
‘Can I have me on here?’: ‘ability’ and the language of pupil-progress

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ABSTRACT The flip-side of teaching-as-delivery is assessment-as-ventriloquism. Required to describe pupils and their progress through the language of Level Descriptors and exam grade criteria, any teacher risks losing her voice. This article notes the hierarchising and normalising intention of currently authorised versions of assessment, and looks for a countervailing practice and language.

Learning is more like coming to know a country
than climbing a ladder. (Lawrence Stenhouse)

For a short while after I was sent to boarding school I all but stopped talking. In company I restricted what I said aloud to a quiet ‘Yes’ and ‘No’, perhaps with ‘Thanks’ added, and at mealtimes allowed myself to request the water or the salt. I was able to make myself scarce (that telling phrase) in the time between lessons and sport and eating, and not be faced with the social requirement to converse. But gathered in the crowded dining room with the rest of my House, the oddness of my silence, and hence of course my own oddness, was quickly evident. Ironically, I muted myself precisely in order not to stand out but to diminish.

My quasi-mutism, if such it was, lasted a week or two, and I gave it no thought for years, until the issue of being able to speak was reframed in my working life as a problem to do with power relations, the operations of discourse, and the arrival of a new language in which to discuss my activity as a teacher of English. Like the grey squirrel driving out the red, the language of teaching-as-delivery, of National Curriculum (NC) Level Descriptors and Attainment Targets, of Literacy Strategies, Learning Objectives and Lesson Starters, began to render otiose the language I used and which expressed what I knew as English teaching. That language grew foreign in its own home-spaces of classroom and departmental gathering. I remember being given a booklet of revised NC Level Descriptors for English, and concluding I would not read it.

Such information seemed to me then one of those sets of knowledges I thought it important not to learn.

This was superstitious: a visceral un-worked-through recoiling from the supposed power of language not only to affect what I might find myself thinking, but to suborn the person I might be or become. Fear of contamination was at work, fear of being acquired by the discourse. Yet such a fear seems not entirely foolish in the light, for example, of what the forgers of the National Literacy Strategy wrote about the way they dragooned teacher-compliance by imposing 'a shared language ... a common language' (Stannard & Huxford, 2007, pp. 116-117), or given the alarm bell rung by a former Editor of this journal in the period which led to the introduction of the National Curriculum:

In Britain too there is growing concern at government determination to extend centralised control of instruction. Nanette Whitbread ... has detected a new confrontative style in pamphlets and policy-statements from the DES. ... The language is changing, Whitbread notes. Teachers have become 'agents' whose role is to 'deliver instructions' to students. (Smith, 1986, pp. 164-165)

The reinvigorated discourse of English teaching-as-delivery did not let me speak. It (re)constructed me for the classroom not only as subaltern but as a blank slate, someone whose prior experience and expertise, and whose past work, undertaken in the now-superseded tongue, was of no consequence. It negated the orientation of that past work, and attempted to impose a new direction which led away from what I felt to be the principles and values out of which sprang my teacherly commitments and pedagogical approaches. To the extent that they set themselves in opposition to the new discourse, those values and principles were not to be tolerated or accommodated any more.

Using Words for Effect

I came to understand my response to the Revised Level Descriptors document, and to similar policy documents of the time, as a form of 'not-learning'. (The phrase is Herbert Kohl's, from a remarkable essay first published in 1991 and later re-printed) It seems to have been a necessary refusal, taken in order to safeguard a bedrock conception of how students learn in English lessons and consequently how I must approach the matter of teaching. The intention of such documents was to make English teachers reframe our work and so begin firstly to act and subsequently to think in new ways. The method was to authorise one sole vernacular. Failure to speak it, however eloquently one might speak other dialects, rendered one mute and so, ignorable.

This new lingua franca was steeped in notions of fixed 'ability' and worked to reconfirm them. References to the 'ability' of students, or to their 'ability levels', still permeate the policy texts and are never seen as problematic. The tendency for the language of 'ability' to frame and stabilise how a pupil is made present, made to 'be', and so how she is understood and responded to, has

been criticised often enough, not least in *FORUM*. Such language finds its justification or confirmation in Level Descriptors and official explanations of grades or test-scores. Here are two examples:

Level 4: Pupils' writing ... is lively and thoughtful. Ideas are often sustained and developed in interesting ways ... Vocabulary choices are often adventurous and words are used for effect. Pupils are beginning to use grammatically complex sentences, extending meaning.

Level 5: Pupils' writing is varied and interesting ... using a more formal style where appropriate. Vocabulary choices are imaginative and words are used precisely. Sentences, including complex ones, and paragraphs are coherent, clear and well developed. (QCDA, 2010, p. 18)

What might warrant this hierarchy of skills, attributes and qualities? Who decreed 'lively and thoughtful' less meritorious than 'varied and interesting'? Why is 'using words precisely' more to be rewarded than 'using words for effect'? (And aren't all words used for effect, which is to say for meaning?) Do grammatically complex sentences extend meaning, or obscure it? Is there a useful difference between 'adventurous' and 'imaginative' vocabulary-choices? Isn't part of the point of deploying imaginative vocabulary to appropriate its adventurous charge? Why not, in short, assess pupil writing on its own terms in its own time and context, rather than size it up like Procrustes and fit it, one way or another, to some pre-fashioned contraption?

Because, it will be objected, in a system that compels them regularly to track and level and (re)assign target grades, this is what teachers needs must. They too find themselves fitted to the merciless frame. A sanctioned set of Level Descriptors helps transmute written or spoken words into the evidential data of progress. The Level Descriptor becomes the ready-reckoner in the head. Its terminology provides the common language through which to discuss a pupil's work. Take away Level Descriptors and teachers will still have 'some pre-fashioned contraption' by which to arrive at judgements about a pupil's work; only it will be their own device: subjective, private, opaque. Fairer to everybody if criteria or standards for assessment are fixed objectively and made the single point of reference.

Except I think this procedure isn't 'fairer'. Or rather, it's only fairer within the conception of formal education as at bottom a practice of ranking pupils against an arbitrary norm. Rather than a ready-reckoner, teachers need to carry in their heads some way to keep the act of assessment more conscious of itself, more alert to all that's involved in appreciating and responding to the work done and hence to the pupil who has done it in her situated complexities. Nor is tracking, levelling or grade-targeting an adequate proxy, summation or harvest for the work of assessing pupils' learning. The shared language, the common ground, for talking about such work is not to be found in stratified collections

of pre-moulded sentences but in the continually-scrutinised and replenished understanding and articulation of what it is to be a teacher at work assessing. The burden of that work must shift: from a process of matching pupils' words against a handed-down tabulation of elements towards its obverse, the expression in action of the teacher's professional values, understanding and experience.

An Open Field

The variations of phrase and the distinctions of vocabulary which mark out each successive Level Descriptor from its predecessor remain drastically inadequate as descriptions of pupils' writing or talk, and license a debilitating failure of imagination (conceived as the ability to be where the other person is) on the part of the teacher. Central to teaching is the way the teacher watches and listens to the pupil and interprets what the pupil says and does, or doesn't say and do. That interpretation will come to be framed in language, especially if it is to be made apparent to others. These days it will either frame itself qualmlessly in the sanctioned tongue, or those insights and understandings made conscious in a different language will have to be translated. This is what Level Descriptors are for: they offer to describe a reality (for the writing is indeed lively and thoughtful and uses words for effect) but in exchange they frank its value. In doing so they mobilise the entire 'ability-based' context and the consequences which ensue. Teachers may assess, but only in the language prescribed. And so what the teacher consulted at the outset as a handy phrase-book ends up speaking through her and for her, over-dubbing her own voice.

The seminal act of attending to pupil or class, thinking about what is seen and heard, and so coming to a better (but never final) understanding seems to me a foundational activity for the art of teaching. It requires a particular kind of perception, one whose emphases or concerns will derive from (and reveal) the teacher's fundamental understanding of what it is to be acting to foster the pupil's educational development. It will resist the atomisation of the pupil-in-performance which Level Descriptors and similar pre-digested approaches authorise and encourage. John Berger, exchanging letters with his daughter about what it is to perceive, suggests that:

[p]erception never only takes in a single fact or a single series of facts. It's always receiving messages from a circuit or a whole field of energy. It picks up waves rather than particles. (Berger & Berger, 2003, p. 27)

A teacher's pedagogical perceptiveness may amplify particular messages from the 'whole field' which is the pupil. But it must also sustain in play the sense of the pupil as indeed a 'field'. And, at best in my view, as an open field. The teacher will try to retain a conception of the pupil's mind as akin to that unlimited inner space the poet Coleridge (inspired by another poet's work) once evoked:

[You will note] the marvellous independence or true imaginative absence of all particular place & time [in *The Faery Queene*] – it is neither in the domains of History or Geography, is ignorant of all artificial boundary – truly in the land of Faery – i.e. in mental space. (Foakes, 1987, pp. 409-410)

I read Coleridge's notion of 'mental space' as recognition of the limitless capacity of imagination and thought, and hence of the capacity to learn. Coleridge's boundless conception might offer grounds for the working hypothesis of unlimited educability, and be the only possible definition of that 'true potential' which teachers are often exhorted (impossibly) to enable their pupils somehow to reach or achieve.

Faery space, marvellously independent, is ideal space, to be sure. Real pupils live in and are subject to history and geography, and the realities of many another domain, and must reckon with these determinants. But the shaping restraints exerted by material existence may be superseded in the mind, that through the mind they may be superseded materially. Without a full untrammelled countervailing conception, such as Coleridge's, of anyone's mental 'space' or learning capacity, it seems to me teachers are more prone to begin to believe their pupils' minds come predefined, and develop (or fail to) only as described by the language of Level Descriptors and their ilk. Such countervailing conceptions need keeping alive.

In his book *The Wild Places* Robert Macfarlane sets out to reconsider his knowledge of particular kinds of physical space. He does so through direct experience coupled with highly alert attention and reception rendered discriminatingly into words. He reconsiders also what it is to map such space, and so make it seemingly understood and known. He writes:

Broadly speaking, there are two types of map: the grid and the story. A grid map places an abstract geometric meshwork upon a space, within which any item or individual can be co-ordinated ... The power of grid maps is that they make it possible for any individual or object to be located within an abstract totality of space. But their virtue is also their danger: that they reduce the world only to data, that they record space independent of being. Story-maps, by contrast, represent a place as it is perceived by an individual or by a culture moving through it ... They are living conceptions, idiosyncratically created ... born of experience and of attention ... Maps such as these, held in the mind, are alert to a landscape's volatility as well as its fixtures ... They are born of a sophisticated literacy of place, rather than aspiring solely to the neutral organisation of data. (2007, pp. 141-145)

By a close and scrupulous attention born of fertile receptiveness, Macfarlane is able to save from dismissal or disregard features of place otherwise unregistered. The way he makes himself available to conceive the landscape, or moments in

it, enables him to re-present it in ways which value it more justly because more faithfully. He notices the way a chapel door 'opened with an ease that belied its weight, its bottom edge gliding above the flagstones of the porch, which were dipped by the passage of many feet'. (p. 220) He notices how windblown marram-grass leans over and inscribes 'a portion of a perfect arc in the sand with its sharp tip, like the pencil-arm of a compass'. (p. 252)

Macfarlane records a 'thawing of vision' (p. 227) which helps him see afresh elements and dispositions of landscapes with which he thought himself already familiar. This thawing, a process which takes place across the duration of the book, schools his understanding of wild places: of what wildness is, and where it is. He comes to understand not only how wildness gives the lie to his initial conception of it (as outside history), but how wildness can be a quality or property of people as well as of place.

A Benign Re-estrangement

As I read Macfarlane's book I wondered at (or did I merely fancy?) the correspondences between his lived encountering of landscapes he perceives as wild and the encounters that take place between teachers and pupils in the seemingly-tamed terrain of classrooms. If it is possible, and not merely fanciful, to come at the inner landscape somewhat as Macfarlane comes at the outer, perhaps his version of 'wildness' may stand for that unique otherness which is each pupil at her or his chair, mapped currently by the grids of levels and oriented by target grades, and so known, but only by a wrongheaded exactitude which misses what it would seem most securely to have fixed. The grid, and the language ratifying it, record the 'space' of the pupil independent of her being. But it is with the 'being' that teachers are properly concerned.

We continue to need ways of talking about assessment or pupil progress more commensurate with what they try to describe, and scoured of the conviction that 'progress' happens (and should happen) in stages laid out beforehand. Since the description attempted is of an aspect of Being-in-the-world, the language of assessment should endeavour to be more story map than grid map. It would be energised by the requirement to look more closely and attend more openly, the better to choose words which match what has been perceived. It would be provisional, conscious of the pupil as a dynamic, as a 'potential' rather than as having potential, and so as strictly unpredictable. That wild element would retain its due. There would be no sense in furnishing teachers with a set of sentences supposedly able to meet every case, or at least to capture closely enough the activity and presentation of each pupil at a given point or age. Instead, the emphasis would be on teachers reinvigorating themselves as lookers, listeners and articulators of what is taking place in their classroom, and on a benign re-estrangement of pupils, the better to re-encounter them.

Perhaps this is mere fancy. Impractical; untrustworthy. Such a proposal does not sit with a system geared to summative assessment. It is not directly

amenable to articulating gradations of performance conceived before the event. It offers no handy ladder of norms by which to gauge progress. It turns away from the space mapped by currently-prevailing techniques of assessment, whose overriding effect is to instil in many pupils an abiding sense of failure and inadequacy. That sense, I suspect, finds an echo in many teachers, compelled to track and level in the approved manner and so to work against their teacherly dispositions and beliefs.

Alison Clark researches with young children to evaluate and improve Early Years settings. She records (2007, p. 357) how she once asked a group of three year olds, her expert witnesses, to draw a map of 'what's important here' in their setting. A child pointed to what she had drawn and asked: 'Can I have me on here? Because I like me'. It can be a profound question: the extent to which the pupil (and the teacher) may be present in the process of formal education. How fully, how meaningfully, in any combination of Level Descriptors is the pupil 'here' (let alone in the telegraphese of fixed-ability: 'a grade B kid', 'less able')? And, as the questioning child also reminds us, there is the issue of why the pupil (the teacher) might want to be 'here' anyway.

If, as appears, the Secretary of State for Education, to further his own destructive political agenda, will abolish NC Level Descriptors at Key Stages 1 and 2, perhaps there is a moment to be seized by those for whom the language of assessment is still understood (and spoken) in ways exiled for the past two decades. Such understanding would, for assessment purposes, warrant far more often the telling of stories than the consulting of grids. It would require a vocabulary of assessment be unpredictable, because alive to the individual event. Alive also to assessment as an ethical act, the language of assessment would be concerned to tell careful truth about what a student comes to grips with through learning: what she puzzles over, imagines, accomplishes, keeps pursuing. It would disguise neither its own provisionality nor its fallibility, nor deny the otherness (the wildness?) of the pupil. It would help the three year old, or the Key Stage 3 year old, put the 'me' on here, and agree that here indeed is a 'me,' found and recognised, and left at large.

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