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## Questions in/of English

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### ABSTRACT

Our starting point is provided by two accounts of observed lessons. The two lessons happened, at more or less the same time, in the same English department in an East London secondary school. Both lessons, observed by the second- and third-named authors, involved the shared reading of the same novel. We are interested in the difference between these two lessons, a difference that is manifested most clearly in the different ways in which questions enter in the two lessons. We argue that this difference is symptomatic of two fundamentally different versions of English as a school subject.

### KEYWORDS

English; questions; curriculum; pedagogy; practice; lesson observation

... there is a form of positivism underpinning much of the thinking about learning that has become dominant – certainly in the UK – that cannot be allowed to stand unchallenged.

... the study of literature and cultural texts can itself be a potent source for ideas about learning, ideas which are in many ways at odds with the ‘evidence-based’ shibboleths which dominate educational policy. (Knights 2017, 142)

Early on in our pre-service teacher education (PGCE) programme, student teachers are asked to write in detail about a lesson that they have observed, paying particular attention to the ways in which language is used and to evidence of learning. They produce this piece during the first few weeks of their first practicum. Soumeya and Faduma had been placed in the same school. Both happened to choose to write about Year 8 English lessons in which the opening chapter of the same young adult novel was being read. *In the sea there are crocodiles* (Geda 2011) tells the story of Enaiat, a boy from Afghanistan, and his experiences as a refugee.<sup>1</sup>

The observations conducted by Soumeya and Faduma are, thus, of parallel lessons: lessons taught by two different teachers within the same department, each teaching the same ‘content’ – the opening chapter of the same text. We should make it clear that our focus of attention throughout this essay is not on the individual colleagues whose lessons were observed, and certainly not on either their commitment to their students or their competence: the accounts which Faduma and Soumeya wrote are sympathetic appreciations of the teachers’ skill, exercised in all the complexity of real-life classrooms. We are using these accounts – ‘good examples of practice’, rather than examples of good practice, to invoke Kelchtermans’ (2021, 1508) useful distinction – to explore the differences in pedagogy and in the versions of English that are instantiated in these lessons. What

makes it possible and, we hope, legitimate to do this is that these forms of practice are recognisable – that they bear family resemblances to many other lessons – and that the approaches represented in these lessons can usefully be analysed in relation to competing curricular and pedagogic discourses in circulation much more widely.

We want to focus on a single moment in each account. Here is part of Soumeya's observation:

Although the entire class is reading the novel together, the teacher assessed the students' understanding after each scene. She asked simple questions such as 'what three things did Enaiat's mother tell him to remember?' and 'why did Enaiat's mother tell Enaiat to count the stars?' This was a short test to see whether the students were following the storyline, and no one was struggling to figure out what was going on. The teacher had also placed a different set of questions on the interactive white board that she would like the students to think about as they read. They answered the questions in their book. The questions are colour-coded and cater to all the abilities in the classroom. For instance, the most challenging question on the board was in the colour orange and said 'Do you agree with her actions? Why/ Why not?' (Soumeya)

In the lesson observed by Soumeya, it is the teacher who asks the questions (and the students who answer them). These questions serve a number of distinct (or distinguishable) purposes. Those which Soumeya categorises as simple – the ones that the teacher poses orally when the reading is paused – are tests of students' recall. They enable her to assure herself that students are paying attention and that they have a grasp on the text as plot. There is, it is suggested, a disciplinary dimension to them, in the sense that they are a means whereby the teacher manages learning (and behaviour) in her class. At the same time, they might be construed as conforming to currently dominant ideas about learning and about curriculum: they test memory and retrieval, and they represent the experience of reading the novel as, at least in part, a process of acquiring (and storing) information – facts, if you like, such as the three things that Enaiat's mother told him to remember.

The questions that the teacher has displayed on the interactive whiteboard – ones she had prepared earlier – are different. One of them, at any rate, colour-coded as the most challenging, makes different demands on the students and positions them differently in relation to the text. The question that Soumeya records – 'Do you agree with [Enaiat's mother's] actions? Why/ Why not?' – asks students to evaluate the actions of a character and to provide reasons for the position that they take.

In the lesson that Soumeya observes, this version of differentiation, where different provision is made for students of differing 'abilities', is represented in its most unobtrusive and flexible version: students are free to choose the question they respond to, though there is usually some tacit expectation that they will make an informed choice, one that is guided by their knowledge of their place in the class's internal hierarchy of attainment/ 'ability'.

Our interest is in the classification of this question as the most challenging. It is plausible that lurking behind this lies Bloom's taxonomy (Bloom et al. 1956; Krathwohl 2002; Munzenmaier 2013), a way of categorising the difficulty of learning objectives, and hence the cognitive challenge posed by tasks and questions, that has remained stubbornly persistent in the UK, in universities (Newton, Da Silva, and George Peters 2020) as well as in schools (Pollard et al. 2019; Magaji and Ade-Ojo 2017; Toplis, Golabek, and Cleaves 2010) and in many other countries (Bijsterbosch, van der Schee, and Kuiper 2017;

Tavakoli & Davouli 2016; Wong & Day 2009). We make the connection between Bloom's taxonomy and the level of challenge ascribed to this question because it demands an evaluative response: it thus qualifies for the category at the peak of Bloom's hierarchy – evaluation – whereas the recall-oriented questions that the teacher was asking might be considered to belong at the base of this same hierarchy, in the domain of 'knowledge of facts'.

The works we have cited in the previous paragraph do, indeed, refer to and make largely uncritical use of versions of Bloom's taxonomy – and these works are in that sense representative of hundreds of others. But we are less concerned with this literature in itself than with the ways in which Bloom's taxonomy has become deeply embedded in the thinking – and the practice – of many teachers. Thus, for example, experienced teachers frequently give student teachers advice about questioning that involves the recommendation to script questions, as part of their lesson planning, so as to be able to pose appropriately challenging questions at targeted individuals. The taxonomy is thus implicated in a process of question-formulation and objective-setting that is predicated on aspects of teacher knowledge – the knowledge of individual students' prior attainment (or, more loosely, their 'ability') – as well as on the notion that the form of the question is directly and straightforwardly related to the degree of cognitive challenge that it poses for the learner. Each of these assumptions merits scrutiny.

Kress et al. (2005, chapter 6) offer a compelling study of the ways in which a teacher's interactions with students, influenced by the notion of already-established, already-known, differences in 'ability', tend to construct such differences pedagogically, in the classroom. John has written elsewhere (Yandell 2020) about the problems, for English teachers, of operating on the basis of 'knowledge' of a student's prior attainment, let alone the ascription of some abstracted level of individual 'ability', as a reliable or useful guide to the ways in which students might respond to the shared reading of a literary text. What is lost when teachers are locked into making judgements about ability is a preparedness to be surprised by the readings that are enacted in the classroom – and surprised by the students who contribute most to these readings. Equally questionable is the proposition that the form of a question determines its difficulty. For an example of questions that are formally simple but enable the most impressively sophisticated, thoughtful responses to a complex text, see the account of a lesson on *Richard III*, taught by Monica Brady (Yandell 2013, chapter 9). Brady's questions – 'What does Richard want? What obstacles stand in his way? How far has he got?' – might seem designed to elicit nothing more than plot recall, with a side helping of character analysis. But this is not what happens at all. The work that questions do, and the work that they facilitate, cannot be abstracted from the concrete circumstances of the dialogic interactions in which they are situated (cf. Nystrand et al. 1997, 84).

One of the most powerful critiques of Bloom's taxonomy was made by Richard Pring (1971). It is worth returning to Pring's argument because of its direct applicability to current questions of English curriculum and pedagogy. First, Pring takes issue with the way in which the taxonomy creates a separation of cognition and affect: as he argues, this distinction is not sustainable, analytically or practically. Second, he rejects the hierarchical separation of 'knowledge' from other intellectual abilities

Such ‘logical atomism’ misses the important point that for something to be recognised as a fact requires some comprehension of the concepts employed and thus of the conceptual framework within which the concepts operate. Similarly with regard to the knowledge of terminology, it does not make sense to talk of the knowledge of terms or of symbols in isolation from the working knowledge of these terms or symbols, that is, from a comprehension of them and thus an ability to apply them. To dissect the ‘cognitive’ in this way is, through lack of analysis, to miss the essential unity in the development of thinking. And this is dangerous because it encourages a design of the curriculum in which the output is a set of unconnected skills but not an educated person. (Pring 1971, 90)

The notion of a ‘curriculum in which the output is a set of unconnected skills’ might have sounded far-fetched to Pring, half a century ago; it seems an apt description of some of the versions of English that have gained currency in more recent years.<sup>2</sup>

We move now to a moment in the lesson observed by Faduma:

Getting a class of twelve and thirteen-year-olds to understand or empathise with the plight of people like Enaiat is not exactly straightforward, and this is something I would overhear within some of the students’ individual conversations. When instructed to discuss in pairs during pause points, a pair of students across me were fixated on a particular aspect of the novel. “Why would his [Enaiat’s] mother abandon him?” exclaimed one student. His partner was quick to tell him that Enaiat’s mother did not *abandon* him, “she just had to leave him to escape alone because of the Taliban”. In this English lesson, where the whole hour was dedicated to reading and understanding what has been read as a class, were two students making sense of this challenging and complex part of the novel in entirely different ways. The first student seemed to be grappling with how any mother could do such a thing to their child, whilst the latter student remained aware of the root issue behind the mother’s actions in the first place. They had not yet finished their conversation when Ms W’s lesson drew to a close. (Faduma)

The question debated by the two students is the same as the ‘challenge’ question in the lesson observed by Soumeya, in that it addresses the same problem posed by the opening chapter of the novel: why would Enaiat’s mother abandon him? In other aspects, though, this is not the same question at all. Here it is a student’s question, or rather a reader’s question – one that arises spontaneously from the shared reading of the text. It isn’t a question imposed by the teacher, framed by levels of difficulty and hierarchies of ‘ability’. As Faduma’s account indicates, it is a question that has to be asked, its urgency deriving from the need to make sense of the story.

Nystrand et al.’s (1997) distinction between authentic and test questions is relevant here:

Authentic questions are questions for which the asker has no prespecified answer and include requests for information as well as open-ended questions with indeterminate answers. Dialogically, authentic teacher questions signal to students the teacher’s interest in what they think and know and not just whether they can report what someone else thinks or has said. Authentic questions invite students to contribute something new to the discussion that can change or modify it in some way.

By contrast, a *test question* allows students no control over the flow of the discussion. . . . a test question allows only one possible right answer, and is hence monologic . . . (Nystrand et al. 1997, 38)

In the lesson observed by Soumeya, the question of the separation of Enaiat from his mother has become a test question; in the lesson observed by Faduma, it is, quite unmistakably, an authentic question.<sup>3</sup>

There is more to be said, of course, about the interaction observed by Faduma. The two students involved are, as she suggests, coming at the issue from different starting-points. The student who asks the question is wrestling with the enormity of what is represented in the opening chapter. In what circumstances, he exclaims, could it possibly be the case that a mother behaved in this way towards her son? His interlocutor has an answer: it is explicable because of the context of Afghanistan at that moment in history. This isn't an exchange between more and less capable, or more and less knowledgeable, peers. Both students are bringing knowledge of the world to bear on the problem that the text presents. In one case, it is knowledge of what mothers are like; in the other case, it is knowledge of Afghanistan, of the Taliban, and possibly of the experience of refugees. None of this knowledge is immediately identifiable as belonging to the domain of English as a school subject. It is, in Vygotskian terms, everyday knowledge (Vygotsky 1987; cf. Yandell 2013; Yandell and Brady 2016), though to regard it as such is also to recognise quite how capacious a term 'everyday knowledge' needs to be if it is to encompass such disparate kinds of knowledge and of knowing. What Faduma's account suggests, too, is that this is an ongoing dialogue: the issue isn't resolved by the second student's mention of the Taliban – it is a conversation that carries on beyond the confines of the English lesson.

Is it a happy accident that Faduma was privy to this conversation, prompted by the question that functioned in the other observed lesson as a 'challenge' question? Perhaps, but we would want to argue that it was highly likely that this would be what students, given the opportunity to pause in their reading and talk about what had been going on in the first chapter, would have talked about. It is the central problem that is presented in the opening – a problem that fictionalised Enaiat confronts in retelling, and hence reliving, the moment of his separation from his mother. It is the problem that pulls us into the story; at the same time, as Faduma's account suggests, it is the problem that confronts us with a difficulty of understanding, or of empathy. It confronts us with a situation beyond what most of us have experienced (which is also something that fiction tends to do). And this returns us to the difficulty of the placing of this question as the 'challenge' in the lesson that Soumeya observed. We find ourselves wondering how you could read this chapter and not confront this question. What would such an experience of reading feel like?

It's all very well for us to claim this, to assert that in some sense the question is intrinsic to the experience of reading the novel. We don't know that all the other students in the lesson observed by Faduma were having similar conversations. Neither, we assume, would the class teacher know this. In Faduma's account of the lesson, the reading was punctuated with 'pause points', moments for students to reflect, in conversation with their peers, on the sense they were making of the novel. But these reflections were not framed by a set of questions, prepared earlier by the teacher, as was the case in the lesson observed by Soumeya.

A rationale for the lesson that Soumeya observed might be that such a structure, such a way of organising the reading of the novel, is designed to ensure that the students are paying attention, that they understand what is going on in the story, and that they are presented with specific, targeted questions designed to provide the appropriate level of cognitive challenge for each and every one of them. This rationale might also indicate that the way in which the reading was supported enabled the teacher to remain properly

accountable for the learning that was being accomplished. In the lesson observed by Faduma, on the other hand, it might seem that learning is left to chance, that the teacher has abdicated her pedagogic responsibility: she can merely hope that, in the pauses that she creates in the reading, the students will talk about the novel (rather than last night's football, or whatever else might be preoccupying them) and that what they will say to each other will be mutually edifying. Alternatively, one might consider that the teacher whom Faduma observes is treating her students as collaborators in the process of meaning-making, and that the evidence available to us would suggest that they are responding appropriately to this confidence in them. What should be considered as 'off-task' talk is usually not quite so straightforward to determine as might be imagined. Apparently tangential discussions can prove remarkably productive (cf. Yandell 2013).

The lesson observed by Soumeya might be seen as aligned with currently powerful ideas about teaching: direct instruction, deliberate practice, and 'promoting good progress'. Thus, new teachers are inducted into the profession by:

... analysing with expert colleagues how to reduce distractions that take attention away from what is being taught (e.g. keeping the complexity of a task to a minimum, so that attention is focused on the content) ... breaking complex material into smaller steps ... [and] how to sequence lessons so that pupils secure foundational knowledge before encountering more complex content. (DfE 2019, 11)

Such an approach to teaching and learning is predicated on a set of assumptions: that what is taught is what is learnt; that learning is an incremental, largely linear process; that teaching, and planning for teaching, involve the segmenting and sequencing of material so that it is presented to learners in an order whereby 'foundational knowledge' is encountered (and assimilated – consigned to memory) before 'more complex content'. It is also a version of education as something which is done to the learners: students' interests or agency do not figure in this account at all.

These nostrums might seem commonsensical. We tend to assume that it's a good idea to start at the very beginning (because that's a very good place to start). But this is not really where schooling ever starts. Learners, in this model, are represented as blank slates. But they arrive at school – or at the opening of *In the Sea There Are Crocodiles* – with all kinds of prior knowledge and experience that are directly relevant to how they will read the text. Almost certainly, that knowledge will include knowledge of mothers and how they tend to act (Vygotsky's [1987, 218] point about the concept of 'brother' being 'saturated with experience' is at least equally applicable to the sign, 'mother'). And, in the East London school where Soumeya and Faduma conducted their observations, it is likely that some students will arrive at the novel with first-hand experience of migration, and possibly of being a refugee, while others will know a great deal about the languages, cultures and histories that are invoked in the novel.

There is, in the field of English education, a long history of attentiveness to students' lived experience – their experience of what happens beyond the school gates – as constitutive of the subject (Dixon 1967/1975; Britton 1970; Rosen 1981/2017; Burgess and Hardcastle 1991; Turvey 1992; Doecke and McClenaghan 2011; Brady 2014; Shah 2014; Yandell 2016; Bracken 2018; Doecke and Yandell 2018). If this dimension of knowledge, which includes both first-hand experience and experience of the texts (including oral stories, books, films and computer games, for example) that are



encountered beyond the classroom, is to be taken into consideration, it becomes really much trickier to determine what is to be categorised as ‘foundational knowledge’ and what might represent ‘more complex content’. If we think about the conversation overheard by Faduma, we might speculate that the second student – the one who emphasises the importance of the Taliban in the decision that Enaiat’s mother makes, that is forced upon her – might have arrived at the lesson with greater knowledge of the political context of Afghanistan. (What knowledge looks like in this context is itself not at all straightforward, in that the perspectival dimension of knowledge is particularly salient here. The student’s response to their partner’s question might equally be interpreted as evidence that they had more fully assimilated the way in which the Taliban had been represented in mainstream Western media and by Western politicians.)

In the two observed lessons, the relationship of scientific (or curricularised) to everyday (or extracurricular) knowledge is markedly different. In the lesson observed by Soumeya, the teacher works hard to provide the students with contextual knowledge, while also trying to involve them in the exploration of the world of the novel:

The teacher promoted inclusivity by asking students if they knew what *Ba omidi didar* means. Since no one put their hand up, she used Google translate to investigate. It didn’t provide a meaningful translation, so the teacher set a mini-homework task for the students to go home and to try find out what the phrase means so that they could share it during next lesson. The teacher also explained ‘Shia’ and ‘Taliban’ so that the students could have a better understanding of Enaiat and his mother’s escape from Nava. Thus language is used by the teacher to access social and historical context that is related to the novel; the teacher also explained the proximity between Afghanistan and Pakistan since Enaiat travelled through Pakistan. (Soumeya)

Compare this with Faduma’s account:

Whilst the teacher’s performative reading of the text indicated how much students’ learning is shaped by their teacher, there were also various points in the lesson where this was almost reversed. This might have been in part due to the phrases and excerpts of Pashto and Dari that were woven into the novel, but it was also an interesting example of how teachers themselves learn from students. The two official languages in Afghanistan, Pashto and Dari, are used in the novel. These phrases are sometimes translated/explained to English readers, and sometimes they are not. This is where students with south Asian heritage in the class would intercede and translate the meaning—chiming in and talking between themselves about *chai* and *jaan* (term of endearment). At that moment, the language reflected their shared experiences, cultures and backgrounds. And in turn, their language was marked by an air of confidence as they shared their expertise. The teacher adopted a receptive and keen attitude in this dynamic, allowing for another form of learning to flourish in her classroom. (Faduma)

Here, as Faduma notes, the heteroglossic language of the novel is approached differently. This classroom functions, in such moments, as itself a ‘third space’, ‘a site where no cultural discourses are secondary’ (Gutierrez, Rimes, and Larson 1995, 447; cf. Yandell 2013, 71): the teacher becomes a learner, the students become the teachers. A very large proportion of the students in this school are of South Asian heritage. Why, then, in Soumeya’s lesson, was the teacher’s attempt to promote inclusivity unsuccessful? Why did no-one raise their hand? Was it because no-one had the answer, or because students were unsure of the legitimacy of their out-of-school knowledge, of whether it was permissible in the context of an English lesson?<sup>4</sup> The difference between



the two classrooms is not, in any straightforward sense, a difference between students who have knowledge and those who do not. In one class, though, it would seem that students share what they know because they are confident that their own ‘funds of knowledge’ (Gonzalez et al. 2005) will be valued. Students, in one lesson, appear to have the agency that they lack in the other, despite the efforts of the teacher to elicit responses from them.

It would be reasonable to consider the difference that we have sought to establish between the lessons as differences in method, or pedagogy. These are real differences – differences in the social relations of the classroom that have a marked impact on how students behave, on who gets to ask questions and who feels able to answer questions, on how learning gets done. We should also make clear that we do not believe that these pedagogies are simply the products of the individual teachers’ beliefs and values. In what follows, we make connections between what Soumeya observes and the dominant discourses that are currently exerting a strong influence on what happens, moment by moment, in many classrooms. Nonetheless, it might appear that, for all these differences, these are lessons in which the same ‘content’ is being explored. After all, these are lessons covering the same part of the same text; they are lessons in which, as should already be apparent, many of the same features of the text are being brought into prominence. We want to suggest that this isn’t the case: that it is only in the most trivial sense that the same content figures in the two lessons, and that what is enacted in the two classrooms are two irreconcilably different versions of English.

As we have already indicated, the version of English that is instantiated in the lesson observed by Soumeya is one that is in alignment with a view of subject knowledge, curriculum and pedagogy that dominates the landscape of education policy in England. This is the model that is reflected in such recent documents as the *ITT Core Curriculum* (DfE [Department for Education] 2019), quoted above, and the *Early Career Framework* (DfE 2021), both of which have produced what is, in effect, a mandated curriculum for teacher development. In this model, the responsibility of teachers is to:

Deliver a carefully sequenced and coherent curriculum, by . . . identifying essential concepts, knowledge, skills and principles of the subject and providing opportunity for all pupils to learn and master these critical components. (DfE 2021, 12)

A teacher’s role is thus to deliver; learners, by implication, are to receive. What the subject is – its essential concepts, knowledge, skills and principles – has already been established, somewhere at some remove from the classroom, presumably by people other than teachers and their students. (Such conceptions of knowledge simply don’t know what to do with the everyday knowledge that is at the heart of exchanges within English classrooms – everyday knowledge that, in important senses, provides the content of English [Yandell and Brady 2016].) It is entirely consistent with this model that both the policy instruments we have mentioned place such emphasis on memory and the retention and retrieval of information (DfE 2021, 10–11); on explicit teaching and the anticipation and correction of misconceptions as the core work of teaching (DfE 2019, 13; 2021, 12); and on repetition and practice as the means whereby students acquire knowledge and skills (DfE 2019, 12, 18; 2021, 11, 17).

Reflecting on Vygotsky's contribution to pedagogical theory, James Britton (1987, 262) declared, 'The teacher can no longer act as the "middle-man" in all learning'. The message has not yet been received by the Department for Education, it would seem. Their reductive model of teaching and learning is problematic in relation to any discipline or school subject: it is a banking model of education (Freire 1972). When the text that is being read is a novel that, in its locations and narrative perspective, offers its own challenge to monocultural, monolingual norms, there are peculiarly sharp ironies in observing a pedagogy of transmission, one that positions the students as deficits. Here, though, we want to concentrate on the case of subject English and to draw on recent scholarship in an attempt to explore the nature of the difficulty that is posed for teachers of English by an approach which assumes that knowledge means propositional knowledge and which places teaching in an ancillary role in relation to the production of knowledge.

In *The Teaching Archive: A New History for Literary Study*, Rachel Sagner Buruma and Laura Heffernan (2021) argue that there is a longstanding problem in the way that the story of the discipline has been told. Earlier versions of the narrative have located developments primarily in the published output of literary scholars. Each movement, from Practical Criticism (Richards 1929) onwards, has been charted through the works of the individual figures centrally associated with it. What has been ignored in this history is that these same figures, and their many peers, have spent most of their time teaching. Thus, claim Buruma and Heffernan (2021, 6), 'literary value *seems* to emanate from texts, but is actually made by people. And classrooms are the core sites where this collective making can be practiced and witnessed'. When they talk of classrooms, what they have in mind is all sorts of teaching space, in all sorts of institution:

Literary study was not a long-ago elite formation that somehow opportunistically adapted to the more pragmatic needs of mass education; it was often cultivated alongside or even as part of vocational education. The disciplinary shape of English bears the marks of this history, but it will be visible to us and to others only once we see classrooms at vocational programs, night schools, community colleges, and technical institutions as part of our intellectual genealogies. (Buruma and Heffernan 2021, 213)

This isn't simply a problem of history, though; as they make clear, it has huge repercussions for us now, since 'The separation of teaching and research enables the cleansing of pedagogy from the expensive stain of disciplinary knowledge' (Buruma and Heffernan 2021, 210). Even more important, this has implications for how we understand what it is to do English, or literary study, in school just as much as in university:

Perhaps singularly among the disciplines, literary study is enacted rather than rehearsed in classrooms; the answer to the question "Did I miss anything last week?" is truly "Yes - and you missed it forever." (Buruma and Heffernan 2021, 4)

A similar argument has been made, on this side of the Atlantic, by Ben Knights:

English (more perhaps than many other disciplines) constantly performs its own invention as a pedagogy and form of knowledge.

It is a misunderstanding to treat 'English' - or any other academic subject, for that matter - simply as a body of knowledge, or as a tribe of specialists, cumulatively adding to the sum of knowledge which it subsequently transmits to its student initiates. It should be seen, rather, as a network of practices, and a social and cultural intervention. (Knights 2017, 21, 34)

The emphasis on English as a network of practices involves taking seriously what happens in the classroom, as the site not of transmission but of cultural making, not some pale imitation of literary study but as the thing itself. In this view of English, pedagogy is not the ‘method’ (as it would be called in some other countries) whereby disciplinary knowledge is passed on to a new generation; it is, rather, constitutive of the subject itself. In this version of English, the model of teaching and learning offered in recent policy (DfE 2019, 2021) seems inadequate, to say the least. Direct instruction, information storage and retrieval are not the processes that Knight envisages, when the practice of English is, every bit as much as the texts which are its objects of study, irreducibly implicated in the play of meanings.

In going beyond the seductions of manifest content, and deferring the quest for information, students are implicitly expected to make their own incursions into the unsayable, complicating, as they do, the protocols of everyday speech. As a result, the medium of teaching is in actuality no more transparent than the modernist text with which it shares a challenging opacity. In short, English - residually at least - *not only studies the aesthetic but also performs it in its day-to-day practice*. There is an assumed continuum between the verbal and conceptual play of the text and the play of the articulate reading. (Knights 2017, 108; emphasis added)

If we return, for a moment, to the two students overheard by Faduma, what matters is not that the question is answered but that it is asked, and thus forms the basis of an ongoing conversation. This is the ‘play of the articulate reading’ – play that takes itself seriously just as it marks a serious engagement with the text and the moment that is represented in the text.

The version of English that Faduma observes is not, therefore, ‘a carefully sequenced and coherent curriculum’ (DfE 2021, 12). Such notions of curriculum – and of the teaching that would best ‘deliver’ it – are supported by the work of cognitive scientists like Daniel Willingham, who has argued very strongly for a hierarchical model of knowledge, and thus of learning and of thinking, in which there is an absolute separation between the mental activities of novices and those of experts:

It’s not just that students know less than experts; it’s also that what they know is organized differently in their memory. Expert scientists did not think like experts-in-training when they started out. They thought like novices. In truth, no one thinks like a scientist or a historian without a great deal of training. (Willingham 2009, 128)

Willingham (2009, 141) makes a sharp distinction between ‘knowledge creation’ and ‘knowledge understanding’: the former is the job of experts; the latter what might be expected of learners. From this stems his injunction (2009, 143) to teachers: ‘Don’t expect novices to learn by doing what experts do’. What Willingham’s version of English might look like is in line with the lesson observed by Soumeiya.

For Ben Knights, on the other hand, the novice/expert divide is not a binary opposite, at all, since both are engaged in the same practice:

Students are not expected to turn into Frank Kermode or Judith Butler overnight, but they are expected to be able to act out the novelty of insight in their essays or their seminar contributions. The ‘scene of reading’ into which we seek to induct students consists of small-scale dramatisation of the steps of discovery - with its own narrative of ignorance (simulated or actual), a weighing of alternatives, triumphant disclosure, and teasing provocation to the credulous or

literal-minded. As a subject where in principle a student is as capable of startling new insight as an experienced scholar, 'English' establishes criteria for what is *interesting* or enlivening in the absence of any immediate semantic pay-off. (Knights 2017, 114; original emphasis)

In the lesson observed by Faduma, when the students are discussing Enaiat's mother's abandonment of him, they are participating in a struggle over meaning. They enter into dialogue with each other and with the text not merely to understand someone else's (expert) knowledge but as people assuming their right to contest and construct knowledge, using the resources available to them. Here, what is being enacted is a form of literary sociability (Doecke 2019) that exceeds the confines of the lesson itself precisely because the students have an interest in what they are discussing.

## Notes

1. This essay involves a collaboration among the three contributors, but the collaboration is of a particular kind. It draws on the accounts of observed lessons written by Faduma and Soumeya. John developed the interpretation of these accounts provided here, in dialogue with Faduma and Soumeya.
2. On this, and coincidentally with reference to the same novel that was being read in the classes observed by Soumeya and Faduma, see Bleiman (2019).
3. The distinction between an authentic question and a test question parallels the distinction between meaningful writing (or other forms of language) and exercises: see Moffett (1968); Edelsky (2006).
4. *Ba omidi didar* is translated in the text, but not immediately. Later in the same paragraph, it is glossed as 'We'll meet again soon' (Geda 2011, 15).

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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