



# **Investigating literacy practices within the secondary English classroom, or where is the text in this class?**

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Abstract

The Vygotskian concept of the zone of proximal development has been interpreted in such a way as to provide theoretical support for particular, government-sponsored, models of both pedagogy and literacy. This article proposes a radically different interpretation of the ZPD, informed by Bakhtinian understandings of heteroglossia. This alternative model is then used to describe and interpret the pedagogic and literacy practices that are observed in a secondary English lesson, in which students deploy a wide range of cultural and multimodal resources to make sense of a complex text.

Keywords: zone of proximal development, scaffolding, literacy practices, heteroglossia, pedagogy, multimodality

## **Investigating literacy practices within the secondary English classroom, or where is the text in this class?**

I am interested in examining the ways in which reading is constituted within the secondary English curriculum. To begin to do this, I want to investigate what happens in a single lesson, one that I observed in June 2005 in a coeducational comprehensive school in East London. I make no large claims for the representative quality of this lesson, though I do think that what happens in the lesson is recognisable as a version of English, a version that is underrepresented – indeed, scarcely acknowledged – within the dominant, policy-oriented discourses of literacy. I also want to link the description of the lesson, and the literacy practices inscribed in it, with an exploration of issues of pedagogy.

In recent years a great deal of attention has been paid to literacy practices outside the classroom, while, as Kress *et al.* (2005: 117) observe, “little attention has yet been given to the study of literacy practices as experienced by pupils ... in secondary-school English classrooms.” Kress *et al.* argue the need to observe what does go on in English classrooms, since, despite the extent of regulation by policy, curriculum and pedagogic frameworks, “English teachers actively construct their subject day by day, *differently* in the settings of the different classrooms.”

To describe the lesson, I will make use of the multimodal approach adopted by Kress *et al.* (2005, see also Kress and van Leeuwen 2001, Kress *et al.* 2000); to explain what I think was going on in the lesson, I need to refer to the much cited and much contested Vygotskian concept of the zone of proximal development.

## **Scaffolding and the zone of proximal development**

Whether or not the concept should properly be attributed to Vygotsky (Van der Veer and Valsiner 1991: 331), the ZPD has become firmly established as part of the Soviet psychologist's contribution to learning theory. In its appearance in *Mind in Society* (Vygotsky 1978), the idea of the zone of proximal development emerges in the context of a discussion of assessment, and specifically as a challenge to already dominant ideas about IQ testing and ability as a fixed individual attribute from which subsequent attainment can be extrapolated (Kozulin 1998: 69). In *Thought and Language*, on the other hand, the zone of proximal development becomes centrally implicated in Vygotsky's probing of the role of instruction in the development of scientific concepts: the assertion that "What the child can do in cooperation today he can do alone tomorrow" (Vygotsky 1986: 188) opens up the possibility of social models of learning. The zone of proximal development is thus directly relevant to questions of pedagogy: what Vygotsky was grappling with was the issue of intervention – of the ways in which an individual's development can be assisted (Wells, 1999, 2000). What, in other words, is the role of instruction – and hence what is the teacher's role? How is the zone of proximal development construed, and how is it relevant to the consideration of teachers' construction of English as a school subject?

Within the discursive field of recent government policy on literacy in the UK, one version of the ZPD has attained an influential space. In a metaphor borrowed from Wood, Bruner and Ross (1976), the teacher's role is to provide "scaffolding" for the

learner's linguistic development in general and, more particularly, the move to writing.<sup>1</sup> Thus in the *Key Stage 3 English Framework*, "scaffolding" is presented as one of a range of "effective teaching styles," intended "to support pupils' early efforts and build security and confidence" (DfEE 2001b:16); in the advice on developing *Literacy across the Curriculum* (DfEE 2001c), teachers are exhorted to teach writing by, *inter alia*, "scaffolding the first attempts", advice that is repeated in in-service training materials, where more information is provided as to what the scaffolding might consist of:

Scaffold the writing. Pupils could:

- Use a writing frame which provides overall structure and typical language
- Use a word bank
- Add written sections to a semi-complete version of the text
- Use an existing writing template on computer (DfEE 2001a: 44).

The term is used both as a shorthand for a variety of tools that can be provided to assist the emergent writer, as above, and also as a way of conceptualising the sequence of learning activities:

The teaching sequence is designed to scaffold success for all, and the steps between the learning activities are small enough to allow little mistakes to be picked up so naturally and quickly that no one needs to make a big mistake. This means intervening early to correct errors, not allowing them to become embedded (DfEE 2001d: ix).

The connection between the concept of scaffolding and its Vygotskian origins are made explicit in Harrison's research report on the Strategy (Harrison 2002: 17) and in Beard's echo of Vygotsky in his definition:

‘Scaffolding’ refers to a process that enables pupils to solve a problem or carry out a task which would be beyond their unassisted efforts (Beard 1998: 39).

What unites all these forms of scaffolding is the way in which they position the learner and the teacher, the assumptions that are made about agency, knowledge and pedagogy. The learner is presented as incapable: without sufficient scaffolding, her first attempts would, presumably, collapse; she is prone to “little mistakes”; she is defined, in effect, by her inability. The teacherly other, in contrast, is the one who knows, who “correct[s] errors” and whose shaping of texts (through the use of writing frames and the provision of “semi-complete” versions) ensures the acceptability – and hence success – of the learner’s attempts at writing. Wray and Lewis, whose work on the development of literacy has been hugely influential in determining the content and orientation of the Literacy Strategy as the UK government’s intervention in pedagogy, make the claim that Vygotsky “put forward the notion that pupils first experience a particular cognitive activity in collaboration with expert practitioners” (Wray and Lewis 2000: 26). They proceed to redefine the zone of proximal development as a four-stage process whereby expertise is transferred from expert to learner:

1. Demonstration
2. Joint activity
3. Supported activity
4. Individual activity (Wray and Lewis 2000: 26-27; see also Wray and Lewis 1997: 21-22).

It is worth noting that the end-product is both the acquisition of expertise (knowledge or skill) and autonomy. The process is fleshed out by another contributor to the same volume:

Teaching is about scaffolding: the model of teaching demonstrated here is very complex, but is based on the belief that teaching is not simply about the transfer of a body of knowledge. More importantly the teacher is one mechanism through which children are given the structure and pathway in which the subject content becomes the vehicle for other skills. This role as an 'expert facilitator' is one where children's learning is 'scaffolded' rather than 'constructed'. This is carefully demonstrated through the use of open-ended questions in the various debriefing sessions that take place, and the use of writing frames differentiated to support students at different levels of ability. The outcomes of learning are in some ways modeled by the teacher, and the students then apply this 'expert' view to their own understanding. The eventual aim under this model is that the students should become equipped to carry out the work and learning for themselves, so that the expert facilitator can withdraw (Greig 2000: 88-89).

Though Greig is at pains to emphasise that what is being advocated here is not (old-fashioned) transmission, it would seem that the difference is that what is being transferred from expert to novice is both content and skills: it is, in other words, still a transmission process, but one in which more is delivered. Learners, it is acknowledged, are different from each other, but only in their "levels of ability." What is not at issue in this model is the direction of transfer. At the end of the process, the reason that the expert is able to withdraw is because the learners have become like the expert. In essence, then, this is a technicist version of the zone of proximal development, from which all questions of subjectivity, of culture, of power relations and possible conflict have been removed. It positions the teacher as expert and the process of learning as one that enables the replication of the teacher's expertise. As Searle (1984) asked, "Who's scaffolding whose building?"

A radically different conception of the zone of proximal development has been developed by those for whom the significance of Vygotskian thought lies in its attention to what might be termed sociocultural perspectives. It is to this interpretation

that I will now, briefly, turn. Lave and Wenger (1991; Wenger 1998) counterpose the view of the ZPD as scaffolding with cultural and societal/collectivist interpretations: indeed, their model of situated learning as legitimate peripheral participation in communities of practice can, in effect, be construed as a sociocultural investigation of the ZPD. Lave and Wenger admit the possibility of conflict and change within the community of practice; nonetheless, the central relationship within their model is the dyad of newcomer and oldtimer – a dyad which may not seem entirely at variance with Wray and Lewis’s expert-novice relationship (on the limitations of Lave and Wenger’s dyadic model, see, for example, Fuller *et al.* [2005]).

Vygotsky’s ideas about the ZPD were still evolving at the time of his death (Wells 1999, 2000). As Daniels (2001) observes, a richer version of the ZPD has been produced by reading Vygotsky in conjunction with his contemporary, Bakhtin, and in particular the latter’s “emphasis on multiple voices engaged in the construction of ... meaning which is not necessarily located within the individual” (Daniels 2001: 67; see also Tolman 1999, Moll and Whitmore 1993). Bakhtinian heteroglossia renders problematic the dyadic simplicity of the expert-novice relationship, and hence:

This speculation on the nature of support with the ZPD raises questions about broader social influences. Multiple and possibly conflicting discourses with different sociocultural historical origins may be in play within the ZPD. This view of the ZPD as the nexus of social, cultural, historical influences takes us far beyond the image of the lone learner with the directive and determining tutor. It provides a much expanded view of the ‘social’ and the possibility of a dialectical conception of interaction within the ZPD (Daniels 2001: 67).

What would be the consequences of such a view of the ZPD for classroom practice?

What forms of pedagogy would be implicated in the ZPD as a fully sociocultural



space? And, more specifically, what literacy practices might be accommodated, developed and promoted within a classroom where the ZPD could be conceptualized in this way? To begin to suggest answers to these questions, I want to move to a description of the lesson.

## **Beginnings**

The class, a mixed ability group of thirty twelve- and thirteen-year-olds at an East London school, is in the middle of a scheme of work based around Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. In previous lessons, students have read extracts from the first half of the play, up to the assassination of Caesar, using the script of the BBC *Animated Tales* version; they have watched the assassination scene and Brutus's funeral oration from the (1953) Marlon Brando film.

The lesson begins, in accordance with a routine that is departmental policy in the school, with time for individual reading. Without prompting, most students produce a book from their bag, settle at their appointed seat, and start reading. Those who arrive without a book are given one by the support teacher, Morlette. (One student, Billy,<sup>2</sup> is reluctant to sit where he has been asked to, but his attempt to negotiate a different position is half-hearted.) Though scarcely providing sufficient time for any sustained reading, the activity clearly is effective in calming the class, enabling an orderly start to the lesson proper, and possibly reinforcing messages about the value attached to "private" reading within the English curriculum. This opening provides an interesting contrast with what is to come. Here, for a few minutes, is something that approximates to the dominant model of reading within our society: each individual

communing in isolation with a book that has, to a greater or lesser extent, been chosen by the reader. This is the conception of reading that is inscribed in the National Curriculum's version of English:

Reading: during key stages 3 and 4 pupils read a wide range of texts independently, both for pleasure and for study (DfEE 1999: 49).

Within the secondary curriculum, attention is paid to the breadth of reading experience and there is a recognition of different purposes, "pleasure" as well as "study" (though one might wish to question whether these two terms represent a binary opposition, mutually exclusive possibilities, or a points at opposite ends of a continuum). In either case, however, such reading is to be conducted "independently". In this, the programme of study for the secondary English curriculum continues an emphasis that is also present in the primary curriculum: from the very beginning, reading is associated with independence, an individual practice.

After five or six minutes, Monica,<sup>3</sup> the teacher, takes the register, then asks the students to put their books away. She is sitting on a table at one end of the room. The students are sitting in well-defined groups of three or four; all can make eye-contact with the teacher. In addressing the whole class, Monica's voice is only slightly raised: there is an expectation that she will be listened to, and she is. She says that in the lesson we will be thinking about Brutus and doing some role play; first, though, she says that she wants the class to think about things that are really important. Religion, suggests one student; Morlette raises her hand and says "Human rights"; "The right to be gay," adds Nazrul. This prompts Kemi to talk about the new pope: she doesn't approve of him because of his prejudiced attitude to homosexuality. Monica listens to

each of these contributions (as do the other students) but does not make any explicit response. She says that she wants students, in their groups, to talk about violence: “Is it ever right to use it?” She suggests, quite casually – in a way that might indicate that these issues are already common currency within the class – that they may want to think about situations where a country has been invaded, or about the apartheid regime in South Africa: “Ms Lindsay might want to say something about that,” she adds, alluding to the fact that Morlette is South African.

And the students do talk. At Billy, Jo and Paul’s table, where I am sitting, the conversation stutters into life. They talk about bullying, and how they would respond if a younger brother or sister were being attacked in the playground. Elsewhere, Nazrul’s group discusses the situation in the Occupied Territories and the violence of the *Intifada*.

After about seven minutes, Monica stops the group talk and asks for reports from each group. Kirsty talks about the right to use violence to defend one’s family. She refers to the recent news story about Abigail Witchalls, a young mother who had been stabbed in Surrey while out walking with her young son (Pallister & Jones 2005). In Kirsty’s view, the Abigail Witchalls story is one that illustrates the need to resort to violence. Chris responds that everything can be talked over, and so violence cannot be justified; Kemi disagrees with Chris’s position, arguing that there are times when the only way of dealing with a bully is to confront the bully physically. Morlette refers to the case of Tony Martin, the Norfolk farmer who shot and killed a burglar (Gillan 2000): she says that she thinks he was wrong to do what he did, but she recognises that people have different moments of last resort. Lisa introduces a

personal anecdote about the police failing to respond adequately to a violent situation; this encourages Billy to tell the class about his grandmother, who was robbed while she was in hospital, and again the police had not acted as Billy's family expected them to.

It is worth drawing attention to two aspects of this moment: firstly, the space that existed for Billy to tell this story, to be listened to, for this intensely personal family experience – weighed down with the family's sense of their grandmother's vulnerability, her dignity, her particular right to claim assistance from the police – to become part of the lesson, not extraneous to it; secondly, the extent to which Billy's story was taken up by others – it found echoes in other students' experiences of the police not being there when they were needed.

What is striking about this part of the lesson is not just the quality of individual interventions in the discussion or the maturity with which students can signal disagreement with each other – though these features of the students' talk are impressive – but the level of engagement shown by all the students in the room. This is evident in the quiet seriousness with which each contribution is received. If this is a product and manifestation of the social relationships within the class, it is also something that the class may well have learned from Monica. When a student is speaking, her gaze and posture indicate that she is giving them her full attention; when Perry, a relatively new arrival to the class who seems to find it difficult to stay still and listen quietly to other students, interrupts or distracts other students on his table, Monica's quiet admonitions to him emphasise that he needs to be quiet so that *she* can hear what is being said, and concentrate properly on it. Something of the

processes of socialisation that have created this environment are discernible in the lesson itself. In reporting back on her group's discussion, Lisa, who is in the same group as Perry, says, in an entirely matter-of-fact way, that she had started off holding the view that violence was always wrong, but she had listened to Perry and he had convinced her. Similarly, Morlette's contributions to the discussion model what is expected of the students in this lesson, this classroom.

In this part of the lesson, Monica says very little. She ensures that each group gets a turn, and shows that she is listening to what they have to say. When Foyzur offers a rather confused (and confusing) explanation of an Islamic justification for the *Intifada*, reporting that he found this information on a website, Monica merely suggests that he might need to do some more research by checking out some other websites. When someone from each group has spoken, Monica announces that we will come back to this discussion at another time, but now we must turn our attention to Brutus. There is, thus, no forced closure of the debate, no attempt to resolve or summarise all the contributions; neither is the relationship of this part of the lesson to what follows rendered explicit in any way.

### **Why did Brutus decide to kill his friend?**

Almost thirty minutes of the hour-long lesson have passed before Monica simply poses the question: "Why did Brutus decide to kill his friend?" She explains that each group will be allocated a part of the play, a key moment in the period before the assassination, and that their task will be to prepare a role-play of that scene. Copies of the scripts are distributed, and each group is assigned their scene (Brutus talking with Portia, Cassius persuading Brutus to join the conspiracy, and so on). At first, the

groups rely heavily on the script. Students sit, heads bent over the text, with little obvious interaction within the groups. They locate their section of the script, sometimes unaided, sometimes with help from Morlette or Monica. Some students read a few lines aloud, to the other members of their group. And then, at different moments over the next ten minutes, each group leaves their seats, moves into the spaces between the furniture and begins to improvise their scene. The move is spontaneous, in the sense that it emerges from the group, not in response to a suggestion from the teacher, and it is accompanied by a marked shift in the relationship of the students to the roles that they are playing. Leaving the scripts behind, they are able to use the resources of movement, pose, gesture and gaze as they begin to inhabit the characters. Kirsty and Jenny become versions of Portia and Brutus, versions informed and inflected by the girls' knowledge of other married relationships, whether their parents' or the representations of adult male-female relationships in soap operas or films or cartoons. Kirsty's Portia maintains a physical distance from Jenny's Brutus that enacts her displeasure, her anger and disappointment in Brutus for his failure to share his thoughts with her; Jenny, in turn, guilty because of this silent breach of trust, cannot meet Kirsty's eye. Billy and Jo work together on the scene in which Cassius first raises the possibility of the conspiracy with Brutus – and Billy finds a linguistic register but also a way of holding his own body that seem more Brutus-like than I could possibly have anticipated.

In these role plays, there is a doubleness to what is going on. On the one hand, students are drawing on experiences and emotions that are part of their own subjectivities – bringing themselves into the lesson, as it were. How this happens is also worth dwelling on: each group starts with the script and then moves away from it

as the group members begin to inhabit the roles; each group starts sitting down, the scripts prominent in the interactions within the group, scripts guiding and structuring these interactions. Then, at different moments in each of the groups, the students get up, start to draw on other semiotic systems (gesture, movement, pose, expression) as they construct the interactions between Cassius and Brutus, Brutus and Portia, and so on. Does this movement into theatrical spaces – if that is what they are – enable students to draw on other resources, other possible ways of being the character, other roles and possibilities? This is where the other part of what is going on seems to rise to prominence, as students relish the opportunity of being someone else. The moment is one which simultaneously allows for continuities with experiences beyond the classroom while also providing students with the liberating potential of an alternative persona or identity. In this lesson, each in their different role plays, there is Nazrul's Caesar, whose elaborate costuming effects have been created with two tops zippered together to create an impromptu toga; there is Kemi as Cassius, playing Brutus for the self-important fool that he becomes under the spell of her sly persuasion; there is Billy as Brutus, assuming a more public – almost pompous – manner of speech, quite distinct from the register he uses for normal classroom interactions; and there is Kirsty as Portia – both wifely and resolutely refusing to be patronised or excluded by Brutus. In all these cases – and many more – there is the pleasure of playing another person that I have described elsewhere in writing about a different class's experience of reading *The Demon Headmaster* (Yandell 2005; see also Barrs 1987, Gee 2003, on the liberating potential of adopting roles).

In the final ten minutes of the lesson, the groups get to perform their role-plays, with the rest of the class as audience. Before each group begins its performance, the

students arrange themselves in a freeze-frame that is intended to capture the essence of their scene, and Monica photographs them.

### **Heteroglossia, classroom scripts and ways of reading**

Gutierrez, Rimes and Larson (1995) have explored the ways in which power is constructed between the teacher and students. Using Bakhtin's (1981) concepts of dialogic meaning and social heteroglossia, they present a view of the classroom as “inherently multi-voiced” and suggest that “social heteroglossia, or the inherently intertextual and interdiscursive nature of social interaction, is not only a feature of novelistic writing, but a feature of the world” (1995: 446). Their observation of classroom interaction leads them to argue, however, that in most classrooms what is produced is a “rigidly monologic teacher script”, through which the teacher’s power is maintained and in which the “dominant cultural values” are reflected.

While some students contribute to and participate in the teacher script, those who do not comply with the teacher’s rules for participation form their own *counterscript*. In this context, members of the classroom community hold varied expertise in the form of local knowledge, but the inscribed knowledge of the teacher and classroom regularly displaces the local and culturally varied knowledge of the students (Gutierrez *et al.*, 1995: 446-7).

It is easy to see a parallel between the monologic practices described by Gutierrez *et al.* and the “scaffolding” version of the ZPD inscribed in the Key Stage 3 Strategy.

The assumption, for example in the *Literacy Progress Units* (DfEE 2001d) from which I quoted earlier, is that students’ acquisition of (approved) literacy depends on the elimination of error and compliance with rules. In such contexts, it is, perhaps,



not surprising that “counterscripts” have proliferated – counterscripts that are experienced by teachers as disruptive and anti-educational.

In place of the unproductive, discordant coexistence of monologic teacher script and disaffected student counterscript, Gutierrez *et al.* propose a “third space” – a place which seems to bear more than a passing resemblance to the fully social, dialectical version of the ZPD outlined by Daniels:

The only space where a true interaction or communication between teacher and student can occur in this classroom is in the middle ground, or "third space," in which a Bakhtinian social heteroglossia is possible. Conceiving the classroom as a place for social heteroglossia reveals the potential for the classroom to become a site where no cultural discourses are secondary. Acknowledging the inherent cognitive and sociocultural benefits that come from the multiple discourses is of particular importance, especially in classrooms populated largely by African American, Latino, and mixed-race students (Gutierrez *et al.*, 1995: 447).

As an example of the teacher’s monologic script, Gutierrez *et al.* provide a “current events” quiz in a ninth-grade classroom. There is, it seems to me, a direct and illuminating contrast between the cultural practices of the quiz, where the teacher asks questions about stories selected from that day’s *Los Angeles Times*, in which the teacher defines knowledge in such a way as to construct the students as ignorant, and the ways in which “current events” are introduced into Monica’s lesson. In the lesson that I observed, no single source or script is privileged to the exclusion of others – though Monica does question the reliability of Foyzur’s internet-based sources. The world is allowed into the classroom, not as a prepackaged entity but as material to be constructed, interrogated and contested within the dialogic discursive practices of the classroom. Thus Kemi’s fierce criticism of the Pope builds on

Nazrul's assertion of gay rights, and Monica introduces Morlette's autobiography – her experiences in South Africa – as potential subject-matter for the class's exploration of violence. When I listened to Nazrul and his group talking about the situation in the Occupied Territories, it was clear that Nazrul saw Palestine as different from the cases cited by other students – where violence was construed as legitimate if it were a direct response to – a reciprocation – of equivalent violence (defending one's friend in a playground fight, standing up to bullies, and so on). What Nazrul was arguing was that the *Intifada* was justified because of the *general and historical* denial of Palestinian rights by the state of Israel. I would want to argue that this represents a more developed, more political, view of violence within a nexus of historically situated power relationships – not fully articulated, perhaps, but there nonetheless.

Curriculum, as social heteroglossia, is a constructed text, a mosaic of the multiple texts of the participants; it is the social practice of the classroom. Redefining curriculum as social practice forces the abandonment of monologic instruction and provides the social and cognitive rationale for including and constructing multiple forms of knowing (Gutierrez *et al.*, 1995: 468-9).

The lesson that I observed has to be understood in the context of the history of the teacher's relationship with the class. Monica had been teaching the class since the beginning of Year 7 – so for nearly two years. What one sees in one lesson is the product of, or stands in a relationship with, the students' collective experience of other lessons in which they have participated in similar activities. In discussion after the lesson, Monica suggested that lessons such as this one can only be achieved with a class that the teacher has "trained up" since Year 7; qualifying this, though, was her recognition that classes have their own identities, that this is a good class – which is a

way of gesturing at the social dynamics of the group, the class's sense of its own identity. Monica talked of a girl who had been in the class until her family moved out of London, a girl with Tourette's syndrome. She told of the girl's behaviour, of how upsetting other students found it but how they had accepted it over time. The story is about the class's – the students' – inclusive attitudes and behaviours, but it also reveals Monica's sense of the history of the class, its (social) development.

For me as an observer, the characteristics – and the quality – of this lesson are thrown into sharp relief by the fact that this is the eighteenth lesson I had observed in a three-week period, and all the others have been taught by students on the initial teacher education course on which I teach. The fundamental contrast here is not one of competence but rather of the widely differing timescales involved – and hence of the difference in the classroom relationships established. Continuity is an enabling condition – it permits the possibility of the development of a relationship, of shared experiences and expectations becoming part of the discursive fabric of individual lessons.

I indicated at the start that what I observed in this single lesson seems to me to be a recognisable version of English. I am reminded of Tony Burgess's (1984) description of a series of lessons in another East London comprehensive school, the best part of a quarter of a century ago, lessons in which “the activities of literature are constructed from within deepening and elaborating classroom discourses” (Burgess 1984: 59). In urban classrooms in the USA, likewise, the practices recorded by Suzanne Miller (2003) and by Carol Lee (2001) share important points of correspondence, in the sense of development over time, in the respect with which students' contributions

were treated, in the collaborative construction of richly intercultural meanings and understandings, with the practice that I observed in Monica's classroom.

All of this might appear to have very little to do with the reading of *Julius Caesar* – and yet, it seems to me, it is fundamentally important in determining the character of that reading. What is constituted in these interactions is the social arena of the classroom, the social relationships of the classroom, not as preconditions for reading/English/work but as inextricably bound up with the experience of subject English. More specifically, the first part of the lesson creates the parameters, the fields of reference and of relevance, for the reading of the text. It announces that students' views, experiences, knowledge of the world outside and of the social relations within and beyond the classroom, are implicated in their reading. And that links with something else identified by Monica after the lesson – the fact that the class is enjoying *Julius Caesar*. Is there a connection between the seriousness with which they are treated in their English lessons – the fact that they are expected to discuss things that matter and discuss them in an “adult” way – and their enjoyment of “adult” – both difficult and high status/elite culture – texts?

Whatever else this lesson is, it cannot be construed as an exercise – it is not presented as a preparation for something else, as a way of honing students' skills of debate or role play, but rather as the thing itself (Edelsky 1996; Moll and Whitmore 1993). And is this also linked to Vygotsky's tendency to look at development through the lens of problems/problem-solving: the complexity of language and learning – the complex relationship between the two – is tested (and visible) in contexts where participants are presented with problems. So here what Monica does is to suggest that

the lesson is part of an investigation of Brutus: Brutus is a problem to be explored. Why did he decide to kill his friend? It is significant, too, that the question is posed by Monica in these terms – not why did he kill his friend, even, but why did he *decide* to: the emphasis is placed on an intellectual process, on how the decision was made. This approach is common to both parts of the lesson: each is introduced by Monica posing a question. Also significant, perhaps, is that this is the only explicit or marked commonality: there is no – inevitably reductive – attempt to articulate the relationship between the two halves of the lesson, save only in the structural parallel: a question is posed, and then students are invited to explore answers to it.

Of course, it would be possible to construe these activities and the lesson in which they were situated not as literacy practices but as something else – as “speaking and listening” (in the jargon of the National Curriculum, a separate attainment target, not to be confused with reading [DfEE 1999]). For only a few minutes in the hour-long lesson were students in Monica’s class focusing their attention directly on the printed words of the script of *Julius Caesar*. And yet every part of the lesson functioned to create the opportunity for students to explore the play and to collaborate in the construction of a reading of it, a reading that paid attention to its dynamic and difficult interplay of perspectives, its movement between personal and political, a reading that amounted to full engagement with the text. It is important, I think, to stress that what the lesson demonstrated was that there simply is no necessary connection between accessibility and dumbing down. This was not a twenty-first century equivalent of *Lamb’s Tales*, not Shakespeare domesticated or trivialised (Bottoms 2000), but a way of reading that enabled students to draw on a vast array of social semiotic resources to make the text meaningful.

The question posed by the second title to this paper alludes to Stanley Fish's *Is there a Text in this class?* (1980). There is not space here to explore fully what seem to me to be problematic about Fish's concept of an interpretive community, though I would want to argue that the Year 8 class that I observed was indeed acting as – had become – an interpretive community. The text that they were reading, though, was not one that was instantiated merely on the pages of their partial scripts of *Julius Caesar*: in the course of the lesson, the text was read as it became, as it were, productively multimodal – its multimodality, instantiated in talk, in movement, in gesture, in the images of the tableaux, inextricably linked to the meanings that the class produced.

Wertsch, Tulviste and Hagsrom (1993) draw a contrast between the passive responses that are required of students in most classrooms and situations where more active participation is demanded. In the latter, as in Monica's classroom:

are required to take on an increasingly active responsibility for the strategic processes involved in reading comprehension precisely because they are required to participate in intermental functioning by ventriloquating through a social language that presupposes their taking on cognitive authority (Wertsch *et al.* 1993: 349).

1 Stone (1998) and Harrison (2002) ascribe the first use of “scaffolding” to Wood *et al.* (1976). However, in an earlier contribution, Bruner (1975) uses the term to refer to the interaction between a mother and her child:

In such instances, mothers most often see their role as supporting the child in achieving an intended outcome, entering only to assist or reciprocate or ‘scaffold’ the action. ‘Scaffolding’ refers to the mother’s effort to limit, so to speak, those degrees of freedom in the task that the child is not able to control – holding an object steady while the child tries to extract something from it, screening the child from distraction, etc. (Bruner 1975:12).

What is noteworthy about this earlier coinage is that the activity thus described is one initiated by the child – not part of a planned intervention by the mother.

2 School students are referred to by culturally appropriate pseudonyms.

3 I should like to thank Monica Brady for kindly permitting me to observe this lesson, and many other lessons.

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John Yandell leads the PGCE English and English with Drama course at the Institute of Education, University of London. Before moving into teacher education, he taught for twenty years in London secondary schools. He has written on aspects of education policy and practice from the teaching of Shakespeare to the effect on schools of the Ofsted inspection regime.

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