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Satisfaction, Settlement and Exposition: Conversation and the University Tutorial

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Abstract

In this paper I consider the tutorial conversation in Higher Education. To focus the discussion I use the scenario of a tutorial conversation between a lecturer and a student. I begin by suggesting that the increasing emphasis placed on student satisfaction in certain Higher Education Institutions tends to focus the tutorial conversation towards a form of settlement that I then consider in light of Thoreau's *Walden*. To explore what other conversation might be possible, I turn to the philosophical writing of Martin Buber. I discuss his 'life of dialogue' in relation to the distinction he draws between *I - Thou* and *I - It* and to how Nancy Vansielegem and Jan Masschelein analyse this in relation to the 2002 film, *Le Fils*. With reference to the film adaptation of Alan Bennett's *The History Boys* I suggest a different starting point for the tutorial conversation. I conclude that the tutorial discussion, seen as an invitation to speak, and as a form of exposition and dialogue, is the possibility of the opening up of a new dimension of thinking and acting. This is the invitation to a conversation in education that is itself truly educative.

Scenario

Tutor: I saw from your email yesterday that you wanted to talk about your assignment for the module on research methods; that's fine, but tell me exactly what you want to focus on in this tutorial.

Student: Yeah, I know you went through the structure and the writing guidelines for the assessment in the last session, and I can follow that, but I want to check if my plans for the research proposal are right.

Tutor: Do you mean that you're not sure whether your research proposal is feasible?

Student: Erm, I'm not sure really. I just want to make sure that what I'm going to do will be ok and that I'll be able to collect the data I need and that it will be enough.

Tutor: It is important to make sure that your plans for the research are manageable for you. In research it's often not easy to say that one approach is 'right', and therefore that another is 'wrong' in some way. But let's leave that aside. At this stage we need to make sure that you feel happy with what you're doing, so let's look at your plans. I seem to remember that you're hoping to conduct a focus group, is that right?

Student: Yeah – I was going to tape it so that I didn't miss anything when I came to do the analysis.

Tutor: Ok, but have you tried this out, piloted this yet? It's really difficult to tape a group of people talking, and then identify the different voices when people are interrupting and talking over one another. This could potentially make the analysis much more difficult. I'd suggest that you made a video of the focus group; this would make things much easier to manage when you came to do the analysis as you'd have the visual and the audio data to go on. This would help you to untangle the various ideas as they were discussed and differentiate the voices and contributions more easily.

Student: And so if I do that, and discuss why I've done it that way, will that be ok?

Tutor: Well, you need to make sure that you've given a clear rationale for your choice of approach to data collection. You would need to justify your choices with reference to some literature that you've read on conducting focus groups. That will help you meet this learning outcome [*Tutor points the student to a section in the module handbook*]

Student: Ok, I'll do that. So, if I amend my data collection method like you said, and put in some references, that will be ok?

Tutor: In that section, yes. The more reading and criticality you can work into your assignment, the better, but making those changes will mean you're doing what's needed for a grade in the 'pass' band. Look, here it says: 'Students demonstrate a sound understanding of the principles and limitations of their chosen approach to research' [*Tutor points to a section of the marking criteria in the module handbook*]. Are you happy with that?

Student: Yep – Thank you!

Satisfying Talk: Conversations in the University Tutorial

In this paper I give attention to how the current discourse of ‘student satisfaction’ in some universities plays out in the tutorial conversation. I use the word ‘tutorial’ here to refer to the one-to-one meeting that a tutor has with her tutee to discuss course content, concepts, or often how the student should approach the course essay or assignment. Such a tutorial is distinct from the kind of discussion that a student might have with a designated ‘personal tutor’ to address sensitive issues that might be affecting study, from the ‘Oxford tutorial’ (common in a small number of élite English universities), and from group tutorials or seminars that form part of the delivery of a course.

It is common to think of the one-to-one university tutorial as offering the space for a dialogue that enables the student to engage with the ideas and concepts to which she has been introduced: in short, it is to provide a space for what Kala Retna *et al.* (2009) describe as ‘intellectual growth’ (2009: 253). However, such a laudable aim is, I argue, often at risk of being hijacked by the pressing need for the tutorial to result in a kind of student ‘satisfaction’. Satisfaction with the student experience is now, as Elizabeth Staddon and Paul Standish identify, ‘reiterated, as if *de rigueur*, in university policy statements and in the burgeoning literature on student satisfaction’ (2012: 631). Such satisfaction in this context is characterised by a lack or ‘want’ (of resources, of clarity or of understanding). Satisfaction, and the related concepts of happiness and well-being, are not new fields of enquiry: philosophers since Socrates have considered happiness as experienced through the virtuous life. There has been, though, in recent years, an upsurge in the numbers of popular self-help texts on happiness and life satisfaction (eg Pryce-Jones 2010; Summers and Watson 2006), international comparative studies¹ and work from within more academic fields such as psychology, all of which are concerned in some way with strategies for happiness (Lyubomirsky 2010).

Measuring Student Satisfaction

Higher Education has not been exempt from this trend towards foregrounding improvements in the student experience, student wellbeing and, in particular, student satisfaction. The marketising of Higher Education, with its focus on league tables and student surveys, has inevitably led to an increased emphasis on measuring student satisfaction. In the UK, this emphasis is most clearly expressed in the importance accorded by universities to the annual National Student Survey (NSS). The NSS, commissioned by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) has, since 2005, gathered data annually on the quality of undergraduate courses in UK universities.ⁱⁱ

The NSS websiteⁱⁱⁱ headlines the fact that in 2012 satisfaction rates were up on the previous year in every area surveyed. Overall satisfaction stood at 86%, with big improvements in academic support (up from 70% to 79% of students who were ‘definitely or mostly satisfied’). Only 8% were dissatisfied and the data shows the highest ever satisfaction ratings since the survey’s inception. Even the lowest figure is stable (55% of full-time students rated the promptness of feedback as definitely or mostly satisfactory, - an increase of 1% on the 2011 figures).^{iv}

Satisfaction and the University Tutorial

Increasingly the university tutorial has become one of the key contexts in which student satisfaction can be addressed (Retna *et al.* 2009). With a whole section of the NSS dedicated to ‘academic support’, it is not surprising that tutors are charged with ensuring that the student leaves the tutorial ‘satisfied’. Clearly this is working: 78% of students responded with the most positive indicators to the statement: ‘I have received sufficient advice and support with my studies’. But this empirical data begs a number of important questions. First, how can satisfaction with, say, access to IT facilities (one of the sub-

questions asked under ‘Learning Resources’ in the NSS), be understood - or measured – in the same way as satisfaction with one’s education (questioned under the sub-headings of ‘Teaching’ and ‘Learning’)? Second, what is the nature of the satisfaction being measured?

Let me initially address the second of these questions. The understanding of satisfaction that appears to underpin these somewhat crude measures is a very narrow one. It equates with a form of contentment, with the positive and happy feelings that derive from everything being settled. I suggest that in the scenario that opens this paper, the tutorial conversation is characterised by such satisfying talk, the kind that is a form of settlement: of closing down and securing. Perhaps the etymology of the word ‘conversation’ is useful in illustrating the point here. The Latin roots indicate that in ‘con-versation’, we ‘turn’ (*vertere*) ‘with’ (*cum*) others. There is a sense of accord here that is entirely absent from conversation’s common synonym, ‘discussion’ with its roots in the Latin *discutere* meaning ‘to strike asunder’ and from *dis* (apart) and *quarere* (to shake).^v Student satisfaction, in the tutorial context, derives from a conversation (rather than a discussion) which is based on the contentment^{vi} derived from knowing exactly what is required to gain a pass mark in an assignment, or to achieve a certain degree classification. For the tutor, a tutorial conducted in this way gives assurance that the student, satisfied with the discussions, subsequently evaluates the module well, and scores ‘Academic Support’ highly in the next survey of satisfaction.

This satisfaction discourse is indicative of the ways in which both the tutor and the student (in the scenario) tend to think, and of the power of certain discourses to authorise such thinking. It is as if these discourses have a stifling effect. This is not to say that student satisfaction is, in itself, not an appropriate topic of discussion in the university.

Nor is it the case that ensuring that students have the information necessary for them to perform to their best ability in all forms of assessment is not a right and proper approach. It is rather to draw attention to where the blinkered pursuit of the prestige that high levels of student satisfaction brings gets in the way of other kinds of thinking or talking. Furthermore, where there is an ineluctable link between satisfaction and the student's assessment, there is a tendency for the tutor to restrict her conversation with students to what is required to pass the module assessment. For her part, the student – keen to pass the assignment and gain a good degree classification – wants to take advantage of the tutorial to be assured of what she must do to pass. Whilst the student must meet the all-important learning outcomes, a conversation dominated by such issues neglects other (less easily measured) matters such as what it is to learn, what it is that one still has to learn, and how our education can be pursued through conversation with another. But in a culture which obsesses with student satisfaction, these thorny issues are settled into more palatable, 'student-friendly' sound bites such as 'The course has helped me to present with confidence' and 'My communication skills have improved'.

Settling

To return to our scenario, this type of talk is satisfying because of the way in which it 'settles' thinking. This theme of settlement is one that is taken up in the transcendentalist literature of Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson. In these writers' work, especially in Thoreau, human becoming is marked by ideas of leaving, departure and sojourning, that are described in terms of a lack of settlement. In *Walden* (Thoreau 1854/1999), Thoreau espouses a way of living, thinking (and crucially of using language^{vii}) that disrupts ideas of security and settlement. He writes: 'I was more independent than any farmer in Concorde, for I was not anchored to a house or a farm, but could follow the bent of my genius'(p. 51), and later: 'You want room for your thoughts

to get into sailing trim and run a course or two before they make their port' (p. 127). Such ideas are also central to Emerson's perfectionism^{viii}: our journeying (through education or cultivation) to a further state of becoming, of the self. This journeying is a necessary part of one's becoming; it is in the constant losing of the self (characterised by a lack of settlement and by leaving) that is its finding. But we should not see Emerson's perfectionism in terms of some kind of developmental model. The perfectionist journey cannot be described with reference to particular delineated stages; it rather requires that 'A man should learn to detect and watch the gleam of light that flashes across his mind from within' (Emerson 1841/2003: 267). Branka Arsić (2010) highlights the significance of the concept of leaving to Emerson's writing on the perfection of the self. She writes that for Emerson, 'To allow for change, to abandon the stationary, to overcome the fear of rupture, and to face interruption are all, in fact modes of leaving where and what one is' (p. 3). For Arsić, Emerson's 'ontology of becoming is fundamentally ... an ontology of leaving' (p. 5).

In terms of the tutorial conversation, I do not want to generalise here and to claim that tutorial conversations are characterised *per se* by such settling talk. I do want to emphasise, though, that such conversations are indicative of a particular culture within some universities. It is as if something in this culture steeps those who pass through it in particular ways of thinking and talking that block and force out other ways. But just as certain topics of conversation are 'allowed', others are off-limits, excluded. At one point, the tutor in our scenario hints at a broader issue that might lead to fruitful discussions with the student: whether it is possible to say that certain approaches to empirical research are 'right' or 'wrong'; but then this discussion is abandoned with the comment: '*But let's leave that aside*'.

Such a settling of conversation happens certainly because of the time constraints, but may also be indicative of a certain cultural expectation, a preoccupation with the latest drive to improve satisfaction and to enhance the student experience at the expense of a space for speaking about the trickier issues of learning one's subject and with 'intellectual growth'. What would it be like, for example, if the tutorial conversation were to run along these lines: 'I hear what you say about the assignment, and about the learning outcomes, but let me ask you another question: What do you think research is for? Why should universities give attention to it in the way they do?' What I am drawing attention to here is a re-thinking of the tutorial discussion that goes beyond a conversation driven by accountability and service-level agreements. It is to ask whether an unsettling education can be a satisfying one.^{ix}

Martin Buber and the 'Life of Dialogue'

Martin Buber (1958, 1961) writes about how our human relationships are played out by way of our encounters with each other and with language through a 'life of dialogue' (1961: 37). In contrasting the life of dialogue with one of monologue, Buber claims that the 'basic movement – or essential action of the former is the act of "turning to the other"' (1961: 40). But this kind of dialogue is not to be equated with endless conversation. As he writes: 'The most eager speaking at one another does not make a conversation' (1961: 19). Whilst this would be a speaking of sorts, it is only genuine dialogue when:

[E]ach participant 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. (1961: 20)

For Buber, such an encounter is indicative of an *I-Thou* relationship, one characterised by mutuality and exchange. In contrast, Buber outlines how 'technical dialogue, prompted solely by the need of objective understanding' (1961: 37), constructs individuals as

objects to be used to serve particular interests. Such dialogues, and such relationships, are described in terms of *I-It*.

So let me return to the tutorial scenario that opened this paper. Do the questions that the student asks, and the responses the tutor gives, betray a form of what Buber calls ‘technical dialogue, a conversation prompted solely by the need of objective understanding’ (1961: 37)? In our scenario, this objective understanding focuses on what is needed to pass the assignment. But for either party to try to change the conversation, *without actually engaging with the life of dialogue*, would be an artificial move; it would, in Buber’s words, be ‘monologue disguised as dialogue’ (1961: 37). To be in dialogue, though, is necessarily to be engaged in an un-settling conversation; to ‘speak from being to being’ (Buber 1961: 39), writes Buber, is to be exposed to the other; it is a risk, and it is unsettling.

Conversation and Exposition:

Let me develop this idea of unsettling with reference to *Le Fils*, a French film from 2002 directed by the brothers Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne. The plot concerns a carpenter, Olivier Gourmet, whose young son was brutally murdered. Some years later we see Olivier working as a joinery tutor at a training centre. Olivier agrees to take on a boy, Francis Thorion, as a trainee. Olivier finds out from the training centre records that Francis is in fact the boy who murdered his son, and has just been released from prison. The majority of the film shows their developing relationship and conversation. In their discussion of *le Fils*, Nancy Vansielegem and Jan Masschelein draw attention to a kind of speaking that disrupts the idea of communication as mediation, self-empowerment or exchange, in favour of what they call ‘speaking that exposes us to what happens, to what is present’ (2012: 90). They argue that the film illustrates this particular kind of speaking

that ‘implies the need to abandon and be abandoned. It requires the willingness to put oneself ... at stake, to free oneself from oneself, to see and think differently’ (p. 90). Such speaking is a form of ‘exposition’, not in the sense of a laying out a point of view, but rather an: ““ex-position” - that is, a speaking that puts one *out of position* ... a movement outside or beyond oneself’ (p.87).

If Olivier were to engage in the kind of discourses and practices that emphasise dialogue and communication, then he might well want to demand of Francis why he killed his son. He might feel some claim to a right to such information, and feel that Francis is obliged to provide it. Some form of satisfaction could come from this.^x Instead, the kind of speaking in which Olivier engages is such that he is put out of position. In many ways he is simply exposed to what happens: to Francis’ arrival at the training centre, to the questions Francis asks in learning his craft, to his plea for Olivier to become his guardian. When Olivier does speak, it is not to engage in conversation aimed at settling matters, or conversation concerned with ‘the world of causalities, explanations and the accumulation of knowledge’ (Vansielegem and Masschelein 2012: 92); rather he says to Francis: ‘*Je veux juste qu’on parle*’ (‘I just want to speak with you’). This speaking does not suggest the *I-It* relationship that has its basis in the world of objects; it has rather the characteristics of *I-Thou*. As Buber writes: ‘I do not experience the man to whom I say *I-Thou*. But I take my stand in relation to him’ (1958: 22). It is not that there is a method here, a set of procedures that must be followed or a technique that can be taught or learned. The speaker puts *herself* rather than the object of the conversation at stake, and in this is the ‘abandoning of any comfortable security’ (Vansielegem and Masschelein 2012: 85).

A conversation for education

So how might we think, then, of the extract of conversation in our opening scenario? In one sense, there is nothing at all wrong with it. Advice is given and, it appears, understood and eagerly accepted by the student. An observer may think that this tutorial conversation is exemplary: the student is encouraged to contribute; she is given specific feedback in relation to the module learning outcomes, and the targets are SMART.^{xi} The student might have every right to be satisfied in some respects: the thorny issues are ironed out, her plans are validated and the pass mark is likely assured. All is settled – Thoreau might say ‘sedimented’.^{xii} To continue with this analogy, though, what would it be like if the sediment were stirred up? What life would come from the silt? In this is the possibility for an education where the discussion, rather than settling rights and obligations, is ‘an abandoning or exposing of oneself, is about giving and accepting words, about inspiring and being inspired’ (Vansieleghem and Masschelein 2012: 97). Such a discussion is one in which both the student *and* the tutor are put at stake, just as both Francis and Olivier are exposed to what happens. This is the outcome of the ‘life of dialogue’. In the exposure of this discussion is a space for education.

So how might this kind of discussion be initiated and continued in the current culture of some universities, and could this unsettling discussion be satisfying? In the scenario, the starting point for the tutorial is the student’s work and her concerns about passing the assessment. It is from this point that the conversation runs its unswerving course towards its ultimate goal where the tutor asks ‘Are you happy with that?’ and the student replies ‘Yep – Thank you!’ But what if the starting point of such tutorial discussions were not the student’s work; what if it were a text or a film, a picture or a piece of music? And what if the physical space for this discussion were not the confines of the academic office or the seminar room? Just as in Thoreau’s *Walden*, the stirring up of the sediment is a physical action (as is his building of the hut, his hoeing of the beans and his plumbing of the pond),

are the conditions for the un-settling of our thinking and speaking to be found outside the tutorial room?

In a scene from the 2006 film adaptation of Alan Bennett's *The History Boys*^{xiii}. Irwin, the teacher parachuted in to give the boys, in the Headmaster's words, 'polish ... edge', takes a history lesson on the First World War. Instead of being in the classroom, the boys are seen sitting in a circle on the grass in the school grounds. Dorothy (who teaches history) and Hector (general studies), watch from a window as Irwin takes the boys for a walk and Dorothy comments 'Oh, going walk-about'. The boys have prepared essays and are being given feedback, much like in the tutorial scenario. But in the film the essays are left in the classroom and the boys gather around a war memorial, and starting with Philip Larkin's poem, *MCMXIV*, discuss not only history, but truth, art and then relationships. Irwin, cognisant of the pressure of time, needs to ensure that they pass the exam. But his approach (which attempts to disrupt the boys' ideas of what makes for a good history essay – at least for the Oxbridge entry exam) seems still imbued with the same kind of settling discourse. Hector's approach, on the other hand, seems largely unaffected by the upcoming examinations. Let us consider briefly the following short extract of dialogue from a discussion on poetry:

Hector: And now for some poetry of a more traditional sort.

Timms: Oh, God!

Hector: Er, Timms, w-w-what is this?

Timms: Sir, I don't always understand poetry.

Hector: You don't always understand it? Timms, I never understand it. But learn it now, know it now, and you will understand it, whenever.

Timms: I don't see how we can understand it. Most of the stuff poetry's about hasn't happened to us yet.

Hector: But it will Timms, it will. And when it does, you'll have the antidote ready. Grief, happiness, even when you're dying. We're making your deathbeds here, boys.

Hector is here acknowledging that learning cannot be understood wholly in terms of having particular facts worked out or settled. It is rather that not knowing allows one to

embark on a journey, one that, though unpredictable, might ultimately be more satisfying.

Ian Munday, writing about this same extract, puts it like this:

It is not to say that the boys will take ownership of a poem's meaning and be able to nicely fit it into a conceptual schema Rather, it is the acknowledgement that the poem will transform and take on different meanings as both Hector's and the student's experience of the world changes and also, that the poem might generate or shape those experiences—that with the poem, they will go on a nomadic, rhizomatic and unpredictable journey (2012:56).

Perhaps we can conclude, then, by saying that there is little wrong with measuring student satisfaction with issues such as the provision of computer facilities or the menu in the cafeteria, by means of a simple rating scale. However, satisfaction with one's learning goes beyond what can be measured by means of simple numerical scales; it can come from discussions that do not seek to solve, but rather to acknowledge the situation in which the student finds herself. It is discussion in which there is the possibility of 'a form of learning that intensifies or unsettles desires rather than simply aspiring to satisfy them' (Staddon and Standish 2012: 631). Such learning would surely be characterised by the kind of tutorial discussion seen in terms of Buber's distinction between *Thou* and *It*. The world of *It*, he writes, moves man:

to look on the world of *It* as the world in which he has to live, and in which it is comfortable to live, as the world, indeed, which offers him all manner of incitements and excitements, activity and knowledge. In this chronicle of solid benefits the moments of the *Thou* appear as strange lyric and dramatic episodes, seductive and magical, but tearing us away to dangerous extremes, loosening the well-tried context, leaving more questions than satisfaction behind them (1958: 50-51).

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ⁱ See, for example the OECD's Life Satisfaction survey [ONLINE], Available at: <http://www.oecdbetterlifeindex.org/topics/life-satisfaction/>, Accessed 3rd December 2012.

ⁱⁱ The NSS measures student opinion – using a six item rating scale – in seven core areas: teaching; assessment and feedback; academic support; organisation and management; learning resources; personal development; overall satisfaction. A further eight optional questions (using the same rating scale) cover

satisfaction with: careers; course content and structure; work placements; social opportunities; course delivery; feedback from students; physical environment and welfare services.

ⁱⁱⁱ The National Student Survey, [ONLINE], Available at:

< <http://www.thestudentsurvey.com/index.html#UcBCsWfdWoe>>, Accessed June 18th 2013.

^{iv} Statistical data is published as 2012 National Student Survey Summary Data, [ONLINE], Available at:

< <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/whatwedo/it/publicinfo/nationalstudentsurvey/nationalstudentsurveydata/2012/>>, Accessed June 18th 2013.

^v See the dictionary entry, [ONLINE], Available at:

< <http://etymonline.com/?term=discussion>>, Accessed June 21st 2013.

^{vi} The association of ‘satisfaction’ with ‘contentment’ dates from the sixteenth century. Earlier uses, dating from c.1300 relate to the act of a Church authority in satisfying, or atoning for, sin and later for satisfying a debt or creditor, [ONLINE], Available at:

< http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?allowed_in_frame=0&search=satisfaction&searchmode=none> Accessed May 28th 2013.

^{vii} In *Walden* Thoreau uses the notions of the ‘mother tongue’ and ‘father tongue’ to describe our human relationship to language (1954/1999: 93). A father tongue relationship to language comprises a different economy of living, one that is characterised by a lack of settlement and security – and is a distinctive way of living with our words as individuals and as part of a community of speakers, readers and writers of language. Paul Smeyers, Paul Standish, and Richard Smith see in *Walden* a text that proposes an economy of living that is not to be understood as mere self-sufficiency, but as a call to a form of education, an uncommon-schooling. This economy of living is characterised by what they call ‘the realizing of a language (or the possibility of a language) that can provide the conditions for the economy that he [Thoreau] seeks’ (2007: 126).

^{viii} By ‘perfectionism’, Emerson means an orientation towards a better self. Because it has no finality, it is always partial and on its way; it is to be contrasted with an idea of perfectibility.

^{ix} I take the term ‘un-settle’ here to mean disrupting, confounding, making uneasy (of thoughts and ideas); this should be seen in contrast to the ‘unsettling’ (upsetting, making anxious) of an individual. Whilst I am not advocating that tutorials should set out to unsettle (to upset) students, the un-settling of ideas might result in a disconcerting of the student that is opens up new ways of thinking and therefore is, as such, educative.

^x Compare again the etymology of ‘satisfaction’ in terms of atonement. Just as the confession is the means of absolution in the Catholic Church, Francis’ confession to Olivier, understood in the dialogic sense that Vansielegem and Masschelein outline (and to which their notion of speaking as ‘ex position’ contrasts) is a form of satisfaction.

^{xi} A commonly used mnemonic for setting targets: Specific, Measurable; Attainable; Relevant; Timely.

^{xii} Thoreau, writing of the pond in *Walden*, makes numerous references to the physical sediment in Walden Pond. He also uses this imagery to signal what he saw as the sedimenting (or settling, lifelessness) of thinking and of society more generally.

^{xiii} The film’s action is set in the fictional Cutlers’ Grammar School in Sheffield in the early 1980s. A group of high achieving boys are completing an additional year to prepare for the Oxford or Cambridge entrance examinations and interview. Under the supervision of the ambitious Headmaster, the boys are taught by Hector for General Studies and Irwin, a contract teacher, who works alongside Dorothy Linott, the Deputy Head, to prepare them in History.