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The End of Surprise? The State of the Subject of Secondary English, and Implications for Initial Teacher Education

Brian Rock

Abstract

The chance to be part of educational experiences which provide dialogic spaces for the surprising or unexpected are essential for future English teachers and their pupils. The impact of neoliberal reforms on the secondary English curriculum and Initial Teacher Education restricts teachers' autonomy and pedagogical creativity whereby teaching approaches are reduced to approved processes, leading to monologic and repetitive learning experiences for young people. This has begun a process which, as philosopher Martin Buber would argue, denies the possibility of spontaneity and meaningful expression in the classroom. In response, this paper reflects on my position as a former secondary English teacher and recently employed lecturer in Initial Teacher Education. I set out a way forward where beginning teachers can be empowered to achieve a balance between external expectations and their own values in relation to their subject and the pedagogical approaches they employ. To achieve this, we need to provide spaces for critical reflection on so-called 'best practice' in teaching and learning, especially for those at the beginning of their career.

Keywords: Secondary English, Initial Teacher Education, curriculum, pedagogy, Martin Buber, dialogism, neoliberalism

First, a word about the position I write from as the author of this article. I am a recently employed Senior Lecturer in Initial Teacher Education (I.T.E.) after 10 years of teaching secondary English. In response to this transition in role, I felt that a good starting point in my research career was to commence an exploration of my particular experiences as a teacher. This enables me to interpret and critically analyse my own lived experiences in the classroom, and how these may influence how I will facilitate learning for future teachers on I.T.E. programmes. In particular, this examination has enabled me to reflect on the extent to which the neoliberal government policies introduced during my secondary teaching career, in the form of increasingly prescriptive national curriculum values and pedagogical practices, have impacted on secondary English and teacher education.

Many readers of this journal will have been asked: 'Why would you like to become a teacher?' Perhaps your answer had to do with a desire to share your love of your subject and to shape the lives of young people. Or, perhaps you cited an inspiring teacher who facilitated creative and engaging student-centred experiences which motivated and challenged you. Within my own education, through the study of English literature I remember being given opportunities to cocreate with my teachers, lecturers and peers new insights and understandings of literary texts. One lecture series will always stay in my mind. The text was *Othello* by William Shakespeare, and each week my fellow undergraduates and I explored this play through different critical theory lenses - whether that be narrative, structuralist, post-structuralist, feminist, Marxist, de/postcolonial, queer – providing us with the analytic tools needed to interpret the changing world of the 21st century and an understanding that texts can be interpreted in multiple and often conflicting ways. At my PGCE interview, when asked why I would like to become a teacher, I expressed my belief that, through the teaching of

literature I could provide young people with critical and dialogic reading engagements which can be surprising for their self-development and understanding of the wider world.

My transition to a new role as lecturer has made me reflect on whether I succeeded in providing truly genuine and surprising opportunities for my secondary students. The dialogic discussion inherent in the reading of literature has shaped the pedagogical choices I took, but during my career as a teacher my personal philosophy became increasingly incompatible with what Anderson and Elms reflect on as the 'hierarchical, high-stakes, standards-based curriculum and assessment frameworks' introduced by neoliberal policy changes.[1] I fear that I became a 'vessel' to impart a body of pre-existing knowledge and specific social and cultural outcomes which are predetermined by the neoliberal educational model of the 'knowledge-led' English curriculum at the expense of my own values and pedagogical preferences.[2] This neoliberal model commodifies learning to meet the needs of the capitalist market, whereby skills and knowledge which learners develop are only deemed useful in creating successful future participants within this market.[3] This leads to what Gilbert defines as 'a relentless focus on individualisation and stratification by measuring staff and students using all kinds of numerical data – including test and inspection grades.'[4]

In response to this concern, I have been drawn towards the work of twentieth century German Jewish philosopher Martin Buber's writings on education to make sense of the impact of the social, ideological and governmental reforms on the English curriculum and on teacher education which are slowly eroding teachers' professional autonomy and pedagogical creativity. This article is not an in-depth study of Buber's philosophical arguments. Instead, I draw on Buber's reflections on the importance of dialogism in education which, he argues, should offer genuine moments of surprise between educator and student, to make a case for the need for careful and critical implementation of neoliberal reforms in education, especially for future teachers. Teaching approaches are being reduced to approved processes, leading to a move towards monologic and repetitive—rather than critical and dialogic—learning experiences for young people and future teachers. Buber proposes that education should instead develop people's character through authentic moments of surprise facilitated by teachers, as '[o]nly in [their] whole being, in all [their] spontaneity can the educator affect the whole being of the pupil'.[5] Rather than being a 'vessel' of neoliberal education policies, future teachers should be 'wholly alive and able to communicate [themselves] directly to [their] fellow beings'.[6] This is especially true within English, a subject which is inherently dialogic when teachers and students engage in reading literature together. Surprise is an essential element of English as the subject deals with 'the ineffable and the unknowable'[7] rather than the quantifiable or predetermined. Reading literature is not a straightforward process; knowledge in texts is diffuse and ever evolving depending on the social and ideological lenses we read through. This needs to be recognised to empower teachers and students to freely express and debate interpretations of literary texts as they read together.

Neoliberalism and the Eradication of Risk

Buber's conception of dialogic approaches as interactions between people which focus on the co-creation of new insights and understandings is particularly appropriate to revisit when reflecting on the neoliberal curriculum changes within teacher education. Buber's conceptualisations of educational dialogue have been contested due to its 'inconsistent implementation' and 'inconsistencies within its underlying theoretical structure', and doubt around the possibility of full and actual dialogue ever occurring due to the inherent power dynamic which will always exist to a certain extent between educator and student.[8] However,

his conception offers us opportunities to reflect on the desire to create a more egalitarian encounter between people. In my role as I.T.E. Lecturer I see it as my duty to plan opportunities for dialogic discussion on the state of English studies at secondary level so that early career teachers are fully informed of the decisions which they make, or which are made for them, about the curriculum they teach and the pedagogical approaches they take or are directed to take. This is because monologic approaches to pedagogy, which are deemed to be 'research-led' and 'best practice' by those in power, increasingly deny the possibility of spontaneity and meaningful expression in the classroom.

I wish to contribute to future teachers' development of the critical tools they need to navigate the impact of neoliberal educational policies which have influenced the development of the ITT Core Content Framework (CCF),[9] Early Career Framework (ECF),[10] and Ofsted Research Review of English.[11] Future teachers should be made aware of and encouraged to engage in the contested debates within English studies and teacher education so that they can develop their own autonomous vision of teaching and learning, rather than unthinkingly replicating endorsed pedagogies without being fully aware of the implications on young people's learning experiences. Bruderman, reflecting on Buber's work, writes that

> dialogue has come to be viewed as an educational and cultural phenomenon whose promotion will ensure a humanistic, pluralistic, and humane model of education that establishes an open, egalitarian sphere of expression between the authority figure (the teacher) and the person subject to the authority (the pupil).[12]

Bruderman explores how this dialogical model of education moves away from 'a rigid structure, from conceptions of standardization and quantification, and from economic utilitarianism and competitiveness',[13] a structure which has become all too apparent due to the commencement of the I.T.E. Market Review with its implementation of the CCF, ECF and reaccreditation process for providers of teacher education.[14]

Teaching which is solely driven by the need to meet the standards of the neoliberal agenda risks engaging in what Buber refers to as a purely technical practice. This erodes teachers' professional agency and pedagogical judgement when responding to the specific needs and interests of young people,[15] and is of particular concern to me as I prepare future teachers on teacher education programmes. Grossman expresses concern around specifying too precisely what teachers should and should not do within a classroom,[16] risking the development of a purely 'technical' dialogue[17] which is repetitive, dull and monologic in its presentation of seemingly objective knowledge or universal truths around 'best practice' in the classroom. This has led to an 'eradication of risk',[18] with limited space for teachers to be trusted to draw on their own professional judgement and subject knowledge when designing and implementing the curriculum. During their training on school placement, future teachers encounter school cultures which are increasingly driven by neoliberal accountability and managerialism, leading to demoralisation and an acceptance of models of teaching practice which constrain the purpose of education.[19] This is heightened by the radical policy changes since 2010 in I.T.E. which have led to a market-based approach in the recruitment and education of future teachers, in turn leading to a silencing in the role of universities.[20] The introduction of the ECF, with its prescribed curriculum, and revision of the CCF, treat teacher preparation as on-the-job training rather than education, and moves away from university-led towards school-led provision.[21]

Twenty years after Ball outlined his concept of the terror of performativity,[22] compliance, standardisation and measurement have increased, reducing a teacher's autonomy and agency. This has led to a culture of deliverology',[23] especially, as I can testify from my own experience when preparing students for GCSE English examinations. Rather than drawing on '[a] dialogic approach to literature' which 'allows for a surprising openness' between teacher and students,[24] the pressure to deliver student attainment outcomes influences pedagogical choices made in the classroom, with teaching enabling information reproduction for exams which is privileged as the appropriate domain of knowledge.[25] I remember, for example, teaching a small group of nine teenage boys who were deemed to be of 'low-ability'. Facing them was the challenge of passing their GCSEs, with a stress placed on the need to achieve at least a grade four in English and Maths in order to access the next stage of their education at college. This pressure was replicated in my need as a teacher to achieve a positive Progress 8 score for this class which in turn reflects the school's overall data set. This led me towards delivering a learning experience which eradicated risk, with the teaching of set literature texts being reduced to key quotations and core ideas which the young people in this group rote learnt in order to regurgitate in their examinations. All nine pupils achieved at least a standard pass in their GCSE, but this was at the expense of a more dialogic form of learning which could have provided them with critical reflection on the world and promoted their pleasure in reading and writing.

As Kulz metaphorically describes in her book *Factories for Learning*, an ethnographic study of a flagship academy school, the education structure currently in force has become a results-driven system where inequalities are widening rather than narrowing. Her book points to an educational system where space for open discussion and creative thought is being limited, with academisation becoming part of a 'wider turn towards authoritarian methods in education' where teacher autonomy and young people's creativity is constricted at the expense of achieving outstanding examination results.[26] I find Holdstock's vision of the English classroom particularly pertinent. Holdstock, in line with Kulz's concept of factories for learning, paints an image of a secondary academy as a homogenous entity with

> prescribed lesson objectives, information, images, questions, tasks, model answers and success criteria. Often, identical presentation slides will be used simultaneously in multiple classrooms. All of the lessons [Holdstock] passes progress in linear and predictable ways.[27]

Holdstock depicts secondary English teachers losing control of their pedagogical choices. He desires space for young people to make their own choices about meaning rather than accepting 'manufactured interpretations their teachers offer.'[28] Yandell critiques the neoliberal agenda which has created what both Kulz and Holdstock observe in secondary academies, and what I and future teachers have experienced: an English curriculum which is becoming increasingly fixed and inert, 'ready to be delivered, more like a sack of potatoes than a box of delights.'[29]

The Need for Mutual Surprise

It is the element of risk which should be embedded within planning and delivery of the English curriculum and teacher education in order to provide young people with 'surprise'. Buber presents an image of a newly qualified teacher with a class before them which is 'like a mirror of mankind, so multiform, so full of contradictions, so inaccessible'.[30] Despite the

complex nature of the range of learners and the challenges this provides in terms of inclusive and adaptive practice, a teacher must move beyond a desire to dictate learning outcomes and instead plan learning activities and use questions which come from a genuine position of curiosity towards young people's ideas.

There is a rich array of academic literature on the value and diversity of dialogic approaches in education.[31] I wish to draw attention to, in particular, Barnes' conception of an 'enacted curriculum'[32] in order to create a link to Buber's conception of genuine dialogue as a 'turning towards the other'.[33] Barnes argues that, rather than teachers planning the curriculum based on their own or institutional intentions where knowledge, learning activities and assessment outcomes are predetermined, to become meaningful a curriculum has to be enacted by both students and teachers through dialogic communication.[34] This enactment mirrors the spirit of Buber's conception of 'surprise'. Buber described the central role of surprise which needs to be allowed in dialogic encounters in education. For Buber, this creates hope and creativity for the future. Buber writes that it is 'neither a routine repetition nor a lesson whose findings the teacher knows before he starts, but one which develops in mutual surprises'.[35] For Buber, surprise must be mutual between teacher and pupil. As Stern notes through his interpretation of Buber's concept of surprise,' [i]f teachers only ask questions to which they know the answers, they are unlikely to be surprised, and their students are unlikely to feel that they – the students – are really making sense of the world'.[36] Stern surmises Buber's view, stating that '[t]he truly human life is neither individualist nor collectivists, but is lived through dialogue in the place 'in between', where the 'I' and the 'thou' both gain their existence.'[37] It is this 'in between' space which needs to be reinvigorated in order to enact the secondary English and I.T.E. curricula to their full potential.

The State of the Subject of Secondary English

Much has been written on the impact of neoliberal policy changes on secondary English, especially in relation to panoptic Ofsted inspections,[38] performance related pay,[39] prescriptive text choices,[40] and the datafication of teaching – data which is performance rather than learning-driven.[41] Spontaneity and meaningful expression in the English classroom has been much reduced due to overly structured curricular approaches focused on guiding young people along 'some well- or ill-defined learning trajector[ies] to arrive at pre-set curricular endpoints'.[42] This has become apparent due to the changes to the structure of secondary education, with a focus on a 'knowledge-led'[43] English curriculum and its corresponding considerations of supposed pedagogical 'best practice'.

This is symptomatic of wider concerns within education, something Yandell perceives as the 'sustained attempt to reverse the progressive, pluralist and egalitarian gains' of the later 20th century in favour of a neoliberal conception of a knowledge rich education informed by the works of Hirsch,[44] Young and Lambert[45], Miskin,[46] and embedded into the curriculum by conservative MPs Gove and Gibb.[47] This 'knowledge-led curriculum', determined by an elite few, is set up on a pedestal as 'better knowledge',[48] thus establishing the subject knowledge of an 'expert' teacher who has authority over their 'novice' pupils, and so excluding pupils from the production of new insights and understandings.[49]

Of particular concern is the denial within the Ofsted Research Review of the rich research base of English studies with its history of international debate, contestation, renewal, and innovation.[50] The publication of this review has led to critical responses,[51] with concerns that the review's focus on ways and means of achieving the English curriculum, which leans

towards theories from cognitive science, is at the expense of more creative pedagogies. The insistence on the effectiveness of theories of cognitive science to aid progression, 'the perceived attainment and development of pre-packaged skills and knowledge in students',[52] has led to a drive towards direct instruction, retrieval practice and a formal, pre-determined secondary English curriculum which is delivered to—rather than negotiated with—young people, and which is divorced from their 21st century authentic experiences rather than reflective of these. From my own experience, particularly when teaching GCSE literature texts, this has shaped the design of English schemes of work and the ways teachers transmit and test the acquisition of knowledge and vocabulary rather than co-construct understanding of knowledge with young people.

Due to the impact of the design of the 'knowledge-led' curriculum, there is a move towards providing GCSE students with prescribed and imposed meanings of the core texts which they are summatively assessed against. In these cases, increasingly it is the teacher who sets the intentions for learning and the monologic interpretations of the texts in order to meet the requirements of an exam board. The core texts then offer a narrow range of knowledge, textual experience and range of meanings, losing the inherent heteroglossia which exists within the reading process. This loss is due to the pressures of performativity teachers are under to deliver the curriculum with endpoint linear examinations in mind. Reading literature should provide Key Stage 4 students with the experiences, attitudes and feelings which mature and affirm their own lives. As Thomas argues, '[t]he double power of literature is that it is a window into the reader's world and into the world around',[53] however, this sense of discovery, intrigue, and pleasure is being drained out of the GCSE experience due to measurement, standardisation and pedagogies promoted by the Ofsted Research Review of English. Atherton, Green and Snapper argue that reading develops writing and offer students a humane understanding of the world.[54] In many English classrooms reading is being reduced to spotting the lexical, grammatical and stylistic modes when decoding texts, with students writing up their 'manufactured interpretations' which are imposed on them using formulaic writing frames, such as Point Evidence Explanation (P.E.E.) paragraphs, to prepare them for the closed book and reductive nature of the linear testing which occurs in GCSE exams.[55] Perry's research indicates that many Heads of English report ~~on~~ how the curriculum at Key Stage 3 is designed to prepare students for Key Stage 4, thus narrowing the curriculum even further. This pragmatic decision is driven by examination needs in order to support students to meet the expected progress targets through direct instruction.[56] Retrieval practice, in the form of quizzing, is often used to embed a finite number of knowledge ideas in students' memories to meet the requirements of the test, with young people relying on 'formulaic responses' like P.E.E. rather than making their own choices.[57] Yandell and Brady argue that due to assessment demands P.E.E. is used at Key Stage 3 as 'ubiquitous building-blocks of literary critical essays in English schools' where annotation of lexical and grammatical features becomes the focus at the expense of 'big picture' contextualisatons.[58]

Enacting Surprise in Initial Teacher Education

What is currently missing within the drive towards a 'knowledge-led' curriculum at secondary is a dialogic impulse, and, because of this, in my role as Lecturer I model dialogic approaches with future teachers to compensate for this. While Buber is wary of the technical and more repetitive aspects of the curriculum when it is enacted, it must be stated that to a certain extent these are essential otherwise we would have a free-for-all approach to the curriculum. Thus, there is potential in the development of the CCF as part of beginning teachers' professional development, but only if the implementation of the framework allows

for critical and creative thinking on the part of student teachers. The CCF is not a full curriculum for training teachers and it is accredited training providers' responsibility to design appropriate curricula. Any curriculum design must provide a necessary mixture of the technical, the exchange of knowledge information 'prompted solely by the need of objective understanding'[59], and forms of knowledge and understanding which are strengthened through genuine mutual dialogism.

Because of this, I return to Buber who explains that a person 'wants to make things' whereby one wants 'to be the subject of [an] event of production'.[60] If the human desire, whether as teacher or student, is to create and become the subject of their own production, it is important that our secondary English and I.T.E. curriculums promote surprise by purposefully planning for students' imaginative, creative thinking and autonomous agency while at the same time giving teachers the permission to draw on their own professional judgement to make careful and critical decisions about how to teach the curriculum. As Bleiman argues, we need to help students to 'think big and think for themselves'.[61] In the literature classroom, Bleiman views talk as essential to encourage 'big picture' thinking to inform students' thoughts and ideas as they read literature. Studying literature is a collective experience as teachers and students mutually learn from each other's responses. It is essential that future English teachers realise that literature talks to and change us and our lives and it is the teacher's role to empower students with critical literacy skills so they can read the world and its texts with critical insight and awareness of alternative readings.

My role as Lecturer of I.T.E is to empower beginning teachers to achieve a balance between external expectations, contemporary pressures, and their own personal values around their subject and the pedagogical approaches they employ to support young people in the English classroom. The research base of the Ofsted Research Review of English and the CCF establishes a set domain of knowledge around teaching which, if not carefully implemented and critically debated, may create future teachers who compliantly wed themselves to specific and limited approaches recommended in order to achieve the 'knowledge-led' curriculum at the expense of other pedagogies. As part of the Secondary PGCE programme I teach on we plan and deliver subject knowledge days with our English training teachers. In our delivery of these sessions, we focus on critical debate, giving student teachers opportunities to reflect on their own perceptions of the advantages and disadvantages of curriculum reforms and trends in both traditional and contemporary pedagogical practice, as promoted or demoted by the Ofsted Research Review of English and CCF. The goal in these sessions is to raise questions about educational approaches, both for lecturers and students, which enable mutual surprise; through mutual dialogic encounters with training teachers, we aim to generate new insights and understandings to begin to open the 'in between' space needed for careful and critical self-reflection. Key discussions so far this year have focused on the value of oracy in the classroom, creative and alternative approaches to assessment, and the principles of the 'knowledge-led' curriculum and how this may be designed.

This is key to the future of teacher education. A one size fits all approach to so-called 'best practice' should always be questioned, not necessarily by those facilitating learning, but by those learning so that they can formulate their own position in relation to the evidence presented to them. Research evidence must be carefully presented and justified by lecturers to ensure it reflects the rich research base on English pedagogy and the ways young people learn so that future teachers can act creatively within the perceived constraints of national and fluctuating agendas in education. The restoration of the importance of creativity and critical thinking are key ways forward to reinstate a sense of surprise and dialogic engagement within

secondary English and I.T.E. curricula. English teachers are not vessels who are trained to impart predetermined knowledge bases for young people to memorise. Only through dialogue can true personal and pedagogical knowledge be achieved, and this process needs to be modelled on I.T.E. programmes so it can be enacted within the classroom. Within English, this can occur if teachers explore literature texts in open, tentative ways, providing the texts with scope for wider discussions rather than closing off the development of what Buber would define as genuine insights and understandings which are mutually created between educator and student.

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