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Killing the conceptual: Knowing, research, and poetry for children
A conversation between Michael Rosen and Jen Webb

Michael Rosen and Jen Webb met in London on 21 June 2011 to talk about the relationship between poetry and knowing. Michael's poetry is written for young readers, and his understanding of what he is doing, and why, and with what underlying ontological and axiological premises, is explicated in this discussion. Central to the conversation is Michael's perspective on how poetry can be put to work as a generative and genuinely educative domain for school children. Whether we invite them to write poems, read poems or discuss poems, Michael shows, we can use approaches, attitudes and techniques that open up a space in which young people can find their lives, their experiences and their thoughts validated. This can be a way to intervene in the established ways of understanding individuals and groups, in schools and in society more generally, and to open up new ways of knowing.
We began the conversation with a brief tangent on technology and mythology, motivated by the Livescribe Smartpen being used – a product put out by the Echo group. [1]

Michael:
I like technology where the people behind it are thinking, 'What do people need?' And also, of course, these are potentially quite democratic instruments because they're cheap; anyone can get one and use it.

Jen:
I'm not sure that Echo is the best name, though. I do tend to think in terms of mythology and wonder, 'Do I really want to identify with Echo?' – endlessly caught in a loop.

Michael:
She was better than Narcissus, wasn't she? He really was a shit.1 I quite like one version I read which says that he went on peering at himself, and then he fell in the water and drowned. Other versions say the gods took pity on him and turned him into a flower, but I quite like the idea that he thinks, 'I'm so beautiful, I'm brilliant', and then slipped straight in.

Jen:
And he didn't have the wit to get out of the water. But let's get started; what my colleagues and I are trying to do in our project is to tease out the relationship between poetry and knowledge.[2] In Australia, as here in the UK, the creative disciplines have been pushed to become part of the university and now the teaching staff have to produce what counts as research. A lot of people are

asking if our practice permits that. It seems that most of us in the arts feel intuitively that art does create knowledge, but it is not yet thoroughly embedded in our systems. So in this project we are trying to find out what university-based poets think about the relationship between practice and knowledge-generation, and what it means to be a poet who has to make not just creative works, but also works of knowledge.

Turning to your practice: when you're preparing to write and are gathering material and thoughts, do you think that your energy is in the concept that you're working with – that is, the facts, or knowledge – or is your energy in finding the right image, the right words, putting down the right line?

Michael:

Quite often a starting point is a phrase or an image; it might be a memory, it might be a sensation. It can be triggered off by daydreaming, by an association in my own mind; it might be something my children have said, or it might be a phrase. Those are starting points; and then I get quite quickly to concept. I'll ask myself questions about why I've remembered it or thought about it, and then more abstract things will come to mind.

Let's take an example. My dad used to cook us a traditional Jewish dish you make with unleavened bread, *matzo brei*. What I remember was that he used to say, 'Don't tell your mother I'm cooking this.' Then I thought about how we always say, 'Don't lie to your mum', but there was my dad, basically saying, *Let's collaborate, let's lie to Mum*. He'd never say anything against her, and so it was quite funny that he did this naughty thing behind her back and cooked this stuff that was greasy and schmaltzy.

You can see that my route has gone from a memory of him doing it, and wanting to acknowledge that he did occasionally do parental things, and then it's gone conceptual: into the question of lying, and of lying to your mum. But I don't want to make it too conceptual. At the end of the wonderful poem 'Sheepdog Trials in Hyde Park', C Day Lewis says, 'My work is a kind of controlled woolgathering, too.'[3] I think, *you don't need to say that Cecil Day, just tell us about the sheepdog trials and leave us to decide whether your work is a controlled wool gathering or not*. What I try to do is go to the conceptual and then kill it off: to write as authentically as I can about the incident that has led me to the conceptual thought, and hope that people will go conceptual themselves if they want to. The poems don't have to take you there.

So we've got the concrete, which is the memory of Dad, the *matzo brei*, the conversations, *don't tell your Mum* and all that; but quite early on I've gone conceptual and thought, 'Why have I remembered it?' Part of it is the nice thing – the old man is cooking for us; but there's also the naughtiness, the lying. At some level I've censored out the conceptual, because I'm interested in writing poems that pass their information across to the subjective of the listening reader, and where the conceptual stuff will come in at some other level – through discussion maybe. I think that's how I would see the relationship between the concept and the art.

That's not to say I don't admire concept. People often ask 'What's your favourite poem?', and quite often I say it's 'Dulce et decorum est',[4] where Owen shoves it right in your face. He doesn't need to, he could just describe the trenches and say, 'Bent double like old beggars', but at the end he says, 'The old lie'. I hesitate to write like that: it's so conceptual that, for children, I mostly avoid it.

Jen:

Are you deliberately avoiding being didactic, or is it that you want to keep this space for children more playful, more open?

Michael:

Probably a mixture of both. I think that I like the idea of writing in such a

provocative way that the conceptual stuff will happen afterwards; that teachers and children will have queries, that they'll start asking questions in the space you've left at the end of the poem. If you tie it up too much, then there'll be nothing for them to talk about.

Jen:
And if you tie it up too much, then what you've done is create an argument and put it through the poem, rather than letting it just *be* a poem.

Michael:
Also you have expressed authority. When I first started writing I didn't realise how much authority the printed page has for children, particularly in schools. It's a huge institutional weight that comes on a child. If you said something like, 'Well, actually, the sky is blue because God painted it blue' with that level of authority, children would say, 'That's true', simply because you've said it, and therefore it must be true. I don't like that. I prefer to be more provocative, and it's easier to be provocative if you're not too conceptual.

Jen:
So in your example, instead of telling the child the sky is blue, you might ask them if the sky is blue, or say something like 'When the sky was blue', which holds the possibility that things might be otherwise.

Michael:
Yes, or you can say something surreal, like, 'The sky is always brown, isn't it?' That would be more interesting for me, certainly in the context of poetry for young children. I think that occasionally, when something has really irritated me, I might have gone a bit conceptual; but mostly I avoid it. I have done books of political poetry for adults though, but they go around lefty circles where nobody thinks you're an authority so you feel a bit more free to say things. Your readers don't take everything you say as gospel. But with children, and there's something conceptual, I think, 'What are you doing putting that in a poem?' It could be nice to write a book that is didactic, but only within a framework where you announce, *this is a didactic book.* I wouldn't want to write a poem like that.

Jen:
Because?

Michael:
I suppose it's because I'm trying to reinvent poetry, certainly in the context of schools. I'm trying to make it something different, so it isn't offering a direct statement of belief. One of the models in my mind is *The Pardoner's Tale* by Chaucer. He tells us about the pardoner, and then the pardoner tells a very powerful story about death and about how, if you pursue greed, you will end up killing yourself and others. And this story comes from the pardoner who is identified as a complete rogue and who, at the end of the book, is trying to sell indulgences. This is the very thing Chaucer thinks is just appalling, that is a complete hoax. The cunning thing is that he doesn't say indulgences are wrong. He just puts this great story in the mouth of a person he disagrees with, in order to get you thinking about how clever these people are. He's showing and telling at the same time just how cunning are these people who sell indulgences. I think the whole drama of all that is about as conceptual as I'd ever want to be. It's sort of Shakespearian, in that the ironies of the situation make you do the thinking, rather than the text laying out thoughts for you.
Having said that, I like Wilfred Owen saying 'the old lie'. The great thing about that poem is that it was coming from such anger and from such a concrete situation. I think he's desperate, he thinks people don't know what life

is like in the trenches and he is telling them: he's saying, 'Look, you folks at home, every time one of us dies they keep telling you *dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*.' Not many of us are going through that and I tolerate the didacticism of it because of the extreme situation he was in. I suppose that if I were starving to death or falsely imprisoned then I might do that too. There are those lovely, powerful poems that came out of South Africa, and some of them were quite didactic. Think about Hugh Lewin's poem 'touch'[5]: he's in prison for supporting the ANC and is talking about all the people he hasn't touched. It is very direct, but at the same time it is very conceptual; he's making you think about bodies and the fact that he was not actually in contact with any *body*. I suppose one of the reasons I'm cautious about the conceptual thing is because I've had a pretty cushy life compared with the majority of the people in the world.

Jen:
So it's quite easy to get on a soapbox and make pronouncements?

Michael:
Yes, exactly. So there's a little shit detector in my mind saying, 'Don't lay it on, be a bit more ironic, be a bit more distanced.'

Jen:
What you were saying a little earlier makes me think about Bourdieu's work on education theory, and particularly his work on reproduction that is involved in the process of education.[6] It seems that you're quite deliberately avoiding reproduction, which is interesting, given that a lot of your work is designed for young people in school.

Michael:
Yes; well, there are several ways to try to avoid it. One way is to avoid an elite way of talking. As Bourdieu points out, a lot of education is simply about talking to the children of people who are educated. I can see it in my own education, because my parents were both teachers and active politically, and the kinds of dialogue that went on in my home suited the education I had because it was dialogic, it was very comparative, and it was very discursive. I always had a sense that whatever I said was part of a wider debate. It was a gift, really, it was like an A Level at breakfast, perpetually.

Jen:
So if you didn't become an intellectual person then you really had messed up.

Michael:
Absolutely. There was no way of avoiding it. Even my brother, who was desperately trying to avoid it by being a scientist, is the most dialogic scientist that I've ever met. He's in charge of the Darwin Archive at the Natural History Museum now, so he's in dialogue with Darwin.
I'm very aware of Bourdieu's concerns; for instance, if I go into a classroom sometimes the teacher will say, 'I'm so glad you've come, Michael, because the quicks are writing poems and the slows are doing rhyming words.' I have a very strong sense of Bourdieu at that moment and think, 'What are you doing?' This thing poetry was invented as a democratic medium—in the broad sense of the word. Homer, or the Homeric poets, didn't say that poetry was only accessible to some people. We were talking about Echo and Narcissus earlier: there was no point in having those stories if only some people could understand them. The point is that, like Jesus' parables, or like Beowulf, this literature was meant to be for everyone, and yet as we developed class societies, more and more we've developed literatures that are very excluding.
Obviously there are occasions when, for specialist reasons, you might want

that: if you're trying to produce knowledge that requires a particular kind of mode of thought then you don't want always to be populist. But it seems to me, particularly with young people, that there's no point in a poetry that excludes. You have to try to say some of the most difficult and interesting things, but in a way that will not exclude anybody. In a sense you break the reproduction cycle, and let children see that this form of knowledge – or understanding, reception, cognition – is different from all that other stuff they do that appears to them like hurdles, or hoops they have to go through in order to get to the next stage, and where they can be wrong.

I'm always asking teachers to try and make poetry something you can't be wrong about. Their response can't be wrong; it can only be different. So much of the education around poetry is about proving certain children can be wrong and, essentially, the teachers are forced into always being right. I think it's a false way of positioning people, and so I'm constantly trying to find methods of teaching and methods of performance where you can't be wrong. The child can have a dialogic relationship with the poem. I ask children questions like, 'Does the poem remind you of anything? If you could ask the poem any questions, what questions would you ask it? If you could answer those questions, then how would you answer them?' So I frame the questions in the context of the poem: I open questions we can ask of the poem, so the kids think of the poem as something you investigate from the point of view of your knowledge and your awareness.

Poems, to my mind, are very specialised forms of cohesion – of sticking words together. All language coheres, of course, but poems are specialised forms; they have developed their own forms, and obviously rhyme and rhythm are most famous. I say to children, 'What secret links can you find between bits of the poem?' It can be on any basis: linguistics or phonology, or chronology, it could be the lexis. In that way they investigate the prosody of the poem for themselves. It isn't the business of the teacher, who says, 'Today we're going to look at metaphor', and then have a discussion around metaphors or symbolism. It all comes out of them finding strings for themselves.

Jen:
So it's genuinely child-centred learning.

Michael:
Yes, but also it's investigative. It takes from science the notion that if you have something in front of you, you say, *What does it feel like? What does it look like? What does it smell like? Why do we think it smells like that? Why does it look like that? If we put it with that, what happens?* And then you observe, you develop theories about it, and then test the theories. I think we ought to do the same with poems: ask, *Why is it like that thing that you remember, that text that you remember? What's the link between the Dracula film you saw and that poem? There's blood? That's a good link*. Do you see what I mean? That interests me. I hope that is a way of defying the reproduction process, because it gives authority to the child, and it gives the child the sense that a poem could be theirs. If you do this with them, they finally crack open things that they thought they could never crack.

Jen:
Would you have children writing poetry in the same sort of way?

Michael:
In an ideal world I would always be writing poems with children I was with, and who were involved in activities. Quite often I'm thrown in at the deep end a bit, so I do various things. I like to work from a film or story or another poem or an activity: we might go out on a coach or a train, or go to a museum or something like that. In those situations I quite like exploring, cutting in to

whatever is there, by taking on the voice of something or somebody within the situation. There's a wonderful little French film from the 1950s, *White Mane*. [7] The film is about a boy on the Camargue who wants a wild horse that the rangers have captured. There's a battle for power between the boy, the men and the horse itself: at one point the boy ropes the horse, but even as he is trying to get the horse it is giving him difficulties. It's quite an interesting moment of tension in the film; you're conflicted about whether you're on the horse's side or the boy's side (you are probably not on the men's side). I freeze frame, and say to children, 'Imagine you were the boy at that moment. What are you thinking? What are you seeing? What are you hearing? What are you imagining? What does it feel like?'
So they have this set of open-ended questions, and I write up their answers, and then I'll say, 'You know what you can do with this? You can pull out bits that you like from these notes that we've made, and see what happens. You can take bits, repeat bits, move bits around so that you have something that has something to do with what's in the boy's head.' That would be an example where I've done an activity.

Jen:
So you put the world in their hands.

Michael:
Yes. You can do similar things with objects as well. I did a workshop recently in a school, and we were in a room that had been the Dinner Hall. I said, 'If you were a light in the Dinner Hall, what could you see? What could you hear? As the light, what would you be thinking?' I wrote up about five or six of their answers to these questions, and had them use the bits, take them and move them around. Nice things come out of that.
Then there was something a bit different. There was a class of Year Three children, who are seven to eight years old. I was asked to get them to write things that would go in a time capsule to be buried just round the corner from them and to be opened up in about a hundred years. I said, 'The thing that most people will want to know is who you are.' It's very hard to say who you are if you start with 'I am …', because you'll say 'I am 12' or 'I live in Hackney', and it's very difficult to think of anything else.
So I told them I had been listening to the radio and heard a woman from Montserrat. Quite a few of the children came from the Caribbean so it rang a bell for them. There had been a terrible volcano there, some people died, a lot of them came to England, but some people had stayed on the island. The interviewer asked the woman why she had stayed and she said, 'We can survive. And anyway, we can hear the volcano and we've all got volcano bags.' He asked, 'What's a volcano bag?' and she said, 'It's where we put all the stuff that we need; if we have to go running it's in the volcano bag, waiting on the hook.'
I posed the idea that the time capsule could be the equivalent of a mind volcano bag, and said, 'You'd want to put in a description of the most valuable thing that you've got, something that you really treasure and why you treasure it. You'd probably want to put in a memory of something that somebody has said that you think is valuable or helpful. You could put in a dream in, something you're really afraid of, something that you hope for.' They wrote absolutely stunning things, things that might or might not have been poems, but were ultimate statements about themselves. I think they're really powerful and it all came from this idea of a metaphysical volcano bag: it lets them into a space that they occupy, but without knowing it.

Jen:
Which means you're giving them the training in self-reflexivity – again, it's very Bourdieu.[8]

Michael:
Yes, indeed. They can stand outside of themselves. The moment they start saying, 'This is what I said', you know you have used the classroom as a place of knowledge, but a place where they've produced the knowledge. All right, it came from my questions which are very carefully framed, but they have played with them. In a very diverse classroom you have very different things that the children are saying and comparing, and that school is very diverse; the kids go from refugees who have literally just arrived to people like me. I compare it with when I was a kid, and my family was thought very adventurous because we went to France, and there was a sense that there was something slightly strange and exotic about us because of that. In London suburbs then, nobody did that: they went to Broadstairs and Hastings. But some of these children go to the Caribbean, or to Africa, or to the Indian sub-continent. Much poorer kids are travelling, now, in order to make contact with grandparents, and this has reversed the position as far as knowledge of the world is concerned. These children do have knowledges that we very rarely draw on.

Jen:
But if we find ways to do so, that can validate their knowledge – for them and to them.

Michael:
Yes. I'm interested in a poetry that does that. One of the nicest things I've done wasn't my idea, actually; it came from the teacher. She found a poem by a Jamaican poet, James Berry – at least I think it was his, I've never been able to find it since – called something like 'My other home'. We worked with the children on the idea that we all have other homes. For some it just meant, 'I go and stay with my Nan around the corner'. For others it meant going to the Caribbean, or to Indonesia. I thought it was wonderful because it told us so much about how these children live in the world.

Jen:
That's quite a good segue to the next set of questions, which are about location. I wondered about the actual place where you write – if you have a secret room or the *room of one's own,* or if for you it's a state of mind that is your location.

Michael:
A state of mind, yes. I've a place at the end of the garden, but I quite like to write when I'm on the move, sort of scribbling it down. There is a point when I probably need an hour or two where I'm not really in contact with anybody at all, but I don't have to be in a special place. In the past I did, but I think that's changed as a consequence of Google – it sounds trivial! – the consequence of there being a knowledge base that isn't totally dependent on books. I am somebody who is constantly in dialogue with other sources of knowledge – newspapers, magazines, books, academic papers. Not a day goes by when I'm not in mental dialogue with this stuff. In the past I had to do that with hard copy. I either had to get off to a library or buy books and magazines, and I surrounded myself with this stuff. It became very homely to be amongst it. Until I discovered the joys of Google, I thought it was absolutely essential: that the only place I could work was surrounded with this stuff. It would generate new ideas – I'd be browsing among this stuff and then think, 'Oh, I could write something about that'. I'm a little bit sad about it, but there's this place at the end of the garden that is jam-packed full of books and papers and magazines, and I don't need it any more.

Jen:
So it's become a storeroom, or an archive, rather than a place you work?

Michael:
Yes, I don't need it now because all you need is a laptop. So the last ten years have changed me, because I used to think that I could only write if I was surrounded by the stuff that mattered to me. Now my wife and I are talking about the prospect of moving and she said, 'What should we do with all your stuff?' On one hand I think, *but that stuff, it's me, it's how I write*; and then I think, *no, I don't actually*.
But on the other hand: I'm doing a project on Emile Zola, and I have a little box full of his stuff. He came to this country for about 11 months, in the middle of the Dreyfus case. He had defamed the Chief of Staff and they tried him and found him guilty; he appealed and was still found guilty, so he ran away and then mooched around South London in drab little hotels while his wife and then his mistress and then his wife and then his mistress came over, taking turns to visit him. I found out most of this through hard copy, not through the internet, because there are still some areas that aren't, as it were, Googlified. It may be that it's going to be these areas that we find most interesting.

Jen:
I suspect so. A number of photographers and artists I know have put aside their digital cameras and are finding old cameras, or toy cameras, and going back to darkroom photography. Then, of course, they will Photoshop the produced work, but there's a desire for tactility, a desire for the concrete object; as much as we love the digital domain.

Michael:
That takes us back to performance. I spend 30% of my time in face-to-face encounters with children because there is still something special about it. If there was a lot of it going on in schools I probably wouldn't think that, but it's still a rarity when a performer comes in a school, particularly a performer who is attached to a set of books. They find there is a person behind those books, and they can engage with that person about the process of writing. I've been doing this for nearly 40 years now. On one hand, I embrace the Google world with its new relationship to knowledge, but at the same time there is some part of human relationships where the face-to-face encounter remains the best way we know to negotiate ideas and feelings. I say one thing, you say another, I say another again, and we're in a permanent state of affecting each other at all sorts of levels. You can't do it with a book; you can't do it with a screen. They're great things but there is something more.

Jen:
It is interesting in a phenomenological sense. There's been quite a lot of work extrapolated from biology in the last decades, much of it emerging from early writings by Maturana and Varela where they talk about existence, or being, as being-in-connection. We – whether 'we' means amoeba or cows or humans – are constantly interacting with our environment, and it changes us and we change it.[9]

Michael:
Marx put it by saying, 'In changing nature we change ourselves.'[10] I never understood it when I first read it. Of course what it means is that in the process of enacting the change, you change yourself. I'm very interested in that in terms of writing: writing is a way of changing nature because you textualise something as you write about it. At the moment I'm looking at this door, for instance, but if I write about it then I textualise the door. It is no longer the door, it's the door in the text, and so I have changed something about my perception of it; and in changing it I have changed – have repositioned – myself, and changed my relationship to that door, and maybe to all doors.

Often, people treat human beings and knowledge and nature as somehow static: that there is a nature, and you write about it, and then the reader gets it, and nobody has changed anything. If you read 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' there is Keats, trying to say that there's this kind of flight that is miraculously captured on the urn. We read it in school, and it was treated as if it was this god-given piece of art that we had to read because it stated something important. It wasn't helped by how Keats ends it, so dogmatically, with beauty/truth truth/beauty. [11] They presented it to us as a static thing. There was the vase, there was Keats writing about what was on the vase and what he thought about it, and you the reader are going to get that whole sense of flux, the impossibility of capture, one lover chasing after another – which, ironically, he was trying to write about.

It's very hard to conceptualise the kinds of flux that I think are going on in the way in which we affect each other and are affected by things. Education is particularly guilty here because it treats facts as static. Famously, you have a piece to read for comprehension and teachers ask you about facts in the piece that you've just read, as if they are unalterable. Crazily, they will ask students what colour is the cover of the book, or which side is Long John Silver's wooden leg on, as if it matters, as if that's what the piece is actually about. It makes it static, it turns literature into a company report, as if it's saying that these things are stable facts.

Jen:
I wonder if it's a fault of language. As you spoke I'm reminded of something that John Berger wrote; he talks about what it might mean that in writing we use the same material to produce a company report as we do to produce a poem.[12] How do you mobilise a particular sign, a particular word, and turn it into something that's open, as opposed to something that's closed?

Michael:
Yes, that's nice. I think that's what poets try to do all the time. Famously, they're trying to defamiliarise, so that one of the tasks of poems is to take the very thing that you thought you knew, and say, 'What if it was something different?' You can do that through placing words in unusual relationships with other words, or you can try to juxtapose concepts in a way that is surprising and odd, and get outcomes that are surprising. You can see with a lot of poems that there is an effort to defamiliarise, and some of that will be at the level of the signifier, if you like, that Berger is talking about. There are some poets who, no matter how often you talk about feelings and ideas in relation to poems, will say, 'That's not what poetry is. Poetry is about language itself.' If I represent their position correctly, they say that if a poem appears to be about ideas and feelings then the poem isn't doing the job it's supposed to do, which is to defamiliarise language itself.

The problem is that when I read the poems that come out of that school, I find quite often that I don't understand them. If they defamiliarise the signifier so much that it becomes very difficult to see what's going on and to feel it and hear it and understand it, then I suppose I do give up, to be absolutely honest. I suppose I'm old-fashioned; but when I read Shakespeare, I feel all the time that Shakespeare is defamiliarising things in ways that I understand. So if he says, 'Til the last syllable of recorded time',[13] then he's defamiliarised time for me…

Jen:
…and syllables…

Michael:
…exactly, yes. How can time have syllables, and how can syllables be in time? But still I understand it, so there's a conceptual understanding of a text that

doesn't actually make sense. It's the same with the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune.[14] Fortune can't have slings and arrows, because fortune is just a human concept and even if you personify it you can't have slings and arrows, surely? Well, you can because you've just said it, and it makes sense somehow. That's just about as complicated as I can manage. The thing that he does, the Shakespeare poet, the thing that goes on in his poetry is about as much of the defamiliarising of the textural level that I can cope with.

Jen:
Moving on with that idea of feelings, I'm wondering about your relationship to emotion, as a writer? Are you driven by feelings before you write, as you write? Do you use states like anger or love or passion to generate work?

Michael:
No. I think I try and locate any feeling in something very concrete first. I may not even know what the feeling is. It tends to be a bit more visual, tactile or olfactory than that. Then I'll see the more abstract words that you're using there like anger or sadness; that may emerge, but I won't normally start there. It usually a string of associations; it's, *Oh, that time we were camping and it rained and then I stuck my finger through the tent and the old man went crazy because I tore the tent. Meanwhile there was water flowing through the tent. What was all that about?* Do you see that?

Jen:
Yes; so it's both a narrative and an experiential space?

Michael:
It's narrative and a feeling, and the feeling is in the narrative. I try to tease out the feelings and the characters within a situation. So I don't start from an abstract, I start from the concrete or, as I mentioned earlier, from a memory or a phrase. It might be a phrase that I've nicked from another poem, and then I always try to credit it. There's an incredible Emily Dickinson poem that starts off, 'I heard a fly buzz when I died'.[15] I remember that once, I was being told off by the Head, and in order not to think about what he was saying to me I listened to a fly buzzing in the corner. Then I thought, I'll write a poem that begins 'I heard a fly buzz when I was in the Head Teacher's study'. [laughs] In a way though – this sounds really pretentious – it's actually about the same thing: the fly dies and I'm listening to the fly dying while the Head is telling me off. One child in a million will go to the Emily Dickinson poem and find it, and realise that in a funny sort of way it's about the same thing.

Jen:
Because death is in the poem still?

Michael:
That's right. It didn't start from thinking about death, it began by thinking about the line 'I heard a fly buzz'; that triggered off a memory of hearing a fly buzz. In the end it's funny and jokey but with the tragedy of life and death wrapped up in it.

Jen:
Are there things that you want people to know? Do you have a pedagogical sense or didactic sense about your work? Is there something you've tried to convey to readers of the world, or to posterity?

Michael:
I think it's that I want to remind children, and anybody actually, that there are layers to culture. There are official cultures and there are unofficial cultures,

and we are all in possession of those. School is quite an interesting place because a lot of the time it ignores those other cultures; it pretends that the people there are cultureless, and that the only culture around is geography and English and maths. Of course you can't absorb that culture unless you have some cultural tools, the apparatus with which to understand it. How education negotiates that is quite bewildering, because for most of the time it simply ignores children who lack that sort of culture.

Quite a lot of what I write is, in fact, meant to validate the kind of unofficial culture in my own life: the conversations at home, relationships with my brother and parents, the things they talked about, the languages and sub-languages like Yiddish that they used. A lot of my work is about that. My wife and I were interviewing the singer/songwriter Billy Bragg for a radio program, and he said had been reading about something called intangible cultural heritage. It could be gestures, it could be smiles, it could be the food we eat. There's a vast amount of this; it may not be artefact, it may be process, or it may be body, the cultural ways in which people express who they are and how they are in the world. But a lot of it has absolutely no value unless you're of a certain class or certain status in society.

A lot of what I'm doing and saying is that you, as a child, could do the same thing. I've written about nicking a chocolate cake; you could write about the stuff that you nicked. I've written about the rude thing my mate said in the middle of a lesson; you could write about that. A lot of my work is meant to be saying, *this is me but you can do the same thing*. It's meant to be germinatory. Also, it's linked to what I think are the two most powerful ways in which authority oppresses us: through instruments of passivity and shame. Passivity is induced in children all the time, by us as adults, as parents, as teachers. One example is the disciplinary procedures schools use; the teacher will move things round on the board to show how the children are behaving. If they're using the traffic light system then it will be a set of lights, and all the children at any single moment in the day are a certain colour of light, with the top light being good and the bottom bad. At any given moment of the day you, the child, are either very good, good, not so good, bad, or very bad.

Jen:
So it's a constant process of external evaluation?

Michael:
Yes, and this is happening more and more in schools. It seems to me to be one of the most pernicious things that I've seen going on in schools. Inevitably the same kids are good and the same kids are bad, so all the teacher does is just reinforce that some children are perpetually bad, and others mysteriously appear to be good. Whatever a 'bad' child thinks about himself, he doesn't appear to be able to do anything to lever himself away from that judgment. Also, as you say, this is an external form of evaluation, so the child has no control over it. It's not as if the child says, 'Actually, I think I am quite gold at the moment. Could I be gold?' Couple that with the rigorous streaming and setting going on – so there's the quick table and the slow table, and the teachers are saying it in front of the children – then if you are on the bad traffic light and the slow table, you are permanently classified as inferior to others. It's a classification that you can never question; it is just given to you, and that is quite ironic since it's happening in a place of education, where you're supposed to be questioning things, engaging with the fact that there isn't a fixed piece of knowledge.

I suppose part of me thinks that my job as a poet is to do anything whatsoever to reverse any sense of passivity and shame. It might be because subversive and illicit things are validated in my poems, or because there are ironies that show you that the world adults have created is not perfect and that they aren't always right. This can go on at a purely linguistic level where you say, 'You know this

language stuff that you are given every day and told it goes like this and has sentences? Do you know it doesn't have to?' I always say to children, 'When you're making poems you can treat language like Lego and move it around. If you want to say "The mat sat on the cat" then it doesn't matter. Or you could say "mat the cat sat the on" and see if that works; sometimes it will and sometimes it won't.' So, even at the level of the signifier, I'm trying to say, *the world doesn't control you, you control it*.

Jen:
I have just one last thing, and that is a quote from Auden. He wrote, 'Insofar as one can speak of poetry as conveying knowledge, it is the kind of knowledge implied by the biblical phrase, "Then Adam knew Eve, his wife." Knowing is inseparable from being.' Does that say anything to you?

Michael:
Mm. 'Biblical sense' meant that they had sex, didn't it? I suppose he's saying that it's through the body that you know someone. Auden was very sensitive about sex because he had to explore whether he was gay or not. I think he's interesting because for most people sexuality is something you're taught without ever being taught it. So the moment gays and lesbians start articulating ideas about it, it's instantly challenging. I think Auden means that through sexuality, through sex of any kind, people get to know each other. I wouldn't think he means just with the act of sex, with the act of congress. I'm assuming what he means is that when two bodies come into contact – in all the different ways in which bodies can come into contact, which can include talking to each other – you have a new knowledge; you get to know somebody, that person gets to know you and new knowledge is produced because, going back to Marx, you have changed the nature of the relationship.

Jen:
So, going back to your earlier comment about the door: your being with the door changes you even if it doesn't change the door itself, because it changes the door for you.

Michael:
Yes; and you've got to produce speech or gesture or movement that will suit the occasion with that other person. New knowledge is produced as a consequence of two people coming in to contact with each other. I suppose that's what he's getting at, and it's very fruitful. Again, it's dynamic, the idea that I am me, you are you, and we meet like two photographs. Of course if two photographs meet they're not really doing much to each other, not even at the atomic level; they're just propped up opposite each other.

Jen:
So there is actually no meeting for them; there's only a meeting for people who look at them and make a story about it.

Michael:
Yes, that's good. I think for most young people, encounters with texts are often just a bit more complicated than the model of 'the reader'. Adults may or may not talk about their reading with anybody else, but the moment you put texts into schools there is a whole mediation that is vast, and that has crucial effects on what meanings people are making of it. There'll be discussions, there'll be the authority of the teacher, there'll also be stuff that can't be controlled because it goes on in the playground or chatting on the way home or with parents. These texts are much more socialised than a lot of adult reading is. Obviously, with adults, there is critical apparatus: people hear chats on the radio, they look at reviews in the newspaper, there are reading clubs and so on.

Even so, a lot of adults just pick a book, read it, and maybe say one or two things to someone else. Children's socially mediated reading is full of wonderful potential if they are given the space to interrogate each other and the text – to investigate, to be curious about the text and about each others' responses. If you can create an environment in which that happens then these texts, I think, are massively important.

Endnotes

1. Echo (her name comes from the ancient Greek for 'sound') was a mountain nymph who loved the sound of her own voice, and who provided Zeus with cover in his amorous adventures with other nymphs by distracting his wife, Hera. Once Hera worked out Echo's role in Zeus' infidelity, she punished the nymph by talking away her voice, leaving her only the ability to repeat the words of others in an endless repetition. To make matters worse, Echo fell in love with Narcissus, a hopeless situation because that young man was so vain that he disdained those who fell in love with him. The goddess Nemesis punished him by ensuring he would see himself in a pool of water. He fell in love with himself and, unable to tear himself away from his image, died there at the pool. return to text

2. 'Thinking poetry: knowledge, research and the creative manoeuvre': Professor Kevin Brophy from the University of Melbourne; Associate Professor Paul Magee from the University of Canberra; Professor Jen Webb from the University of Canberra. return to text

3. To lift, to fetch, to drive, to shed, to pen
Are acts I recognize, with all they mean
Of shepherding the unruly, for a kind of
Controlled woolgathering is my work too. (Cecil Day Lewis 1992 *The Complete Poems of C Day Lewis*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA: 542-43) return to text

4. 'Dulce et decorum est' 1917 in Cecil Day Lewis and Edmund Blunden (eds) 1963 *The collected poems of Wilfred Owen*, New Directions, New York: 55. return to text

5. Hugh Lewin, 'touch', in Barry Feinberg (ed) 1980 *Poets to the people: South African freedom poems*, Heinemann, Portsmouth, NH: 84. return to text

6. Education was of crucial importance for Bourdieu because he identified it as the mechanism through which the values and relations that make up the social space are passed on from one generation to the next. Accordingly, he devoted much of his research to mapping the relations and objective structures within the French school system. His point was not that schools inevitably have the function of reproducing social inequalities, but that they tend to do so, and therefore he challenges those committed to using education as a vehicle for social change to make moves within the field that might bring about change. See *Homo Academicus* (1988, Polity, Cambridge); *State Nobility: Elite Schools in the Field of Power* (1996, Polity, Cambridge); and, with Jean-Claude Passeron, *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture* (1977, Sage, London). return to text

7. *White Mane: the wild horse*, or in French, *Crin Blanc, Cheval Sauvage* (1953), directed by Albert Lamorisse, music by Maurice Leroux.,won the *Palme d'Or* for Best Short Film at the Cannes Film Festival in 1953. return to text

8. Bourdieu wrote extensively about the importance of reflexivity if we are to be aware of, and rupture, the unthinking acceptance of values, questions and categories of the field and the society in which we operates. Reflexivity produces a break with this mindset through reference to the notion of radical doubt as a departure point for any research activity. See: *In Other Words: Essays Towards a Reflexive Sociology* (Stanford: Stanford University Press 1990); with Löic Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (1992, Polity, Cambridge). return to text

9. Biologists Maturana and Varela argue that cognition emerges from a mix of circularity and complexity on the part of systems. All life forms are systems, in this perspective, and exist and form themselves by interacting with their environments, and adjusting themselves to their conditions. Humans are not particularly different from other life forms; we may be technological, more than that we are biological systems that interact with our environments and with each other. See Humberto Maturana & Francisco Varela, *Autopoiesis and Cognition: The Realization of the Living* (1980, D Reidel, Dordrecht). return to text

10. Karl Marx, describing labour as a process in which 'man' opposes nature in order to achieve human needs, writes, 'In thus acting on the external world and changing it, he at the same time changes his own nature'; see *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* 1.1 (2007, Cosimo Press, New York: 198). return to text

11. John Keats, 'Ode on a Grecian Urn', in *Complete poems* (1982, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA: 282): '"Beauty is truth, truth beauty" – that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know'. return to text

12. John Berger, in *And our faces, my heart, brief as photos* (1984, Writers and Readers, London: 21-22), writes: 'That a poem may use the same words as a Company Report means no more than the fact that a lighthouse and a prison cell may be built with stones from the same quarry, joined with the same mortar'. return to text

13. William Shakespeare, from *The Tragedy of Macbeth*, Act 5, Scene 5:

> To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,
> Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
> To the last syllable of recorded time,
> And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
> The way to dusty death. return to text

14. William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark,* Act 3, Scene 1:

> To be, or not to be: that is the question:
> Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
> The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
> Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
> And by opposing end them? return to text

15. From her poem 'Dying' (1862), in RW Franklin (ed), *The Manuscript Books of Emily Dickinson* (1981, Belknap Press, Cambridge, MA: poem 465). return to text

One of the best-known figures in the children's book world, Michael Rosen is renowned for his work as a poet, performer, broadcaster and scriptwriter. Appointed UK Children's Laureate in 2007, he lectures and teaches in universities on children's literature, reading and writing. As an author and anthologist he has been involved with the publication of over 140 books. Michael Rosen is currently the visiting Professor of Children's Literature at Birkbeck, University of London

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