

Thoughtless language, or the death of child-centred education

I have recently changed job. After ten years as a (mainstream) classroom teacher, I have become a language support teacher. It has been an odd, sometimes difficult transition, but it has given me the opportunity to see a range of lessons from a perspective that is much closer to the child's-eye view of schooling. So what does education in the twenty-first century look like? The short answer is, scarily like the bad old days of the early seventies. No, I don't mean the days of trendy progressivism which probably existed more in the rhetoric of Black Paperites and their successors than in any reality. I mean the schooling which I received at a fairly typical, traditional northern grammar school.

To explain this sweeping statement, I want to start with a learning experience that seems to prove me wrong, to show how far education has progressed in the last thirty years.

In a science lab, a Year 7 class is learning about electricity. The teacher wants the students to think about electricity, about how the electrons move round a circuit. At the start of the lesson, he helps them to conceptualise this process by getting them to look at a (real) bicycle. Their attention is drawn to the pedals, the chain, the back wheel. They are encouraged to see the links in the chain as analogous to the electrons in an electrical circuit, the pedals as the equivalent of the battery, the power transmitted through the links in the chain to the wheel just as the battery would transmit energy via the electrons to the light bulb.

This is, it seems to me, a wonderful way to start the lesson, an effective way of introducing the students not just to part of their unit of work on electricity but also to important ways of thinking about science, even about thinking itself.

There is a little time for questions, asked by the teacher and answered by the five or six most confident students in the class. But it all happens very quickly. The students move back to their seats. Textbooks and exercise books are handed out. On page 117 are a couple of brightly-coloured illustrations, a short section on electrical circuits and some questions. The students are to answer the questions in their books. They work individually. Talk is discouraged, treated as a distraction from work. I worry, as I observe and work with those students most in need of support, about how much sense they have made of what they have seen and heard. I feel that they need more time to explore what was happening with the bicycle, more time to question and to talk about these phenomena and their relationship to the workings of an electrical circuit.

The textbook asks the students to think up their own analogy for an electrical circuit, to explain the points of similarity, and then to discuss the shortcomings of the model that they have presented. These questions, far more than the presence of a few illustrations or the sophistication of layout, mark the difference between the modern textbook and the ones with which I was confronted in my own schooldays. Here is an opportunity to make connections, to think about the way we think about electricity, to explore the power and the limitations of analogy as a mode of thought. This was, I felt, Science opening up its own discursive practices for examination, Science revealing itself as an intellectual process, not a hermetically-sealed body of knowledge.

With a little prompting, some students come up with astonishingly impressive ideas. Ramon starts thinking about the water cycle, from rain to rivers and the sea and back to the sky. Ifteker recalls that in his primary school, a typical inner-city Victorian triple-decker, there were two staircases, one at each end of the building: one

was designated the up staircase, the other the down. So, he suggests, the movement of children around the school was a bit like the movement of the electrons in a circuit. We talk about what happened at playtime, how sometimes kids would go down the wrong staircase and chaos ensued. Could electrons behave in a similarly disruptive way, he wondered. No, Edmir assures him, electrons couldn't really choose which way to go.

And then the lesson moved on. Most students had not, in truth, even begun to respond to the problems posed by page 117 of their textbook. They simply had not been given the time, the intellectual space they needed to talk through the complex ideas that they were being asked to grapple with. But the teacher knew what the scheme of work demanded, and what the scheme of work demanded was that parallel and series circuits had to be dealt with before the pips went for the end of the day.

So the lesson had to move on. We had to move on.

When I was still a teenager, an interesting piece of research was being conducted by Mary Budd Rowe. Investigating the interactions between teacher and pupil, she showed the importance of "wait time" – of slowing down the speed of what happens in the classroom. The average teacher, she discovered, asked questions at the rate of two or three a minute. Students needed to answer within one second, otherwise the teacher would intervene again, or another student would answer. Allowing students more time to think, the research indicated, has the following benefits:

the length of students' responses increased; the number of questions asked by children increased; contributions by 'slow' children increased; and disciplinary moves decreased (Wellington and Osborne, 2001, p. 33, referring to Rowe, 1974).

Such notions are now too old-fashioned to be countenanced. Thanks largely to Ofsted, we all must worship before the great god of Pace. For a lesson barely to pass muster, it must have Pace. And so we must move on. We are always moving on. Dwelling on an idea, giving time for thought, for reflection, for open-ended dialogue, would inexorably lead to loss of Pace. And without Pace, we fail. The lesson becomes a failing lesson, and too many failed lessons produce a failing school.

My school, like schools the length and breadth of the country, is now in the grip of The Strategy. Lessons, previously amorphous creatures that sometimes slid promiscuously into one another, have been given definite shape and form. They have beginnings, middles and ends. We start with what we are going to learn, we learn it, and then we look back at what we have learned. Learning happens, as The Strategy ordains, in bite-sized, lesson-shaped chunks.

It is, of course, helpful if teachers are clear about what they are attempting to achieve in a lesson or series of lessons; equally, there are benefits to be gained from sharing these objectives with students: students are more likely to learn if they know what it is that they are meant to be doing, if they understand the point of the lesson.

But what is taught is not necessarily what is learned — and we are all capable of learning several things simultaneously. There is a danger that the emphasis on explicit learning objectives, shared with students, might lead to a loss of sensitivity to what is really going on in the classroom — to teachers ignoring, or failing to appreciate, the unplanned, incidental learning that is actually happening. For bilingual students, and indeed for all minority ethnic students, the polysemic nature of learning is even more significant. Inextricably connected with the concepts of the taught (overt) curriculum is the language in which these concepts are embedded and communicated; and around the whole process of learning there is a culturally-specific context — a whole nexus

of culture-based assumptions and premises. Teachers ignore these contexts at their peril.

There is, moreover, the problem that what a teacher intends to communicate by sharing the lesson objectives may not be at all the same thing as is understood by some or all of the students.

These are all, it seems to me, general and fairly intractable problems — problems to be aware of, but issues that certainly do not vitiate the project of achieving clarity about — and sharing — the lesson objectives.

A more local and specific difficulty is the practice of expecting students to copy the learning objectives into their books at the start of each lesson. What does this achieve? It encourages students to focus on the board, to be aware that there are, indeed, learning objectives, that this is a lesson that has been planned. But the procedure tends to mask any lacunae in the communication of objectives: they are not, generally, discussed or introduced orally; comment upon the objectives is not encouraged.

For students who have difficulties with written language, or with literacy in English, or with organisational skills, what this procedure does is to create a barrier at the start of the lesson: they struggle to keep up from the very start. In practice, it often means that they miss out on the orally-delivered information about what they are being asked to do.

Once the learning objectives have been copied down, the lesson moves on to the starter activity. Those who created *The Strategy* made it plain that the starter does not necessarily have any connection with the rest of the lesson. It is almost as if incoherence has become a positive quality, one of the attributes of Pace:

The Key Stage 3 National Strategy promotes teaching that is varied in style and distinguished by a fast pace and strong focus, as well as being highly interactive and motivating. ...

A lively interactive opening to the session with a sharp focus on specific objectives engages pupils' attention and is fun. Frequent intensive sessions of this sort have a greater and more lasting effect than periodic 'skills' lessons. They provide an opportunity to address directly the revision objectives at Word and Sentence level. They are popular with the whole ability range, but highly recommended for classes containing pupils who have not yet secured the Word and Sentence level objectives. The starter activity may relate to the lesson that follows, but it may also relate to a series of starters developed over several lessons. A sequence of starters can be identified as a block in the medium term plan (DfEE, 2001, p.6).

Children's experiences in primary schools are not what they used to be. Their learning is more compartmentalised than once it was, and they arrive at secondary school aware of literacy and numeracy hours and all that jazz. Nevertheless, the secondary curriculum is presented to students in a far more fragmentary form. The divisions between subjects are more absolute, enforced by the movement from room to room, from building to building.

What the starter activity does, how it works, in my school, should be seen in the context of this increased fragmentation of the curriculum — and hence of students' learning experiences. Where starter activities have no apparent connection (apparent to the learner, that is) with the main business of the lesson, they add to the

incoherence of an already atomised day. And even where there is a connection, the object of study can tend to appear decontextualised. This is not helpful for many learners, particularly those who are struggling to keep up, struggling to make sense of the curriculum on offer: it is, therefore, particularly unhelpful to those for whom a context for learning is most important — early stage bilingual learners and those, such as many minority ethnic students, for whom the culture-bound assumptions of the activity may pose a significant barrier to learning.

My observation of starter activities in action is that they tend to marginalise and stigmatise some students right at the beginning of the lesson, inducing a sense of panic and inability. The whole-class teaching excludes, to a greater or lesser degree, all but the most confident, the quickest, the most able.

I accept, though, that there is a subjective element to this. As a support teacher in the classroom, I am most acutely conscious of those who are struggling, those who cannot join in. But I am not sure if there is a benefit sufficient to compensate for this disadvantage. How much are those who are joining in actually learning? The answer to this is, I suspect, that it is too early to tell. But we should be looking for some fairly hard evidence that the specific lessons of the starter activities are learned, that they make a difference. My first impression is that this is not the case.

A few weeks ago, I observed two starter lessons aimed at distinguishing between “their” and “there”. The following week, I noticed an item in the staff bulletin which used “there” inappropriately where “their” would have been correct. The item was in the name of one of the teachers who had been delivering the starter activity. Starter activities lend themselves to inaccurate statements about language. Still on the subject of there/their: is it really helpful to say that “there” is always indicative of place? There are other usages of “there”, aren’t there? And how many teachers are confident of their own ability to identify, let alone adequately define, a subordinate clause?

I am not criticising colleagues for any alleged grammatical ignorance. The problem, rather, lies in the contextlessness of the starter. Instead of being a place where aspects of language — including, if you like, the function and effect of complex sentences — can be investigated in context, they become the pedagogical equivalent of Coles Notes: nasty, brutish, short — and often somewhere between tendentious and plain wrong.

A recent English lesson, again for Year 7 students, had as its focus, as part of a unit of work on poetry, Seamus Heaney’s “The Early Purges”. Students were put into groups of four and given, on separate pieces of paper, a number of words and short phrases from the poem. They were asked to group the words, and told that they had to decide for themselves the categories to which they were assigning the words. (This was billed as a starter activity, but as it was integrally connected with the content of the rest of the lesson, the term might be considered somewhat misleading.)

The activity was startlingly successful. “The Early Purges” is a complex text. The words that the students were given included “sogged”, “sluiced”, “slung”, “snared”, “soused”, “sickening”, “frail metal sound”. In mixed-ability groups, students collaborated together to make sense of these clues, arriving at categories to do with water, emotions, predatory actions. They started to make predictions about the subject-matter and meaning of the whole text: Mashur’s group even managed to hypothesise that the poem was set on a farm and reflected different, opposing views on violence towards animals. It was, it seemed to me, a task which gave students the space and the structure within which they could use language, their own language as well as Heaney’s, to make sense of a complex text – a task that prepared them well for

a reading of the whole poem. Indeed, without this activity I doubt if many of the students would have made much sense at all of the text.

One group, however, approached the task from a different perspective. The group was led by Gregory, a student who is quick to participate in most starter activities. Gregory's group took one look at the words from the poem and began to categorise them grammatically, sorting them into verbs and adjectives. Assigning such categories to a list of words is predicated on an essentialist notion about the grammatical function of words – and that's a hard road to follow in a language whose users have for more than four centuries been appropriating nouns as verbs, verbs as nouns (and so on). When the selection of words contains so many past participles, it's even harder. (How can you tell, out of context, whether "soused" is a verb or an adjective? Answer: you can't.) Why did Gregory's group take this approach? Because it was made up of students who had, by and large, learned their literacy lessons too well. They knew that theirs was the right approach, because that was what they had been expected to do in so many other starter activities before.

The real problem with Gregory's group's categories, though, is not that they were unsustainable. It was that the way they looked at the words had no connection whatsoever with any act of reading, of deriving meaning from a text. The activity did nothing, therefore, to prepare this group for the poem itself. The other groups, for all their exposure to the nonsense of much word- and sentence-level work, still approached the task with the expectation that words (language) should make sense. How refreshing, as the Heineken advert says.

The Strategy, emphatic that literacy is a good thing, demands that all teachers consider the literacy aspects of their subject. Much influenced by the Australian genre school, it encourages explicit attention to text types. So far, so good. But what has happened in practice?

The main problem with the approach which has been used in getting students in my school to think about, or think again about, types of non-fiction text is that it has tended to locate the text type entirely within the text itself, rather than in the interaction of text and reader. This characterisation of text types may be seen by others to be unproblematic — as if there are, so to speak, Platonic ideals of descriptive and explanatory texts, lurking wherever it is that ideals lurk — but the approach has consequences that impact on many students' ability to come to grips with the concepts.

Within the context of a unit of work on text types, the fiction/non-fiction opposition was rehearsed through a starter activity, in which students were presented with the opening sentences of different types of text and asked to ascribe each opening to one or other category. What this did, in practice, was to communicate the message that fiction was to be seen as synonymous with falsehood, non-fiction with truth. (Asked to write "fiction" and "non-fiction" on each side of his whiteboard, one student substituted "truth" and "lies".) The immediate problem with this activity is that it operates on the premise that it is possible to identify the two categories from an opening sentence. It isn't. This is obvious if one thinks about, for example, the content and narrative strategies of realist fiction.

More generally, though, fiction is not usefully defined as texts which are not true — texts which contain no true statements about the world that we know — but rather as texts which operate according to a different set of readerly expectations. We go to fiction texts for different purposes — but we do expect fiction to have some bearing, somehow, on contingent reality. (Conversely, we do not reassign a text to the category

of fiction simply because we are aware of a factual inaccuracy. If an old atlas, for example, represents an large tract of land as the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, that does not mean that the atlas is a work of fiction.)

Fiction, whether it starts with a description of Euston station in all its gritty reality or with a phrase such as “Once upon a time ...”, declares its fictiveness in the contract established between text and reader. The label of non-fiction, and all the helpful sub-categories of non-fiction, cannot usefully be detached from the reader’s purposes in attending to the text.

In one lesson, the teacher brought in a large tub of chocolates. After the students had each eaten a chocolate, they analysed the design of the wrapper in which their chocolate had been presented. What was impressive about the students’ responses in this lesson was how acute they were in identifying and describing the aspects of the wrapper which contributed to the overall appeal, which articulated, in other words, the language of persuasion.

What was remarkable about the lesson was that students were presented with the thing itself — a genuine example of a text type, a text that had, if you like, established a direct relationship with them as readers. What happened in many other lessons in this unit was that students were expected to study something that was at one or more removes from the text type itself.

A page in a geography text book that seeks to explain about the method of chocolate production and manufacture is one thing if it is encountered in the context of a geography lesson, in the context of a unit of work on, for example, trade and agriculture. It is another thing entirely in an English lesson. A photocopy of a page in a geography text book, presented to students in an English class, demands even more from the students in terms of a series of imaginative leaps. They are expected to accept as a given the contract that would, in the circumstances of a geography lesson, be established between text and reader — even though the readerly purposes central to such a contact are in fact absent from the interaction between text and student in an English lesson.

This brings me back to the thread that binds these disparate experiences of students’ learning (and not learning) together. Child-centred education was given a bad press by those who regarded such approaches as lacking in rigour, as a kind of *laissez-faire* approach which left children to learn as they saw fit, what they wanted, when they wanted.¹ Others, more searchingly, questioned the universalising, essentialist tendencies of child-centred theories, their failure to address the specifics of the social construction of subjectivities – and hence the ease with which such theories glided over the structural inequalities and power relationships which shape children’s experience of the education system.²

What child-centred approaches achieved, however, was the foregrounding of the question of *how* children learn. What we have now, in contrast, is a system in which much thought is devoted to what children should learn, what they should be able to do, what they should know, by what age and stage, and much energy is spent in determining and enforcing what teachers should teach, and how. The agency of the young people who are meant to be learning has, in effect, disappeared from the picture – and it is that absence from the current education landscape that reminds me most powerfully of my own schooldays.

It would be easy to make the case by focusing on the obvious casualties of the present system, the students who are labelled as failures because they do not reach the required level of the National Curriculum by the prescribed age, the students who do

not achieve the right grades at GCSE. Some of these students – the most dogged, the most determined - are the ones who bring their homework to our lunchtime study support club. They are usually fairly recent arrivals in the English system, from Bangladesh, Somalia, Angola, Congo, Eritrea, Turkey, Kosovo. Their difficulties are easily represented as linguistic ones: they need extra help with their homework because they are at an early stage of acquiring fluency in English, and so they have imperfectly understood the content of the lesson preceding the homework assignment. But that is not the whole story, I think. As Sajon or Yasmin or Eliandro struggles with the periodic table, it seems to me that their unfamiliarity with English is only part of their problem. They are equally lacking in fluency in that most necessary of school dialects, the language of nonsense. Many of their peers, you see, do not understand the periodic table any better than they – but they have learned how to play the game, how to mask their ignorance with schoolproof answers.

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¹ This polemical tradition continues to thrive. See, for example, Phillips (1996) or Woodhead (2002).

² Walkerdine (1983), Jones (1983), and Edelsky (1996) all provide searching critiques of the limitations of child-centred educational theories and practices.