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**John Yandell, *The Social Construction of Meaning: Reading Literature in Urban English Classrooms*, hardback, 197 pages, London: Routledge, 2013, £85, \$140.  
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Professor Harold Rosen, seminal post-war figure in the teaching of English in secondary schools, put it like this:

Whatever language the pupils possess, it is this which must be built on rather than driven underground. However narrow the experience of our pupils may be (and it is often wider than we think), it is this experience alone which has given their language meaning. The starting point for English work must be the ability to handle effectively their own experience. Oral work, written work and the discussion of literature must create an atmosphere in which the pupils become confident of the full acceptability of the material of their own experience. Only in this way can they advance to the next stage. (qtd in Michael Rosen)

These words don't originate from the academy or the seminar-room. They were written from the classroom, in 1958, when Harold Rosen was head of English at Walworth School, then a pioneering inner-London comprehensive. Aimed at his departmental colleagues, Rosen's words continue to pose a fundamental challenge to any teacher of English: how will you regard the language your pupils bring to, and use in, your classroom? And, because language is central to learning, how will you regard the pupil herself or himself as a learner?

Rosen would always affirm how important it is to respect, value and make use of the language the pupil already possesses. For it is with this language that the pupil has made and will continue to make meanings, which is to say, will continue to learn. By taking this stance the teacher regards the pupil as already an agent in the educational endeavour, and as already possessing what is needed to learn more, to

re-make both experience and the encounter with new knowledge in ways that make sense and will serve. For Rosen no pupil arrives at school intellectually impoverished or deficient in ability to learn, or even as lacking in cultural capital. The pupil is seen in an accepting, and hence an enabling, light. He requires the English teacher to create a classroom in which, to further the cause of pupils' development, 'the pupils become confident of the full acceptability of the material of their own experience'. To develop, to make progress, the pupils must feel they too, along with their teacher, already have something to say, and that it is educationally of value, usable, worth saying.

It takes high skill to create a classroom in which all pupils feel able, encouraged, indeed eager to make meaning through the English they already possess, and through engaging with the English of the teacher, the school, the texts offered by the curriculum and the English used by fellow pupils. This labour is at the heart of good English teaching as understood and developed over decades by practitioners in the capital. In part it is Harold Rosen's legacy. John Yandell's timely and probing book reveals the enduring importance of this tradition and its vitality and efficacy in contemporary classrooms.

Yandell looks in detail and over a sustained period at the work of two teachers who are 'representative of particular approaches to teaching and learning in urban secondary English classrooms' (45). These approaches, he argues, are 'scarcely acknowledged within the dominant policy-oriented discourses of literacy and literacy instruction' (67). Both teachers work in 'Wharfside', a mixed multi-ethnic East End comprehensive. One is newly-qualified, the other a veteran. Yandell's main interest is in how literature is read, and re-read, in these teachers' classrooms by their pupils, and how the pupils make and re-make sense of what they read. He understands reading as a social as well as an individual activity, in which meanings are negotiated by and with others through talk. To read is not to acquire a skill-set as preparation for something else. Rather, reading is 'a complex set of motivated, historied processes' (15) and literacy not a single form but 'a variety of different, and differently-situated, literacy practices' (2). His book, some of whose chapters have appeared in revised form as academic papers, is in part 'an argument about what reading looks like in secondary classrooms' (44), and in part a disclosure of such reading as alert, shared, contested, cumulative in its fostering of understanding, and powerfully educationally-productive.

Yandell draws illuminatingly on the work of Lev Vygotsky, the Soviet psychologist and educational researcher, and in particular on the ways Vygotsky contended with his longer-lived Swiss contemporary, Jean Piaget, over how children learn. For Vygotsky, human psychology is a cultural (which is to say a social) phenomenon, one which the child strives actively to make her own by learning, remembering, understanding, imagining... He writes:

Every function in the child's cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level; first, between people..., and then inside the child. This applies equally to voluntary attention, to logical memory, and to the formation of concepts. All the higher [mental] functions originate as actual relations between human individuals... Hence, we may say that we

become ourselves through others and that this rule applies not only to the personality as a whole, but also to the history of every individual function. (43)

Yandell understands the crucial importance for the teacher of enabling the pupil's knowledge and experience, including that acquired out of school, beyond formal education, to come into productive relation with the knowledge valued and presented by formal education, as curricular content. That is, in Vygotskian terms, the centrality for learning of the relationship which must be worked between 'everyday' and 'scientific' concepts. Yandell echoes Vygotsky's view that this relationship is dialectical, which means that in the encounter the 'scientific' concepts (the codified disciplinary knowledge of the curriculum) may be transformed and re-organised, just as are the 'everyday' concepts, or the knowledge and understanding pupils bring with them. And so it can happen that teachers find they learn something further about the text from their pupils.

This conception of what learning entails carries implications which, as Yandell points out, are ethical, political and philosophical. His book is timely because of the late espousal by policy-makers of an antagonistic view of learning, one advocated by supporters of the 'core knowledge' and 'cultural literacy' approach taken by E.D. Hirsch in the USA. Advocates of the Hirschian model want a pupil to learn, by rote if necessary, a pre-set structured corpus of codified factual knowledge. By so doing, they believe, the child will be enabled to participate in the common culture because she will command, recognise and relate to that culture's stock of shared references, allusions and understandings, or what an English school's minister has called 'the shared intellectual currency' of a society.

Advocates of Hirsch are happy to decide what shall comprise the body of knowledge assimilation of which supposedly results in cultural literacy. They have already begun to codify it, and they seek to integrate it into the Primary curriculum. They claim that children from the most disadvantaged layers of the working-class, and from certain ethnic minorities, have most to gain from their model, since it is these children who remain at principal risk of being failed by the school-system. Their opponents point out that the so-called common stock of knowledge has a class character, and codifying it to make it central to the national curriculum serves, despite denials, a ruling-class interest. A dominant culture, which reflects the knowledge, concerns and interests of a dominant class, does indeed talk from a shared knowledge base. It exist along with a whole set of other, more or less marginalised cultures whose knowledge, concerns, allusions and references tend to be disregarded and unvalued within the education-system. Hirschians seem to believe in the possibility of a homogenous culture unfissured by conflicts deriving from (amongst other things) class struggle and the racist legacy of an imperialist past. They also, more mundanely, seem to hold to a view that learning is mainly about remembering what you have been told. Yandell, and the teachers in whose classrooms he researches, have a more complex conception.

In a series of chapters orbiting his central concern with the social construction of meaning, Yandell distils understandings derived from close observation of lessons. We read the transcripts of key moments in these lessons, and so can follow how pupils engage with the language of, for example, Shakespeare or Arthur Miller, and come to

make it meaningful in their own lives. Yandell writes engagingly about the 'messy' (44) choices and decisions involved in the process of his activity as a researcher, and in particular about the tensions and benefits which sprang from knowing well the teachers in whose classrooms he worked. He locates and accounts for himself in his research, and in doing so explores questions about the researcher's impact on the experience being investigated, and on the relationships which make research possible. As a teacher of English in London for some two decades before taking a post at the Institute of Education, Yandell can also draw on his own experience as an insider to illuminate some of the conflicts which have arisen (and continue to arise) as government policy challenges or spurs practitioners. What English teaching is, and how the subject English is to be considered and configured, remain highly contested. Nowhere is this more apparent than in inner-London classrooms which characteristically host pupils from a wide variety of ethnic heritages and backgrounds, and contain a preponderance of working-class pupils, whose experiences of school and the street are markedly different from the experiences of policy-setters in the DfE.

Yandell raises questions to do with the relation between word and world, and with what reading is, and who should decide it, which are also questions about what is to count as knowledge, and who is to determine this. He gives a fascinating account of how John Agard's poem 'Half Caste' is read in a lesson which exemplifies how skilful teaching, allied to a sense of trust between pupil and teacher, can enable students to engage even when they present initially as resistant. Beyond this, the account illuminates how the students read complexly, how their readings very much matter to them and how their points-of-view are attended to. This attention is crucial, since 'reading is a process in which the whole subjectivity of the reader is implicated... [is] the product of a specific historical subject, reading in a specific historical context' (91).

But aren't some readings simply wrong? Doesn't the social construction of meaning risk endorsing misconceptions and undermining rigour in analysis? Yandell opens up this issue, and in particular highlights the pressure on English teachers to mediate a dominant or 'required' reading as established by examiners or syllabus assessment criteria. He argues for the value of reading responses expressed through tasks which draw on imagination and creativity, such as writing a character's diary, a story's alternative ending or a novel's additional chapter. These responses will also embody critical awareness and understanding. He examines the ways role play is used to enable pupils to possess Shakespeare's words, to embody a character and through action, intonation and gesture make the character meaningful – and theirs. The chapter in which an apparently disaffected pupil unexpectedly, and seemingly out of the blue, offers an insightful reading of Richard of Gloucester testifies not only to excellent teaching, but also to scrupulous observation and committed thinking-through.

John Yandell undertook the research on which this book is based almost ten years ago. In the interim constraints have continued to tighten around English teachers, and particularly around those who teach in a tradition recognisable as that inspired by Harold Rosen and others and made more robust through the work of the organisation Rosen helped found: the London Association for the Teaching of English. Under the Govian dispensation, what Rosen once referred to as 'bleakness' has

returned. Teachers face the renewed attempt to impose as orthodoxy a prescriptive approach to language use, a traditionalist canon of texts, a reductive tally of acceptable responses and a deficit model of pupils and their language. But, as Harold Rosen was quick to remind, the way to answer this is with courage, informed conviction and public argument:

The terrain remains contestable, to a degree. The mistake which may have been made... was to behave as though the contested space was solely a matter of persuasion, the sheer force of better ideas. Spaces do not simply exist in the system, they have to be won, defended and extended. (18-19)

Yandell's book is accessibly written, sharply argued, rooted in lived classroom experience and informed by an intellectual tradition which, though currently marginalised, continues to offer a rich educational vision. That tradition defends space vital for today's English teachers, and offers ways to extend it. So does this book.

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