

Essay 5

Areas of exploration: intertextuality – a teacher's reflections

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My oldest son is an IB Diploma student. This gives you a sense of his current age, at the time of writing. When my wife was pregnant with him, she remarked that she had started to 'see babies everywhere'. My wife was not, as far as I know, having uncanny visions. She was literally and ubiquitously seeing newborn babies accompanied by their mothers (mainly) and fathers. Psychologists, I dare say, have a name for this kind of phenomenon. If they do, I don't know what it is called, but I imagine that it is a fairly commonplace experience. I am reminded of my wife relating this to me because something quite similar has happened to me this week. As a man I am not, obviously, pregnant, so it is not babies that I am seeing. Instead, it is instances of intertextuality, the subject of this essay.

My recent meetings with intertextuality began on a visit to a rather progressive school in Bavaria where I had been invited to provide training to a new teacher. The teacher in question is a fascinating Hebrew scholar. Over coffee, our discussion moved to a consideration of reading, and my acquaintance began to tell me about something hitherto unfamiliar to me called PARDES. This reading model, he told me, is part of the midrashic tradition of exegesis, beginning in the ancient scribal period and subsequently developed by the rabbis in antiquity. As I learnt about PARDES I understood that part of this very old reading model is informed by the notion of intertextuality, although it would take until the 1960s for Julia Kristeva, writing in French, to coin the term in an essay translated as 'Word, dialogue and novel'.

A few days after this conversation, I received through the post my copy of the *Guardian Weekly*. The books section included a review by John Mullan of John Kerrigan's book, *Shakespeare's Originality* (2018). Shakespeare's pilfering of ideas is of course notorious. Mullan suggests that Kerrigan's book goes beyond what is already known, following ideas backwards in time to, as far as possible, their genesis. It asks, to the extent it is possible to know, what constitutes originality and where does originality begin.

My third and final recent encounter with intertextuality was one that put me in a sanguine mood. I have been marking IB extended essays in English and, while some essays have been masterly, more have been mediocre. One essay in the bunch, however, stood apart from the others as *primus inter pares*. In this essay, a student had investigated a contemporary novel, explaining how the novel is best understood

intertextually in the various ways it parallels, invokes and alludes to Greek tragedy. It is, to say the least, a lovely piece of writing.

So much for my own most recent dalliances with intertextuality. It is the case that intertextuality is, as of 2019, one of three 'areas of exploration' that inform how the (revised) IB English Language and Literature course should be constructed. The other two areas of exploration – 'Readers, writers and texts' and 'Time and space' – are not directly considered in this essay. Without controversy, you may recognise that intertextuality is already an important concept informing the first Language and Literature course, launched in 2011. As of 2019, however, the revised course foregrounds the concept much more overtly than was previously the case. In this essay, my intention is not to, if you like, 'unpack' the study guide or to provide detailed advice on course planning. Rather, my intention is to provide a personal reflection on intertextuality and to consider how it has already shaped my own thinking about the Language and Literature course. Thus the essay is anecdotal and, I dare say, risks meandering. My hope, however, is that you will identify something that provokes your interest, whether through agreement or disagreement, and that contributes to your thinking about the significance of intertextuality in your own teaching and your own version of the course. In what I am about to discuss, there are, I argue, pedagogical implications for classroom practice. If my case is made polemically, and if you should disagree, that is no bad thing. Such disagreement would confirm that reading involves critical engagement, and is dependent on the preconceptions that readers bring to texts.

To begin, let me share an anecdote of a miserable classroom failure – my failure, that is: I was conducting an individual oral commentary (IOC) with an ambitious and diligent student. The extract that I had provided was taken from Kazuo Ishiguro's novel, *The Remains of the Day*. Those familiar with the novel may remember that an important conference takes place at Darlington Hall in March 1923 to discuss the plight of post-Great War Germany in light of the Treaty of Versailles. The conference, it is difficult to understate, is crucial to understanding the novel. As the IOC proceeded, I noticed with increasing alarm that the student had failed to understand the significance of the conference, situated as it is between two world wars, to plot and character development, and to evolving thematic concerns. Things in fact got worse: as I pressed the student to show better understanding, it emerged that she thought that the Second World War preceded the First World War. I am not making this up. What does this story reveal, beyond the limited historical knowledge of a student, and my failure to recognise this limitation prior to an important summative assessment? Fundamentally, I think, it discloses the startlingly obvious fact that literature – and, for that matter, any kind of text – does not contain a sovereign or inherent meaning.

Meaning is not, independently, in the text, but rather exists in a complex historical network of relational meanings, including the prior knowledge a reader brings to any text. In this way, it makes sense to discuss meaning as a pluralised system of possibility in which a text is better understood as an 'intertext'. Broadly speaking, this is what we mean by intertextuality. In the anecdote I have described, the student did not have essential background knowledge to understand the significance of the text extract, and I had failed as a teacher to recognise the student's failure to understand. If there is good news, it is that the student in question went on to achieve a very respectable grade, and I managed to keep my job.

While this tale of one teacher's error may seem, at first sight, somewhat prosaic, I would argue that this is not the case. Beyond the possible impact on the student's chances of examination success and what follows from this, I think that this cautionary tale has potentially broader and more profound implications for educational practice generally. In prefacing what I am about to suggest, I sometimes feel that my position moves against contemporary, conventional education sentiment. That is, to be clear, there seems to be a view – one expressed at the nexus of schooling and its relationship to the world of work – that students no longer need to know facts. They don't need to know facts because Google has all the facts you'll ever need. Students, in this view, only need to know where to find them. This diachronic shift in thinking about education, if expressed a little simplistically, has been from what students should learn to how students should learn. Instead of being taught facts, 21st-century students should be taught how to research and investigate. This simple bifurcation is, however, unhelpful and, if I may be bold, wrong. It is, of course, true to say that the internet and new communication technologies have revolutionised research possibilities and that an ability to research is important, albeit that importance has not been, in my view, recently established. It does not, however, follow from this that knowing facts and committing them to long-term memory are redundant practices. Cognitive psychology reveals that long-term memory is not like some kind of external hard drive that can be plugged into the brain on a whim. It is, instead, *integral* to all of our mental processes. Working memory is different from long-term memory. Working memory is limited, and it cannot be outsourced to an internet search engine. Finding information on Google uses up working memory, and limits our capacity to use this information in combination with new or other information. In other words, learning new knowledge requires prior knowledge. Also, those who de-emphasise knowledge of facts, because everything can be looked up, miss a further related point: specifically, knowing *what* to look up presupposes prior knowledge, without which research skills are all but useless. Put simply, looking something up needs to be built on prior knowledge already stored in long-term memory.

If all of this seems a little removed from your language and literature study guide, it is simply a way for me to say that all reading is unavoidably intertextual, and your more astute readers are likely to be your more generally knowledgeable students. Another way of putting this is to suggest that successful language and literature students require cultural capital – a term coined by Pierre Bourdieu and developed in his 1973 work, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. While I subscribe to this position, my view is far from undergirded by an interest in the promotion of elitism. On the contrary, it is built on a simple desire to see my students, in the widest sense, flourish as citizens and do well in their IB examinations. For this to happen, they need to know facts. Knowing facts limits the possibility that they will flounder in an IOC because they have poor knowledge of major historical events.

Intertextuality, then, matters. It matters because successful reading is dependent on prior knowledge. Still, this is possibly not for the most part what you think about when you consider intertextuality as an ‘area of exploration’ that frames the teaching of the Language and Literature course. Let’s move in this more pragmatic direction; that is, towards the course itself.

At a rather straightforward level, intertextuality is about understanding language and texts in social, cultural and historical perspectives. A little curiously, perhaps, the language and literature study guide refers to the ‘unique’ characteristics of individual texts. The quality of uniqueness cannot, *ipso facto*, exist in a system where *all* meaning is relational. Try to imagine the sound of one hand clapping. Thrust your right hand through the air if you must. Did you hear anything? Almost certainly you did not. Nothing too significant anyway. We need, at least, two hands to clap. Sound, or meaning, requires the meeting of hand on hand. In a similar way, the meaning of texts can only fully be understood in terms of their relationship to other texts. Not least, texts – dismissing the boldest claims of poststructuralism for now – require writers and readers for meaning to exist. And, as I have already discussed, an altogether better sound will emerge when the reader is armed with a good amount of cultural capital for ammunition. If I were to offer you any advice at this stage, it would be to begin to teach students from the beginning of your course what intertextuality means (recognising that the concept is contested in academic literature and that important epistemological implications follow from this). Understanding intertextuality, and possibly challenging some of the ideas that emerge from it, is likely to promote course enjoyment and critical thinking among your students. Additionally, it provides a kind of conceptual ‘peg’ on which students can connect ideas.

To introduce intertextuality, it is probably best to avoid a pithy definition put onto a PowerPoint slide. It is much better to give students opportunities to develop understanding through engaging them emotionally in activities that can elicit a plurality of competing perspectives. As an example of how this might work in practice, let me explore film director Patricia Rozema's radical reworking of Jane Austen's 1814 novel, *Mansfield Park*. Released in 2000, the film proved remarkably controversial because Ms Rozema decided to foreground the fact that Sir Thomas Bertram's wealth has its origins in the slave trade. This differs from Austen's novel where slavery and colonial exploitation are not in focus. What emerges is a film director who has intertextually reimagined and reworked a canonical novel, most probably to give it relevance to a contemporary audience. Against Rozema, there are those who may be regarded as 'conservatives' or 'traditionalists'. Those who would argue in this perspective would likely suggest that 'classics' such as *Mansfield Park* are beyond politics. In this view, such canonical works have a universal meaning, transcendent of time and place, and should be left alone. Such real-life controversies offer great potential to teachers of language and literature. The debate is made for students, properly prepared, to step into. Also, one can imagine, disagreements of the kind I have outlined allow you and your students to begin to explore and challenge notions of canonicity (and thus authority). That is, a notion of canonicity presupposes, to a degree, that literature – often with a capital 'L' – has some kind of timeless and universal significance relevant to all times and places. This idea sits uncomfortably with notions of intertextuality that suggest that meaning in texts is in a *continuous* state of production and reception. In this perspective, meaning is always simultaneously inside and outside a text, dependent on an ongoing process of appropriation and restructuration. I cannot be certain, but I would imagine that Ms Rozema would express this endorsement of intertextuality in defending her endeavour to make an old novel relevant for a new audience, notwithstanding that a film is not a book.

At the heart of the tension between intertextuality and canonicity are significant issues of epistemology and power. I'll return to these at the conclusion of the essay. For now, I would like to suggest that the notion of intertextuality transcends, or should transcend, the course – both the literature parts and the language parts – and works as an underpinning concept to provide cohesion and coherence. Thus, above, I made a suggestion that students develop an understanding of the concept of intertextuality, and I used an example from literature as a possible approach to developing this understanding. What is applicable to literature is equally applicable to language. Indeed, I have found in the years that I have taught the IB Diploma that quite profound insights can be established when working with apparently mundane texts. Have a look, for example, at the text below. What does it mean?



We tend to think about this iconic door sign as ‘normal’ and, for most people, uncontroversial. However, if you reflect a little more, the sign has a particular history, and it is difficult to fully understand the sign without understanding something about how society in most instances regards men and women in an apparently uncomplicated binary opposition. Our ideas about men and women have become *sedimented* over time, and these values are expressed in the sign, fossilising cultural values derived from biological facts. However, such ideas cannot really be separated from historical gender inequality in societies where such signs are found. Moreover, a fixed binary opposition of males and females is problematic for those who identify as transgender or gender-variant. In other words, if as teachers of language and literature we can encourage our students to *see through language* that is widely understood to be natural and normal, we provide a vehicle for critical thought where students evaluate what is frequently taken for granted. I am suggesting, then, that you can promote critical classroom discourse where even the most hegemonic texts – including, say, *Mansfield Park* – can be read in a range of ways. This pluralistic way of reading is afforded through the recognition that the meaning(s) of a text is not fixed, but rather the outcome of a wider dialogic process. In my experience of teaching, where students reach this understanding, it is incredibly empowering. Instead of trying to find a meaning in a text, which they may consider to be ‘hidden’, students develop confidence in the strength of their own well-motivated perspectives.

In classroom practice, encouraging pluralistic readings can be done in a range of ways. I have, for example, drawn on the work of the academic, Stuart Hall (one of my own university professors) whose work focused on, among other things, the intertextual decoding of linguistic signs. In his 1973 essay ‘Encoding/decoding’, Hall, rejecting a transmission model of reading, gave significant agency to readers and identified three ideal reading positions: a dominant reading, where readers share the text’s ideological code; a negotiated reading, where readers partly share a text’s ideological code; and an oppositional

reading, where readers reject a text's ideological code. In classroom practice, it is often not difficult to encourage students to find at least three different, evidence-based readings of a text, utilising Hall's model. This is intertextuality at work, and it is an understanding that students can, for example, readily exploit to write better, more nuanced Paper 1 responses.

Stuart Hall is not the only theoretician whose ideas I have leant on in the classroom. There are others, although it has taken years of trial, error and critical reflection to reach an understanding of what I have been doing, and to recognise the role of critical theory in my teaching. Intertextuality has a narrative, or, in the true spirit of the concept, one should probably say 'narratives'. The term, in its poststructuralist conception, emerged in the late 1960s in France, and in particular as a consequence of disillusionment following the defeat of the student movement in 1968.

However, poststructuralism has many antecedents and, retrospectively, I have come to recognise how these imperfect theoretical positions have influenced my own classroom practice. For example, Kristeva was influenced by Mikhail Bakhtin's *The Dialogic Imagination*, and Bakhtin's notion of the 'dialogic' suggests that language at any given time is 'heteroglossic' (i.e. many-voiced). My students and I have found this idea useful when working with the layered, polyphonic narrative construction of literary texts, but also when considering the narrative construction of everyday media texts. For example, in racist discourse, arguably commonplace in a number of daily newspapers, marginalised people and groups tend not to be quoted. That is, the voice of the 'othered' is often absent, and only those with power speak.

Kristeva is best regarded as a poststructuralist. Poststructuralism obviously presupposes structuralism, where the ideas of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure in *Course in General Linguistics* are of central importance. The anti-historical stance of structuralism and the claim that language is a *closed* self-referential system is, I think, difficult to accept. Here, however, is not the place to engage in obtuse theory. While I endorse the criticisms of structuralism, I am not prepared to throw the baby out with the bath water. In classroom practice, I have found Saussure's central, if deficient, idea that language – at both a lexical and syntactical level – exists as a system of choice to be hugely beneficial to engaging students in texts, and to raising their understanding of how language works in both literature and so-called non-literary texts. It is well known, for example, that 'dog bites man' is not news, but that 'man bites dog' is. It is the idea that language exists as a system of choice that the Russian formalists and Prague School structuralists – including thinkers such as Viktor Shklovsky and Roman Jakobson (see e.g. Peter Steiner's

Russian Formalism) – exploited in their own conceptualisation of how literary devices have an effect that, in English, we tend to call ‘defamiliarisation’. Defamiliarisation is the way in which words and sentences are selected (by writers), where language draws attention to itself to undercut a reader’s routine way of seeing and thinking about the world. Unlike structuralist ideology, there is a sense in this view that the self-referential quality of language as a system has an (external) influence on human cognition and action. The idea of defamiliarisation suggests that, in some way, language foregrounds its own form, developing patterns of repetition and deviating from patterns. In the language and literature classroom, this idea is easy to exploit and, again, contributes to improving students’ awareness of texts and their meanings. As an example, in a well-known poem such as William Blake’s *The Tyger*, the range of repetitions is extraordinary, developing a sense of the animal, its energy and strength. By contrast, in many of the poems of ee cummings, it is the breaking of lexical and syntactic conventions that foregrounds language and thus ideas. In similar ways, the racist discourse of the contemporary newspaper establishes its credentials through a complex web of subject–object positions and patterned lexical clusters that make clear a dichotomy of ‘us’ versus ‘them’.

If, again, I have moved away from directly addressing intertextuality, it is by way of suggesting that, in the ‘Western academic tradition’, intertextuality emerges in a historical narrative (or narratives), and that knowing some of this, imperfectly in my case, can be usefully employed by language and literature teachers in the classroom to extend how students understand language and its uses.

As I begin to conclude this essay, it seems germane to mention the writer and academic, Francis Fukuyama, who famously signalled ‘the end of history’ as the Soviet Union collapsed and the Cold War came to a close. Even if Fukuyama made his claim with his tongue in his cheek, he was still wrong. We have not reached the end of history and, in a similar way, the history of intertextuality, our understanding of it and the arguments we have about it are not an end. However, at its most postmodern, in the writings of Roland Barthes, for example, the idea of intertextuality represents a significant epistemological challenge. In this ‘extreme’ view, the meaning of texts can *never* be fixed. In the same way that Nick is never fully able to understand Gatsby, the meaning of any text always recedes at the moment it is grasped. We cannot, in this view, any longer talk of literary ‘works’ (even if IB examinations do), but we must instead talk in terms of ‘texts’, which as Barthes reminds us meant, in its original sense, ‘a tissue, a woven fabric’ (p. 159). This (radical) poststructuralist case rejects the possibility that meaning can ever be fixed, and in so doing challenges the dominant discourses of the powerful. So far, so good. However, it is

also a remarkable and convenient sleight of hand. It enables the poststructuralist to criticise everything without the need to offer a different, better alternative. For you as teachers of language and literature, and for your students, this represents a problem. If no view is better than the next, and nothing needs to be justified because, so the argument goes, it cannot be justified, then positivist thinking, science, truth, right and wrong lose meaning. And, at this point, we give in to ranting on Twitter and accepting the most outlandish claims of fake news. Criticisms of postmodern thinking are many. It is not within the scope of this essay to deal with these claims, but you may decide to read up on them. After all, intertextuality is, in many senses, a great tool to think with. However, if IB students – or anyone else – really believe that anything goes and nothing is sacred, we have a real problem, and there is little chance that the world will become a more peaceful and prosperous place.

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