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## Experts v. Novices: ‘A Fool Takes in all the Lumber of Every Sort’

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### ABSTRACT

Current policy in England, informed by a version of cognitive science, enforces an absolute distinction between experts and novices, or teachers and learners; from this binary, operating in tandem with regimes of performativity instantiated in a curriculum shaped by high-stakes testing, are derived particular forms of pedagogy and particular pedagogic relations. And yet what happens in classrooms is seldom reducible to the prescriptive dictates of policy. Even in tightly constrained contexts, teachers and students act in ways that open up other possibilities, other ways of responding to each other and to the texts that are read together. An account of a single observed lesson, taught by a pre-service teacher, explores some of these tensions and suggests the need for different ways of understanding what is accomplished within English as a school subject.

### KEYWORDS

Canonical literature; English as a school subject; assessment; pedagogy; learning

I want to talk about a lesson that I observed earlier this year because I think it might provide a useful – generative – starting point for a consideration of a knot of issues to do with English and education, with some fashionable notions of how learning happens, or is promoted, and with how learners are positioned by such notions.<sup>1</sup>

This Year 10 English lesson took place in an academy in East London – an academy that has acquired a reputation for achieving very good results. It was taught by Sanaa, a student on the pre-service teacher education programme on which I work. Before I go any further, I want to make it clear that nothing in what follows is intended as criticism of anything that Sanaa did (or didn’t do). I also want to say something about my sense of the class. An ethnically diverse group of 14- and 15-year-olds in a solidly working-class area of London, these were committed students: from the moment of their entry into the classroom, it was clear that they took their education very seriously. From the start, too, two students played prominent roles in the lesson: Moses<sup>2</sup> and Alisha, both quick to volunteer answers to Sanaa’s questions and to intervene in other ways in the lesson, were treated with a measure of deference by their peers.

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You'll get a sense of what the lesson was about from Sanaa's lesson plan (completed using a pro forma that originates with us at UCL):

### **TITLE OF UNIT/SCHEME OF WORK**

GCSE Language paper 1 - Section A

### **KEY CONCEPTS and TERMS FOR THE LESSON**

GCSE Language Paper, Q1, Q2

### **RATIONALE FOR THE LESSON**

This will prepare students for how to tackle section A of their English Language paper in their GCSE exams and end of term assessments. They will gradually build these skills and hopefully feel confident in how to successfully approach these questions.

### **FOCUS OF INQUIRY or LEARNING QUESTION**

L/O: To be able to develop the skills needed to answer Q1 and Q2 and enhance our understanding of this.


There are things to be said about the focus of the lesson – a focus mandated by the English department in Sanaa's placement school. The students were at this point more than a year away from their terminal GCSE exams, yet their attention is directed squarely towards the precise requirements of English Language Paper 1, Section A. The lesson, I should point out, was the beginning of a unit of work structured around preparation for this paper. One might want to pause to consider the relation between curriculum and assessment that informs this approach. This isn't the tail of assessment wagging the dog of curriculum; it's the tail having gobbled up the rest of the animal – so that the tail now *is* the dog.


Attributing individual ownership or authorship of texts as irreducibly collaborative as lesson plans is seldom straightforward. We cannot fully disentangle those parts of the plan for this lesson that were contributed by Sanaa and those that were derived from existing departmental resources. But the initial task ([Figure 1](#)) was designed by Sanaa:


One might suggest that the task offers possibilities of connection between the content of the lesson and students' prior experiences and funds of knowledge (Gonzalez et al. 2005). While introducing the material that is to be the focus of analysis (an extract from *A Study in Scarlet*, the first Sherlock Holmes novel [Doyle 1887]), it locates the lesson in, or in relation to, contemporary cultural forms and practices. Implicit in this, too, is the notion that there might be correspondences between the reading of images and the reading of prose fiction: that both might sometimes entail attention to detail and the making of inferences.

After a couple of minutes, Sanaa brings the class together and invites students to share their ideas. Zak suggests that Holmes has psychic abilities – that he can read people's minds; Alisha says that Holmes is meticulous and different (and, prompted by Sanaa, she explains what 'meticulous' means to her peers); Ayyub predicts that this will be an action-based story about a man who has a thirst for solving mysteries; and Moses tells us that the story is set in the Victorian or Edwardian period, and that the central characters are highly analytical. This all feels productive to me as I observe: students' insightful

Language paper 1 section A







**DO NOW:** Answer the following questions in your books in full sentences.

1. What do you think these images tell you about Sherlock Holmes? What could his occupation be?
2. Based on the film poster, what can you infer about the story?  
*Examine their facial expressions and tagline*

Figure 1. Sanaa's first PowerPoint slide.

contributions are well managed by Sanaa, and a solid foundation has been built at the start of the lesson for the analytical work that is to follow.

Copies of an extract from *A Study in Scarlet* are distributed and the extract is read aloud, the first part by Alisha (who had volunteered to read) and the second by Moses (whom Alisha had nominated to read). Below is the final part of the extract. The relationship between HoImes and Watson is in its infancy: they have just agreed to share lodgings in 221B Baker Street, and Watson-as-narrator is intrigued by his new companion – both by how much Holmes knows about some things (aspects of physiology and the operation of poisons, for example) and how little about others:

His ignorance was as remarkable as his knowledge. Of contemporary literature, philosophy, and politics he appeared to know next to nothing. Upon my quoting Thomas Carlyle, he inquired in the naivest way who he might be and what he had done. My surprise reached a climax, however, when I found incidentally that he was ignorant of the Copernican theory and of the composition of the solar system. That any civilized human being in this nineteenth century should not be aware that the earth travelled round the sun appeared to be to me such an extraordinary fact that I could hardly realize it.

'You appear to be astonished', he said, smiling at my expression of surprise. 'Now that I do know it, I shall do my best to forget it'.

To forget it!

'You see', he explained, 'I consider that a man's brain originally is like a little empty attic, and you have to stock it with such furniture as you choose. A fool takes in all the lumber of every sort that he comes across, so that the knowledge which might be useful to him gets crowded out, or at best is jumbled up with a lot of other things, so that he has a difficulty in laying his hands upon it. Now the skilful workman is very careful indeed as to what he takes into his brain-attic. He will have nothing but the tools which may help him in doing his work, but of these he has a large assortment, and all in the most perfect order. It is a mistake to think that that little room has elastic walls and can distend to any extent. Depend upon it, there comes

a time when for every addition of knowledge you forget something that you knew before. It is of the highest importance, therefore, not to have useless facts elbowing out the useful ones’.

‘But the solar system!’ I protested.

‘What the deuce is it to me?’ he interrupted, impatiently; ‘you say that we go round the sun. If we went round the moon, it would not make a pennyworth of difference to me or to my work’.

(Doyle 1898 [1887], 18–19)

I want to move on to a later point in the lesson, skipping over the reading of the extract from *A Study in Scarlet* and the coverage of Section A, Question 1 (the identification of facts about Holmes), to explore what was happening in the main activity. Students are presented with a handy guide to Q2, to be stuck in their books before we turn our attention to the question to be addressed in relation to Conan Doyle, Sherlock Holmes and the knowledge question:

Q2) Look in detail at this extract from ‘You appear to be astonished . . .’ to the end. Draw a box around it and read it again.

How does the writer use **language** here to convey Sherlock Holmes’s views on knowledge?

The slide on which this was presented also contained two prompts:

- What can we infer and analyse about Sherlock’s thoughts and opinions on knowledge?
- Identify **language techniques** and **word types**.

Sanaa focuses attention on the final section of the extract. She elicits, through careful questioning, that this kind of question requires a particular form of answer – a PETAL or PEETAL paragraph (cf. Gibbons 2019): words from the text must be quoted and analysed. Drawing attention to ‘a man’s brain originally is like a little empty attic, and you have to stock it with such furniture as you choose’, she asks students to talk with a partner about what this means (and what language techniques are employed). After a couple of minutes, Sanaa brings the class together again. Alexei says that Holmes is comparing the attic to his brain, and that the point is that he has a limited capacity. Ella adds to this: most people take up any information, whereas Holmes is more selective – he assimilates only what he needs for the job.

All seems to be going swimmingly. Students are playing the game they have been invited to play, and Sanaa adds that ‘lumber’ might be classed as a metaphor. But Alisha, a highly vocal and astute contributor to the lesson up to this point, wants to pursue this further. She wonders if the force of ‘little’ (in ‘the little empty attic’) is to indicate the possibility of growth. It’s a perfectly reasonable suggestion, coming from a commitment to the possibility of cognitive improvement or development. But this isn’t what Holmes (or Conan Doyle) means, and Sanaa explains that ‘little’ emphasises what is central to Holmes’ view: mental capacity is finite (and everyone has the potential to learn, even if they tend to use this potential injudiciously).

This doesn’t satisfy Alisha, however. It seems clear to me that she has understood something important about how Holmes is represented, and about the ideas for

which Holmes has become a mouthpiece. She is bothered by these ideas and wants to continue the discussion – to speak back to Holmes, in effect. I think that there are two strands to her quarrel. First, she identifies Holmes' airy dismissal of the rest of humanity as 'fools' and wants to explore this further. Perhaps because of her quite visceral, angry reaction against this arrogant assumption of intellectual superiority, she begins to question Holmes' theory of mind. (Moses, on the other hand, offers an interpretation that is supportive of Holmes/Doyle: he suggests connotations of greed in the behaviour of others; the result will be that they become burdened with unnecessary information, and this will lead to stupidity. It's their own fault, he indicates.)

In my observation notes, addressed to Sanaa, I write: 'Somewhere in here, I think it would be worth making the point that SH's model of learning is plain wrong'. I think what I had in mind was the moment in *The Simpsons* when Homer adopts a position that is pretty much indistinguishable from the one articulated by Sherlock Holmes. It's from an episode entitled *Secrets of a Successful Marriage*, where Marge and Homer, sitting side by side on the sofa, are in conversation, and the matter at issue is Homer's sense of his own intellectual limitations:

**Marge:** You can take an adult education course.

**Homer:** Oh, and how is education supposed to make me feel smarter? (*Homer draws out the word 'education', while signalling scare quotes with his fingers*) Besides, every time I learn something new it pushes some old stuff out of my brain. Remember when I took that home winemaking course and I forgot how to drive?

**Marge:** That's because you were drunk!

(Baeza 1994)

Back in the classroom, the lesson draws to a close, wrapped up neatly by Sanaa. But Alisha wants to carry on the conversation (and I become involved in it, reassuring her that she has every right to contest these ideas – and to be angry about them). She moves beyond her initial resistance to the elitism of Holmes' mental model to question his version of useful knowledge. Who decides what knowledge is useful, and on what criteria? she asks.

To answer question 2 on English Language Paper 1, Section A, involves (in this instance) an understanding of Holmes's model of human learning – the brain as a finite storage space, and some information as being more useful than other stuff. Sanaa managed this part very well, clarifying the focus of analysis and enabling students to acquire the requisite skills. What also emerged in the lesson and its aftermath were other questions about this model that would appear to lie outside the domain of the GCSE paper and the immediate preparation for it. And this is where the format of Q2 – *how does the writer use language to convey . . . ?* – is unhelpful, to say the least (as if the idea could somehow exist prior to language, as if thought and word were so neatly separable, and as if it would ever be productive to attend to linguistic forms detached from meanings). Once we take our cue from Alisha and start attending to meanings, we might have questions about:

- the adequacy or accuracy of Holmes's model;
- our own views, as readers, of the model and of the character's attitude to most other people (fools, in his view);

- how people learn;
- how anyone might judge what is useful and useless knowledge;
- and, in the context of the text being read, what Watson-as-narrator's or Conan Doyle-as-author's attitude to Holmes's model might be.

These questions were hovering around the lesson – and most of them informed Alisha's struggle with the text.

An adequate answer to some of these questions would involve engaging with the long and shocking history of (European/North American) ideas about intelligence and racialised difference.

When Homer Simpson proposes the 'one in, one out' model of intellectual development, it's risible. But Sherlock Holmes's version is entirely consonant with the mainstream of scientific ideas in the later nineteenth century. In alluding to this intellectual context, I'm drawing on Stephen J. Gould's wonderful *The Mismeasure of Man* (Gould 1996). Gould traces the links between notions of intelligence and the measurement of intelligence, on the one hand, and ideologies of racialised and class superiority and inferiority, on the other, from the early nineteenth century and the development of the science of craniometry through to the twentieth and the use and abuse of IQ testing. He tells the story of men like Samuel George Morton, who amassed a collection of over a thousand skulls before he died in 1851:

Morton gathered skulls neither for the dilettante's motive of abstract interest nor the taxonomist's zeal for complete representation. He had a hypothesis to test: that a ranking of races could be established objectively by physical characteristics of the brain, particularly by its size. (Gould 1996, 83)

And then, later in the century, craniometry found a new advocate in Paul Broca:

... a trend swept through the human sciences – the allure of numbers, the faith that rigorous measurement could guarantee irrefutable precision, and might mark the transition between subjective speculation and a true science as worthy as Newtonian physics. Evolution and quantification formed an unholy alliance; in a sense, their union forged the first powerful theory of 'scientific' racism – if we define 'science' as many do who misunderstand it most profoundly: as any claim apparently backed by copious numbers. Anthropologists had presented numbers before Darwin, but the crudity of Morton's analysis ... belies any claim to rigor. By the end of Darwin's century, standardized procedures and a developing body of statistical knowledge had generated a deluge of more trustworthy numerical data.

This ... is the story of numbers once regarded as surpassing all others in importance – the data of craniometry, or measurement of the skull and its contents. The leaders of craniometry were not conscious political ideologues. They regarded themselves as servants of their numbers, apostles of objectivity. And they confirmed all the common prejudices of comfortable white males – that blacks, women, and poor people occupy their subordinate roles by the harsh dictates of nature. (Gould 1996, 105–6)

I can't emphasise strongly enough that this was reputable science. If intelligence was conceptualised as directly correlated with skull size, the implication is as Holmes (or Conan Doyle) suggests: make the most of the attic space that you have. (You might notice some parallels with the present – the allure of big data, in the world and in education research – effect sizes, randomised control trials, and so on.)



But the connection between *A Study in Scarlet* and scientific racism is stronger than this. In the nineteenth-century scientific literature that Gould explores, two other tropes recur. First, the association of those groups racialised as Black with non-human animals – mainly monkeys. So Gould (1996, 69) quotes Charles Lyell, the founder of modern geology: ‘The brain of the Bushman... leads towards the brain of the Simiadae [monkeys]. This implies a connection between want of intelligence and structural assimilation. Each race of Man has its place, like the inferior animals’. Second, the link with criminal anthropology (particularly in the work of Cesare Lombroso), and the belief that malefactors could be identified by physical characteristics (differences) alone: skull shape, facial features, arm length, and so on.

What does this have to do with Arthur Conan Doyle?

From slightly later in *A Study in Scarlet*, this is Watson’s description of the corpse of Enoch Drebbler, examined at 3 Lauriston Gardens, off Brixton Road:

On his rigid face there stood an expression of horror, and as it seemed to me, of hatred, such as I have never seen upon human features. This malignant and terrible contortion, combined with the low forehead, blunt nose, and prognathous jaw gave the dead man a singularly simious and apelike appearance, which was increased by his writhing, unnatural posture. (Doyle [1887] 1898, 37)

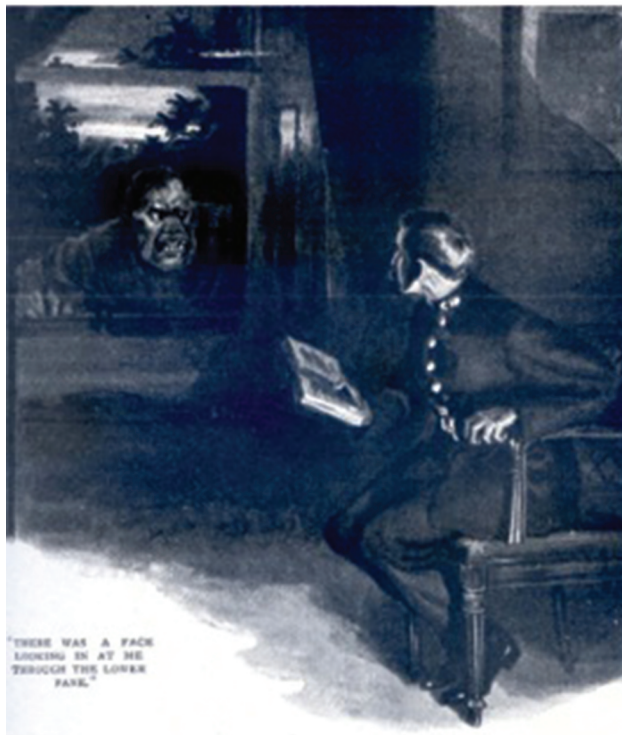


Figure 2. Arthur Twiddle’s illustration of *The adventure of Wisteria Lodge* (McNabb 2017, 741).



And see also this early illustration of another Sherlock Holmes story (see [Figure 2](#)). The face at the window, which appears in this illustration as a gorilla, belongs to a servant who is described elsewhere in ‘The Adventure of Wisteria Lodge’ as ‘a huge and hideous mulatto, with yellowish features of a pronounced negroid type’ (Doyle 1917, 40).

So what are the implications of all of this? As I suggested at the start, we might want to consider whether we think it appropriate, or helpful, or productive, for English to be defined so thoroughly, so pervasively, as preparation for examination. We might raise this question for all sorts of reasons that are inextricably connected to what we think English as a school subject is, or should be, and what values or purposes beyond the narrowly instrumental goal of credentialisation might be ascribed to it.

There are questions about the use to which the text that was the focus of attention in this lesson was put: in the plan, at any rate, its function is merely exemplary. This is the sort of text, or extract from a text, that you are likely to confront on GCSE English paper 1, so let’s get to work on it. But Alisha’s response to the text reveals the impossibility of any text remaining merely exemplary, acting simply as a placeholder for the examination text itself. Any text involves acts of representation. And those acts – again, as Alisha’s response indicates – are inevitably problematic. All acts of representation are. But there’s more to it than that, of course. The choice of an extract from a Conan Doyle story is entirely consonant with the emphasis in the current English national curriculum on nineteenth-century prose from within a tightly-circumscribed English literary heritage. (And somewhere, lurking in the shadows behind this, might even be discerned the spectral presence of Ofsted, with its attachment to a bizarrely un-Bourdieuian version of cultural capital [Bourdieu 1986; Ofsted 2023, par. 226; cf.; Buckingham 2020]).

The extract read in the lesson is from the second chapter of *A Study in Scarlet*. In the first, we learn that Watson is recently returned from Afghanistan, where he has been stationed with the British army (he was serving as a military doctor). None of this might figure explicitly in the paragraphs read by Sanaa’s students, but that doesn’t mean that it is absent from the text – again, as Alisha’s reading of it indicates: it isn’t possible to extricate Holmes’s theory of mind from the colonial and imperialist contexts that have shaped it, every bit as much as they have imprinted themselves on Watson.

In making this observation, I am not proposing that Conan Doyle be henceforth cancelled, or whatever it is that is alleged of anyone who poses questions about the virtues of canonical literature. But I would want to suggest that any encounter with *A Study in Scarlet* needs to make space for a variety of different readings of, and responses to, the text – including the one that I am imputing to Alisha. For what it’s worth, I think my suggestion to Sanaa, that it would have been worth acknowledging the patent silliness of Holmes’ theory of mind, was utterly inadequate. To dismiss it so casually would have been to fail to explore its lineage, the direct connections between it and the mainstream of Western scientific racism in the late nineteenth century.

There is, I think, another problem with too glibly dismissing Holmes’s model of mind, and that it is that it bears a striking, if only partial, resemblance to currently fashionable (and powerful) ideas about how learning happens. For Sanaa and other pre-service teachers in England, the *Initial Teacher Training Core Content Framework* ‘defines in detail the minimum entitlement of all trainee teachers’ (DfE 2019, 3). Under the second section of this framework, entitled ‘How Pupils Learn’, it is decreed that trainees should learn that:

3. An important factor in learning is memory, which can be thought of as comprising two elements: working memory and long-term memory.
4. Working memory is where information that is being actively processed is held, but its capacity is limited and can be overloaded.
5. Long-term memory can be considered as a store of knowledge that changes as pupils learn by integrating new ideas with existing knowledge. (DfE 2019, 11)

And, in the same section, it is revealed that trainees should learn how to:

**Avoid overloading working memory, by:**

- Receiving clear, consistent and effective mentoring in how to take into account pupils' prior knowledge when planning how much new information to introduce.
- Discussing and 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).

**And – following expert input – by taking opportunities to practise, receive feedback and improve at:**

- Breaking complex material into smaller steps (e.g. using partially completed examples to focus pupils on the specific steps) (DfE 2019, 11).

I grant that this is slightly fancier, as models of the brain go, than Homer Simpson's. But it seems equally fixated on a conception of the brain as a storehouse of knowledge, and learning as the reception of carefully curated, sequenced pieces of knowledge. It leaves me asking the same questions that Alisha was posing about Holmes. How do we know what knowledge is useful? And is that really how our minds work?

I want to say something, by way of conclusion, about Alisha. What she was doing with Conan Doyle exceeded by far any acquisition of the skills required to answer GCSE English Language Paper 1, Section A, question 2. She was insisting on her right as a reader to interrogate the text with which she had been confronted. Her reading of it was sensitive, questioning, attentive to its particularities and to the hinterland of ideas that informed it. She was, in short, behaving as a serious student of literature should (and it is to Sanaa's credit that there was space in the lesson for her to do so).

In relation to GCSE English Language Paper 1, Alisha may have been Daniel Willingham's kind of novice:

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)

But in relation to the reading of Conan Doyle, she wasn't. She might not know as much about the sociocultural context of late Victorian England as her teacher does, but she is engaged in the same sort of practice – a practice described much more accurately by Ben Knights than it is by either Willingham or the Department for Education's *Core Content Framework*:

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)

There is another dimension to this ‘scene of reading’ that offers a challenge to the theory of mind that informs the *Core Content Framework*. I have focused on Alisha’s contributions to the lesson because they captured my attention (and they made me think). But this isn’t in any straightforward sense an account of the learning of an individual student – and it certainly isn’t an attempt on my part to calibrate the change in her long-term memory. What I observed was happening in the social world of the classroom, in the dialogue that involved Sanaa and Alisha’s peers and the text they were reading. As the psychologist Paul Broks (2003, 56) has argued, ‘Minds emerge from process and interaction’.

In the lesson I observed, Sanaa was operating in a particular context – one that placed constraints on what she was teaching and on how she was teaching. That is, of course, true of all teaching in formal educational settings: it is always shaped by a range of larger institutional forces. That said, it is nonetheless worth asking how Sanaa might have responded to Alisha’s questions had they both been operating in a context less rigidly determined by the exigencies of the regime of high-stakes assessment. To put the question more bluntly: what intellectual resources might assist in Sanaa’s formation as a teacher?

The *Core Content Framework*, informed by the version of cognitive science that has been promoted by Daniel Willingham, Paul Kirschner, John Sweller and others (cf. Kirschner, Sweller, and Clark 2006), would encourage Sanaa to understand learning as primarily a function of memory, and hence to attend in her teaching to the dangers of cognitive overload. Good teaching thus becomes a process of simplification, of stripping away all that might prove distracting, diverting attention (and thus precious reserves of memory) from the matter at hand; good teaching promotes learning by providing a carefully sequenced and always-already mapped-out linear route through the specified content. I find it difficult to see how this version of what learning and teaching look like would have been of any assistance whatsoever to Sanaa. The closest the *Framework* comes to an acknowledgement that the learners are anything other than blank slates is in the mention of ‘prior knowledge’, to be taken into consideration by the teacher in ‘planning how much new information to introduce’. But here we are back in Holmes’s attic, calculating how and where to arrange the stacking of the new knowledge that the teacher imparts.

This model does not offer Sanaa a way of understanding Alisha’s contributions to the lessons, or of conceptualising her own role as the teacher in the class’s exploration of the Conan Doyle extract, or any other text shared in the space of the classroom. Ben Knights’ emphasis on English (and other disciplines) as cohering around a set of practices rather

than a defined body of knowledge offers a radically different set of resources for thinking about pedagogy and learning in English. It might enable Sanaa to involve Alisha and her peers in a more open-ended discussion of what is interesting and what is problematic about the text – the kind of discussion where students are entitled, or even expected, to ask questions, not merely to learn how to respond to the inert questions of the exam board. Might this be a defensible version of practice in English?

## Notes

1. This essay is a slightly revised version of a keynote lecture given at the University of Bedfordshire, 30 June 2023, as part of the BERA (British Educational Research Association) English Education SIG (Special Interest Group) conference, ‘Exploring issues in English, Education, and Social Justice: current trends in research and practice’.
2. Students’ names have been pseudonymised.

## Disclosure statement

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

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