

8 Secondary school English literary studies

Cultivating a knower code

Frances Christie

Introduction

School English is compulsory in most English speaking countries up to the last years of schooling, providing evidence for its status as a subject of significance. In practice, school English has several components, for, like the university studies from which it derives, it exhibits a ‘horizontal knowledge structure’ (Bernstein 2000), with segmented and often incompatible areas of interest (Christie 2012; Christie and Macken-Horarik 2009, 2011). These include, for example, school English literary studies (henceforth SELS), essay writing about social issues, discussion of visual images including films, or producing speeches and other oral presentations about various topics. In addition, in many jurisdictions, such as the Australian state of New South Wales (NSW Board of Studies 2015), there are available units of study beyond compulsory units, for interested students to pursue an expanded range of literary texts or engage in creative writing of stories or poems. My concern here is with papers common to all students in the last years of secondary schooling and, specifically, the literary component examined in these papers. I explore SELS because, despite the range of areas now taught as subject English, literary studies appears to have enduring value. Curriculum documents on official websites across the Anglophone world reveal that, though often proposing a range of texts, what some call the ‘literary canon’ or ‘literary heritage’ remains well established. Why does SELS receive such continuing attention? What constitutes success in SELS? How can we characterize the knowledge practices of SELS?

I argue that a reading of questions set in SELS in senior years reveals that, while students are apparently asked to develop ‘personal opinions’ about literature, in fact they are required to express judgements shared with the imagined examiner. A shared set of culturally-valued understandings about life and human behaviour is what is at issue. To express such understandings students must acquire an appropriate ‘gaze’ on the story. ‘Gazes’ vary in nature depending on the subject of inquiry (see Maton 2010, 2014b). With SELS the ‘gaze’ involves the cultivation of a particular attitudinal stance towards a literary text and a set of procedures for its expression.

Successful adoption of this ‘cultivated gaze’ (Maton 2010) is expressed as a capacity to articulate moral positions and principles by reference to the literary text. The pedagogic discourse of the SELS classroom helps to construct the gaze, whose cultivation takes years of schooling.

In developing this discussion I draw on Legitimation Code Theory (LCT), specifically concepts from the dimensions of Specialization and Semantics (Maton 2014b), to examine the organizing principles of knowledge practices in SELS. First, I draw on *specialization codes* to explore the gaze underpinning achievement. Maton (2014b; Chapter 1, this volume) defines four principal specialization codes: *knowledge codes* (emphasizing specialized knowledge, principles or procedures and downplaying attributes of actors as the basis of legitimacy); *knower codes* (downplaying specialized knowledge and emphasizing attributes of actors, such as cultivated dispositions); *élite codes* (where legitimacy is based on both); and *relativist codes* (where ‘anything goes’). In this chapter I am concerned with exploring developmental trajectories in the cultivation of a knower code. SELS foregrounds personal attitudes and the expression of appropriate values as the basis of achievement. As students successfully adopt this knower code they learn to read and interpret contextual details found in literary texts, going on to establish a principle, an ethical stand or perhaps a human truth. The experience involved is in some sense transformative in that the aim is to discuss how the literary texts ‘reveal’ or ‘demonstrate’ truths about the human condition. To achieve this students must move between the immediate details in texts and their responses and interpretations, affording a more abstract significance as a moral position or principle. The shift in meaning is thus from the more situated to the more symbolic and such shifts are realized in changes in the language of the written texts students produce in responding to literature.

I thus explore the development of a cultivated gaze by tracing shifts in meanings along two dimensions: within texts in the flow of meanings across extracts of the writing of individual students; and across years of schooling in samples of texts from early, mid and late adolescence. To argue that there is developmental progress in the manner in which the texts are organized and meanings and attitudes are expressed, I draw on systemic functional linguistics (Halliday and Matthiessen 2004; Martin and Rose 2007). These findings are then interpreted with respect to concepts from a second dimension of LCT, Semantics, and specifically *semantic gravity* and *semantic density* (Maton 2013, 2014b). As defined by Maton in Chapter 1 (this volume), semantic gravity (SG) refers to the context-dependence of meaning, where stronger semantic gravity (SG+) denotes meaning is more dependent on its context and weaker semantic gravity (SG-) denotes meaning is less dependent on its context; and semantic density (SD) refers to the degree of condensation of meaning, where stronger semantic density (SD+) denotes more meanings condensed and weaker semantic density (SD-) denotes fewer meanings condensed. One can also describe strengthening and weakening both semantic gravity and semantic density (SG↑↓, SD↑↓).

Achieving mastery of the necessary language for successful participation in the knower code of SELS can be traced across years of secondary schooling and is an especially important aspect of schooling in the years of adolescence, not least because it is compulsory. A significant value attaches to the study of literature for its apparent role in development of ethically responsible persons. To demonstrate the point I shall consider several SELS questions set for students at the senior public examination level in different countries, drawing attention to how these actively elicit and cultivate culturally valued interpretations of, and judgments about, literary texts. I then consider extracts from three texts written by students from early to late adolescence and explore how, as students develop and mature, aspects of their language develop to achieve the necessary gaze for SELS.

Eliciting responses to English literature

Consider, for example, the following three questions on Shakespearean plays, all set in 2010, the first from the New South Wales Higher School Certificate Standard English paper, the second from the South African National Senior English Certificate, and the third from the New Zealand Senior English paper. Any italicized text is from the original papers; I have underlined wordings that suggest the ways students' responses are invoked.

The Merchant of Venice [extract removed]

How does this extract from *The Merchant of Venice* introduce us to the *important ideas* in Shakespeare's play? In your response, make detailed reference to your prescribed text.

(Reproduced in Dixon and Simpson 2011: 155)

Othello

Othello and Iago are more alike than most people imagine. If it were not so, Iago would not be able to manipulate Othello into becoming a bloodthirsty killer, obsessed with revenge. Discuss the extent to which you agree with this statement.

(South African Department of Basic Education 2010: 18)

Othello

"The plays of Shakespeare move us because they present us with realistic depictions of what it means to be human." Use Othello to focus a discussion on the extent to which this is true. You may confine your discussion to Othello or include other Shakespearean plays you have studied.

(New Zealand Qualifications Authority 2010: 3)

Finally, the following two questions are drawn again from the Australian state of New South Wales, where they both appeared in the Higher School Certificate Standard English paper in 2006 and 2009:

Wilfred Owen

In what ways does the poet Wilfred Owen draw you into the world of his poetry? In your response make detailed reference to at least TWO poems.

(NSW Board of Studies 2007: 13)

Belonging

Understanding nourishes belonging... A lack of understanding prevents it. Demonstrate how your prescribed text (i.e. the poem *Immigrant Chronicle* by Strzynecki) and ONE other related text of your own choosing represent this interpretation of belonging.

(Dixon and Simpson 2011: 66)

Two general matters emerge from an exploration of these questions. The first is the constant requirement that students offer what is to be a personal response, where this is sometimes referred to in terms of what ‘you’ feel and elsewhere to what ‘we’ feel. A shared response is sought and a shared comprehension of the issues is assumed, indeed fostered. The second is that questions typically start with a reasonably categorical proposition about the selected text, where students are to elaborate on this in terms that endorse the values involved: ‘Othello and Iago are more alike than most people imagine’, ‘The plays of Shakespeare move us because they present us with realistic depictions of what it means to be human’, ‘Understanding nourishes belonging’. All such statements are strongly assertive of their value positions and not readily open to qualification. Even the wording of the question concerning Owen’s poems assumes general endorsement of the claim made about them: ‘In what ways does the poet Wilfred Owen draw you into the world of his poetry?’. It would be a rare student who would argue a poet did not draw him or her into the world of his poems. Overall, SELS requires a personal response expressed by reference to literary texts, though a strong moral imperative applies, shaping the nature of that response towards adoption of the values represented in the texts.

As noted earlier, the cultivated gaze of a knower code is generally not explicitly taught, its nature more often hidden behind generalizations about the importance of developing personal or individual self-expression and opinion in dealing with literary texts. The gaze is, however, revealed in analyses of the wording of examination questions such as those above and in analyses below of a sample of students’ written texts deemed successful. Furthermore, as the latter will show, the processes of cultivation last for some years of schooling as students learn to shape their responses, shifting

between contextual details in literary texts and symbolic understandings achieved by reference to them.

The three student texts considered in this chapter were written respectively in early adolescence, mid adolescence and late adolescence. All deal with abstract experience and themes, the first to do with racism, the second with the importance of an innocent child's love, and the third with the human need for belonging, all as expressed in different literary pieces (though the third also involves films). Though control of literacy commences in the primary years, it is in the years from late childhood through adolescence that young people achieve an appropriate control of mature written language, including control of a repertoire of expressions of evaluation. This involves moving from the relatively simple grammatical constructions of childhood used for building much commonsense knowledge towards mastery of an expanded set of grammatical resources used to create texts that enable the building of 'uncommonsense' knowledge (Christie and Derewianka 2008). The uncommonsense knowledge of SELS, I shall argue, concerns interpretation and evaluation of human behaviour as expressed in literature.

Learning the SELS gaze in early adolescence

Text 1, by a boy of 12–13 years of age, was written as a talk to be given to the class. He had been asked to present a book review and he chose Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.¹ In the interests of space, I shall reproduce only extracts from the text. In quotations from texts that follow: a row of dots indicates where some original text has been removed for brevity; embedded clauses are shown as double square brackets [[...]]; and clause initial circumstances of place or time (referred to a 'marked Theme') are in italics. Embedded clauses are a key means by which information can be more densely packed into clauses and thus can signal strengthening of semantic density (see Maton and Doran 2015b). Marked Themes are a key indication of shifts in stages of phases of discourse that often accompany changes in the strengths of semantic gravity and semantic density. Reference is also made to the use of abstract lexis, and to the associated contrast between what are described as congruent and grammatical constructions and those that rely on grammatical metaphor, a linguistic resource often associated with shifts in semantic gravity and semantic density (Martin 2013a).²

Extract 1: Interpreting contextual experience

In the first extract, drawn from the opening part of the text, he offers a series of observations that progress from reconstruction of relevant detail about the character Huck towards statements about what Huck *learns* from his adventures with Jim. In writing of Jim, the student writer re-uses the racist language

adopted by Mark Twain, perhaps the better to underscore the contrast between the contempt with which black Americans were often viewed and the compassion and warm friendship that Huck comes to feel for Jim. This passage begins with relatively simple and context-dependent meanings (SG+, SD-) (in the form of contextual information) and moves to more generalizing and condensed meanings (lessons about life) that signal a weakening of semantic gravity and strengthening of semantic density (SG↓, SD↑):

Huck is an uneducated young rogue [[who gets up to a lot of mischief and into a lot of trouble.]]... *When he meets Jim on Jackson's Island*, he becomes a good friend to the 'runaway nigger'. He takes care of Jim, and doesn't turn him. They have great adventures working together and looking after each other as they travel down stream on the raft. Huck learns how powerful friendship is, and *for once in a long time, when he is with Jim*, he feels accepted and wanted, and learns about loyalty to other people.

This initial phase in Text 1 provides contextual information about the character 'Huck' who is identified in the opening Theme position. The attributive process 'is' sets up a substantial nominal group that includes an embedded material process 'gets up to'. The evaluation of Huck's character is thus typified in terms of actions, for he is 'an uneducated young rogue who gets up to a lot of mischief and into a lot of trouble'. Compression of information by means of expanded nominal group structures, such as used here, is an important linguistic tool and, where mastered, enables young writers to condense or 'pack in' a great deal of information, both experiential and attitudinal (Christie and Derewianka 2008). This is an essential step in enabling the move towards symbolizing events, as will become evident in later extracts of the text and more so in later adolescence.

Once Huck's general character is established the writer shifts to a new phase signalled by the marked Theme '*When he meets Jim on Jackson's Island*'. This suggests we are about to begin a phase that tells us more of what happened at the time of meeting, what they did, said, etc. Instead there is a somewhat abrupt move from the specific event to a generalized state: 'he becomes a good friend'. The shift is a little awkwardly managed, suggesting the young writer has some difficulty controlling how to reconstruct events over time. Learning to master relevant contextual details, organizing them into smoothly flowing discourse is a considerable challenge, and the young writer has yet to achieve complete control, though a better instance of such control appears below. Importantly, though, the writer introduces the concept of friendship here, albeit in a congruent form 'becomes a good friend'. Subsequent clauses then serve to exemplify this state of friendship, generalizing Huck's actions in a series of material processes: '[Huck] takes care of Jim, and doesn't turn him in, working..., looking after..., travel...?'

From this relatively congruent phase there is a further shift into a phase where the student writer stands back from the events and attributes a reflective response to Huck. Grammatically there is a move from material to mental processes (underlined) to introduce explicit and abstracted values (bold), as in: ‘Huck learns how **powerful friendship** is...’. A subsequent marked Theme, ‘*for once in a long time*’, gives particular prominence to the unfamiliar state in which Huck finds himself, and the phase of evaluative reflection continues, realized again in mental processes and expressions of values, as in ‘he feels accepted and **wanted** and learns about **loyalty** to other people’. While values are attributed to the character Huck, this phase nonetheless introduces a significant value judgement on the events. The text thus represents a move from action to reflection and, in the process, from more congruent to more abstract and grammatically metaphorical language.

From the perspective of Semantics we can interpret the movement in phases across the extract as an upshift from relatively strong semantic gravity and weak semantic density in representing contextual details from the novel to weaker semantic gravity and stronger semantic density in expressing abstract understandings about life. Within this upshift, however, there are smaller shifts, as the student manages dynamic movements in context dependence and condensation of meanings within and across clauses. For example, the semantic density implicated in the first reference to ‘a good friend’ initially weakens in the elaboration of specific actions indicative of friendship, and then later strengthens as these meanings are repacked in a series of abstract feelings and values: ‘powerful friendship’, ‘accepted’, ‘wanted’ and ‘loyalty’. The choice of ‘rogue’ is interesting in this respect as it condenses meanings of both antisocial behaviour and invoked sympathy. Semantic density is strengthened and then immediately weakened in a more congruent explanation: ‘gets up to a lot of mischief and into a lot of trouble’.

Extract 2: Interpreting themes

In a subsequent extract the writer develops his ideas further, this time by reference to the ‘major themes or ideas’ in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*:

The two themes [[that I have selected from the novel]] are ‘friendship’ and ‘racism’. Huck and Jim both express friendship throughout the novel, being loyal to each other. *Despite the times* [[*when Huck has the opportunity to turn in Jim as a ‘runaway nigger’*]] he remains loyal to Jim. Jim also looks after Huck.... The novel tells us that friendship is powerful, and that you should be loyal to your friends and trust them.

Overall, this extract exhibits a dominant semantic wave, from relatively weaker semantic gravity and stronger semantic density (SG-, SD+) when

introducing the theme, through more contextualizing and simpler information (SG+, SD-), and ending with a generalizing and condensed ethical principle (SG-, SD+).

To begin, the word ‘theme’ is itself an abstraction, one probably introduced to the writer by his teacher: he knows he is now standing back from the details of the story to offer judgement about their significance. The changes in the language are now quite marked; the meanings have become more abstract and symbolic, and a direct assertion is made about what the story ‘tells us’. Here the use of an inclusive pronoun ‘us’ involves the writer’s audience in accepting his interpretation of the story. This is reminiscent of the way, noted above, examination questions often seek to elicit shared interpretation of literary texts. In addition, note that young people in early adolescence often make use of processes that suggest what literary phenomena like literary texts ‘show us’, or ‘tell us’, or ‘reveal to us’.³ I have no evidence that such expressions appear among younger children and their emergence is one important measure in adolescence of a developing capacity to ‘stand back’ from a text or an issue and consider its symbolic meaning (Christie and Cléirigh 2008; Christie and Derewianka 2008).

The opening sentence uses an identifying process to provide a definitional statement of a kind used quite sparingly in such pieces of writing: ‘The two themes that I have selected from the novel are “friendship” and “racism”.’ Such statements often carry considerable attitudinal force, as is the case here. They are a powerful resource for setting up whole phases of discussion. In the subsequent clauses the abstract notion of ‘friendship’ is elaborated a little. It is something people can ‘express’: ‘Huck and Jim both express friendship’ and it is equated with ‘being loyal to each other’. In the final phase, the events are repackaged and ‘the novel’ made agentive in a verbal process, revealing a moral truth to be derived from the events: ‘The novel tells us that friendship is powerful’. The abstract principle that ‘friendship is powerful’ is then repackaged as a kind of generalized dictum or ethical principle to live by in: ‘you should **be** loyal to your friends and trust them’.

Extract 3: Concluding interpretation of themes

The final extract from Text 1 is primarily concerned to interpret the themes of the novel and to make judgements about the values it represents. It moves through three phases of meaning beginning with a strong overriding claim about the significant principles or values addressed in the novel. Some reference is then made to generalized contextualizing information, and the extract concludes with a reaffirmation of principle and values.

The novel also comments loudly on racism. Mark Twain uses the issue of slavery to focus on the evils of [[thinking that one race is superior to another]]. *In Huck’s society*, white people are accepted as the natural

masters, while the black ‘niggers’ are regarded as things [[to be owned]]. As such, they have no rights at all, but must live and do exactly [[as their masters say]]. As Huck gets to know and love Jim, he becomes aware of the inhumanity of slavery and *by the end of the book* has decided to do the ‘morally right’ thing and not the ‘lawfully right’ thing and help Jim to freedom. Racism is a theme [[which runs right through the novel]] and it is clear that Mark Twain thinks it is deplorable.

This extract begins with an ethical principle that exhibits relatively weak semantic gravity and relatively strong semantic density, then strengthens semantic gravity and weakens semantic density through providing contextualizing information, before returning to reaffirm an ethical principle, returning to weaker semantic gravity and stronger density. It thus exhibits a semantic wave.

Here the novel functions as the *sayer* in a verbal process, strongly asserting its theme: ‘The novel ... comments loudly on racism.’ The novel is then recast as the writer (Mark Twain) and the condensation of meanings in the term ‘racism’ is teased apart and unpacked – ‘uses the issue of slavery to focus on the evils of thinking that one race is superior to another’ – thus constructing a minor semantic wave within a larger wave. The ethical principle or stance on these issues is encoded in the evaluation of ‘evils’.

A marked Theme signals a shift back to the events of the novel, although these remain as generalized representations of participants, processes and circumstances: ‘In Huck’s society, white people are accepted as the natural masters while the black “niggers” are regarded as things to be owned. As such, they must live and do exactly as their masters say.’ Semantic gravity is therefore marginally strengthened but not to the level evident in extract 2 of this text (earlier above).

A further marked Theme signals another shift in the discourse, this time out of generalized events into the realm of symbolized values and principles. Initially this movement is attributed to Huck and his processes of reflection and understanding, as represented in the mental processes of cognition, ‘Huck gets to know and love Jim’, and the writer goes on to attribute to Huck a recognition of an ethical position, in the notion of ‘the inhumanity of slavery’. Paralleling the final movement from values to dictum in extract 2, here the student moves from Huck’s ethical values to his decision to act on those principles, in: ‘and by the end of the book [he] has decided to do the ‘morally right’ thing and not the ‘lawfully right’ thing and help Jim to freedom’.

The student completes the phase by reconnecting the issue of ‘racism’ to the task of discussing a major theme in the novel. He first asserts the significance of the theme – ‘Racism ... runs right through the novel’ – then explicitly articulates the ethical stance that is to be read from the text, though attributing it to the author, in ‘it is clear that Mark Twain thinks it is deplorable’.

Though Text 1 focuses a great deal on abstract ideas such as ‘friendship’, ‘racism’ and ‘the inhumanity of slavery’, the text is relatively congruent in its grammatical construction, as might be anticipated from a writer in early adolescence. Reflecting on the general orientation evident across the extracts of Text 1 from a writer in early adolescence, it is possible to identify a developmental trajectory of meanings: from *the immediate contextual detail* (e.g. ‘Huck is an uneducated young rogue’, ‘He meets Jim’, ‘He learns how powerful friendship is’) to *what ‘we learn’* (e.g. ‘The novels tells us’, ‘the inhumanity of slavery’, ‘racism is ... deplorable’).

Learning the SELS gaze in mid adolescence

Text 2 was written by a girl aged 15 who was studying *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee. The question given by her teacher drew on a quote from the novel, involving a scene in which the chief protagonist, Scout, went to be with her father, Atticus, who sat outside the local jail, protecting a black man wrongly held there for rape. A potential lynch mob had gathered around the jail, the significance of their presence not understood by Scout, who was both young and innocent. Her very innocence helped to defuse what was a serious situation, a matter the novelist was at some pains to develop. The student had been asked to discuss the significance of the events in this passage of the novel.

I shall use three extracts from a long essay, selected because they demonstrate how one young writer goes about interpreting themes in the literary piece, moving between abstract principles and contextual information. In fact, two fields are in play in this text (Christie 2002), one to do with the values of literary critique and interpretation, the other with the details of the novel’s story.⁴ The former is evident in the use of such technical terms as ‘scene’, ‘passage’, ‘text’, which help shape the interpretation of the literary piece. The latter is evident in references to the story. Overall, the writer commences her essay on a very abstract note, establishing an important principle, going on to elaborate on this in rather more congruent terms, before turning to consider how the novelist has established the principle, again in relatively congruent terms. All this requires some detachment from the details of the novel in order to adopt an interpretive stance about it.

Extract 1: Interpreting contextual experience

The essay begins with an ethical principle that exhibits relatively weak semantic gravity and relatively strong semantic density, which is elaborated and then explained in terms of the text, strengthening semantic gravity and weakening semantic density though not much. Overall, as I shall explain, this extract represents what Maton terms a ‘high semantic flatline’ of SG–, SD+ (Chapter 1, this volume).

This scene [from the question] in the book *To Kill a Mocking Bird* by Harper Lee is an excellent representation of the effects a child's innocent love can have upon others. *In this passage* Harper Lee is communicating her idea [[that a child's innocence leads to a love of everything and this love can overcome hate]]. This idea is expressed strongly in the text. *In order to explain this idea*, Harper Lee had to set up the idea of Scout's innocence. She did this particularly through describing Scout's behavior.

I noted above that adolescents learning to interpret literary pieces must learn to discuss what those texts 'communicate', 'reveal', 'demonstrate' 'show', 'represent', and so on. Verbal and causal/relational processes such as the examples just mentioned are often used at points where symbolic meaning is being established. The opening sentence is a case in point; the process is metaphorically realized as a nominal group (underlined) and positively evaluated (bold), in: 'This scene ... is an **excellent representation** of the effects a child's innocent love can have'. Here the student brings together both the events ('this scene') and their symbolism, around which she can develop her discussion. The next sentence elaborates by developing the abstract notion of an 'idea': 'Harper Lee is communicating her idea that ...'. The semiotic abstraction 'idea' encapsulates particular meanings from the text so that they can be further discussed and evaluated. Such terms are a valuable resource for student writers as they move between text and interpretation. In this case the terms that specify the 'idea' are in turn abstractions: 'love', 'hate' and 'innocence'. As summarized above, the extract thus far maintains a semantic profile of weaker semantic gravity and stronger semantic density.

A marked Theme, 'In order to explain this idea', then shifts the discussion to the novelist's methods, in other words, to considering how the ideas came to be interpretable from the text. The movement is from what the novelist meant, as an abstracted mental process ('idea'), to what she did, as material and behavioural processes ('set up'; 'did'): 'Harper Lee ... set up the idea of Scout's innocence', 'She did this ...', 'describing Scout's behavior'. This final phase of more congruent representations of the novelist at work strengthens semantic gravity and weakens semantic density somewhat. However, there is relatively little movement across the extract as a whole. A semantic profile of SG-, SD+ approaches a flatline. One reason is that, while there are references to a 'scene in the book' and 'the text', the only reference to events or characters in the novel is in the abstraction 'Scout's behavior'. Being able to manage an extended semantic profile of this kind is an indication of considerable movement from the pre-adolescent writing of Text 1.

Extract 2: Interpreting contextual experience

In extract 2 the writer again refers to specific events from the novel, this time represented in a quotation. The quoted events are interpreted in terms of what 'we can see'.

In this quote we can see that Scout didn't see the danger or feel the tense atmosphere. Instead she related everything back to [[what she had experienced]] ... 'Atticus had said it was the polite thing to talk to people about what they were interested in, not about what you were interested in ... so I tackled Mr. Cunningham in talking about his entailment once more in a last ditch effort to make him feel at home.'

In this quote we are able to see that Scout was polite and kind, despite the situation and wished to make Mr. Cunningham 'feel at home'.

Scout's behaviour is both reported and interpreted in both: 'In this quote we can see that Scout didn't see the danger or feel the tense atmosphere' and 'In this quote we are able to see that Scout was polite and kind'. As in Text 1, the inclusive pronoun 'we' invites us to share the writer's interpretation of the events. However, this interpretation is limited to what we can learn about the character Scout. There is no move in this phase to more general principles or values. In contrast to extract 2 of Text 2, the semantic profile here maintains a low semantic flatline (SG+, SD-).

Extract 3: Interpretation of symbolic significance in the novel's passage

In the final extract from Text 2, the writer has moved from talk of what 'we can see' (preceding extract) to talk of what the novelist's writing 'shows'.

Through this passage Harper Lee uses language to show how the love of a child can overcome the hate of an adult. She does this through describing the actions of Scout and by using certain words and phrases which show that Scout's innocence and love were stronger than the hate [[felt by Mr. Cunningham]].

The initial representation of the symbolic significance of the events – 'Harper Lee uses language to show how the love of a child can overcome the hate of an adult' – requires resources of abstraction and grammatical metaphor, as underlined. The ethical position stands beyond the novel, reflecting relatively weaker semantic gravity and stronger semantic density. Some reference is then made in more congruent language to how the novelist has achieved her purpose in establishing symbolic significance, albeit as generalized actions, in 'through describing the actions' and 'using certain words and phrases'. The semantic profile moves minimally at this point in the direction of strengthening semantic gravity and weakening semantic density. In a final move the principle is reinterpreted back into the novel, grounding it in a character and stance, reaffirming the overall profile through this extract of stronger semantic gravity and weaker semantic density.

In summary, in Text 2 the writer in mid adolescence makes use of more resources for constructing context independent meanings, and for condensing

information and values, including more instances of grammatical metaphor. Grammatical metaphor is used both to compress experiential information about character and events and assist in the expression of attitude and judgement. As such, Text 2 has a greater semantic range than Text 1. An idealized account of the developmental trajectory in mid adolescence can be represented as a move from *reflections on events* (e.g. ‘This scene is an excellent representation of the effects of a child’s love’) to *what ‘we learn’* (e.g. ‘In this quote we are able to see’) to *what is shown* (e.g. ‘Harper Lee ... shows the love of a child can overcome the hate of an adult’).

Learning the gaze in late adolescence

The language of late adolescence, at least among successful students, is relatively more grammatically metaphorical. Text 3 extracts are drawn from an essay written in answer to a question set at the Higher School Certificate English examination in 2009:

Belonging

Understanding nourishes belonging... A lack of understanding prevents it. Demonstrate how your prescribed text (i.e. the poem *Immigrant Chronicle* by Strzynecki) and ONE other related text of your own choosing represent this interpretation of belonging.

In addition to the prescribed text by Peter Strzynecki (a contemporary Australian poet), the student chose the film *Babel*, directed by Alejandro Inarritu, as the second related text. As the student explained, it investigated ‘issues to do with lack of understanding and belonging’. The terms of the examination question establish the abstract concepts around which the essay was to be written.

Extract 1: Abstractions re human experience

In this first extract, the writer moves between different fields: the field of literary and film critique, and the fields that are construed in the ‘contents’ of the poetry and the selected film. It comprises an assertion of an abstract principle, its elaboration, and identification of texts to exemplify the principle.

A primary human need is the need [[to belong]] but belonging is not automatically conferred. Belonging implies an understanding of the individual and the group and negotiating a way towards acceptance of those needs. Conversely, exclusion emerges when the individual or the group fails to understand one another... Peter Strzynecki’s semi-autobiographical poetry ... traces the lives of a migrant family in a new country. Similarly, the film *Babel*, directed by Alejandro Inarritu in 2006, investigates issues to do with lack of understanding and belonging.

The opening starts on a very abstract note, making broad generalizations about the concepts of ‘A primary human need’ and ‘belonging’, terms exhibiting relatively weak semantic gravity and strong semantic density. The writer then provides explanations of the concepts of ‘belonging’ and its converse ‘exclusion’, interpreting the terms as generalized actions, people doing or not doing things. However, rather than strengthening semantic gravity and weakening semantic density, the author employs much abstraction and grammatical metaphor packing meanings into a dense explanation, particularly in relation to ‘belonging’. We find, for example, ‘belonging implies an understanding of the individual and the group’ ... ‘and a way towards acceptance of those needs, rather than the more congruent expression: ‘If people belong, individuals and groups can understand each other and they can negotiate how to accept each other’. ‘Exclusion’ is unpacked a little more congruently, for it is said to emerge ‘when the individual or the group fails to understand one another’. Reliance on nominalization and grammatical metaphor is a feature of the dense written language commonly found among successful senior SELS students. Nonetheless, to this point there is minimal strengthening of semantic gravity and weakening of semantic density.

There is then a shift in field introducing the two texts and establishing their relevance to the concepts at issue. In both cases the texts are represented as actors in material processes: ‘poetry ... traces’, ‘the film ... investigates’. Strzynecki’s text is represented as exemplifying the concept of ‘exclusion’ in a relatively congruent description of specific people and place, in ‘the lives of a migrant family in a new country’. With ‘Similarly’, connection is made to Inarritu’s film which is referred to in more abstract terms as an investigation into the key issues: ‘to do with lack of understanding and belonging’. The extract begins and ends with specific reference to abstract ideas. The semantic profile thus begins and ends as weaker semantic gravity and stronger semantic density, with a small undulation but mostly tracing a high flatline.

Extract 2: Exemplifying abstraction by reference to the first text

In this second extract the writer provides more detail of character and events to reveal how the poet exemplifies concepts of ‘belonging’ and ‘understanding’. At one point, incidentally, where text is removed a shorter version of what is said is substituted in the interests of clarity (‘caused him to attract’).

Feliks, Peter Skrynecki’s father, may have lived in Australia but he ‘kept pace with the Joneses of his own mind’s making’. He reminisced with his Polish friends... He belonged to the world [[he grew up in, that he could understand]]. His disengagement with Australia (‘causes him to attract’) negative reactions such as the department store clerk [[who asked his son]], ‘Did your father ever attempt to learn English?’ *Even in these few lines* we see just how important understanding can be for belonging.

This extract focuses on the character, Feliks, father of the poet. He is referred to frequently in Theme position (He, His), as it is his difficulties in adjusting to life in Australia that the writer attends to. His generalized activities are initially represented relatively congruently in ‘lived in Australia ... kept pace with the Joneses ... reminisced with his Polish friends ... belonged to the world he grew up ... he could understand’. The semantic gravity at this stage is therefore relatively strong and the semantic density relatively weak, although a brief shift occurs as the nature of Feliks’s activities is condensed and minimally decontextualized as ‘disengagement’ and ‘negative reactions’. The generalized and abstracted activities are then exemplified in a specific incident: ‘the department store clerk ... asked his son “Did your father ever attempt to learn English?”’ This is a point of maximum semantic gravity and minimum semantic density. However, the marked Theme, ‘Even in these few lines’ initiates a last movement in which the student writer steps back from the specifics of the event to interpret its significance. A strong evaluative position on belonging is established by reference to the language of the poem, a position that it is assumed ‘we’ can readily ‘see’ and hence share: ‘we see just how important understanding can be for belonging’. This return to the abstracted notions of ‘understanding’ and ‘belonging’ introduced in extract 1 shifts the semantic profile back towards weaker semantic gravity and stronger semantic density.

Extract 3: Exemplifying abstraction by reference to the second text

Extract 3 turns to some discussion of the film *Babel*, and the general pursuit of themes to do with ‘belonging’ and ‘understanding’ is developed further. As the writer declares, in the case of the filmmaker, ‘lack of understanding is at the core of his work’. This extract comprises a statement of an abstract principle, followed by contextualizing details from the text that exemplify the principle.

For Alejandro Inarritu, director of the film Babel, culture is a significant aspect of the struggle for each individual’s place in the world, in his multilayered plot in this film whose title conveys a strong Biblical allusion.... In his director’s notes Inarritu emphasizes the theme of his film.... Lack of understanding is at the core of his work. The story of a Moroccan boy [[who accidentally shoots an American tourist]] is juxtaposed with the story of a deaf Japanese girl, Chieko, [[who wants to communicate but doesn’t know how to]].

Two marked Themes indicate two phases in the extract that both foreground the film’s director. The first, ‘For Alejandro Inarritu, director of the film *Babel*’ introduces an abstract generalization about the director’s view of ‘culture’ in the relational clause ‘culture is a significant aspect of the struggle

for each individual's place in the world', while it is said 'the multilayered plot in this film conveys a strong Biblical allusion'.

The second marked Theme, 'In his director's notes', introduces a phase which 'emphasizes the theme of his film' and the fact that 'Lack of understanding is at the core of his work'. The relationship of the events in the film to the theme is managed in a single clause constructed as two substantial nominal groups (in bold) around a relational circumstantial process ('is juxtaposed'): '**The story of a Moroccan boy who accidentally shoots an American tourist** is juxtaposed with **the story of a deaf Japanese girl, Chieko, who wants to communicate but doesn't know how to**'. The semantic profile here thus moves from the weaker semantic gravity and stronger semantic density exhibited by the opening principle and then moves to strengthen semantic gravity and weaken semantic density through the rest of the extract.

Extract 4: From abstraction re artists' achievements to ethical principle

Extract 4 constitutes the concluding paragraph of the student's text:

Both Inarritu and Skrynecki have explored the processes of understanding [[which lead to communication and acceptance]]. [[What both composers have shown]] is [[that rejection results from the barriers of language, place and social structure]]. But when we understand those around us, we can gain a strong sense of [[what it means to belong]]. Understanding is like Feliks Skryneckis's garden: a place of nourishment.

Successful young writers at this level in SELS frequently refer to the author's/director's deliberate construction of their stories to exemplify abstract and generalized issues and values. This typically involves the use of material processes, such as 'trace', 'explore', 'investigate' or 'identify'. By such means the student writers can connect values about life and references to their literary texts (Christie and Derewianka 2008: 72–85). The young writer here commences the concluding paragraph with one such construction. It draws together observations about the two selected artists, beginning with a generalized account of what the two have undertaken in 'Both Inarritu and Skrynecki have explored the processes of understanding which lead to communication and acceptance'. The writer then moves to discuss what both poet and director have 'shown' in terms of ethical principles, constructing this as a forceful, even categorical statement, in 'What both composers have shown is that rejection results from the barriers of language, place and social structure'. Each participant around the process is constructed in an embedded clause, enabling a great deal of information, already discussed and examined in earlier paragraphs, to be packed into this summarizing conclusion. The text at this point displays relatively weak semantic gravity and relatively strong semantic density.

The writer then reinterprets what the poet and director have ‘shown’, to what ‘we’ can learn from this. The position on ‘rejection’ is reconstructed as a positive principle related to ‘understanding’, in the process unpacking the meaning into the more congruent ‘when we understand those around us, we can gain a strong sense of what it means to belong’. This minimal move towards strengthening semantic gravity and weakening semantic density is then reversed again to conclude with a statement of the value of that learning. In another forceful evaluation of ‘understanding’, the writer concludes ‘Understanding is like Feliks Skryneckis’s garden: a place of nourishment’.

Across this extract the student has moved from what the composers did and what they showed, to what we learned, to what the value of that learning is. The semantic profile leads to a final position of relatively weak semantic gravity and relatively strong semantic density. The developmental trajectory in the writing of this student at late adolescence can be described as a move from *assertion of principle* (e.g. ‘A primary human need is the need to belong’) to *exemplification of the principle* (e.g. ‘Strzynecki’s poetry traces the lives ... Inarriu investigates issue to do with belonging’) to a *final reiteration of the principle* (e.g. ‘Understanding is like Feliks Strzynecki’s garden: a place of nourishment’). This represents a semantic wave from SG-, SD+ to SG+, SD- to SG-, SD+ (see [Figure 1.4](#), page 17).

Conclusion

Returning to my starting question of how to characterize the educational knowledge structure of SELS and what constitutes success in its study, I argue that the knower code of SELS involves a capacity to express values related to the human experience, established by reference to literary texts. Mastery of this code requires an ability to read and interpret the literary piece, and an ability to create a response to the text by moving between references to the literary piece and declarations about what that piece tells us, shows, represents, or reveals. The semantic shifts as students move from contextual detail to abstract understanding are clearly evident. The resulting semantic profiles vary depending on the individual writer and the text(s) discussed. However, we can argue that the tendency of younger writers is commonly to begin their discussions of literary texts with explicit reference to details of story and characters, expressed in relatively congruent language, thereby strengthening semantic gravity of claims and values. From this basis they move to reveal what is ‘learned’ about characters, to considering what the literary piece ‘tells us’, typically values that stand beyond, but are exemplified by events of the text. This move relatively weakens semantic gravity. At the same time, initial discussions of phenomena and expressions of evaluation from the context of the literary work become condensed into general moral issues and positions, strengthening semantic density. It has also been noted that there are extracts in which a particular semantic profile is maintained over an extended phase of text. In the case of writers in early adolescence this may be at a lower level of SG+, SD-.

The tendency of writers in mid adolescence is to begin from an abstract principle said to be ‘represented’ in the literary text, then elaborate on the principle by reference to contextual details and writer means, thenceforth moving back and forth between contextual detail and principle. This introduces more of a semantic wave and greater semantic range. In late adolescence successful writers, at least, tend to establish abstract understandings or principles first, thus beginning at a point of weaker semantic gravity and stronger semantic density. They then go on to exemplify the principle with reference to the literary text, and perhaps its construction, strengthening semantic gravity and weakening semantic density. This is not to the same strengths as previously. Semantic gravity tends not to reach the strength of the texts by younger writers and the semantic density tends to remain stronger overall. There may often be movement back and forth between the two before a principle or symbolic value is reasserted in a concluding phase. The final movement returns to relatively weaker semantic gravity and stronger semantic density.

Close attention to semantic waves in student texts, the resources they use to manage this, and to how it changes over the years of adolescence can thus give us valuable insights into the processes of mastering a cultivated ‘gaze’ of a kind apparently valued in SELS in English speaking communities. In making this process more visible we hope to be able to devise more explicit means for its construction.

Notes

- 1 The author is Alaric Lewis, who kindly agreed to my use of his text in this analysis.
- 2 A congruent grammar occurs when linguistic items are used in their most immediate and ‘congruent’ sense, e.g. when nouns refer to entities, verbs express actions, and so on. In non-congruent grammar (grammatical metaphor) these relations are skewed. Young children use a congruent grammar, while grammatical metaphor emerges in late childhood to early adolescence. See Halliday and Matthiessen (1999).
- 3 They do in fact appear in other discipline areas, as in science, for example, when used to ‘show’ the significance of an experiment, and in history for ‘showing’ the results of some events (Christie and Cléirigh 2008).
- 4 Christie (2002) provides a longer discussion of the two registers said to function in the pedagogic discourse of the classroom. Here I allude only to two fields – one concerning the ‘content’ of the literary piece, the other concerning the overall pedagogic shaping of the text as literary interpretation.