Learning under lockdown: English teaching in the time of Covid-19

John Yandell

Institute of Education, University College London, London, UK

What happens when, in a nation under lockdown, teaching moves online? How is English as a school subject being differently configured? What are the gains and losses?
This essay examines, through the prism of a single online lesson, the approach to English, to curriculum and pedagogy, that has been adopted by the Oak National Academy website, a repository of online lessons that has been sponsored by the Department for Education in England. It offers a highly prescriptive, monologic approach to English, an approach that is structured around the pedagogy of 'direct instruction' and the demands of high-stakes assessment.

Key words: online teaching; pedagogy; literary knowledge; intertextuality; dialogue; learning.

On Friday 13th March, I was on the picket line when the announcement came through from UCL, the university where I work: face-to-face teaching was cancelled forthwith, for the remainder of the academic year, and, from the following Monday, all teaching would move online.[1] In these very strange times, the surreal has become normal, mundane. A British Conservative prime minister declares that there is, after all, such a thing as society,[2] and the reconfiguration of a university's entire teaching programme is accomplished over a weekend.

Except, of course, that it wasn't. Moving teaching online is not like moving to a different classroom, or even like moving from Purley to Pontefract. It isn't the same activities conducted in different circumstances; it involves working through a whole new set of challenges that are as much pedagogic as they are technological (Williamson et al. 2020). It isn't just a question of learning how to hold tutorials and seminars on Teams or Zoom or Google Meet, or how to convert lectures into online presentations, or how to make resources and materials available online, or even how to represent collaborative learning tasks in forms that might be usable (and useful) for socially distanced individual students communing with the outside world through a laptop or tablet or phone (and sometimes across widely different time zones).

And, even on a postgraduate teacher education programme, it means confronting the fact that different students have wildly different technological and material resources available to them: while some may enjoy fast, reliable connectivity with good bandwidth, many do not; while some have convenient, quiet places for study, most do not. These are not, of

course, mere individual variabilities: they map onto structural inequalities, of class, gender, ethnicity. For the school-age student population, these material differences are much more sharply posed. As a consequence of this, some schools have abandoned all pretence of moving teaching online in the current crisis because they have recognised that their pupils were not able to access the resources that had been provided through school intranets or other online learning platforms. So they have resorted to the mass photocopying of resources and study booklets, distributing them to their pupils' homes by hand. It seems that we are not quite all in this together.

Something else emerges from the experiences of the past two months: online teaching tends to be a poor substitute for the real thing. Teaching and learning are embodied, irreducibly social activities. Classrooms – even postgraduate seminar rooms – are extraordinarily complex, unpredictable and exciting places, precisely because they are places where myriads of interactions happen more or less simultaneously. They are places where what is learnt is not reducible to what is taught, and still less to what a teacher (or some other designer of curricula) intended to be taught. The interactions that happen online – even over a robust and properly functioning internet connection – are much less intricate, nuanced and multidimensional. This is teaching by semaphore rather than the pedagogy of dialogue.

To be sure, the online conversations I have had with my students have helped to sustain us through this period. (As one of my own children remarked, how much worse would this situation have been if it had happened in the 1990s – lockdown under dialup, as it were?) But what makes such conversations possible is not Microsoft Teams alone; it is the fact that we are able to draw on a shared history of offline, embodied interactions, in school and in the seminar room. The pedagogic relationships are already established.

The lockdown has brought home to us a properly complicated – social – understanding of what schools are for; and what they are for is far more than the mere transmission of knowledge. By this I don't mean that schools are important sites of socialisation (though this is true, and thus one of the challenges that will confront teachers when schools reopen is the resocialisation of whole cohorts of children and young people). What I mean is that learning and development happen in and through the interactions that constitute the experience of schooling:

> When people talk about the school curriculum they often mean what teachers plan in advance for their pupils to learn. But a curriculum made only of teachers' intentions would be an insubstantial thing from which nobody would learn much. To become meaningful a curriculum has to be enacted by pupils as well as teachers, all of whom have their private lives outside school. By enact I mean come together in a meaningful communication, talk, write, read books, collaborate, become angry with one another, learn what to say and do, and how to interpret what others say and do. A curriculum as soon as it becomes more than intentions is embodied in the communicative life of an institution, the talk and gestures by which pupils and teachers exchange meanings even when they quarrel or cannot agree. In this sense curriculum is a form of communication. (Barnes 1976, 14)

In this version of schooling, knowledge is made and remade in the dialogic cauldron of the classroom. Barnes's concept of the enacted curriculum involves dialogue – and sometimes disagreement – not only among the participants in the evolving life of the classroom but also between school knowledge and out-of-school knowledge.

But if the lockdown provides us with the chance to reflect on what is most valuable in the experience of school life, it has furnished others with the opportunity to develop a fundamentally different vision of schooling – a vision that is ideally suited to the affordances and constraints of online learning. In what follows, I focus on one influential instantiation of this model, constructed with support from the Department for Education: the Oak National Academy, 'an online bank of quality-assured, curriculum-mapped videoed lessons and resources … to support remote teaching,' which, as its website declares, has been 'created by teachers for teachers' (https://www.thenational.academy/about).

To discover more about the version of education that is on offer there, I want to look in detail at one of the lessons available on this site. It is a Year 10 English lesson on 'Approaching unseen fiction texts' (https://www.thenational.academy/year-10/english/approaching-unseen-fiction-texts-year-10-wk1-1/). Before I go any further, though, I should make it clear that my intention is to explore how some currently powerful ideas about curriculum and pedagogy are instantiated in a single lesson, one that is representative of the approach taken on the Oak Academy site. That approach is by now well established in many schools, has considerable public currency and is endorsed by some of the leading figures in the Oak Academy. So to criticise this particular lesson is not to take aim at the teacher who created it but rather to dispute the prescriptive model of English on which it is based.

This is how the lesson is introduced:

> In this lesson, we will start with a quick quiz. Then, we will learn about the narrative pyramid and the 'Four conflicts in Literature' as ways of reading unseen fiction extracts. It is important that you read with precision so we will be exploring techniques to help you become more thoughtful and effective readers of new texts. You will then have an opportunity to try this out by applying the techniques to an

> extract from a short story: 'The Tiredness of Rosabel,' by Katherine Mansfield. You will be guided through the reading with prompt questions and given chance to try out and become confident in your new learning. At the end of the session there will be a learning recap quiz.

It is worth thinking about the sequencing and framing of the activities and materials as they are presented here – and what the messages that this carries about what English as a subject is and what it is for. That the lesson begins with a quiz provides a clear signal: English is about knowledge – the kind of knowledge that is testable through a series of questions with right (and wrong) answers. More particularly, the quiz establishes that English is about two branches of knowledge: it is about a very specific category of grammatical knowledge and it is also about word meanings. So there are questions to do with identifying verbs and various categories of noun and other questions asking for the meaning of 'sufficient' and a synonym for 'obscured'.

Before I go any further, I should make something clear. I think English as a school subject should promote students' interest in how language works. Such investigations into how meanings are made and contested will, necessarily, involve paying close attention to linguistic forms and structures. Quizzes such as this one, however, contribute nothing whatsoever towards such larger goals. They abstract the naming of grammatical parts from any meaningful use of language and they foster the unhelpful and erroneous belief that meaning is a property of individual words in isolation from any context of utterance. As a pedagogic practice, the approach that informs this quiz was discredited in the 1950s. There is nothing new or daringly postmodern about this observation. Writing in the early 1930s, the Russian psychologist, Vygotsky, quotes a passage from Dostoevsky where a conversation among a group of drunks is enacted through the repeated use of a single swear word: each time the word is used, it carries a different meaning. As Vygotsky (1934/1987, 271) notes, 'it is possible to express all thoughts, all sensations – even a whole chain of argument – through a single word.' This doesn't, of course, mean that there is no merit in learning new words; but what is of real educational value is the development of *concepts* – and conceptual development is never accomplished by the thoughtless expansion of vocabulary.

There is an additional problem that arises from the online-ness of quiz. In a classroom, even so dry and decontextualized an activity can be brought to life, infused with meaning by the way in which it is conducted, by how it becomes part of the conversation of the classroom. Online, the quiz is attempted by a solitary student. How will wrong answers – the very answers that, in real classrooms, can provide the most productive cues for learning –

be addressed? What effect will they have other than to confirm the student's sense of the pointless impenetrability of the subject? Equally, what will be gained by right answers? How will identifying an abstract noun enable a student to make more or better sense of the extract that they are about to read?

But the student is not yet ready to read. First, they must be prepared by being introduced to a 'reading toolkit', in the form of a 'narrative pyramid'. Here, they will learn that stories have beginnings, middles and ends, and that stuff generally happens in the middle. Forgive me, I am misrepresenting the tools on offer, which are far more precise and specialist than my everyday language: stories move from 'exposition' through 'rising action' to 'climax' and then on to 'falling action' and 'denouement'. While the student is being presented with these stages in the form of a diagram, the voiceover exhorts them to take notes and 'jot down any new subject terminology'.

Here again, English is being framed as a subject with its own specialist lexis: learning English means learning the proper language. The voiceover adds that 'getting down the information' is what will 'help us progress in our learning'. What is on offer is strategies for reading that entail the acquisition of new vocabulary and the application of a template that maps out the typical structure of a narrative. Somewhat curiously, this pyramid structure is not attributed to Gustav Freytag, the nineteenth-century German scholar who produced it; nor is it acknowledged that Freytag developed it as a way of analysing tragedy in particular: the assumption is that, when it comes to stories, one size fits (almost) all. This is odd, particularly in relation to the text that is to be encountered (eventually), at least in the form of an extract. Short stories, especially those by modernist writers like Katherine Mansfield, don't necessarily conform to the same narrative structure as tragedy (and it's not at all clear that every play that might be called a tragedy follows quite the same pattern as Freytag produced).

This might seem a little esoteric, so it's time for a story of everyday classroom life. Early this year (before lockdown, that is), one of my current PGCE students was teaching a Year 8 English lesson as part of a unit of work on narrative. Adhering to the departmental scheme of work, she introduced her class to Freytag's Pyramid, presenting it as a model they should follow in planning the stories they were to write. One of the boys in the class, a fairly new arrival in the UK, raised his hand. 'Not all stories are like that,' he declared. And he went on

to explain that the narrative structures he encountered when playing games on his PS4 were often different from, and rather more complex than, Freytag's model.

Online at the Oak Academy, no such opportunities for dialogue, or for the introduction of out-of-school knowledge, exist. The monologic voice of the teacher, the voice of direct instruction, is the only voice we hear.

So, back to our online lesson. We are next presented with a slide entitled 'Reading with precision'. I confess I was expecting some more highfalutin language here, so was a little taken aback when I discovered that reading with precision seems to mean nothing more complicated than tracking what happens in the text – 'first … next … then … and finally'. This isn't unnecessarily complex, I grant, but I'm not sure how helpful it is. It implies that stories are (always?) organised chronologically, and that what is salient – what needs to be tracked most precisely – is events, or plot. And neither of these applies, in any straightforward way, to the short story that is the matter under investigation in this lesson. A further complication, for me, is that this structure of 'first … next … then … finally' is applied not to a whole text but to an extract. Given that the extract is an edited version of the start of a fairly short story, it seems rather misleading to be using words like 'finally' to refer to the end of the beginning, as it were.

The same slide presents what is called 'big picture thinking', which is glossed in the voiceover as what we are actually learning in reading this text. This is accompanied by a graphic, representing 'The Four Types of Conflict'. I'm bothered by the definite article here. It suggests, like so much else in this lesson, that tablets of stone have been handed down from somewhere. (There might have been three, or six, or fifteen, Types of Conflict, but in fact there are four. As the voiceover announces, 'According to literary theory, all texts can be boiled down to these four types.' So that's that.) But I'm a lot more bothered by the language in which these types are presented: 'Man vs. Man'; 'Man vs. Nature'; 'Man vs. Himself'; 'Man vs. Society'. I must have missed the memo from the DfE that informed us that it is, once more, completely unproblematic to use 'man' to refer to humanity in general, or to individual humans, irrespective of their gender. The usage here is the more baffling, given that the text we will (eventually) encounter is one that might be construed as representing markedly gendered forms of oppression and immiseration – one in which the gender of the central character – a female shopworker – exerts a shaping influence on the meaning of the whole story.

Finally, we move on to reading the short story. This is presented as an opportunity to apply what we have learnt. So, in this version of English, the text is a site where a series of abstractions, simultaneously banal and tendentious, about narrative structure and universal themes can be 'applied'. The reading itself is broken into short segments ('first', and so on), and each is accompanied by a set of questions. After the student has provided their answers to the teacher's questions, there is the opportunity to review their response in the light of the model answer provided by the teacher. And the assumption is that the student will supplement their first attempt with the more detailed 'information' provided. As the voiceover informs us, 'the thing here is to test that what you're getting is what I'm getting'.?

But is this how reading works? Do we all read a text in the same way? Do we all bring to a text the same prior experiences, beliefs and values? Does a text mean the same thing to each of its readers? One of the pleasures of the shared reading that is accomplished in English classrooms is that the classroom becomes a site for the exploration of different – and sometimes radically divergent – readings.

The short story from which the extract is taken, 'The Tiredness of Rosabel' (Mansfield 1908), focuses on an evening in the life of a young female shopworker. It begins with Rosabel on her bus journey home from Oxford Circus to Westbourne Grove after a hard day in the millinery. Later, in her flat, she reflects on a moment in the shop and she fantasises about changing places with the upper-class young woman whom she had served. It is an interesting choice of text for Year 10 students, and potentially a generative one.

As part of their GCSE course, many of these students will have read *An Inspector Calls* (Priestley 1947) and so might make connections between Rosabel and Eva Smith, the young working-class woman at the centre of Priestley's play, who was sacked from her job in a department store at the instigation of Sheila Birling, the factory owner's daughter. Students might, equally productively, recall other narratives they have encountered that employ the trope of sudden transformations of role or position to explore differences of class (or indeed other structuring dimensions of identity): from *Cinderella* or *Aladdin* (any version) to *Trading Places* (dir. Landis 1983) and *Desperately Seeking Susan* (dir. Seidelman 1985) to *Freaky Friday* (again, multiple versions, all based on Mary Rodgers' 1972 novel) and *Parasite* (2019, dir. Bong Joon-ho) and so on. The point is to recognise that all our reading is intertextual: we read one text in the light of other texts we have read, and all of these other

texts inflect the meanings that we make. (Below, I touch briefly on the intertextuality of Mansfield's short story itself.)

Intertextuality is the enabling condition of reading; and, precisely because different readers bring different intertextual readings to bear, it is what enriches (and complicates) the reading that happens in classrooms. No glimmer of this understanding of reading permeates the online lesson. There, reading is informed not by prior reading experiences but by the toolkit that the teacher has provided, and reading is presented as occurring along a tramline of linear development. Different readings are reducible to better or worse readings: the more closely the student's reading approximates to the already-finalised teacher's reading, the better it is. That, it would appear, is what reading with precision looks like. The more I listened to the voiceover, the more I felt as if I was eavesdropping on someone's private fantasy of schooling – a lesson where the teachers talk and the students listen, take notes, and make measurable improvements. It is a version of curriculum that stands as the polar opposite of Douglas Barnes's dialogically enacted curriculum, which I cited at the beginning of this piece, or to Brenton Doecke's more recently developed concept of literary sociability (Doecke 2019).

When we read, we also draw on extratextual experiences – our experiences of the world, as well as our experiences of other texts. The opening of Katherine Mansfield's story, set on a London bus in the rush hour, might make an effective point of entry into the text for many readers. There would be scope here for imaginative and creative work *before* any engagement with the text itself, as a way of making a bridge between the students' lives and the world of the story. Such an approach would be productive at any time, with any group of students. The Oak Academy online lesson, however, has been produced at a particular moment in our history. It is presented as a response to the Covd-19 crisis. Mightn't there be space, somewhere in the exploration of the scene on the bus, for an acknowledgement that Mansfield's words are likely to be differently resonant, differently meaningful, for us now than they might have been a couple of months ago? It really would be hard to imagine anyone reading this – 'There was a sickening smell of warm humanity—it seemed to be oozing out of everybody in the 'bus …' – without the reading being inflected by their experience of life in a time of social distancing. This is not to propose an interpretation of Mansfield's story through the prism of our current conditions; it is, though, to suggest that all acts of reading are contingent. Posing the question, as the online lesson

does, of what the author wants to establish in the opening of the story might help to inform the reading; but it is not at all helpful to treat as irrelevant all that the reader brings to the text. And knowledge of *Cinderella* and social distancing offers much greater potential for meaning-making than does the ability to spot an abstract noun.

That, though, is the point. I realise that I have misconstrued the whole focus and purpose of the Oak Academy lesson. I have responded to it as if it were about reading, and about reading one short story in particular. It isn't. initially, I was puzzled as to why the lesson focused on an extract, given that the whole story runs to barely four pages of A4. The story, in this version of English, isn't the object of attention at all. It is merely a vehicle for the inculcation of exam skills. The extract used in the Oak Academy lesson is one that appeared on a GCSE English exam paper in 2017 (AQA 2017a, 2017b). We are thus confronted with a magnificent tautology: the point of English is to prepare students for English exams. Is this the best rationale we can offer to school students in this time of lockdown?

In editing down Mansfield's story, the exam board excised a significant part of the opening paragraph. Having boarded the bus, Rosabel 'sat down next to a girl very much her own age who was reading *Anna Lombard* in a cheap, paper-covered edition, and the rain had tear-spattered the pages.' A little later, Rosabel reads over her neighbour's shoulder: 'She could not see very clearly; it was something about a hot, voluptuous night, a band playing, and a girl with lovely, white shoulders. Oh, Heavens!' As her stop approaches, Rosabel gets up, bumping into the other girl, who is so absorbed in her reading that she doesn't react at all.

It is worth saying something about the novel that the girl was reading, *Anna Lombard*, by Victoria Cross, the *nom de plume* of Annie Sophie Cory. Published in 1901, it went on to sell more than 6 million copies. Set in the India of the British Empire, it tells the story of the daughter of a general who has an affair with one of her servants. She becomes pregnant, her Indian lover dies in a cholera epidemic and she suffocates their baby so that she can live happily ever after with Gerald Ethridge, her white lover. No wonder Rosabel's neighbour was so engrossed in it!

From the opening onwards, then, Mansfield's story might be construed as a story about stories, offering an ambivalent judgement on the pleasures they provide. Behind Rosabel's aversion to her neighbour's reading matter, it might be inferred, lurks Mansfield's own contempt. And yet Rosabel's dream of a life of luxury might be seen to parallel her neighbour's avid consumption of escapist fiction: just as the latter smiles as she reads, so

the story ends with Rosabel smiling as she wakes from her dream the next morning. Is fiction, then, no more than the opium of the people, the comfort of the oppressed? Then again, the student interpellated by the Oak Academy need not worry about such questions – the questions that tend to arise, more or less spontaneously, in the richly dialogic spaces of real classrooms. Armed with their toolkit, they need only to take apart the dismembered remains of the extract that confronts them; the story itself is not their concern.

Notes on contributor

John Yandell has taught at the London Institute of Education since 2003. He spent the previous two decades working in inner London secondary schools.

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[1] An earlier version of this paper was published on the *Celebrating Education* website, https://www.celebratingeducation.org/.

[2] The force of Boris Johnson's recognition lies in its repudiation of Margaret Thatcher's assertion, in a 1987 interview in *Women's Own* magazine, 'you know, there's no such thing as society. There are individual men and women and there are families' (see https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2013/apr/08/margaret-thatcher-quotes).