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Knowledge, English and the formation of teachers

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores some widespread assumptions about knowledge, and particularly the disciplinary or subject knowledge that is construed as an essential property of effective teachers. Drawing on close observation of pre-service teachers' work in secondary school classrooms, it argues that knowledge is born from social engagement and has its life in social activity; thus to conceptualise knowledge as the possession of the teacher, to be passed on to learners, is misleading and unhelpful. What is required is a much more complex, nuanced understanding of the knowledge work that is accomplished in and through the interactions of the classroom.

KEYWORDS

Disciplinary knowledge; English; teaching; teacher development; pedagogy

The production and distribution of knowledge: the role of the university

A recent issue of my university's weekly staff news featured an item with this headline: 'From research to CPD: UCL linguistic experts help teachers with English grammar in schools' (UCL Staff News, 4 August 2016; the same article appears on the UCL website). It's worth quoting the story at some length:

UCL English Language and Literature is using a long-standing research project to enhance UK teachers' knowledge of English grammar so they can pass this on to their pupils.


...

Why teachers need help with grammar

The English language plays a very important role in the National Curriculum. Teachers at primary and secondary schools are expected to teach complex linguistic and grammatical concepts to their pupils.

This can be challenging, as many English teachers have typically received very limited subject knowledge training in grammar. Often new recruits entering teacher-training courses know very little about grammar or are lacking confidence in their knowledge, presumably because they have picked it up in an unsystematic way. This situation raises obvious problems for the implementation of the National Curriculum. (UCL 2016)

The assumptions informing this news item are now so routinely accepted that they have become plain common sense. Knowledge is accumulated by specialists – researchers

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– working in universities. Some aspects of existing knowledge are specified by policy (the national curriculum) as being important for school pupils. Teachers need to have this knowledge so that they can pass it on to their pupils. Where teachers' own knowledge is deficient, the university is able to step in to remedy these deficiencies. (The news item does not quite make it clear what this area of deficit might be. Is it 'the English language'? Or 'grammar'?) What is clear is that this is knowledge that teachers both need and lack. And where there is a further problem with teachers' confidence, this is attributed to the 'unsystematic' nature of the knowledge they have acquired, or the way in which they have acquired it. Here, too, the university can provide the remedy, since the knowledge that it has and offers is, it would appear, systematic.

The problem that the university can assist in is, it would seem, one of implementation – the implementation of curricular policy; elsewhere in the same news story, it is revealed that the same experts have also been of assistance in formulating this policy:

The team was involved in the development of the new National Curriculum (NC) for English at Key Stages 1 and 2 (published in 2014) by the Department of Education. This stipulates that teaching should make use of formal and informal English in different settings, and that grammar teaching must be taught and tested in schools. The Survey team saw an opportunity to use their research to ensure teachers have suitable materials readily available. (UCL 2016)

What do we learn from this? Knowledge – the knowledge that is accumulated and systematised by specialist groups of workers – is a valuable commodity. Such knowledge, once it has been suitably sifted, is passed on. Teachers, in this model, are intermediaries in a chain of transmission, a singularly one-way process.

What doesn't emerge from this account, at all, is any sense that knowledge might be contested, subject to all kinds of uncertainty, border disputes, paradigm shifts, claims and counter-claims. This absence, or silence, would be a little odd in any knowledge domain; in relation to knowledge about language, it is little short of bizarre. Let's take that one simple word, 'grammar', that appears above in the somewhat unexpected statement that 'grammar teaching must be taught and tested in schools'. (Might this be a moment when more is revealed than is intended? So the subject of the tests is not grammar, or grammatical knowledge itself – more on that hereafter – but grammar *teaching*? Might this suggest that the point of testing is indeed to contribute to the regime of surveillance under which teachers must labour in this age of standards-based reforms? Isn't there something a bit circular about this process? And mightn't the pressure that is applied to teachers, through particular forms of high-stakes assessment, have more to do with their apparent lack of confidence than the lack of systematicity in their knowledge?)

What does 'grammar' mean here? Does it refer to a particular curricular content? To a version of sentence and clause analysis? To notions of correctness and incorrectness in the use of language? To aspects of the structure of language and some ways of describing some of these structural features? To the knowledge about how language works that all of us have as human beings, but that most of us tend to draw on more or less unconsciously (cf. Turvey 2014)? But what makes 'grammar' a contested term is not primarily the range of different meanings that are attached to it within more-or-less everyday discourse; it is that it has for decades been close to the centre of a number of debates about language, identity and education. These debates can be traced back to the chapter on Standard English in Raymond Williams' *The Long Revolution* (1961 [1965]; cf. Crowley 2003), to Labov's (1970) work and that of many other scholars within the field of sociolinguistics (Blommaert and Verschueren 1998;

Hasan 2005; Harris 2006; Hymes 1974, 1996; Rampton 2005, 2006), to the argument between Basil Bernstein and Harold Rosen (Rosen 1972) about language and social class, to the ethnographic work of Shirley Brice Heath (1983), Brian Street (1984, 1995) and many others. But this history is also, and increasingly, one of political interventions in questions of curriculum and pedagogy from the Kingman Committee's *Inquiry into the Teaching of English Language* (DES 1988), which preceded the first imposition of a national curriculum in England and Wales, to the controversies around the Language in the National Curriculum (LINC) project in the early 1990s (Carter 1997), as well as to statements by a range of politicians about the causal relation between grammar and morality (see, for example, Carter 1997, 7–9; Marshall 2000, 30–33), through to the introduction of the National Literacy Strategy (DfEE 2001; cf. Stannard and Huxford 2007). In England, throughout the past three decades, language policy has figured prominently – and controversially – as a means of regulating the practices and purposes of schooling.

Thomas Popkewitz (1998, 27) described the school curriculum as performing an alchemy on disciplinary knowledge. It transforms:

... competing sets of ideas about research ... [into] knowledge as uncontested and unambiguous content for children to learn or solve problems with ...

Thus, it is possible in schooling to talk about children's learning as involving conceptions and misconceptions of concepts, as if concepts were stable and fixed entities of knowledge.

The alchemy that makes the world and events seem to be things of logic removes the social mooring from knowledge. The debate and struggle that produced disciplinary knowledge are glossed over and a stable system of ideas is presented to children.

Now, it seems that the role of the university is to be complicit in this alchemy, to represent knowledge in already-curricularised forms as if it were abstracted from the social, shorn of all debate, existing outside history and culture. I am equally troubled, however, by the representation of teachers as lacking in subject knowledge (in this instance, lack of knowledge about 'grammar', or language).

Teachers and those who aspire to become teachers are, in my experience, the first to be concerned about the knowledge that they bring to teaching (and rather easily persuaded that their own knowledge is deficient). Offers to provide support, to enhance teachers' existing stock of (subject) knowledge, are, doubtless, sincerely meant. They tend to be based on assumptions about the nature of knowledge itself that have become widely accepted (cf. Furedi 2009; Hirsch 1987, 1996, 2006; Simons and Porter 2015; Young 2008, 2009, 2011; Young and Lambert 2014). But the longer I spend with teachers and in classrooms, the more I have come to question these assumptions and to recognise the force of the argument, made by David Lusted more than thirty years ago, for the crucial importance of pedagogy:

[Pedagogy] draws attention to the process through which knowledge is produced. Pedagogy addresses the 'how' question [3] involved not only in the transmission or reproduction of knowledge but also in its production. Indeed, it enables us to question the validity of separating these activities so easily by asking under what conditions and through what means we 'come to know'. (Lusted 1986, 2, 3)

In what follows, I try to identify some of the issues about knowledge that arise in the everyday work of teachers. These issues are, I argue, more complex and more contingent than the accepted wisdom of already-identified repositories of disciplinary knowledge allows

for. To open up this argument, I want to tell two stories, each of which is, and is not, a story about (subject) knowledge. My adoption of a narrative approach (Aoki [1992] 2005; Doecke et al. 2007; Parr 2010; Parr, Doecke, and Bulfin 2015), one that focuses on particular moments and on particular teachers working in particular places, is congruent with my attempt to explore the contingency of knowledge and to look more closely at the processes of knowing, or coming to know. It involves some scrutiny of more objectivist models of knowledge and of teacher formation, including Shulman's (1986, 1987) influential and oft-cited category of pedagogical content knowledge.

Diagnoses of deficit: subject knowledge and a struggling student teacher

The first story is about a student on the pre-service teacher education course that I lead. Michael¹ ran into difficulties quite early in the programme. He didn't seem entirely committed to the course, or to teaching, but it was when he had started his first practicum that the problems really began to be acute. In November, when Michael's university tutor visited him in school, he did not seem able to engage the classes he was teaching, and confessed to not feeling confident about teaching Shakespeare (he was meant to be teaching *Romeo and Juliet*). Because of the concerns that were raised about Michael, my colleague visited him again three weeks later. There was little sign of improvement, and the concerns were formalised. When I visited Michael the following January, what I observed seemed to me to be pretty hopeless. Shakespeare had been left behind, and the class had moved on to travel writing, but the change in focus was not matched by any greater sense of engagement on Michael's part, either with the content of the lesson or with the students. As I said to Michael, somewhat unkindly, I could not see what he had done in the lesson that could not have been accomplished by a fairly basic computer programme: where the students' responses matched what he had been expecting, he acknowledged what they had to say; where they didn't, he was awkward, unsure of himself, and keen to move on.

I spent a long time talking with the school-based colleagues who were working with Michael. They were very experienced, both as teachers and mentors of pre-service student teachers. I had worked with them for years, and respected their judgement. They were clear about the root of the problem: Michael, in their view, lacked the subject knowledge that was required for him to flourish as an English teacher; that was why he floundered so conspicuously in the classroom, why he seemed so dependent on a prepared script, so unable to respond in real time to his students' contributions to the lesson. I agreed wholeheartedly with their observation of what was wrong. And, I suppose, I assumed that they were probably right about the cause: deficiencies in subject knowledge. It was, at the least, a plausible hypothesis. The colleagues in Michael's first school weren't being irresponsible or wrong-headed in making the hypothesis that the problem was a subject knowledge problem. They were looking carefully at what was going on in the classroom – and what wasn't going on, the responsiveness that was so conspicuously lacking. And it was reasonable to infer from this that the reason that Michael wasn't able to respond was because he couldn't draw on the knowledge that would have informed any such responses. Without sufficient breadth and depth of knowledge, without a detailed map of English studies, he was not in a position to take what his students offered him and use it to guide them further in their thinking and in their exploration of the field; all he could do was carefully to prepare a script for the lesson and hope that the contributions that others made would follow this script. They didn't, of course; they never do.

Michael was miserable (and also, I sensed, quietly angry). He knew that he was failing to make progress. The conversation that he had with me was an honest one. We both acknowledged that it was difficult to see how he could transform himself, within a very short period of time, into an effective teacher. Somewhat reluctantly, however, I agreed that he could start his second practicum, at a different school. We arranged that I would visit him there once he had had a few weeks to establish himself. And I made it plain that I would have to inform the colleagues in the second placement of Michael's difficulties on the course thus far.

I visited Michael again, two months later, five weeks into his second practicum. The school was less than a mile away from his first placement, with a fairly similar pupil population. He was, once more, working with experienced English teachers (and his mentor was a former student of mine). The lesson that I was to observe was, coincidentally, again located within a scheme of work on travel writing.

The lesson moved from the analysis of two television adverts to a final activity in which students worked in groups to devise and then present their own tourist advertisement for a country of their choice. The transformation in Michael's practice was little short of breathtaking. I quote from the notes I took while I was observing his lesson:

9.22 What is most apparent is the difference in you between now and two months ago. You are confident, you interact positively with your students – you are inhabiting the role of teacher in leading the class through a coherent set of activities. And you are leaving space for students to do the work – to think, to talk. It is very, very good to see you like this in the classroom.

You say that you have had requests to play [the short video clip of an advert] again. You say you will, and you want students to focus carefully on what is said and what is presented visually. (Again this is powerful evidence of effective teaching: you are attentive – and responsive – to your students, altering your plan to take account of the feedback you receive.)

9.24 Shania starts, with an analysis of the visual. She has a lot to say – and it is very impressive, isn't it? You ask a supplementary: what is the reason for showing children? (Throughout, your use of supplementary questions is important – it pushes students to develop their ideas and to be more explicit about their thinking.) (from my lesson observation notes, 23 March 2016)

What was most remarkable about it was the evidence it provided of the quality of pedagogic relationships that Michael had been able to construct, over a very brief space of time, with his new class. He knew them well, and they trusted him and responded enthusiastically to him. These aspects of teaching are not ones that can be summoned up at will: they depend on, and reveal, a shared history. The experienced colleagues with whom he was now working told the same story. From the moment of his arrival in the school, they were puzzled at the difference between my warnings of a student teacher at risk of imminent failure and their encounters with a young man who was consistently conscientious, committed, effective – and knowledgeable – in the classroom.

The contrast between the two lessons that I had observed was primarily a contrast in pedagogy: Michael had moved from cutting a sad, isolated figure to being a skilled orchestrator of his students' contributions. But what this also revealed was that the hypothesis about a lack of subject knowledge was, quite simply, wrong. Confidence was crucial here – the confidence to form relationships, to respond to what was said in the moment, and so

on; once such confidence had been gained, it became clear that Michael was already knowledgeable about how texts function and how meanings are made and remade. Thus, for example, in the analysis of the first advert, Michael led his students through a careful, shot by shot exploration of the ways in which a story was being constructed. Building on a range of students' contributions, Michael was able to draw attention to the ways in which the advert's narrative line functioned as the central vehicle of its persuasive design on the viewer. (One of the problems with the ways in which persuasion is often represented in school is that the power and subtlety of storytelling tends to be overlooked. The assumption is that advertising works through a direct address to the viewer/listener, and that it can best be explored by the identification of discrete rhetorical devices. And that's nonsense – as Michael's approach enabled his students to appreciate.)

Previously, I, like the colleagues in Michael's first school, had assumed an absence; now, different observational data led me to infer that Michael possessed enough, and the right sort of, subject knowledge. In neither moment, though, would the matter have been resolvable by giving Michael a test, or by looking at his qualifications, the transcript of his degree, or whatever other evidence might have been provided as indications of his knowledgeability. More rigorous probing of Michael, outside the context of the classroom and outside his role as a beginning teacher, would not have got us any closer to figuring out what was going wrong in the classroom. His problem wasn't with travel writing, or with Shakespeare, or – to return to my starting point – with unsystematic or nugatory knowledge of grammar; it was with Shakespeare, or grammar, or travel writing *as a focus of activity in the classroom*. It was, I'm suggesting, not knowledge in the abstract but knowledge in the context of the pedagogic relations of schooling that was proving tricky for him. And the trickiness lay primarily in the pedagogic relations, not in the knowledge (insofar as the two are in any sense separable). In the opening sentence of this paragraph, I wrote about Michael possessing, or not possessing, subject knowledge. But I am not at all sure that this is an appropriate verb, or a helpful way of thinking about knowledge. To treat knowledge as an entity that can become the possession of an individual is to reify it, to remove it from the social semiotic processes that are implicated in the production of knowledge. What happened in the final part of Michael's lesson helps to exemplify what I mean here.

The first group to present their own improvised tourist advert had chosen to promote Nigeria as a holiday location. Beverley and Samantha, the two girls leading the group, inhabited roles that were recognisably those of (older) Nigerian women: they were playing versions of family members (mothers? aunts?). It was a complicated performance, as well as being a dazzling assured and very witty one: knowing, and designed to evoke reactions of recognition from the more knowing members of their audience, it was heightened, slightly parodic, and very affectionate – a kind of layered in-joke, that enabled the students simultaneously to enact and hold up to critical scrutiny the exoticism, the casual othering, that is entirely characteristic of the tourist trade's representations of culture. Both the students presenting and those in the audience were occupying multiple positions, on the inside of a version of West African culture and on the outside, observing the act of representation and thereby being enabled to consider the politics of representation itself. And one dimension of what was going on here was that the girls were speaking back to Michael, asserting their West African heritage and identity in response to Michael's declared pride in his own Caribbean heritage (one of the adverts he had chosen to show them was produced by the Jamaican tourist board). What, then, was the 'knowledge-base' of this lesson? Was it travel writing, or

the language of advertising, or persuasive techniques? It was, but not in the sense that these areas of knowledge might be taken as fixed categories. For, as Doecke and McClenaghan argue:

Genre ... is a product of the social relationships in which it is employed; it both mediates and is mediated by those relationships, with the result that it can never be reduced to a set of rules that people automatically follow in their exchanges with one another. (Doecke and McClenaghan 2011, 78)

In Michael's classroom, knowledge of the advertisement as a generic category was being produced through a series of generative activities, each of which was located in, and made meaningful through, the cultures and histories of the participants – cultures and histories that were, simultaneously, the material that was being worked on and the object of attention.

It might be helpful here to recall the words of the Bullock Report, in its exploration of knowledge and the role that language plays in the development of thought. Hugely influential for a generation of English teachers, Bullock opened up the possibility of focusing on language in the classroom – all classrooms – not through instrumentalist or prescriptivist lenses but as centrally implicated in processes of learning:

It is a confusion of everyday thought that we tend to regard 'knowledge' as something that exists independently of someone who knows. 'What is known' must in fact be brought to life afresh within every 'knower' by his own efforts. To bring knowledge into being is a formulating process, and language is its ordinary means, whether in speaking or writing or the inner monologue of thought. (DES 1975, 50)

It is, I hope, becoming clear that I do not see Shulman's (1986, 1987) category of pedagogical content knowledge as means of explaining Michael's development. The central problem with Shulman's model is that focusing on how content (subject knowledge) becomes transformed by the teacher by the magic of pedagogical content knowledge into material that can be assimilated by the learners still leaves his model locked in what is, in effect, a static – objectivist – conception of subject knowledge, as if it were something that is the possession of the teacher, to be handed on, with the right sort of pedagogic framing, to the learners (cf. Ball and Bass 2000; Banks, Leach, and Moon 1999; Doecke and McKnight 2003; Doecke et al. 2007; McEwan and Bull 1991; Sockett 1987). It is still treating such knowledge as existing *outside* the social.

What I cannot offer, in any determinate sense, is an account of the factors that enabled Michael's development in his second school placement. But I will offer a hypothesis. In his first school, the interactions between Michael and his colleagues created a cycle of negative reinforcement, wherein each ascription of deficit diminished his confidence and each subsequent crisis, each failure to demonstrate knowledge and competence, provided further evidence of his incapacity. In the second school, in contrast, a cycle of positive reinforcement was established, and thus he thrived. The hypothesis seems plausible to me, not least because it locates the transformation of Michael firmly in the social and the affective.²

Contesting deficit: the classroom as a site of knowledge construction

To explore this further, I want to tell a second story, concerning a different pre-service teacher. This is the story of a single lesson, taught by Harriet, during her second practicum. Harriet was teaching a small group of Year 9 students (13- and 14-year-olds), a bottom set, in a school

in Essex. If the story of Michael is a story about an assumed deficit in the teacher, this story is primarily concerned with the prior ascription of deficit to the school students.

The class was studying *Romeo and Juliet*. The regular class teacher had developed a strategy for coping with Shakespeare, with this class in mind. The students were provided with a graphic novel form of the text, with the Shakespearean dialogue in speech bubbles. They were meant to follow in their copies while they listened to an audio version of the play. The approach was intended to support the students, who were considered to be weak readers, to give them access to the (authentic) Shakespearean text without having to read the words for themselves, as it were.

Harriet was reluctant to adopt this approach when she took over teaching the class, because of what she had noticed during her first few lessons when she had been observing and acting as an additional teaching assistant. The students had been struggling with the text. Some had largely abandoned the pretence of following the words in their own copies of the comic book version; others had, she sensed, been careful to follow the teacher's lead, turning the page when the teacher did so. As Shari Sabeti (2014, 184) has argued, in her exploration of comic book versions of Shakespeare produced for educational purposes: 'Adaptations into seemingly more accessible formats ... may not always provide simple or straightforward solutions' to the problem of enabling adolescent readers to access Shakespearean texts. Readers are presented with a package, a complex ensemble of interpretive and representational choices already made for them, at some distance from the classroom. For Harriet's students, there was the additional challenge of following the graphic text at a pace set by the audio version, so that they did not have the opportunity, so central to the experience of such texts, of exploring for themselves, at their own pace, the complex interplay of word and image and the sequencing of the narrative within more or less clearly defined frames.

The context was fraught with contradictions. Here was a class that was constituted in deficit. This was the bottom set, full of students who knew all too well that they were in the bottom set and who made it perfectly clear in their conversations with Harriet that they understood and had internalised the implications of their institutional position. Confronted with this and with a mandated curriculum that required the study of Shakespeare, the class teacher had attempted to construct a way of reading the play that would be manageable. But, as Harriet had seen, the effect was to reduce the students to, at best, a state of passive acquiescence, as they did their best to observe the outward and visible signs of participation in the activity without it becoming meaningful to them. The scaffolding that had been provided to compensate for the assumed weakness in their own reading was so elaborate, so substantial as to act not as a support but as a barrier.

In previous lessons, the class had struggled through to the end of Act I and the first meeting of the lovers at the Capulets' ball. For the lesson that I observed, Harriet chose to focus attention on Capulet and his relationship with Juliet. Before the students entered the classroom, Harriet had put two tasks on the board: the students were invited to describe Capulet and to think of a question that they would like to ask him. I would want to suggest that, right from the start of the lesson, these prompts position the students very differently: the assumption is both that they already know things (they have their own sense of Capulet as a character) and that they might want to find out more. (It's a simple point to make, but it is still, in my experience of observing classrooms, somewhat of a rarity to see opportunities for students to ask their own questions being built into the planned lesson.)

It's the first period of the day and students arrive singly or in small groups. Harriet draws their attention to the tasks as they enter. After about seven minutes of sporadic talk in pairs and small groups, Harriet brings the class together. She asks students to share the adjectives they have used to describe Capulet: 'caring' (Victor); 'protective' (George); 'loving' (Ben); 'honest' (Matt); 'humble' (Chris). Harriet probes the students to justify their words they have chosen. Chris's use of 'humble' excites my interest. He knows a great deal about Capulet, and about how fathers ought to behave. I started off by thinking that he'd just picked the wrong word; as the conversation continues, I become more inclined to think that his use of it is poetic and entirely apt: it gestures at the question of power and patriarchy, and it places Capulet – the Capulet of Act I – as a man who does not abuse the power that he has.

Lucy wants to ask why he is so protective over Juliet. She thinks this is because she is his only daughter. Billy asks whether Lord Capulet would want Juliet to leave home with Paris. Ben is very clear that she isn't old enough. Tommy says Capulet is caring. He has interesting questions about Lord Capulet's past – about his own marriage, how it happened and how that has affected him. And Harriet asks her students to recall the last thing that Capulet said – about the party, and about how this might relate to Capulet's feelings for Juliet. What was abundantly clear to me as observer of the lesson – and what I hope is communicated by this account of the first part of the lesson – is the tone of these exchanges. Harriet's starting-point in her interactions with her students is that they will have something to say – that they are, in other words, already knowledgeable. An atmosphere of sociability, an expectation of dialogue, helps to mitigate the students' institutionalised sense of their own shortcomings.

Harriet explains that we are going to fast forward – skipping through to Lord Capulet in Act III. According to her plan, this segment of the lesson was envisaged as a bridge between the part of the play on which they had focused (Act I, scene v – the Capulets' ball) and the scene that she wanted the class to explore in the lesson (Act III, scene v – the confrontation between Capulet and Juliet). She reminds the students of how well they already know the plot. On the board, she presents an image of the Capulets' ball – a frame from the Luhrmann (1996) film. Students ask why Juliet has wings. Ben knows that it is fancy dress – and Romeo is 'a knight in shining armour'. Chris makes a very sophisticated point about the costumes representing how the lovers see each other: he sees her as an angel, she sees him as a knight ...

Harriet presents Juliet's line 'My only love sprung from my only hate'. Archie works out that this is to do with the families. There is an animated discussion, led by Ben, about trouble at the party. He remembers Tybalt's anger, while Aidan recalls that Lord Capulet had told Tybalt to leave it.

Referring to the way that Tybalt appears in Luhrmann's version, Ben says Tybalt looks like a Mexican; Chris says it's like he's head of the Mafia. Ben adds that the costume shows that Tybalt is 'like a devil – he's evil' (and about to start a fight). Lucy recalls the balcony – and that Juliet asks Romeo to marry her. At this, Ben is very censorious, appalled by the idea of marrying after an hour: 'that's not normal!' And Chris makes the point that, were such a thing to happen today, Romeo would be imprisoned, or beaten up (because of Juliet's age). This prompts Ben to pursue the idea of historical distance: he mentions the issue of boy actors. (This is such an interesting connection to make. It is, of course, precisely along these lines that the Puritans presented their critique of the theatre as a place of immorality. And it shows a rather well-developed sense of context and difference.)

Ben has a very detailed recall of the fight scene in the Luhrmann film. He recounts it, not quite frame by frame, but shot by shot. And he says: 'He realises that it is going to ruin his relationship with Juliet, so he can't fight.' Aidan comments on the use of the weather – 'forecasting' [foreshadowing] what is going to happen. Other students recall more information about plot and characters. Harriet asks who else knows about the marriage. 'Only the Friar and the Nurse,' comes the response. She presents a still of Paris and Capulet – and George knows that Paris is asking to marry Juliet again. Chris understands why Capulet might have changed his mind about the marriage – because of Tybalt's death.

These exchanges are very deftly managed by Harriet. The stills from the Luhrmann film are well chosen and it is clear that they work effectively to draw the students into the conversation. But (again, an obvious point) it is not the images alone that have this effect: it is how they are mobilised within the lesson. It is the tone that Harriet adopts, how she positions the students as knowledgeable and interested, how she attends to what they have to say and takes their contributions seriously. This is (has become) a space in which students' voices are heard, and listened to. And this quality of the pedagogic relations enables the students – these same students who had been, in Harriet's account, so passive and alienated in earlier lessons – to demonstrate a pretty impressive level of engagement with the text that they are studying.

This sequence was intended as an opportunity to recap the action of the intervening scenes – to 'fast forward', as Harriet put it, so that all the students had a secure sense of what had been happening and would thus be able to locate Capulet's meeting with Juliet within the longer narrative arc of the play. This aim was accomplished, without doubt. But much more than this was going on here than simple recall, or sharing, of information: this is no mere plot summary. Readings are being produced that are intertextual, alert to allusive nuance in the fragments of performance text with which the students are presented. Alongside this strand in the collaborative reading process, there is an interest in difficult questions of historical context and perspective. There is a knowledge of different conditions of theatrical production, and this knowledge is mobilised around a discussion of gender roles in the play. And there is an acknowledgement that these questions of representation – of how the relationship between Romeo and Juliet is presented, and how we might position ourselves in relation to this – are also ethical questions.

Harriet announces that we are going to watch a little clip (from the Luhrmann film), in which Capulet talks to Juliet about marrying Paris. Harriet asks one group to consider the use of names, a second group to look at facial expressions, a third to concentrate on staging and movement, and a fourth to focus on dialogue. Before we start watching, Harriet asks Lucy what Juliet will say. She understands that she can't say yes, because she is married already, but she can't say anything – 'she'll just be upset'. Students watch very attentively; more than this – they are gripped. 'What an idiot!' exclaims Ben when the scene has finished. 'He looked like he was going to push her down the stairs.'

Victor says, also about Capulet, 'He came into the room well grumpy ... he's a woman beater!' And he wants to watch the whole film. Archie notes that Lady Capulet calls Capulet 'sir' and he calls her 'wife'.

But then Chris says, 'I don't get that. In the Shakespeare thing, he's a really nice bloke.' Chris, you may recall, is the student who hadn't seen the Luhrmann film (or, presumably, any other version of *Romeo and Juliet*). He is in the interesting – and quite unusual – position of reading the play for the first time, encountering it without the baggage of prior knowledge

of the story. I would also want to suggest that his response is a measure of how involved he is in the scene, in that he sees this representation of Capulet as belonging in an entirely different text from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. The fundamental change in Capulet's behaviour matters to him – and he is so appalled by it that he sees it, not unreasonably, as belonging to a different character altogether: Luhrmann's take on Capulet, he assumes, rather than Shakespeare's.

Chris recalls that Capulet tells Juliet that she can die in the street if she doesn't do what she is told. Aidan knows about rich families having tombs, and he asks if Capulet is the only man in the house: he's struck by the number of women that there are, and is thinking through what that might mean for Capulet, how that might help to explain his behaviour. Harriet asks Travis how he would describe Capulet now: 'abusive', 'king of the castle'.

Harriet now presents students with part of the script, printed on a single side of A4 paper. She wants students to highlight threats or insults and underline the parts where Capulet tells Juliet what to do and what will happen. Harriet invites Aidan to read three lines. Tommy asks about 'my fingers itch'.

Archie figures out that this means that he wants to slap her. Chris realises that Capulet is abandoning her. Other students ask about 'baggage'. Harriet takes Tommy through the significance of 'graze where you will' – not only 'go where you like' but also the derogatory implication that Juliet is like an animal. I wonder if Harriet might have taken this further, in terms of Capulet viewing Juliet as a sort of possession. But Tommy gets there anyway: he picks up on Ben's paraphrase – about Capulet giving her away – and comments that it is as if Capulet owns her.

Harriet brings the class back together and asks Ben to share a line. He chooses 'a curse in having her'. 'Is that surprising you?' Harriet asks. 'Yes!' comes the emphatic answer from the class. Archie focuses on 'Hang thee, young baggage' – she's not his burden any more. Lucy picks 'disobedient wretch', which she glosses as 'scum'. Victor returns to 'my fingers itch': Capulet wants to slap her. Victor is not surprised by this (because he understands Capulet's anger). Lucy says that Capulet now is evil, full of anger.

What is going on in this part of the lesson might be regarded as the core business of subject English. Here is a group of students paying close attention to a canonical text. They are exploring together, under the guidance of their teacher, the work that words do, the ways in which meanings are made. They are appreciative readers, able to make persuasive inferences; and they are enjoying themselves, too – enjoying their ability to make powerful sense of it all. At the same time, they are deeply ethical readers: their interest in the words that are used is not separable from their interest in what is happening in the relationship between Juliet and her father – and they are sharply critical of what Capulet is doing. Their reading is a moral and emotional engagement with the text, not merely a dissection of it. Close reading here depends crucially on the students' already-existing knowledge of the context of the utterances – the dramatic situation – and it enhances, deepens, enriches such knowledge.

After the lesson, Harriet talked to me about her decision to put aside the graphic version of the text and to give students the extract from the scene in this pared-down, unadorned form – a print-out on A4 paper. She felt that the graphic text was too complete a package – that it did not leave space for the students to make the text their own, to puzzle over it and interrogate it and fill it with their own meanings. The move that she made demonstrates a confidence in her students as readers of complex texts and a determination to give them

agency, to position them as makers of meaning, not mere recipients of others' readings. The students accomplish this first in relation to the film and cartoon stills that Harriet displays on the interactive whiteboard, then in relation to the extract from the script.

Harriet asks students to write adjectives to describe Capulet in this scene. Victor wants to know what Juliet said to Capulet to make him angry. And he answers his own question – 'I don't want to get married.' 'I don't believe that – I'd want to get him sued!' Archie asks if you might call Capulet arrogant and self-centred. Chris understands that Capulet doesn't like being disobeyed. Aidan realises that Capulet might be trying to help Juliet, but he isn't doing it very well. (This is also worth pausing over. It's an extraordinarily mature reading of Capulet. Where does this insight come from?) And Archie thinks he might already have spent money on the wedding. Lucy links it to the death of Tybalt – Capulet compensating for the lack of protection, and for Juliet's grief. Tommy says he wants to control Juliet's life.

Chris suggests: 'that was how girls were treated then'. It's an arresting statement, shifting the terms of the conversation and of the analysis of Capulet's words and actions. Where the earlier contributions, I think, tended to respond to the scene as if it were being enacted now, in 2016, Chris explores another dimension. We simply don't know what prompted this shift in perspective. It might have been Chris's attempt to think through the problem of the apparent discontinuity in Capulet's character. If, for a modern-day reader/viewer such as Chris, there appears to be a contradiction, a chasm separating the Capulet of Act I from this Capulet, perhaps this contradiction is itself a product of historical distance: what seems incompatible to me, Chris suggests, might not have appeared so at the time when the play was first produced. Chris's intervention can also be seen as a contribution to a thread that has run throughout the lesson: the awareness of, and interest in, the conditions of the text's production: Ben's mention of boy actors and Aidan's knowledge of earlier funerary practices.

'What about the audience at the time?' Harriet asks. As the lesson draws to a close, we have arrived, somewhat fortuitously, at the teaching point which, as her lesson plan indicates, she had intended to reach: 'Link to historical context in answers – diff[erence] between audience reaction to Capulet's anger.' Chris thinks that an Elizabethan audience would not have been shocked – that they would have taken Capulet's behaviour as normal. 'Everyone would be yes, go on, slap her!' And Tommy remembers about hangings being a public spectacle (which he adduces as evidence of a more violent society). Lucy talks more about the position of girls at the time.

I would want to suggest that what the students are doing here is behaving like real readers. Their reading involves both a close and affective engagement with the text and a questioning of it, a readiness to deploy moral categories and an awareness of the otherness of the world represented, and hence of the need to interrogate the judgements that they are making. As it happens, though, I would want to disagree with the conclusions that they reached at the end of this remarkable lesson. I explained my reasons in my observation notes:

First, there is the internal evidence of the play: the structural contrast between Capulet in Act I and Capulet in Act III in itself makes it very hard for an audience simply to accept what Capulet says and does here. Second, there is the extent to which Juliet is presented in a positive light: if we empathise more with her, it becomes harder to accept Capulet's treatment of her. Third, there is the very marked difference between Shakespeare's treatment and that of his main source – which really does present the story from a more orthodox, patriarchal position.

What I wrote in my observation notes invoked certain kinds of literary knowledge in developing an argument about the internal organisation (or form) of Shakespeare's play and its relation to other texts. I wanted Harriet to consider this textual evidence, though, not because it would enable her to arrive at a better (more knowledgeable) reading but rather because I wanted to challenge the certitude of the lesson's conclusion. I was reacting against what I sensed as a shift in the orientation towards, and conceptualisation of, knowledge in the lesson, a move away from what had been the impressively open, productively dialogic attitude towards knowledge, an attitude that encompassed a recognition of what the students brought with them to the lesson and that positioned them as actively engaged in the production of knowledge. This moment seemed to mark a retreat to a more restricted version of knowledge-as-information, as if one could simply read off from other historical evidence about the forms that patriarchy took in late sixteenth-century England definite conclusions about what the audience would have made of the character of Capulet and then transmit these conclusions to learners in the classroom.

The dialectic of everyday and scientific concepts: from knowledge to understanding?

When Harriet and I talked after the lesson, I touched on this point of disagreement. Her first reaction was to attribute this to a deficit in her subject knowledge. Harriet, unlike most of her peers, took a linguistics degree, in which literary study figured only peripherally. Because of this, she is all too ready to accuse herself of a lack of systematic knowledge within the field of (English) literature. She also told me that the class teacher had suggested that this – the difference between sixteenth-century audience responses and twenty-first-century reactions to the scene – was an important and appropriate teaching point with which to conclude the lesson.

Does this indicate, then, that an appropriate response on my part, as the university tutor, would have been to suggest some remedial action – the literary equivalent to the help with grammar that my colleagues elsewhere in UCL are keen to offer to teachers? Definitely not. What was at issue here was not a deficit in subject knowledge but what is, in my view, a much more important debate about the nature of knowledge and hence about the orientation towards knowledge that should characterise pedagogic relationships and processes. Chris and Harriet (and the class teacher) are not wrong about Elizabethan audiences – it is simply not the case that my ('superior'?) knowledge trumps theirs. The point is that we don't know: the responses of Elizabethan audiences are not known, or knowable, to us (and in any case it is extremely unlikely that all members of an Elizabethan audience responded in the same way to what was being represented on stage). These are matters to explore, to speculate and to argue about (cf. Yandell and Brady 2016). They are, in Popkewitz's words, not 'fixed entities of knowledge' but ideas to be debated and struggled over.

But let's get back to the end of Harriet's lesson and the yet-to-be-settled question of the way that an Elizabethan audience might have responded to the scene in which Capulet forces his daughter to marry Paris. Questions of knowledge are relevant here. What I am less sure about is any suggestion that there is a simple binary opposition between a systematic, organised subject knowledge, on the one hand, and an unsystematic and largely tacit, everyday knowledge on the other. The concept of historical distance – that the past is a foreign country where people do things differently – is vitally important in the domain of literary

study, as it is within the discipline of history itself; but this, as the students' contributions throughout the lesson indicate, is not neatly distinguishable either from a general (everyday) sense of pastness or from particular knowledge, acquired from beyond the school gates as well as in the classroom, about changing sociocultural practices (in the theatre, in funeral rites and in families, for example). Knowing about Arthur Brooke's narrative poem that is a source for Shakespeare's play helped me to read *Romeo and Juliet* intertextually and thus to construct an argument about its different emphases, its adoption of a different narrative perspective. But I don't think that this amounts to a different kind of knowledge – more systematic, or even more disciplinary, as it were – than the knowledge that informs Ben's intertextual reading of the Luhrmann still as drawing on and echoing the conventions of the Western genre.

The activities in which Harriet's students participate are meaningful, meaning-making activities; these are not exercises in preparation for subsequent acts of independent reading, but rather the thing itself: literary praxis, perhaps. Each of these activities has been carefully structured and sequenced by Harriet to enable this participation by her students, Harriet deftly guides them through each part of the lesson. The point about this is not just the vital importance of confidence (agency) on the part of teachers and students. It's that the social relations are pedagogic relations: that what gets done gets done in the social – and that includes knowledge. Knowledge isn't, then, primarily an attribute of the teacher that is simply the precondition for teaching. Vitally important is the teacher's attentiveness to, and ability to work with the students in producing, the knowledge that is constructed in the classroom. So, knowing stuff about Shakespeare, or about grammar, is much more significantly a collective accomplishment of the lesson than an ingredient that exists independent of the lesson (in the teacher's mind, perhaps). What I am arguing is that knowledge is less a precondition of pedagogic interaction than a product of pedagogic processes:

Knowledge is not produced in the intentions of those who believe they hold it, whether in the pen or in the voice. It is produced in the process of interaction, between writer and reader at the moment of reading, and between teacher and learner at the moment of classroom engagement. Knowledge is not the matter that is offered so much as the matter that is understood. To think of fields or bodies of knowledge as if they are the property of academics and teachers is wrong. It denies an equality in the relations at moments of interaction and falsely privileges one side of the exchange, and what that side 'knows', over the other. (Lusted 1986, 4)

Ronald Miller (2011) has argued that what is central to the Vygotskian conception of the zone of proximal development, or the role of instruction (the terms are, for Miller, more or less synonymous, to the extent that the ZPD is that space where instruction can be productive) is not content knowledge – the acquisition of discipline-specific content – but rather an orientation towards learning. Following Vygotsky, Miller takes the learning of grammar as a particularly clear instance of what he has in mind:

Unlike other school subjects, in the case of grammar, instruction does not add any new content to the child's store of knowledge. Here the role of instruction is to render covert knowledge overt by providing the child with explicit formal knowledge of the language that is spontaneously and, for the most part, correctly generated by the child without explicit instruction. It is this second-order aspect of instruction, of knowing about knowing or of 'conscious awareness', that Vygotsky calls structural or formal as opposed to the specific contents of various knowledge domains ... [C]onscious awareness or meta-knowledge or 'knowing that' one knows ... underpins the concept of 'formal' knowledge in contrast to everyday or common-sense knowledge. According to Vygotsky, the role of instruction is not merely to transmit content-specific knowledge but to

bring about a state of reflective understanding that enables the learner to control, monitor and master the learning process. (Miller 2011, 118, 119)

Might it not be generally true of handling subject knowledge in English (and perhaps even in other curriculum subjects as well) that what matters is not so much the new content added to the learner's store of knowledge but what Miller refers to as 'a state of reflective understanding that enables the learner to control, monitor and master the learning process'? What subject English provides, particularly in its textual or literary dimension, is the opportunity to look afresh at concepts that are encountered as much in everyday existence as in the classroom (cf. Yandell and Brady 2016). In the sociable, dialogic space of the classroom, Harriet's Year 9 students, studying *Romeo and Juliet*, are able to re-examine their store of knowledge about fathers and children, for example, to look at the sign 'father' from the perspective provided by the play. To say that the concepts encountered in such texts – family, loyalty, love, death – matter, to us as to a sixteenth-century audience (or a sixteenth-century writer) is not to indulge in tendentious claims about universalism, or the timelessness of literature. On the contrary, it is the distance between those concepts, those signs, as they are instantiated in the text and the everyday that enables not just recognition but re-cognition – a thinking again. And in such classrooms, learners are able to enter into this activity knowingly, aware of themselves and of their interlocutors as engaged together in the production of new meanings.

Notes

1. Teachers', student teachers' and school students' names have been replaced with culturally appropriate pseudonyms throughout.
2. My hypothesis thus might be construed as analogous, within the field of teacher education, to Tomasello's (2003) usage-based theory of language acquisition. Arguing against the innatism of Chomskian generative grammar, Tomasello locates the processes of language acquisition primarily in the relation that develops intersubjectively between child and caregiver.

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