

# 10

## Keeping the Lights On: A Play in Two Acts

*Mari Cruice*

### Act one

[A small office in the English department of a modern secondary school. There are five black leather swivel chairs, five desks in varying states of order, and two desktop computers. Wall-to-wall shelving groans with collections of novels, plays and poems. In one corner there is a small fridge, on top of which there is a kettle and an eclectic collection of mugs.]

SAM and MEGAN are two English teachers. They both completed their Doctorates in Education ('EdD') just over two years ago and now teach in the English department.]

MEGAN [*looking nervously into a mug to check whether it's clean, then pouring in water from a kettle*]: I bumped into one of our EdD tutors today.

SAM [*sitting at a computer, typing quickly*]: What, at Kingston Uni?

MEGAN: Yeah, Victoria. I haven't seen her for ages.

[*MEGAN sits down at her desk, but turns her chair to face SAM.*]

SAM [*swivelling in her chair to face Megan*]: Me neither. How is she?

MEGAN [*smiling and nodding*]: Really well. Still crazy busy, still teaching teachers.

It was one of those intense, chance meetings on a wet and windy morning that somehow seems to have been predestined.

SAM: Blimey, that's a bit Shakespearean for a Thursday morning in suburbia.

What did she say, 'hail to thee, Thane of Cawdor'? [Shakespeare, 1998: 774].

MEGAN: No, she asked me if I want to write a chapter for a book she is planning.

SAM: There you go, that's pretty much the modern equivalent: 'All hail to thee, thou shalt be published hereafter.'

MEGAN: I don't know about that, 'I have no spur to prick the sides of my intent.'

SAM: Well, I can be your Lady Macbeth and goad you into action. What's the book about?

MEGAN: It's about theory in practitioner inquiry and how practitioners interact with it.

SAM: Ha! We don't; unless we're in the middle of a course. We're too busy laminating plenary cards and marking with three different coloured pens to think theoretically.

MEGAN: Sad but true. You know, after I spoke to Victoria, I dug out some of the pieces of writing I did when I was working on my Doctorate.

SAM: And...

MEGAN: And I realised that when I started to read theorists: Stephen Ball [1990, 1994, 1997, 2003, 2007, 2008]... Foucault [1977, 1980a, 1980b, 1984] for instance, I was so excited to have found their work. It was like discovering amazing photographers who had travelled to all the places I'd been, but somehow they'd managed to capture everything with so much more artistry and flair than I ever could.

SAM: I'm glad your first reaction was excitement. I remember feeling cross that we hadn't been exposed to their ideas before. I'd spent over ten years teaching before... How can I extend your metaphor?... Before things started to come into focus. Anyway, I've got to run. [*She stands up*].

MEGAN: Oh don't go yet. Wait till the end of break. I haven't had a properly intellectual conversation for at least eighteen months.

[*She stands up to get a biscuit from on top of the fridge.*]

Biscuit?

SAM [*takes a chocolate digestive from the packet and sits down again*]: Ta.

[*There is a long pause*].

MEGAN [*dunking her biscuit thoughtfully in her tea*]: You know... Speaking of focus... The reason Foucault could take better pictures than either of us was because he had the capacity to zoom in and out of history. His knowledge was so sweeping and deep that he could pan over great swathes of time, then focus with clarity on more modern events that we, with our relative ignorance, can only see fuzzily [*taking a soggy biscuit out of the mug*].

SAM: Yes, I do remember that clarity [*examining her perfect biscuit*], that mental sharpness that I felt when I looked out of the ivory tower, seeing through the eyes of giants. But now we've descended back into the fray, and my vision is blurring because tomorrow I've got five lessons to teach, two of which are being observed by the powers that be and if I don't get 'Outstanding' for both... [*biting the biscuit*].

MEGAN: What? You'll feel that your identity as an Excellent Teacher will be threatened?

SAM: It's more than that these days, isn't it! My livelihood will be threatened [*stuffing the remaining bit of biscuit into her mouth*]. Now, you may have time to ponder the niceties of educational research, but I've got photocopying to do.

MEGAN: Blimey, what's happened to you?

SAM: Nothing's happened to me. It's just that reading Ball and Foucault are not going to help me convince the Senior Leader that I am ticking all of the latest set of boxes. And while I might not have changed, the system we are working in has shifted enormously, in case you haven't noticed. It's suddenly much easier

to lose your job. Look around you, there are ghosts everywhere. Colleagues who have been fired, teachers who have euthanised their careers after 'substandard' lesson observations. They are haunting every staffroom I know of.

MEGAN: Yes, and if we'd collectively paid more attention to Ball, we may not have ended up with so much misery in our midst [*taking her iPad from her desk*]. Look, this was a passage from Ball that I cut and pasted into my notes. He wrote it over *ten years ago* and it seems frighteningly prescient:

[...]there are pressures on individuals, formalized by appraisals, annual reviews and data bases, to make their contribution to the performativity of the unit. In this, there is a real possibility that authentic social relations are replaced by judgemental relations wherein persons are valued for their productivity alone. Their value as a person is eradicated. This contributes to a general 'emptying out' of social relationships, which are left 'flat' and 'deficient in affect' [Lash and Urry, 1994: 15]. Again, performance has no room for caring.

[Ball, 2003: 220]

SAM: That is exactly what's happening. Staff don't feel cared for as people with lives and identities beyond the workplace. They are increasingly feeling like they are employed as a means to an end, the 'end' being the achievement of an 'Outstanding' inspection grade. And if at any point their practice is perceived to be at risk of not meeting the inspectorate's criteria for Outstanding, their jobs are at risk. Never mind that the criteria constantly shift, or that the consistency of the observers' judgements is hugely variable. No, we're not in a conversation, we're in a competition, and it doesn't matter that the rules of the game are unfair. We must compete or we'll be out of a job.

MEGAN: But *you're* not going to get fired, because you have read Stephen Ball [1997] and you're going to create a 'fabrication' for the very purpose of being observed. At least you understand the unwritten rules.

SAM: Yes, I haven't forgotten what I learned, but Management got wise to that game didn't they? They understood that all-singing, all-dancing lessons were being produced performatively; for the purposes of inspections or observations. So now what happens is, they ask the students whether the lesson that is being observed is 'representative' of lessons in general. Which means we can no longer fabricate. That's why we're all working sixty-hour weeks. There is nowhere to run and nowhere to hide.

MEGAN: There we go, you're referencing Foucault.

SAM: Ah yes, the panopticon [Foucault, 1980b: 147]. The ubiquitous, hierarchical surveillance system.

MEGAN: Exactly. All that theory is deeply relevant. That's why I felt so energised when I discovered it. Brilliant thinkers were illuminating our experiences, describing them with an uncanny accuracy, making sense of our collective fear and compliance.

SAM: You're right. Back to the beautifully focused pictures. There is so much collective wisdom out there, but since finishing my studies, it's hard to stay in touch with it all. For a start, I no longer have library access, no Athens password, no keys to the ivory tower... We learn to think theoretically, to have our lives illuminated by brilliance and then, at the end of a Master's course or a doctoral programme, the lights are switched off.

MEGAN: Well, you could go and work in a university?

SAM: But then we're right back at square one in terms of knowledge transfer. Professional doctorates are supposed to...

MEGAN: Supposed to what?

SAM: Well, they are supposed to bridge a gap aren't they? We are practitioners, but we've been schooled in theory. We should be crossing the moat every day, but since finishing my studies, it's hard not to feel that the drawbridge has been pulled up again and I am locked outside the tower.

MEGAN: And you resent that?

SAM: I don't know. Maybe I was being too idealistic, thinking that I would be able to share my theoretical knowledge more widely within the school. I imagined setting up a research group, having fruitful discussions about pedagogy...

MEGAN: But?

SAM: But look around you. The dominant political group doesn't like intellectualism in education. University education departments are being closed down all over the country. The dominant group values craft over theory and compliance over autonomy. It probably serves me right! Ball would say that I'm a product of my time, a neo-liberal subject; my studies were just a calculated act; an investment in my neo-liberal, economic self [Ball, 2003]. Maybe my dark heart was after personal rewards, and I'm annoyed that I seem to have grossly miscalculated.

MEGAN: Yeah but you know... You can only articulate that because you have done so much reading. And your heart isn't only dark. You're from a huge family of teachers and both your grandfathers worked down the mines; emancipation through education is in your blood. I know you well enough to understand that you didn't do all that studying just to get a promotion.

SAM: True. And that's another key theory we've both internalised. What did Perry [1970] say about the road to academic maturity? That we go from viewing the truth in absolute terms and move towards a commitment to relativism. We develop the ability to recognise multiple, coexisting, conflicting versions of the truth.

MEGAN: Exactly, and that includes recognising multiple, conflicting, versions of ourselves. We may be white, middle class subjects, so saturated in neo-liberal discourses that we inevitably try to climb our way up some self-actualising but oh so greasy pole, just to survive; whilst at the same time, we are Celtic women, committed to social justice, accepting low-paid work in leaky, overcrowded buildings because we are passionate about the subject of English, a subject which has been particularly hard-hit by the inspectorate's narrow focus, on 'pace' and 'progress'.

SAM: There's a great line by Scheurich [1997: 1] which I know by heart: 'I have wavered and mis-stepped, I have gone backward after I have gone forward; I have drifted sideways along a new imaginary, forgetting from where I once thought I had started. I have fabricated personae and unities...' That's how I feel, that nothing is simple or linear.

MEGAN: You said it. You know it by heart. All this theory has become a part of who you are. You view the world differently because you spent five long years studying, learning to look through different lenses, recognising complexity...

SAM: You're right, but you are one of the very few people I can talk to about what I am seeing. Am I going to bring up the problems of performativity or discuss the niceties of postmodern theory in a middle-management meeting? There is no scope for those kinds of ideas there, we mainly talk about numbers: which student is working at which level; which staff member is at risk of not getting the highest score in an observation, should an inspector call...

MEGAN: And at those meetings, we are mainly silent.

SAM: I know. We don't want to engage in the discourse of data because we know that so much data is flawed but we don't feel we can resist it. Didn't you write your thesis on assessment?

MEGAN: Yeah, it was a detailed exploration of assessment practices in secondary English classrooms in England and Wales. And I found so many numbers are invalid or unreliable or just patently made up. Teachers are being pressured into demonstrating that students have made progress up a linear trajectory, so they make up numbers. One teacher I interviewed was asked by her head teacher to change her data *five times*, because the progress in maths didn't match progress in English, and because boys were not doing as well as girls! And they don't want students making too much progress either, because that would cause problems down the line for the next teacher who has to show that ALL students are uniformly travelling along their predestined routes to their 'expected' levels.

SAM: It's enough to drive you bonkers. I look around and everyone is whispering that the emperor has no clothes; that the data is dodgy, but no one is saying it out loud. There is a huge culture of fear in education today. Everyone feels more expendable and dissent really is a sackable offence, so we all mutter and dissemble and fill in the boxes with numbers that we know, deep down, are damagingly reductive at best and at worst, untrue.

MEGAN: Well one of my favourite readings of Hamlet is that he was ground down by the pressure to dissemble. Most people read the 'to be or not to be' speech as a monologue about suicide. Hamlet is asking whether or not to end his life, but, early on in the play, he turns on his mother and says: 'Seems, madam? Nay it is. I know not "seems"' [Shakespeare, 1998: 295]. So Rubenfeld [2008] argues that the famous soliloquy could be asking: 'to be or to seem?' Hamlet is wracked by the inauthenticity of the interactions that he sees around him, with so many subjects in the rotten state of Denmark pretending. But Hamlet doesn't want to 'act', in either sense of the word, he just wants to 'be', but given the self-seeking corruption of those in power, merely being is a difficult task.

[The two friends sit in silence as the room darkens. The atmosphere is heavy, they have expressed what they so often repress and their words hang in the air as a hint of red light seeps onto the stage. There is pregnant pause. The tension is broken suddenly by a very loud, comic honking sound, which comes from Megan's phone.]

[SAM laughs at the ridiculous noise].

MEGAN [Smiling respectfully as she reads the message on her phone]: Ah, another pithy tweet on education policy from Michael Rosen [@MichaelRosenYes].

SAM: Do you find time for all that Twitter stuff?

MEGAN: Absolutely! I think you'd enjoy it too, it's a place where people are actually speaking out and describing their experiences of school. There are lots of very powerful blogs out there as well, and teachers are increasingly finding ways of developing real, meaningful communities of practice through digital networks.

SAM: More theory.

MEGAN: What?

SAM: Wenger's Communities of Practice [Wenger, 1998]! You know, having said that I've returned to the fray and can't find time for academics any more, that's not quite true. The one thing that I do find time for is my writing group and I know that all the background reading we did on the EdD reinforced for me how important membership of that group is.

MEGAN: Is this the group of teachers that you meet up with on Saturdays to write with?

SAM: Yeah, we meet in museums or parks and we write together and talk about school and writing and how to teach writing. It's a grass roots movement and the most powerful professional development I've ever had. And it's growing. There are now loads of groups of teachers, meeting all over England and Wales to write and to share. Have a look at our website: [www.nwp.org.uk](http://www.nwp.org.uk).

MEGAN: That sounds cool.

SAM: Yes, it helps to keep me sane because it feels real. There's never any talk of grades or levels. We do evaluate each other's writing, but it's very different from the assessment practices that we have to use in school.

MEGAN: Hmmmm, well at the heart of any evaluation is a value . . .

SAM: Exactly, and first and foremost we are able to *value* each other as people with stories to tell, interesting observations to make and feelings to express. When we write and listen to each other's writing we understand that on some mornings, some of us manage to articulate beautifully whatever it is we have in mind. On other mornings, some of us can't find words or ideas, we just end up with scribbles on the page.

MEGAN: English teachers well before us have known about this and articulated it with passion. David Holbrook, who wrote *English for Meaning* in the 1970s said [again referring to her iPad]:

When we stand in front of a class of children – we do not know what is going to happen. Will it be any good? Will the end-products make sense when we read them through next morning? Will there be anything there at the end of the hour that wasn't there at the beginning? Will there be something with order and meaning

in the pupils' souls at the end rather than mere blots and scrawled paper? Will they beat us? Or refresh us? These are moments of 'life'. They have to be lived through, and God alone knows what the outcome will be. Every creative act, and every lesson, is a 'surrender to creative fate'. The other terminology – 'control' and 'competence' – avoids the complexities by implying that we can deal explicitly with entities. This is to falsify. We can only make these capacities seem more accessible and controllable if we implicitly reduce them thus to mechanistic and functional dimensions by our terminology.

[Holbrook, 1979: 40]

SAM: I know. We've been talking about this for years, the way in which English teaching has flat-lined, shifting in focus from the messiness and difficulty of meaning-making to the relatively facile but eminently more visible task of inserting linguistic devices in texts. But if we don't overtly demonstrate that every single child has made 'better than expected' progress in every twenty minute slot, we are judged to be Requiring Improvement and are at risk of entering the particular circle of hell that some of our colleagues are in: more judgements and more intense observations.

MEGAN: All the pressures of the panopticon, because progress is interpreted as linear, visible and measurable.

SAM: But progress in English is erratic and complex!

MEGAN [*Sighs deeply*]: I've been reading Eisner again [*finds the book and flicks to page 110, which contains a scrap of pink Post-it*]. He says 'some objectives one cannot articulate, some goals one does not achieve by the end of the academic year, some insights are not measurable, some ends are not known until after the fact' [Eisner, 1985: 110].

SAM: Exactly, not everything that can be counted counts and not everything that counts can be counted.

MEGAN: Thank you Albert Einstein! [*Still reading Eisner wistfully and lovingly*]: Here, you'll like this bit because Eisner's articulating the approach that you use in your writing groups. He says that rather than think in terms of narrow objectives, which can be checked at the end of the lesson, we need to think of an expressive objective which is evocative rather than prescriptive: 'In the expressive context the teacher hopes to provide a situation in which meanings become personalized and in which children produce products both theoretical and qualitative that are as diverse as themselves' [Eisner, 1985: 55].

SAM: Yes, that's what we try to do when we write on Saturday mornings. We create stimulating situations, we organise trips to the South Bank or to the Museum of Childhood or Regent's Park and everybody engages with the stimulus in very different ways and produces wildly different texts as a result. Difficult to do this in classroom situations because . . .

MEGAN: Because we are all told to standardise, to share schemes of work, to narrow down the possibilities so that we can compare one child's work with another's and objectively level their work.

SAM: But we end up levelling out any difference . . .

MEGAN: There are other ways of marking, though. Eisner's covered this ground already. He said 'the evaluative task in this situation is not one of applying a common standard to the products produced, but one of reflecting upon what has been produced in order to reveal its uniqueness and significance' [Eisner, 1985: 55].

SAM: More wisdom. At least we've been exposed to these other ways of thinking and knowing, we've had the chance to spend time in the massive libraries of the universities and deepen our pedagogic knowledge so we can critically engage with the latest trend, not just swallow it whole.

MEGAN: But we are swallowing it aren't we? You're running off to photocopy something for a lesson in which you are going to demonstrate that a significant number of your students have made better-than-expected progress in a very short amount of time. Let me guess, you've probably planned something overtly measurable for a younger year group, like telling them to use 'A FOREST' when writing something persuasive. You'll get them to show that they can use [*counting on her fingers to emphasise the point*]. Alliteration, Fact, Opinion, Rhetorical questions, Emotive language, Statistics and Triplets; and the observer – who is not a specialist English practitioner – will be impressed when all these techniques start appearing in the students' work. There will be Clear and Demonstrable Evidence of Progress and all will be well in the world. Whether or not the kids have any authentic opinions about the subject matter they are attempting to be persuasive about will be irrelevant. Better to have all students showing they can alliterate and use groups of three than to engage fully with messy moral questions that may be discussed for well over twenty minutes without all, or indeed any, students being able to show concrete evidence of progress.

SAM: OK, OK, I see what you are saying and my conscience is groaning, but what should I do instead?

MEGAN: Well, you could start by sharing some of Eisner's theories with your observer. Explain the difference between an objective as it is commonly understood in the current discourse and an expressive objective. Tell him that even though you know that lessons in which discrete objectives are taught can be powerful and necessary, that this particular lesson is not one of them. Go on to set up a rich situation, give the students an exciting stimulus to get them thinking and, instead of the bitty ten minute slots they are so often given, where the first chunk of the lesson is dedicated to establishing success criteria and the last part is given over to checking whether those criteria have been met, ask them to write for forty whole minutes! And state that while you cannot pre-specify what every child will learn at the outset, you can give the students space to reflect, and to capture what they have learned at the end. The question shifts from 'did Johnny learn x?' to 'what did Johnny learn?'

SAM: Yes, I could do that. After too many years of silent fuming, it could be hugely empowering. What did Foucault say? 'It's not a matter of emancipating truth from



every system of power... but of detaching the power of truth from the forms of hegemony, social, economic and cultural, within which it operates at the present time' [Foucault, 1984: 74].

MEGAN: Exactly, power is discursive rather than coercive, power is a 'regime of truth' so we might as well start trying to shift the discourse.

SAM: That just seems like such an enormous task.

MEGAN: Yes, but you're not trying to do it on your own. Think about your Community of Practice. And think about all those authors we read and loved: Michael Apple [2004], Nel Noddings [2003, 2007a, 2007b], bell hooks [1994], David Holbrook [1979], Eisner [1985, 2004], Elliott [1996], Jeffcoate [1992]... All trying in their different ways to counter what Weber [1930] said was 'the disenchantment of the world' through the 'increasing scale, scope, and power of the formal means-ends rationalities of... bureaucracy' [Jenkins, 2000: 12].

SAM: But Weber was writing over a hundred years ago and, as far as I can tell, things have become progressively worse. Look at all the technologies we now have for weighing and measuring, all the spreadsheets and Excel formulae, all designed to chart our relentless, post-Enlightenment, post-enchantment march towards progress. And to be honest, as far as I can tell, most teachers (me included) are just falling into line, saluting Ofsted [*Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills*] when they come and goose-stepping towards retirement, senior management or a nervous breakdown, whichever comes first.

MEGAN [*Starting to laugh*]: Sorry, I've now got an image of the entire staff goose-stepping.

SAM [*Not sharing Megan's amusement*]: OK, that's an unhelpful image. But then so is the image that highly influential journalists and politicians are painting of people working in education, labelling them 'The Blob' [Gove, 2013].

MEGAN: Well, that's a perfect example of what Ball calls the 'discourse of derision' [Ball, 1990: 22]. If they mock teachers, call us moaners, dismiss any criticism of reform as emanating from the desire to protect vested interests, they are halfway to victory before we've even armed ourselves for battle.

SAM: But discussion about pedagogy shouldn't be an ideological battleground. It should be a grown-up debate between people who actually know what they are talking about, where everyone acknowledges that there are diverse approaches to learning and teaching. And, as all the literature on tolerance tells us, we can't be genuinely tolerant unless we take a considerable amount of time to understand other mentalities. We can't tolerate and respect something if we don't understand it, that's just indifference or ignorance.

Turner-Bisset [1999] listed types of knowledge that contribute towards teacher professionalism. The first one was obvious and I don't suppose – despite what the anti-blob brigade would have people think – that many teachers would dispute the idea that top of the list is subject knowledge. If you don't know your subject, of course, you can't teach it well, and kids usually find out pretty quickly if you know your stuff or not.

MEGAN: What else is on the list?

SAM: Well, the second one is syntactic subject knowledge.

MEGAN: Which means knowledge of how to get your subject across, like knowing that kids never spell 'definitely' incorrectly when you tell them it's got 'init' in it?

SAM: That's it! The kind of knowledge that you build up as your career goes on, hundreds of ways of making a subject more accessible, memorable, meaningful... Then there's knowledge of the syllabus, knowledge of your students, self-knowledge and so on. If you're ever feeling insecure about your professionalism, you should use her list to remind yourself just how much you know.

MEGAN: And how will reflecting on the extent of my professional knowledge help me to combat the anti-blob brigade and shift the discourse?

SAM: I was getting to that, because the last type of knowledge necessary for teacher professionalism is knowledge of the wider political environment.

MEGAN: Yeah, I have another image in my head now, I think it's from Fullan [1993: 5]. He said that 'productive educational change at its core, is not the capacity to implement the latest policy, but rather the ability to survive the vicissitudes of planned and unplanned change while growing and developing'.

SAM: But, as you so cruelly pointed out, I am just implementing the latest policy, occupying a place I didn't want to occupy, being someone I didn't want to be. I read Elliott and Kushner's [2007] critique of educational reform which lamented the fact that teachers in the UK have been encouraged to view pedagogy as the construction of rationally ordered learning environments. He said that such a system leaves little space for the 'personal' and that it neglects the complexity of classroom life.

MEGAN: I know it, you know it, but what are we going to *do* about it?

SAM: Well, the very least we can do is be honest in our own classrooms, take our discretionary space and engage with the complexities that working with hundreds of unique individuals inevitably brings. We can plan lessons using expressive objectives and 'come out' as pedagogically educated. We can risk non-compliance – and we can write!

MEGAN: Ha ha, you have indeed been the spur to prick the sides of my intent. I am going to write that chapter for Victoria! I am going to explore all the ideas we've been talking about: the joy of engaging with theory, the meaning and energy we find when theories perfectly label and describe our lives; and the capability we have to engage in what we feel is best practice in the face of reductive, dominant political discourses and (why not?) do our own sense-making, develop theories of our own.

SAM: And *I'm* going to do a free writing workshop without putting an objective on the board.

[*Bell rings.*]

SAM: Ah, I go and it is done, the bell invites me.

MEGAN: Fear not, it is a knell that summons you to pedagogical heaven.

SAM: And *Ofsted* hell.

## Lights off

### Act two

[*Back in the English office on a Tuesday evening, Sam is hunched over a huge pile of exercise books that she is marking.*]

SAM: Damn, damn, damn.

MEGAN [*Enters*]: What's up?

SAM: I've run out of pink pens so I can't write my 'Even Better Ifs' on these poems.

MEGAN [*Laughs*]: I thought I'd walked in on a major crisis.

SAM: This is a major crisis, my marking is being scrutinised tomorrow.

MEGAN: Well, just write: 'even better if you'd written your "Even Better Ifs" '.

SAM: 'Even Better If' not everything always has to be marked so formulaically; 'Even Better If' I can just appreciate and respond positively to the creations of the students.

[*MEGAN Empties her bag which contains seven books, all with Post-its sticking out of them. She puts the books on her desk.*]

SAM [*Looking suspiciously at Megan's pile of reading material*]: You've been reading again, haven't you?

MEGAN: [*Standing up and parodying the format of group therapy*]: Yes, my name is Megan, I am an intellectual.

SAM [*Laughing*]: Yeah, you need help.

MEGAN: Well you're the one in crisis.

SAM: Only because my pen's run out.

MEGAN: No, you're more deeply discombobulated than that.

SAM: Yes, I'm exasperated because I am expected to comment on knowledge building in English as if it were knowledge building in science. There is a tacit assumption that every piece of writing that I encounter can be graded hierarchically; that the 'Even Better Ifs' are uncontentious. But as Peter Elbow said over forty years ago '... writing is a black box: it is making marks on paper and then waiting to see what happens when other people come along and stare at those marks... The reactions to a set of words are only partly a function of the words; they are also a function of the mood, temperament, and background of the reader' [Elbow, 1973: 133].

MEGAN: So, for both you and your students, 'Even Better If' you weren't in such a bad mood.

SAM [*Glancing at her watch, it is twenty to five*]: Sorry. I'm knackered. I've got to finish this pile of books and my A-Level marking tonight. I think my own kids are going to go hungry.

MEGAN [*Pulls out a shiny, hardback book. It is Knowledge and Knowers: Towards a Realist Sociology of Education* [Maton, 2014].]: Perhaps this will help.

SAM: What, theory as therapy?

MEGAN: Well yes, if you want to put it like that: Theory as sense-making, theory as clarity, theory as a tool which helps us to see where our emergent identities are at loggerheads with wider political trends.

SAM [*Slumping down on the leather chair and putting her feet up on another chair, as if she were on a psychotherapist's couch*]: Go on then Doctor, what's your diagnosis? Am I beyond help? [*Sneezes*]

MEGAN [*Offering a box of tissues, as a therapist might*]: Tissue?

SAM: Thanks.

MEGAN: Well, I think that this book by Karl Maton, hot off the press, might help. He's written a chapter called 'Canons, knowers and progress in the arts and humanities' [Maton, 2014: 86–106]. First of all, he articulates exactly what you've just said. Science has a hierarchical knowledge structure whereas the humanities has a horizontal knowledge structure.

SAM: Yeah we discussed this on the EdD. I think Bernstein said that science develops by integrating previous knowledge and the arts add segments horizontally [Bernstein, 2000]. I always remember the image of physics being like a shiny high-rise skyscraper and English being like a collection of huts on a dusty plain. That imagery seems to encapsulate the relative status of the disciplines too.

MEGAN: Do I detect a tone of self-pity creeping in?

SAM: Not at all, I'd rather live on a dusty plain building my own hut than feel stuck in an elevator in a high-rise. But aren't we digressing? [*In a mocking, melodramatic tone, putting her hand to her forehead*]: We don't have much time...

MEGAN: Well, I don't think we are digressing, but I can cut to the chase if you're keen to get to the shop to buy more pens. Maton theorises not just knowledge structures, but knower structures [Maton, 2014: 93].

SAM [*Groans*].

MEGAN: Stick with the programme. Look, here's Maton's diagram from page 93: [MEGAN shows SAM the diagram which has a line from left to right which represents a continuum from 'horizontal knower structures' to 'hierarchical knower structures'; it is intersected at its midpoint by a vertical line which runs from top (labelled 'hierarchical knowledge structures') to bottom (labelled 'horizontal knowledge structures'). Four quadrants are named: 'Elite' (a coincidence of hierarchical knowledge structures and hierarchical knower structures); 'Knower' (hierarchical knower structures and horizontal knowledge structures); 'Relativist' (horizontal knower structures and horizontal knowledge structures); 'Knowledge' (hierarchical knowledge structures and horizontal knower structures)].

SAM [*Trying to focus on the diagram, but struggling to concentrate*]: I'm having a 'so what' moment. How is this going to help me?

MEGAN: So, you are exasperated a good deal of the time, because, as you've already said, you imagine the subject of English, which you spend most of your waking hours teaching, as part of a horizontal knowledge structure.

SAM: Right.

MEGAN: But the people who are devising the Whole-school Marking Policy don't necessarily share your view of the subject and have simply put English in the 'knowledge' segment of the diagram. That is, English is a body of knowledge that can be accessed by all (hence the horizontal knower structure) and that is

hierarchically organised (hence the requirement for all marking to contribute to databases which track students' linear movement up a ladder of progress).

SAM: I'm with you so far.

MEGAN: And you're starting to see the relevance?

SAM [*Uncertain*]: Hmmm.

MEGAN: You, on the other hand, would put English, or aspects of it, in the 'Relativist' box. You are arguing, with Bernstein, that English has weak 'verticality' and that in an English class, we're not always explicitly building on what has gone before, we are often adding segments horizontally.

SAM: Yes, hence some of my frustration with the ubiquitous 'Even Better Ifs' which assume the premise that we can always know where learners are on a hierarchy. Peter Elbow, much cited in my writing group, said that 'The striking thing about learning to write is that people have been trying to teach it for as long as they've tried to teach mathematics yet no one has succeeded in making this kind of orderly, hierarchical progression that works' [1973: 135].

MEGAN: Exactly [*putting on her therapist's voice*]: I feel we're making progress in our session today. But there's more to the picture than just knowledge. Remember when we had our discussion a few weeks ago and we were talking about theory as a lens which brings everything into focus? Well, let's see if the final bit of Maton's model will help you see things even more clearly.

SAM: Go on. I've got five more minutes for my theory as therapy session, then I am going to the school shop to buy more pens.

MEGAN: Ok. Maton contends that it's not just knowledge that we need to theorise; we need to combine a theory of types of knowledge with a sense of how *knowers* are understood. He has four main categories. The born gaze, which means knowers are born with natural talent or even genius. Then, moving down the hierarchy, the social gaze, which means that knowers gain legitimacy by virtue of their social class, gender or race. Then the cultivated gaze where knowers can be inculcated into knowledge through prolonged exposure. Then, relatively weak, is the trained gaze, which is generally applied to disciplines with hierarchical knowledge structures.

SAM: So...

MEGAN: So what?

SAM: No, I've moved beyond 'so what'. I'm thinking! [*reasonably long pause*]: So what you are saying is that I need to be aware of the way in which I imagine knowledge and knowers and then contrast them to the ways in which significant others (colleagues, senior management, politicians) are imagining them. Someone, and I'm not going to mention any names, may think that progress in English is moving up a hierarchical body of canonical knowledge and that only a few, highly talented people are born with the capacity to master the discipline. This elite conception of the subject sits well with assessment practices which construct learners as following on a trajectory based on their early childhood baseline scores (or 'natural talent'). People who view English in this way may

also seek to weed out those who are just not going to 'make the grade'. After all, why waste your time studying English literature if you're never going to 'get it'?

In direct contrast, other people – again, I'm not going to personalise this – conceive of English as consisting of horizontal knowledge and they imagine that all knowers can be inculcated into the aspects of the field that interest them most [*starts to smile*].

MEGAN: Exactly, and if you take the time to find out other people's perspectives and to recognise your own position, you will be able to see more clearly the causes of your irritation and, ideally, to discuss, in an informed dialogue, the relative merits of conceiving of English in a certain way. You might even be able to devise an appropriate assessment policy.

SAM: Can I borrow the Maton book? I think I might share that diagram with my line-manager.

MEGAN: Ah, a breakthrough [*hands over the book*]: Are you rushing off to the school shop before it closes?

SAM: No, I'm not going to do the 'Even Better Ifs' in pink, I'm going to mark in pencil and write: 'have you thought about...?' or, 'I personally enjoyed...' I'm going to reflect on what my students have written which reveals its uniqueness and significance.

[*SAM has a half smile on her face. She appears less frustrated, more engaged with the prospect of the work that she needs to complete. Her task seems more purposeful and she is energised by the small slice of autonomy that she has granted herself. MEGAN starts packing a bag and reaching for her coat.*]

SAM [*Looking at her watch*]: Where are you going?

MEGAN: I'm off home to write the last bit of my play script on theory and practice for Victoria.

SAM: Cool, what are you going to say?

MEGAN: Well, it's an epilogue, last words on the importance of theory for teachers.

SAM [*Smiles*]: Theory as therapy! I must admit, Doctor, I am feeling a bit better.

MEGAN: That's why I've been reading again. It keeps me sane, helps me make sense. I've just read Stephen Covey's *The Speed of Trust* [Covey, 2006]. He describes a fisherman who uses a certain type of lens to enable him to see fish in the water more clearly. In his book, he urges us to look through the lens of trust, to see how it impacts all aspects of our lives.

SAM: Trust goggles!

MEGAN: Yeah, he says that organisations in which people don't trust each other pay a huge 'trust tax' [Covey, 2006: 17]. I think, in a similar way, that if we undervalue theory in education we'll end up paying a huge 'misunderstanding tax' because what theory does is help us to understand that we are sometimes having conversations with people who are not seeing the world as we see it. Unless we engage in some deeper thinking, we are not going to be conversing

or building understanding – *theorising* – we are going to be, at best, turn-taking, at worst, mud-slinging.

SAM: So what are you recommending in your epilogue?

MEGAN: Firstly, an openness to theory.

SAM [*Laughing*]: You'll be trying to get everyone to 'borrow the book'.

MEGAN: Yes, I think teachers should be borrowing books. Books like Tobias and Duffy's investigation, which tries to facilitate a grown-up dialogue between constructivist theorists and proponents of direct instruction [Tobias & Duffy, 2009]. I think that we should all be accessing university libraries as a matter of course. I think that the idea of a profession in which all members are qualified at Master's level is a fine one, and it should be put firmly back on the agenda. It might cost time and money in the short term, but it would reduce the 'misunderstanding tax' that we are all paying as a result of knowledge being created but not transferred, or because people are working alongside colleagues or bosses who are seeing the world through such radically different lenses that misunderstandings and misery are rife.

SAM: You're hoping that theory is going to do some very heavy lifting?

MEGAN: Perhaps. Theory combined with trust.

SAM: You know, if you liked what Covey wrote on trust [Covey, 2006], you should read Martin Buber [Buber, 1970]. If you're trying to persuade people that we need to move from suspicion towards trust, he's your man. You said that if we're not careful, we're going to be reduced to turn-taking or mud-slinging. Buber says that if we want dialogue, we have to have trust. He says that trust depends upon meeting the other with an openness and respect, treating the other as 'thou' not merely 'it'. He is an authority on being not seeming, and he urges us to resist characterising the truth of the other as mere ideology.

MEGAN: We're back where we started, thinking about how we avoid treating people as a means to an end, or an 'it'. We're back to Hamlet's desire to be and not to seem. Back to Ball's warning that within the education system teachers' 'value as a person' is eradicated [Ball, 2003: 220]. Back to the ideal of informed discussions about pedagogy.

SAM: Exactly. But Buber also helps us to see the possibility of direct relationships in which one person openly meets another [Buber, 1970]. We can't do this if we haven't made the effort to understand the other's position. Really, if you read no other philosopher this year, or indeed ever, read Buber, he offers a perfect antidote to anyone sick of spin.

MEGAN: Can I borrow the book?

SAM [*Stands up a chair and, wobbling, reaches up to the top shelf of the office to find her much thumbed copy of Buber's Between Man and Man (2002)*]: My dear, you can *always* borrow the book.

MEGAN: Thanks so much [*looks respectfully at the book which has a faded Post-it on p.22, Megan opens the book to the marked page and reads*]: 'There is genuine dialogue – no matter whether spoken or silent – where each of the participants really has in mind the other or others in their present and particular

being and turns to them with the intention of establishing a living mutual relation between himself and them' [Buber, 2002: 22].

[*The two friends glance at each other; contained in a brief moment of eye contact is an acknowledgement of their deep relationship. They have taken the time to open up to one another, to see each other as Thou.*]

MEGAN: See you tomorrow.

SAM: And tomorrow.

MEGAN: And tomorrow!

[*The women hug, MEGAN leaves. SAM, smiling, returns to her desk and takes up her pencil to begin her marking.*]

## Lights stay on

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