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English and the Knowledge Question (Revisited)

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ABSTRACT

The ‘knowledge turn’ in curriculum studies has proved highly influential in the past two decades. But what is meant by knowledge remains both unclear and subject to contestation, particularly in relation to English as a school subject. Two recent books address the knowledge question in very different ways.

KEYWORDS

English; literature; knowledge; curriculum; literary sociability; pedagogy

These days, as I wander around London secondary schools, knowledge seems to be everywhere. Greeted with the promise of a ‘knowledge-rich’ curriculum, students are provided with ‘knowledge organisers’ and are expected, at the start of each lesson, to engage with short bursts of ‘retrieval practice’, where they are tested on their recall of facts ingested in the previous lesson. But what does knowledge look like in English? Two recently published books offer contrasting answers to this question.

Literary Knowing (Davies et al. 2023) is the product of a four-year research project, centred on a longitudinal study of twenty-four early career English teachers in three Australian states (Victoria, New South Wales and Western Australia). Within the field of English studies, it makes a significant contribution to (at least) two interlinked debates, one on the role of knowledge within schooling, the other on the formation of teachers. The five authors bring to the study a range of different disciplinary backgrounds and a wealth of experience. These different standpoints are not just noted but explored: a chapter is devoted to ‘autobiographies of the question’, a phrase borrowed from Jane Miller’s (1995) essay that here introduces the contributors’ first-person accounts of the development of their interest in the questions that framed the research. The autobiographical essays are of intrinsic interest; more than this, they enact a commitment to a methodology that takes seriously the need to historicise the researcher as much as the researched.

Its multivoicedness can obviously be seen as a strength of this study. We hear from different participants, bringing different perspectives on English and on what the research project has done for them, how it has developed their thinking. At times, though, there is a lack of coherence between the individual chapters, written by different members of the research team, with large differences of emphasis and interpretation that are neither acknowledged nor explored. Sometimes, it feels as if the contributors are less in dialogue with than talking past each other. This is not the case, though, with Lyn Yates’ contributions. A sociologist without any particular prior commitment to English, Yates

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demonstrates the value of having, as part of the research team, someone who is positioned an outsider to the field of English studies. Suspicious of claims about the exceptionalism of English, Yates makes the point that part of what subject English represents – what it is – is derived from its place as one subject among many on the school curriculum. It thus should be seen in parallel with those other subjects, shaped and constrained by the same discourses and institutional forces. Yet she remains alert to those features of the ways in which the early career teachers talk about the subject that indicate substantial differences between how they conceptualise English and how teachers of other subjects tend to represent their disciplinary affiliations. Reflecting on what she had learnt from the project, Yates writes:

It was not a surprise to me that the term ‘knowledge’ was not readily acceptable to the teachers. They largely interpreted the term in its everyday sense of propositional truths and resisted claims that ‘literary knowledge’ constituted acquaintance with a specific range of texts or that the point of the textual studies was to convey a set of designated truths, or even that the technical tools or concepts that are part of the subject are the core of what it is. Even more striking to me from our first-year interviews was a comparative insight. Where the history and science teachers I had studied earlier located their subject explicitly in relation to their cognate disciplines . . . the teachers in this study seemed to identify more with a concept of English as a *school subject*, and of being an English *school teacher*. In relation to arguments about ‘powerful knowledge’ or ‘pedagogical content knowledge’ and the like, these teachers did not see themselves primarily as ‘translators’ of a discipline they had themselves acquired in their tertiary studies. They had a sense of what they were trying to achieve, but it was more open-ended and multi-faceted . . . (Davies et al. 2023, 221).

Yates’ observation takes up a thread from an earlier chapter, in which Brenton Doecke and Philip Mead explore the relation between English in school and in higher education. Writers on the curriculum as diverse as Michael Young and Thomas Popkewitz have tended to operate from the assumption that school subjects stand in direct relation to a university discipline. This relation is differently understood, or differently represented: for Young (e.g. 2008, 2011; Young and Lambert 2014), it is disciplinary experts who have the responsibility (and authority) to determine what knowledge counts, and thus what is an appropriate curricular content; for Popkewitz (1998), the shifting, contested and uncertain knowledge of the disciplines undergoes a kind of alchemy, emerging in school subjects shorn of all complexity or debate, detached from its own history and appearing as transcendent truth. For both Young and Popkewitz, however, the origins of the subject lie in the parent discipline. For English, this does not seem to be the case.

In their chapter on ‘Literary knowledge debates’, Larissa McLean Davies and Wayne Sawyer suggest that the exceptionality of English is a product of its hybrid formation from a range of different disciplines (linguistics, cultural studies, creative writing, as well as literary studies). This acknowledgement of the disparateness of the practices included within subject English nonetheless misses the force of Yates’ recognition that English teachers do not understand their work as standing in so straightforward a relation to *any* ‘discipline’.

Elsewhere, though, the report offers a more persuasive account of the nature of English teachers’ work. What is offered as means to better understand the often quite disparate stories that the early career teachers tell is the concept of ‘literary sociability’. This is not a new idea: borrowing it from Kirkpatrick and Dixon’s (2012) work in quite

different settings beyond formal education, Doecke has already (Doecke 2019) made productive use of the term to rethink the history of English as a school subject (cf. Doecke and Mead 2018). Here, the argument is developed further. Doecke and Mead note how often the teacher-participants in their research have invoked moments when ‘texts have proven to be especially generative in stimulating classroom discussion and everyone finds themselves rubbing along together in a congenial manner’ (Davies et al. 2023, 132). These moments prompt the researchers to ask:

... What does this say about these teachers’ understanding of the role that the literary imagination and literary language play in our lives? Why should there be such a strong emphasis on promoting reading as a scene of social interaction and the sharing of experiences of reading literary texts? (Davies et al. 2023, 133)

The cultivation of literary sociability, then, becomes central to the work of English teachers: it is as applicable to a traditionally organised classroom, the teacher at the front, posing questions and determining who should answer them, as it is of a classroom arranged to facilitate talk among small groups of students, where the object of discussion is a text chosen by the students themselves. In either setting, the meaning of a text is not given but negotiated, inflected by the social dynamics of the classroom. Rather than being some ideal condition for interpreting literary texts, literary sociability becomes a means of representing the everyday realities of English classrooms and the work that is accomplished in them. It asserts the primacy of the social in these engagements with texts, the relational, dialogic and contingent character of the activity:

This is to say that the communication between people within those settings should be understood as arising out of the relationships that constitute those settings. This is most obviously the case with respect to the roles that people play as they interact with one another – the ‘self’ that ‘I’ perform as I relate to others within the social space of the school. Such recognition is also bound up with how those relationships shape the reading of texts and how they stretch beyond the immediacy of a school setting, prompting us to conceptualise the school as a context within larger social and cultural contexts. We might think of the community in which a school is located, which in turn might lead us to think about where that community is situated within a larger social structure. It makes a difference whether you are teaching in a small state school in regional Victoria or an elite private school in Sydney (Davies et al. 2023, 136).

These differences are not a set of contextual variables; rather, they exert a shaping influence on how English is differently constituted (and experienced) in these different settings. The picture of English that emerges is one which presents a direct challenge to dominant ways of representing the relationships between knowledge, curriculum and pedagogy. Knowledge (or knowing) in English cannot be understood in reified terms, existing apart from and prior to its entry into the classroom in the codified form of the planned curriculum; pedagogy, or even that curiously abstract notion of ‘pedagogic content knowledge’ (Shulman 1986, 1987), cannot be imagined as merely a set of teacherly techniques to deliver the pre-specified knowledge to its recipients. English is thus conceptualised as being continually remade in the classroom, and differently in different classrooms.

In this, there is a congruence between the argument that Doecke and Mead make and recent contributions to thinking about literary studies within higher education. Buurma and Heffernan (2021) question the priority given to scholarship, in the form of published

works of theory and criticism, in the history of literary study, arguing instead for the primacy of teaching in the development and contestation of the discipline; Knights (2017), too, insists on the need to see the engagement with literature not as a body of knowledge but as a set of pedagogic practices – practices in which experts and novices alike are active participants. And if one accepts the idea that practice (that is, the pedagogic interactions of the classroom or seminar room) is constitutive of literary study, it then makes little sense to talk of subject English (or that part of it which is concerned with work around texts) as standing in some filial relation to a parent discipline.

This does not, of course, mean that what English teachers bring to their work from their previous study is irrelevant. To imagine, though, that there was uniformity in that prior experience of literary (or other) texts, or that those prior experiences were somehow neatly separable from other, extratextual, dimensions of teachers' lives, is not tenable. In *Literary Knowing*, the point is made, most eloquently, through the vignettes of early career teachers that are interspersed throughout the report. These ground the exploration of literary knowledge and of teacher development in the particularity of teachers' lives and experiences. The vignettes are fascinating: the early career teachers have good stories to tell – complicated ones that involve significant moments in their own school and university careers, and in their lives beyond formal education, and the shifts in their understandings and practices across their first few years in the profession. They are exemplary, too – not as aspirational ideals, but as enactments of the study's argument for an understanding of the situated, contingent and relational nature of (English) teachers' work. I would have liked more of them – and I would have liked them to have been explored more fully elsewhere in the book.

Where *Literary Knowing* is less convincing is in its presentation of broader historical and political contexts within which the research might be situated. There is an acknowledgement that how the signs 'knowledge' and 'literature' are understood is shaped by the authors' Australian context. But what is more puzzling is how this context is represented: in a chapter by Larissa McLean Davies and Wayne Sawyer, Australia is positioned as part of the 'global South', a locus from which to speak back to the hegemonic voices of the global North. In support of this re-alignment, West-Pavlov (2018) is cited. I can find nothing in West-Pavlov's work that would justify this; on the contrary, he warns against the term 'global South' becoming evacuated of meaning, thereby following the same course of depoliticisation as post-colonial studies (West-Pavlov 2018, 16). In drawing attention to this issue, I am not attempting to deny the specificity of Australian perspectives, but rather to question whether they can so readily be assimilated within a quite different cultural politics.

A broad-brush approach characterises much of this account of the history of literary study. The binary of two competing 'schools', Cambridge versus London (Ball, Kenny, and Gardiner 1990), is given a new airing, with no mention of more recent critiques (see, for example, Medway et al. 2014; Gibbons 2017). More surprising is the lack of nuance in the treatment of Growth pedagogy, given that two of the book's authors have produced a much more careful reading of Dixon's ([1967] 1975 work and of this tradition in English pedagogy (see Doecke and Mead 2018; Doecke 2019). In a book that is otherwise so attentive to the tensions and contradictions in teachers' positions, so careful to assert

the centrality of classroom practice to an adequate account of knowledge and development, one might have hoped for a more illuminating account of the larger history.

I recognise that I am responding to the book from a particular position – one that might be characterised by McLean Davies and Sawyer as that of the imperial centre. That said, there are, I think, serious shortcomings in the account of the history of literary study that is offered here. Macaulay's (1835) infamous *Minute on Education* is quoted, but there is no apparent recognition that what Macaulay meant by 'literature' was simply not what we might understand by the term today: a much larger, more capacious category, it included all serious writing, scientific and historical as well as literary. There is, moreover, a lack of understanding of the operation of empire itself. Sweeping statements that counterpose the rationale for literary knowledge in the UK with that provided in colonised contexts treat the education of a particular class stratum (those who attended the British private schools) as if it could stand for the wider population. It cannot. Basal readers which first appeared in Ireland in the 1830s were distributed across the British empire, from Ontario to Trinidad – and also to workhouses and poor schools in the UK (Akenson [1970] 2012, 229–30). As Walsh (2007, 57) has argued, it was precisely these basal readers' 'detachment from the specifics of locale that made them so peculiarly adaptable'. The workhouse children in Manchester or Edinburgh were just as clearly positioned as imperial subjects as their peers elsewhere in the empire.

To take another instance from the same chapter on 'Literary knowledge debates': while it may well be the case that critical literacy was taken up in the 1990s in Canada, South Africa and Australia, in pursuit of social justice, the claim that this represented the 'first major debate about subject English being generated and perpetuated from outside the imperial centre' (p. 46) startled me. When I started work in an East London school in the 1980s, critical literacy was very clearly on the agenda, as part of the antiracist initiatives promoted by the Inner London Education Authority. As the Toxteth, Brixton and Broadwater Farm riots had demonstrated, the imperialist legacy of oppression was the everyday experience of minoritised communities in British cities. English teachers (among others) addressed urgent questions of representation by rethinking curriculum and pedagogy (Burgess 1984; Burgess and Hardcastle 1991; Turvey 1992; Hardcastle and Yandell 2018). And it is worth emphasising that this was not a product of paradigm shifts in the discipline of literary studies, however theoretically informed these developments were, but a response to the realities of life in the classroom and on the streets outside.

I have taken issue with the way that *Literary Knowing* has represented the history of literary study. What I found remarkable about another recent entry into the terrain, *The Trouble with English and how to address it* (Helman and Gibbs 2022), is that it betrays almost no knowledge of that longer history. It is a book that lacks any awareness of the value of professional memory (Tarpey 2018) or of a hinterland of scholarship and research in the field of English studies. The work that is cited falls, almost entirely, within a fairly narrow and currently very fashionable line of cognitive psychology. Because of this, there are copious references to cognitive load, dual coding and suchlike arcana – and almost no trace of other investigations into the problem of English.

Marketed as 'a practical guide', it is, without doubt, rooted in practice; it is also both a thoughtful and thought-provoking book. Zoe Helman and Sam Gibbs reflect carefully on the history of secondary English (in England) as they have known it, and participated in it, during the first two decades of this century. They write within the current system,

within the era of standards-based reforms (Darling-Hammond 2004): they take the existing accountability measures, notably the framework of high-stakes public exams, as given, and seek to operate as effectively as possible within them. While this, necessarily, places limits on the agency of teachers, they consistently insist on the scope that teachers still have to shape the curriculum and to make properly informed decisions about appropriate pedagogies. It is this emphasis that infuses the book with a heartening optimism.

Along the way, *The Trouble with English* contains some acute diagnoses of current ills. Helman and Gibbs give short shrift to popular forms of differentiation ('all/most/some', differentiated questioning, and the repeated use of sentence starters) and to structures such as PEE (point, evidence, explanation), which they reject, since such prompts address the symptom (pupils struggling to write in depth) not the cause, which they identify as a lack of knowledge (but which might also be seen as a lack of something to write about).

What informs the critique of aspects of current practice is the authors' commitment to a version of English which has as its goal the development of students' thinking. If this is, as they believe, a version of what is known as a 'knowledge-rich' curriculum, it is one that implacably opposes the reduction of knowledge to information or facts – or, in other words, to what is easily testable. So, for example, noting that many English teachers devote time to enforcing the distinction between a metaphor and a simile, they suggest that this is because, if this is what to be learnt, it is relatively easy to check if learning has been accomplished. More useful, they argue, would be for students to explore the commonality between simile and metaphor and hence to deepen their understanding of the work that they do.

So far, so good. But this is also where problems begin to arise in the theoretical model that Helman and Gibbs have constructed, in that it depends on an absolute separation of two kinds of schema, and hence two kinds of concept:

We build *narrative* schemas by immersing ourselves in the story, co-creating it moment by moment with the author, and using our own prior knowledge and real-world experiences to co-construct meaning. This gives us a sense of the world of that story, its setting and characters, almost as if they are real. We use the same neural networks to 'watch' the story unfold as we would to watch real-life scenes in our lives play out in front of us. And by the time we have finished reading, the text will probably have taught us something. It will have revealed truths about the world.

...

The analytical process that comes after pre-reading is about the teacher helping pupils to see how the text worked its magic – we show them how the book taught them and what they gained from the experience. With this second pass of the text, we might build a related but slightly different schema. This is a *disciplinary* schema. It goes beyond the text. It is the beginning of conquering the whole of English as an academic subject. (Helman and Gibbs 2022, 18, 19)

Throughout, they insist that it is only the second sort of schema, the 'disciplinary' sort, that counts in English, the first ('narrative') sort being nothing more than a necessary preliminary stage in encounters with texts. And they are equally clear that it is the teacher who possesses the knowledge necessary to enable students to grasp these disciplinary schemas. This binary maps directly onto the Vygotskian distinction between everyday

and scientific concepts (Vygotsky 1987; Yandell 2013, ch. 2; Yandell and Brady 2016). In place of Vygotsky's understanding of the complex interaction between everyday and scientific concepts in the course of development, though, Helman and Gibb revert to the Piagetian model – the model that was the object of Vygotsky's critique in *Thinking and Speech* – where newly-acquired scientific concepts simply displace everyday ones.

The argument that concepts and the development of concepts are central to English is a compelling one.¹ As is the case in any other subject, there are disciplinary concepts in English, some of which are fundamental to thinking in the subject: sign, language/semiosis, representation, form, structure, voice, register, genre, audience (I am not pretending that this is either a definitive or a complete list – but that's also the point, in that there isn't a neat, codified and agreed version of foundational concepts in English, much less so than would be the case in History or Physics, say.) But my difficulty with Helman and Gibbs comes when they assert that it is these concepts that are the stuff of English, and not the everyday concepts that are, for them, relegated to the preliminaries of the narrative schema. They propose that we start with an everyday concept of character, a naïve reading of character as analogous to our relationship with others in lived experience, which is then transcended – and abandoned – as we learn that characters are literary constructs; thereafter, our interest lies purely in the analytical – disciplinary – concept of characterisation. The problem with this is that it's a fantasy – it doesn't bear any resemblance to any worthwhile engagement with any literary text, or indeed any text, in any medium, where there is an aesthetic dimension involved. Whether we are interested in *King Lear* or the poetry of Linton Kwesi Johnson, everyday concepts of power, identity, belonging, solidarity, violence and so on – the *what* that is being represented – don't disappear from our horizon when we ask questions about the *how* of representation. If they were to, literary study would become a poor shrivelled thing indeed.

As Harold Rosen ([1981] 2017) suggested, English offers a space where everyday, lived experience and the shared experience of texts can be brought into richly productive dialogue. There is a wonderful instance of this in *Literary Knowing*, a moment from the classroom narrated by Debra, one of the early career teachers who were participants in the research. The class is studying *Henry IV* and one of Debra's students has just returned from a period of suspension:

. . . He just started talking to the people around him about his suspension, and he goes my dad's just got a very different view of masculinity to me. He thinks it's following the rules and doing the right things and being a leader, but I don't think he remembers that you know you do stupid things when you're young, and that's why I do stupid things, and that's . . . you know that's what's happening here as well, and you know you need your crazy people to help you out and sort of push you on the right path. And he didn't realise that I was standing behind him at the time, but I was very, very impressed by the way that he sort of made that connection (Davies et al. 2023, 138).

What is at stake in this moment of cultural praxis is, to be sure, the understanding of and engagement with a canonical text. The student's capacity to draw on his experience, his relationship with his own father, enables him to appreciate the way in which Hal is represented in the play. But that, however impressive it might be, doesn't begin to account for the significance of the knowing that is being achieved. The interplay between text and experience provides the student with a standpoint from which to reflect on his

own identity, his own relationships. The everyday concepts of masculinity, fatherhood, identity, motive and morality are not stepping-stones on the route to secure disciplinary concepts: they are the matter of literary study, and of the serious play that it enables.

Note

1. Working within a Vygotskian theoretical framework, it's an argument that was deftly made by Tony Burgess (2007).

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

John Yandell taught in London secondary schools for twenty years before moving to the Institute of Education, University College London, where he has worked since 2003. He has edited *Changing English* since 2013 and has written books and articles on education policy, research and practice.

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