, one from South Asia. All but two of the students in the class are bilingual. What, I wonder, are they to make of this. I have suggested that what the girls were doing was something that might more properly be termed "doing reading" than "reading." But perhaps there's more to it than that: they are learning, too, about "doing English" – about what counts as legitimate knowledge and legitimate activity, for them, within the confines of an English lesson. The lesson that

they are learning is directly contrary to the suggestion, articulated thirty years ago in the Bullock Report, that:

No child should be expected to cast off the language and culture of the home as he crosses the school threshold, nor to live and act as though school and home represent two totally separate and different cultures which have to be kept firmly apart (DES [Department of Education and Science], 1975).

The lesson functions as an assertion of precisely this separation: school knowledge and home knowledge remain distinct, unrelated entities. The curriculum that is offered (and enacted) in this classroom is consonant with that which was promised in the consultation document which preceded the imposition of a National Curriculum in England and Wales, a curriculum intended to ensure:

that all pupils, regardless of sex, ethnic origin and geographical location, have access to broadly the same good and relevant curriculum and programmes of study (DES, 1987)

“Regardless”: having no regard to, ignoring. If we carry on regardless, maybe all these unfortunate markers of particularity, of difference, will disappear.

There is another aspect to what is going on in this lesson, an aspect that relates not directly to issues of cultural pluralism or antiracism but to the ways in which the lesson, and the organisation of the curriculum within which the lesson is situated, constructs the students as readers and reflects a very specific – and hegemonic - model of reading and reading development.

Lenka’s question – “What god is this?” – received short shrift, I think, because it was perceived by the teacher as extraneous to the real business of the lesson, to the reading of the story. The twelve students were all in that classroom, in that bottom set, because they were not very good at reading (and writing). Their weaknesses as readers were demonstrated by the difficulties they experienced in reading the story fluently – in making the appropriate sounds and also in recognising some of the words. To enable them get better at these skills, the teacher was giving them practice at making the right sounds when reading aloud; where they faltered, the teacher would supply the right sounds – and sometimes even a definition of the word over which they had faltered. Implicit in this approach is the belief that development in reading competence must start from word level, from learning grapho-phonetic correspondences and from improving word recognition, and progress incrementally from there to greater command over longer pieces of text. Such beliefs are common-sense: beginning readers start with small pieces of text, individual words which they sound out and recognise. With experience and practice, readers gradually become adept at coping with longer, more demanding text. This is what we all know: it’s as easy as ABC – and as self-evident. It is also a model of progression that is rendered explicit and codified in the National Curriculum. At level one,

Pupils recognise familiar words in simple texts. They use their knowledge of letters and sound-symbol relationships in order to read words and to establish

meaning when reading aloud. In these activities they sometimes require support (DfEE/QCA, 1999, Attainment targets: 5)

At level six, on the other hand,

In reading and discussing a range of texts, pupils identify different layers of meaning and comment on their significance and effect (ibid.: 5).

Lenka's question suggests what might be missing from this approach. Before she can make sense of the individual words and syllables in the story, she needs to know what to expect of the text as a whole. She needs to know about the framework within which the reading is to take place. "What god is this?" entails a series of other questions: what kind of a story is this? how am I to situate myself in relation to what this story has to offer? what areas of knowledge and experience that I already have might be pertinent to my reading of this story? Now it could well be that these questions will best be left hanging, that the answers will emerge, as it were, in the course of reading the story. The teacher might, in other words, decide that Lenka's question was too important to warrant a simple answer – that the responsibility for answering the question might most productively be given to Lenka and her peers, who would thereby be forced to interrogate the text, teasing out what it is that Hughes is up to in this prize marrow of a tale.

What Lenka's question reveals is how knowledgeable, how expert she already is as a reader. It shows that she understands what readers do, and what readers need to do. It shows an ability to probe and an understanding of the shaping influence of context in making texts meaningful. It shows things about her reading that simply cannot be shown by asking her draw and label neat rows of carrots and cabbages in god's garden.

What Lenka is doing is not necessarily precisely what the National Curriculum attainment target prescribes as the response of a level six student, as the current parlance has it. But what she does might suggest something of the difficulty of arranging readerly behaviours along a linear scale; it might even call into question the notion that competence in reading is acquired in a neatly linear fashion. (And if this linearity of progression represents an oversimplification of the all students' development as readers, there are powerful additional reasons for challenging its applicability to bilingual learners, whose progress as readers of English inevitably stands in a myriad of different relationships to their knowledge and experiences of other languages and literacies.)

In 1978, Her Majesty's Inspectorate had some insightful things to say about English as a secondary school subject:

English is not a linear or sequential subject in the way that a modern language or mathematics is. English language and literature teaching must allow for different levels and types of response from different individuals even where the group is reasonably homogenous. Moreover, in English, a shared experience and the development of a wide range of responses are perfectly compatible, and the very width of the response which mixed ability grouping facilitates can be turned to

the advantage of those involved. As for the experience to be shared, happily it is often the finest literature, that which has the strongest human appeal, which will make the deepest impression on pupils of all abilities and allow them to meet on common ground (DES, 1978).

There is, to be sure, a quaintly Arnoldian faith in the transformative power of literature as the repository of “the best which has been thought and said in the world” (Preface to *Culture and Anarchy*). But there is also, very emphatically, an awareness of the collective and collaborative character of the reading that happens in the classroom – an awareness of reading as an irreducibly social process.

A mixed comprehensive school in North London. A Year 7 class, in the third week of the autumn term. A newly-qualified teacher, teaching an English lesson. The objective she writes on the board at the start of the lesson informs the class that they are to be looking at characterisation. As Jude, the teacher, explains this to the class, she focuses attention on specific reading skills, inference and deduction. Most of the class seem to have met these terms before, though there is much haziness about what they might mean. Is it like skimming, one suggests. Is it looking for bits of information, another ventures. Samantha comes up with the notion that it is to with behaving like a detective, searching for clues. The teacher agrees, and we move into the main business of the lesson, the activities prepared by the borough’s literacy consultant.

The class has already read “My father was a polar bear,” by Michael Morpurgo. They are given a sheet with quotations from the story, directing attention at the characterisation of Douglas, the narrator’s step-father, and of the narrator’s father. Following the plan in the scheme of work, Jude draws a circle on the whiteboard, writes “Douglas” inside it, and draws. Each quotation is then used to adduce a further gobblet of information about Douglas. The story and the lesson activities are to be found in the *Key Stage 3 Transition Units* (DfES), materials produced as part of the Key Stage 3 Strategy.

From one perspective, it looks like a perfectly straightforward lesson. The learning objective written on the board, the materials that the students are given, the spidergraph which Jude draws as a way of pooling information about Douglas (and as a way of modelling how students might themselves collect information) all provide handy ways of getting into a text, of reading actively, of rendering explicit and clear what we know about a character. There is also, as the introduction to the *Key Stage 3 Transition Units* emphasises, an assessment function, to enable

Year 7 teachers to gauge the curricular strengths and weaknesses of pupils who are new to their schools. The transition unit is another means of providing secondary teachers with some common information about pupils from different primary schools (DfES 2002: 3)

And yet it isn’t quite so simple. The quotation sheet reminds us that Douglas is described as having been “a dashing young officer”. Aware of the constraints of time and of the thrust of the activity — to record facts about the character — Jude looks for, and receives, the interpretation that Douglas had been in the armed forces, and that he had been an officer. But

what about “dashing”? How can this epithet be reduced to a handy fact, to one of the ten things we know about Douglas?

The answer is that it can't. Characterisation in this slippery little tale is not quite reducible to the agglomeration of facts about a character. The narrative perspective slides subtly between the childhood consciousness of the narrator and the adult he was to become; other characters are seen through the prism of this ironised double perspective. How does this relate to the description of Douglas as a “dashing young officer”? Well, as Hannah observed at this point in the lesson, these words do not tell us about Douglas so much as about the narrator's mother's point of view. The phrase, in other words, does not just supply another fact about a character, but manages, rather, to indicate both the mother's feelings at the moment when she fell in love with him and also, through the ironic distance that the use of so overworn a cliché achieves, the narrator's very different perspective — and his implied criticism of his mother. Both the mother's falling for him, and the very character of Douglas himself, become trivialised — revealed as shallow — by the cliché.

I was aware that Jude paused, momentarily, over “dashing”. There was a moment of indecision, confronted by the difficulty of unwrapping the meanings of this one word. Because, I think, she felt the pressure to maintain the focus of the lesson, to get through all the quotes about Douglas, she moved on. Sacrifices have to be made to appease the god of Pace.

But the lesson had more to it than the objective and the materials might suggest. The lesson was also about Jude's way of being with the class, her way of encouraging and validating the students' contributions. This may sound hopelessly imprecise, too amorphous a concept to communicate what was going on in the lesson — though it does suggest a different way of conceptualising the process of transition from primary to secondary school, a shift of perspective away from the identification of individual students' strengths or weaknesses towards a more social model of induction, a model that recognises the central significance of the social dynamic of the classroom in shaping the learning that happens there. And it is a way of beginning to explain what happened in the last five minutes or so.

Hannah's suggestion that it was only the mother who saw Douglas as a dashing young officer seemed to open up the space for other students to position themselves in relation to the text. From the other side of the room, Terri repeatedly (and vociferously) announced that Douglas was “ignorant”. It was an interesting choice of adjective, encompassing both Douglas's lack of knowledge of the narrator and also Terri's moral judgement of Douglas. Her engagement — her anger — seemed to me to be real evidence of her ability to read between the lines. Building on this insight, Paul began to imagine what the children's reaction would have been. Spontaneously adopting a role, he addressed first the mother — “Why didn't you tell us?” — and then Douglas: “You're not my real dad!”

Of course, Paul's reading is factually wrong. The narrator makes clear that his mother had never sought to pass Douglas off in the way that Paul imagined. But what Paul was doing was entering into the text, actively engaging with it, testing it out against his own knowledge of how things are in other texts and in the world outside. And what Paul did enabled other students like Ashley and Emmanuel and Ishmael to start speculating about the relationship

between the narrator and Douglas: “Perhaps he said ...” “Perhaps he realised ...” And so, rather than simply producing a neat set of facts about Douglas with which to complete Jude’s spidergraph, the class had started to use inference and deduction to explore the relationship between characters, and had found a way of bringing themselves and their experiences into a text that had, at first sight, told of families and characters far removed from their own twenty-first century London lives.

Another mixed comprehensive school, this time in Tower Hamlets, East London, in the heart of what has become known as Banglatown. The student population, as of the community that the school serves, is predominantly Bangladeshi. A year 7 English class, taught by Sangeeta, another newly-qualified teacher, is in the middle of reading the playscript of Gillian Cross’s *The Demon Headmaster*. In this lesson, students are working in groups of three or four, improvising a “missing” scene which they will then perform to the rest of the class. (A missing scene is one which does not appear in the script, but which might be inferred from those scenes that do.) The activity enables students to draw on their prior knowledge of the text, of the action, the characters and their relationships, to create plausible dialogue and interactions in a given setting. Abid’s group is busy rehearsing. In role as Mrs Hunter, mother of Lloyd and Holly and foster mother of Dinah, Abid is able to extrapolate, as it were, from his reading of Mrs Hunter in the play so far to construct a valid version of the character in the additional scene that his group is creating. The activity, from the teacher’s point of view, works: it enables students such as Abid to step back from the text, to reflect on, collect and reassemble their knowledge of the play in collaboration with other students. But as I listen to Abid, I cannot help hearing other voices than Mrs Hunter’s or Abid’s. Somewhere fairly close to the surface of his performance I sense the presence of his mother – or perhaps other women in his family. I make this claim without, as far as I am aware, ever having met any of Abid’s relatives. There is something too real, too convincing about the persona he has created for it to have been produced merely from the thin characterisation of Mrs Hunter in *The Demon Headmaster*. Abid knows the woman he is playing – knows her well enough to know how she would speak as well as what she would say, how she would behave, how she would hold her body. The point I am making is an obvious one: Abid is drawing on other resources besides those of the text read in class to make sense of the character whom he is playing. He knows about mothers because of his knowledge of a world beyond the school gates – the world of his own family. What makes the activity work so well, perhaps, is that it is located at the intersection of these different worlds, the world of the text and Abid’s lifeworld, so that Abid can draw on his knowledge of both worlds to imagine Mrs Hunter, to bring her into being. There’s another aspect of what is going on here, though. The atmosphere in the group is hard to describe: it is almost as if the boys were sharing a joke – the same collusion, the same knowingness – without there being any sign that the performance is funny. Abid is performing both with and also for the benefit of his peers. It seems to me that he is able to create his version of Mrs Hunter partly because he can assume that the mother he is playing would bear more than a passing resemblance to his peers’ mothers, too. And the zest in the performance owes something to this shared sense of what mothers are like.

A year 8 English class in the same school, on the same day. This class, taught by Kate, also in her first year of teaching, is in the middle of reading Louis Sachar’s *Holes*. They have reached the moment in the novel where Stanley discovers that Zero cannot read, and where

Zero asks Stanley to teach him. In groups, students discuss a set of statements about the two boys and about their relationship. All are able to draw on what they have read to make inferences about the characters, their motives, their past experiences and present feelings. Each group reports back to the class as a whole. Kate then asks students to speculate about how the relationship between Stanley and Zero might develop in the future. Junaid has a lot to say on this. He suggests that Stanley will teach Zero to read and that the friendship between the two boys will become much closer. Some members of the class had already read the whole book, while others had seen the film; Junaid had not, and though he may have been influenced by those who had, his predictions can be interpreted as entirely legitimate inferences made on the basis of the first seventeen chapters of the novel and informed by his knowledge of how stories work. But Junaid does not stop there. He carries on to say that the strength of the friendship between Stanley and Zero would drive a wedge between the other four boys and them, so that Stanley and Zero would become ostracised by the other boys. There is a quality of intensity, of absolute seriousness, about Junaid's delivery in making this suggestion that marks it out from the first part of his hypothesis. He has not wandered off the subject – and yet it no longer seems that he is simply addressing the question of the relationships of a set of fictional characters. This also seems to be a moment when the world of the text intersects with the student's lifeworld – and when Junaid is able to use the resources of the text to talk about real social dilemmas that confront, or have confronted, him.

Within the English education system there has in recent years been relentless pressure to raise standards, particularly of literacy and numeracy as measured in high-stakes tests (SATs). The recently-published Ofsted evaluation of the national literacy and numeracy strategies marks an interesting change in emphasis. Hovering around the edges of the report there is a recognition that the drive for results has had a tendency to narrow the curriculum, to limit innovation and to encourage teachers to see learning as the individual acquisition of prepared gobbets of knowledge:

Discussion and collaboration in English are often more limited than in mathematics. Although shared texts and word- and sentence-level work provide opportunities for the exchange of ideas between the teacher and pupils, such dialogue seldom continues in the rest of the lesson. Questions often offer little challenge and need only limited responses, and tasks often require pupils to work on their own, even in so-called group work. Consequently, opportunities are limited for them to listen to others' views; clarify, adjust and expand their own ideas; and learn the important skills of working co-operatively and productively (Ofsted, 2005: 25).

Though it may be as strange as hearing vultures calling for vegetarianism, it is nonetheless welcome that Ofsted now recognises that "Teachers' inflexibility in using the NLS framework hinders improvements in teaching English" (Ofsted 2005: 21). Fortunately, as the snapshots of London classrooms offered in this essay indicate, there are still places where more open-ended, dynamic and collaborative ways of reading texts are encouraged.

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