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Subverting the Notion of Student Satisfaction

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Abstract

A question posed by an undergraduate student in education provides the starting point for this subversive exploration of two canonical notions in educational discourse. These are reflective practice and student satisfaction respectively. These concepts are generally considered in isolation. However, in this article they are brought into relation, with a view to examining the manifold tensions between them. The author draws upon the work of Edmond Jabès (1912-1991) in order to explore how literature opens the gates to the ethical imagination. She suggests that literature can make available the conceptual and emotional resources that enable us to think differently about the inter-relationship between reflective practice and student satisfaction. Both the form and content of the article attempt to demonstrate that Jabès' *The Little Book of Unsuspected Subversion* (1996) speaks to the essential nature of intellectual endeavour more adequately (and far more vividly) than more conventional responses to the student's question.

Keywords student satisfaction; reflective practice; unknowing

Introduction

“What follows is to be followed. It is no tributary of what was, but of what will be,” he said. (Jabès, 1996, p.14)

“*Is it supposed to be this hard?*” the student asked her teacher.¹ There is a wick that burns in this question. It is a question that cannot easily be extinguished. There are

¹ At a recent conference, a colleague at the University of Aberdeen reported a question posed by a student on an undergraduate education programme. I am very grateful to Kirsten Darling-McQuistan and to the anonymous student for the insights afforded me through Kirsten's account.

thoughts buried deep inside it that are struggling to get out. My aim in this article is to try to set them free.

According to Edmond Jabès (1912-1991), a writer of Egyptian Jewish heritage who will be our guide throughout this article, “every thought has its joys and its bruises” (p. 16)—its birth pangs, we might even say.² “Thought pays attention only to the reactions of thought,” he suggests (p. 16). These gnomic utterances imply that it is only by attending to what the student’s question *does* (even to what it *knows*) rather than what it *means* that we may gain access to her orbit and let her flame burn more brightly.

Those of us who work in education seem to have grown so used to fire fighting that we are reluctant to attend to what the student’s question does. So much so that we tend to assume that it requires an immediate answer. A common response is to exhort the student to take action. For example, we might encourage her to consult the course reading list and to re-examine some recaptured words. In short, teachers’ responses to students’ questions commonly suggest a recursive rather than a subversive turn: they speak to revision and repetition rather than to undermining or overturning received wisdom. Students’ questions are generally interpreted as a straightforward search for meaning. They invite explanation, clarification, or perhaps even simplification. Questions are usually immediately countered with an invitation to knowledge. So in the case above, plausible responses to the student who asked whether it was supposed to be this hard might run like this: “*Have you had a look at the materials on the VLE?*” “*Have you consulted the Effective Learning Team?*”

All of us have no doubt resorted to rejoinders of this type at some point, particularly in a higher education environment dominated by concerns relating to “student satisfaction-”. And so it has come to pass that appeals for knowledge from students are commonly met with further appeals to knowledge from teachers, in an attempt to ensure that prospective teachers develop the capacity to engage in purposive reflection. It seems fitting to invite the readers of *Other Education - The Journal of Educational Alternatives* to consider the extent to which solicitous questions of this type signal an appeal to the reactionary order that characterises contemporary education: namely, the primacy accorded to students’ steady and disciplined progress towards the realisation of pre-determined learning outcomes.

² A brief note on style is in order here. In a gesture to subversion above suspicion, in this article the use of the APA referencing system is confined to sources other than Jabès’s *The Little Book of Unsuspected Subversion*. References to the latter are signaled by the use of quotation marks, with the page number in brackets afterwards. This allows the reader to focus on the space of the ideas, without the usual bibliographic clutter. It also enables me to do justice to the cadence of subversion. There is mischievous and subversive pleasure in consigning information on process and method to a footnote.

The term curriculum (from the Latin *curricle*) invites us to imagine that the role of teachers is largely confined to encouraging students to take their place in the light, two-wheeled open carriage that we have put at their disposal. Thereafter two strong horses spanned abreast will carry them steadfastly towards their destination—some form of safe house, perhaps. There they will find ideas, concepts and theories neatly arranged for them like carefully draped soft furnishings. The developments outlined in these deliberately florid and subversive terms are perhaps particularly evident in the context of the contemporary market-driven approach to education and the concomitant emphasis on “customer satisfaction” (Skea, 2017; see also Fulford, 2016 and 2017). We return to the latter theme below.

This article takes the student’s question as a starting point for a subversive reading of the concepts of reflective practice and student satisfaction. Both these terms have complex genealogies, the former rather lengthier and more nuanced than the latter. However, these need not concern us: others have explored them in greater depth than is possible here (e.g., Gillies, 2016, in respect of the former, and Skea, 2017, the latter). For now, it will suffice to note that these concepts are generally consigned to different silos when it comes to their treatment by educational researchers. One of the purposes of this article, at a superficial level, is to overturn the convention, and to consider these two concepts in relation to each other rather than as discrete entities. (See Pirrie and Day (2017) for a more detailed treatment of this issue than there is scope for here.)

The main purpose of the article, however, runs a little deeper and is more subversive in nature. It is intended as an antidote to the “knowingness” that pervades educational practice in general, and educational research in particular. It explores how literature can open the gates to the ethical imagination; offer alternative perspectives on current policy and practice; and suggest new ways of thinking about educational issues. Richard Smith (2016) has explored how “knowingness” has become mainstreamed into educational practice at all levels — from the sharing of “learning objectives” with school children to the cultivation of “employability skills” in undergraduates. He suggests that “the student is constructed as someone who is to be eminently knowing about the meaning of a university education” (Smith, 2016, p. 281). In contrast, the question with which this article opened seems to offer a nugget of “unknowingness” and thus makes immediate demands upon our thinking attention. Has the student who asked the question gleaned that there is something more to university education than securing a “graduate-level” position or exercising a narrowly circumscribed profession?

We shall explore below how Jabès’ writing offers us a glimpse of a reality that speaks more deeply to the essential nature of intellectual endeavour than more conventional responses to the question raised by the student above. His writing also brings to the fore the quieter epistemic virtues that appear to have fallen out of favour in the contemporary academy: intellectual modesty and diffidence, for

example. Smith (2016) explores how the “virtues of unknowing” have gradually been supplanted by “the tougher epistemic virtues” such as intellectual courage, intellectual rigour, and intellectual honesty. The “virtues” of educational research comprise robustness, comprehensiveness and some degree of mastery of a particular domain. As Smith points out, “epistemic virtues” have their analogues in character virtues “such as grit and resilience, now increasingly being recommended to schoolchildren and their teachers” (Smith, 2016, p. 275).

In contrast, Jabès provides a salutary reminder that “the work is never done. It leaves us to die unfulfilled. It is this empty area we must not so much occupy as tolerate. Here we must settle” (p. 22). The paradoxical idea that we must settle for unsettlement recalls Heidegger’s notion of *das Unheimliche* (the uncanny) that Skea (2017) explores in relation to the process of education in general and to student satisfaction in particular. To paraphrase Butler (2004) (in a mischievous act of knowingness) we might define the uncanny as that curious sense of “being other to ourselves precisely at the place where we expect to be ourselves.” What is remarkable about Jabès is that he manages to make us feel comfortable in this state of permanent exile. I suggest that one of the reasons for this lies in the luminous quality of his writing (in marked contrast to that of Heidegger). As I hope to demonstrate below, this fosters our curiosity and opens up space for thinking.

It is to these qualities that we now turn, with a view to beginning to explore in more general terms what literature can bring to our understanding of the process of education. This will also enable us to examine concepts such as “reflective practice” and “student satisfaction” that have achieved canonical status at different points in time. In short, it is now time to treat these with a small measure of unsuspected subversion.

In the Beginning Were the Words

The particular qualities of the amalgam of poetry and prose that characterise Jabès’ writing are perhaps best explained through recourse to a lengthy quotation from a section of *The Little Book of Unsuspected Subversion*. It is entitled “The Interdiction of Representation” and lies (or rather sings out) at the very heart of the book. This passage provides some remarkable insights into the qualities of writing. It also suggests that thinking and writing are analogous processes, an idea to which we shall return in due course:

So there are two books in one. The book within the book—sacred, austere, ungraspable Book—and the book that opens to our curiosity; profane work, but transparent, in places, to the presence of the Book hidden within it: the sudden limpidity of an inspired word, so airy, so dazzled, so avid to last that it hurls us for a brief moment into the heart of an adumbrated, white, naked eternity. (p. 48)

In the example above, we might speculate that the question of whether or not *it is supposed to be this hard* was prompted by the student's exposure to books or other texts that she found austere and ungraspable. Perhaps she had looked in vain for the book within the book, the profane but transparent work, and had been unable to find the key. Perhaps she trusted her teacher sufficiently to rely on her to provide the means to access what Jabès describes as "the embers dormant under the ashes" (p. 42). Only in this way could she glimpse the other book hidden within, the one that would open to her curiosity and dazzle her with its transparency (p. 42). Alternatively (and perhaps more plausibly) the student may have been confronted with inert knowledge and a sound evidence base that offered no prospect of lightness, airiness or sudden leaps of the imagination.

At this point I should immediately address the issue of my "positionality" (social science jargon for the fact or quality of having a position in relation to other things). I find reading educational research honestly difficult. I often find it banal and over detailed, for it appears that to leave anything to the reader's imagination is considered a heinous failure in such circles. At worst it can be austere and abstruse to the point of being ungraspable—and quite often unreadable. It occurs to me now that this is perhaps why that student's question has made such a claim on my thinking attention. *Is it supposed to be this hard?* Perhaps now is the time to admit that I have often asked myself that question and been unable to answer it.

The idea that I want to pursue here is that the imaginary questions posed by our imaginary colleagues in response to this very real student's question are duplicitous as much as solicitous. This is because in essence they are responses to an *unknown* face, rather than a way of answering (to) a person standing before us. In contrast, the colleague at the University of Aberdeen who provided the example at the beginning of this article freely admitted that she was lost for words in the face of the student's question. Therein lay the humanity of her response and its subsequent claim upon my attention. It was as if she were telling us that once again, she found herself in that "blank space, without voice, without gesture, without words" (p. 22). In doing so, she manifested the type of quiet "unknowing" celebrated by Smith (2016). Her response betokened a profound understanding that "what remains to be done is always only what would claim that it is done: the desert where we are buried by our impotence" (p. 22). The idea that "being buried by our impotence" is not something that we should rush past or try to remedy resonates with Heidegger's notion of letting learn (*lernen lassen*). The following passage, from a series of lectures entitled "What is called Thinking" (1951-52) offers what by Heidegger's standards is a remarkably lucid explanation of the concept:

Teaching is more difficult than learning. We know that; but we rarely think about it... why is teaching more difficult than learning? Not because the teacher must have a larger store of information, and have it always

ready. Teaching is more difficult than learning because what teaching calls for is this: to let learn. The real teacher, in fact, lets nothing else be learned than learning. (Heidegger, 1968, p. 72)

In these terms, to rush a student past an impasse in her thinking or to steer her in a particular direction would signal a failure to let her learn. Yet it seems that as teachers we are generally reluctant to admit that we too are “buried by our impotence”. We find it hard to acknowledge the difficulty of our craft. Indeed we do everything within our power to disguise the extent to which we try to hide our uncertainty. In short, we do all we can to resist dependency. Paradoxically, this entails increasing the level of students’ dependency by carefully “scaffolding” their learning environment, exposing them to “sovereign thought” and shielding them from the “sovereignty of the unthought” (p. 50).

Over time, this may have a profound impact upon the extent to which we are able to cultivate students’ love of learning, their tolerance of uncertainty, and their capacity to deal with the unexpected. Yet we go doggedly on, offering apples to students in our attempts to please them. To paraphrase Jabès, “limits transgressed within their limits” become our daily bread (p. 22). Thus we do everything we can to ensure that students are not unsettled in relation to their learning. They “can read only ripples left by a shipwrecked word and gradually smoothed out by the calmed waters” (p. 41). We do all this for reasons that appear strikingly banal in the context of contemporary higher education, namely in order that in turn students can validate our efforts by delivering high scores in measures of “student satisfaction,” such as the National Student Survey (NSS) in the UK. (For cogent critiques of the student satisfaction agenda and its impact upon students’ expectations see Fulford, 2016; and Skea, 2017). The argument advanced here is that the holy grail of “student satisfaction” can all too easily turn into the kind of facile self-satisfaction that by some strange alchemy manifests itself in self-serving box-ticking exercises designed to record the achievement of learning outcomes.

Despite appearances to the contrary, in the example above the exhortations to consult the course materials or the effective learning tutor are not addressed to an individual *per se*, but rather to the student as a unified category, the student writ large, as it were. Wash your hands; eat your greens, we tell that student—or rather these students. Look into the written page as if it were a mirror, we seem to say. There, see, I told you so. There is your own image smiling back at you. *Everything is going to be all right*. You are no longer in exile. You can settle (down) in familiar territory in a place where the furniture has been carefully arranged for your comfort and to your satisfaction.

Literature and the Possibility of Subversion

The special issue of *Other Education The Journal for Educational Alternatives* in which this article features focuses on the potential of literature to open up new ways of thinking about educational research, education policy and practice. This article shares the same overarching purpose (so there is perhaps limited evidence of subversion thus far). Edmond Jabès, to whom the reader has already been informally introduced, is our spirited guide in this nefarious and uncertain enterprise.

Forced into exile by the Suez Crisis in 1956, Jabès fled to Paris where he associated with the Surrealists, although he never became a formal member of that group. He spent the rest of his life in France, where as a francophone he was able to embrace the French language as his medium of artistic expression. However, his conception of the book is located in the Hebrew rather than the French tradition. It has been noted that his writing is difficult to categorise, as it encompasses a pastiche of dialogue, aphorisms, fragments, poetry and song. This in itself is likely to lessen his (admittedly indirect) appeal to many educationalists, as they that tend to prefer neat distinctions between, say, qualitative and quantitative research. Educational researchers tend to favour research approaches that comprise “reports of case studies, experiments and surveys, discussions of conceptual and methodological issues and of underlying assumptions of educational research, accounts of research in progress.”³ There are educational researchers who talk enthusiastically about “research paradigms” as if they were climbing frames designed in compliance with the latest health and safety directives.

In contrast, much of Jabès’ work “focuses on the book as a place in which ideas—of exile, God, the self—are approached through question and echo.”⁴ In abbreviated form, this article mirrors the intent of the slim volume from which it drew inspiration. It thus comprises echoes from *The Little Book of Unsuspected Subversion*, which provides an intricate and intriguing latticework of questions, and questions about questions. Educators tend to shy away from questions about questions, as they can sometimes lead to greater uncertainty. This practice is to be avoided at all costs, in the interests of ensuring that students experience that illusory condition of satisfaction. As I am attempting to demonstrate here, echoes from Jabès challenging and enigmatic book offer us the conceptual means to think differently about education, and about our role as educators. This is important, not least because the question raised by the student at the beginning of this article deserves a thoughtful (and therefore subversive) answer. Thus both the form and

³ See Aims and Scope of the *British Educational Research Journal* [http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/10.1002/\(ISSN\)1469-3518/homepage/ProductInformation.html](http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/10.1002/(ISSN)1469-3518/homepage/ProductInformation.html)

⁴ For a brief introduction to the life and work of Edmond Jabès, see <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/edmond-jabes>

content of this brief essay are concerned with the realm of subversiveness above suspicion, and thus represent a dialectics of subversion itself. This is in marked contrast to conventional practice in academic writing, where an extensive array of “sources of knowledge” is adduced to provide a firm foundation for the line of argument proposed. And yet as Jabès reminds us “even the most solid fortress is subject to the slightest sagging of the ground” (p. 28). In contrast, crossing the threshold of *The Little Book of Unsuspected Subversion* opens up a conceptual and imaginative space for us to think without banisters in unsuspected ways, including revisiting well-worn concepts such as “reflective practice” and “student satisfaction”.

Jabès’ main translator is Rosmarie Waldrop, who has made more than a dozen of his works accessible to readers of English, beginning with *The Book of Questions* (trans. 1976). In *Lavish Absence* (2002, p. 70), her book on translating Jabès, Waldrop explains how “his aim is not to invert the traditional hierarchy of sense over sound, but to establish parity between them, or, rather, to establish a dynamic relation between language and thinking, where the words do not express pre-existing thoughts, but where their physical characteristics are allowed to lead to new thoughts.” My current enterprise is rather more modest in scope, partly due to my own limitations and partly by design. I share Jabès’ interest in the dynamics of the relationship between language and thinking. The inter-relationship between language, thinking, and embodied experience (including the experience of reading) merits further exploration. As a writer who is also an educationalist, part of my mission is to subvert the pervasive expectation in educational circles that the main function of words is to express pre-existing thoughts, preferably in a format that can be easily digested by students. In short, I would like to place a temporary interdiction on representation, to borrow a phrase from Jabès. As a person (a *mensh*, one might even say) I am animated by a desire to stand with my colleague from Aberdeen and to respond to the unknown student whose question provided the opening line of this article. As I indicated above, this implies attending not only to what that question means—challenging though this is—but also to what it does.

The form and content of this article invite the reader (and the writer through the very process of writing) to consider how it might be if we were to cleave to the righteous order of subversion rather than to the reactionary order of education and conventional writing about research in education. My main purpose here has been to suggest that this radical educational alternative demands our full commitment as human beings rather than our (mere) professional development as teachers (important though this is). For the approach that I am proposing entails looking into a *known* face, for example the face of the student who asked that particular question to that particular colleague at that particular point in time. The richness of that moment resides precisely in the fact that we might not have an answer ready to hand. The colleague from Aberdeen recalled the student’s question precisely

because she remembered being entirely lost for words, and that she could not answer it immediately. This invites us to consider a possibility that is anathema to an educationalist, namely that words do not always enlighten. Rather, there are occasions on which, as Jabès puts it, “silence does not obscure: it regenerates” (p. 5). To do justice to the question posed by the student quoted above is to confront the ineffable, or at least what is unsayable in a particular educational context. In this case, I suggest that the ethical and “reflective” response is to be at a loss, rather than to reach out to a “framework” or adduce a set of “resources.”

“The universe is a book,” Jabès tells us in a short passage that alerts us to the illusory nature of expectations of mastery and of ready answers to difficult questions: “You read a page of light—of waking—and a large part of dark—of sleep—a word of dawn and a word of forgetting” (p. 7). If we drink deep from this rich and enigmatic sentence, then we might be emboldened to offer the following response to the student who provided the opening line of this article: “*I don’t know.*” “*I think that perhaps it is really supposed to be this hard,*” we might say. But that would not be quite enough, would it? In educational terms this is clearly a provisional rather than definitive answer. Moreover, it falls considerably short of the kind of reply that meets an implicit professional standard.

The next step might be openly to acknowledge (although perhaps not in such terms) that “the question is made of darkness, the answer brief light”; that “the answer has no memory” and “only the question recalls” (p. 23). But this would entail deepening our understanding of how “the question creates [and] the answer kills” (p. 37). The net result might be that we would learn to value questions more than answers. It might even mean abandoning the idea that education is essentially about the transmission of authorised, codified and sanitised knowledge. It might entail embracing a view of education as the development of understanding, of a capacity or propensity to see in the dark. The latter vision of education may be viewed as a process of going along together, with students who teach and teachers who learn, and *vice versa* (Ingold, 2018). As Pirrie and Day (2017) suggest, as long as the idea of education as a process of transmission persists, then teachers and academics will be on one side of the line that nobody drew, and pupils and students will remain on the other. As these authors point out, being on different sides of an imaginary line “has profound implications for [the] collective ability [of students and teachers] to embrace learning and teaching as social performance rather than to regard it as the progressive acquisition of knowledge, skills and competences” on the part of an atomized individual.

In *The Little Book of Unsuspected Subversion* Edmond Jabès suggests that “we need continuity, resemblance, reciprocity, as we need fresh bread” (p. 12). I think the pedagogical implications of this are worth exploring, albeit rather briefly, for two reasons. Firstly, this is because they reinstate the centrality of the personal encounter (manifested with such grace by my colleague from Aberdeen). “Thought

has no ties,” Jabès explains, presciently for the case in hand here. “It lives by encounter and dies of solitude” (p. 13). What struck me about the incident related by my colleague from Aberdeen was that for her it was the meeting face to face with the student that was of primary importance. The words simply fell away: she openly acknowledged that she had been at a loss. This, I suggest, is the “lavish absence” that opened the doors to the ethical imagination and provided the key to this article.

Secondly, this need for continuity, resemblance and reciprocity partly explains our inherent sense of dissatisfaction with the provisional answer to the student. In our role as educators operating within a specific framework we run the risk of not seeing in her full humanity. I argue that reinstating continuity, resemblance and reciprocity into the educational project rather than fixating on destinations, outcomes or learning objectives is precisely what is required to re-animate the educational project in an environment dominated by target-setting and accountability. Looking into the mirror of Jabès’ remarkable little big book has offered me one way of going about this. The suggestion I am edging towards here is that it may not serve the interests of students if we, so to speak, persist in paddling in an “exhausted ocean” of knowledge, “sunk back into the passivity of water” that is shallow enough for us to bathe in (p. 9). What use is that when in our heart of hearts we know that we (teachers and students) are “the perpetual questioning that refills the well”? (p. 13). How could it be otherwise? “A raging sea hounds the sky with its bounding questions,” Jabès reminds us (p. 9). Through the mouthpiece of the sage, he later offers us this curiously reassuring account of perpetual dissatisfaction that offers a remarkable insight into the process of thinking:

You think: you imagine, reflect, and dream all at once.
No sooner is it mastered than your thinking sends you back
to your imagination, your reflections and your dreams.
“You will never have the upper hand,” he said.
“You will always be on the bottom, in regard not to what
you think, but to what you still need to think,” he also said. (p. 17)

In the more mundane circumstances of our day-to-day lives, custom and habit often lead us to pity the teacher who has no disciples. She might be dismissed as not being a team player, to put in more secular terms. The person who, say, displays a critical attitude to measures of student satisfaction and the extent to which these can be reconciled with aspirations towards reflective practice may at best be treated with circumspection and at worst with downright suspicion. Fortunately, Jabès is on hand to offer some consolation and an alternative perspective on professional isolation. “I have only bad disciples,” says the sage in *The Little Book of Unsuspected Subversion*. “Trying to copy me they betray me; believing they

resemble me they discredit themselves.” “I am luckier than you,” replied his colleague (as if a sage could be said to have a colleague). “Having spent my life questioning, I, of course, have no disciples at all.” “Is this not why I was sentenced for subversive activities by the Council of Elders?” he mused (p. 13).

“I Can’t Get No Satisfaction”

In 1965, Keith Richards and Mick Jagger gave their generation a rock anthem that challenged the very notion of “getting satisfaction.”⁵ This has resonated with succeeding generations, literally and metaphorically. In more strident terms, the lyrics echo the theme addressed by Jabès above, namely that we imagine, reflect and dream all at once, and that “useless information” merely sends us back to our imaginations, our reflections and our dreams in the endless roundelay that is called thinking.

In the concluding part of this article I shall explore the extent to which the teacher bent on ensuring that students are “satisfied” (whatever that means) wilfully misrepresents the relation of knowledge to ignorance. Once again, the quality of Jabès’ writing makes the scales fall from our eyes. It provides a salutary reminder of the scale of the challenge educators who are committed to the ideals of transmission and mastery have set themselves, and how this enterprise is doomed to failure. “Knowledge knocks against the cold scope of ignorance, like sunbeams on the mirroring sea, dumfounded by its depth,” Jabès reminds us (p. 6). In current educational discourse, the emphasis is on the acquisition of knowledge rather than in the cultivation of the habits of thinking, with all the risks that the latter entails. As the question raised by that perceptive student suggests, we might have to entertain the possibility that thinking (and writing) really is *supposed to be that hard*. Yet there still is no straightforward answer to that student’s question, no simple remedy available on the virtual learning environment. Perhaps, then, we need to embrace the subversion of such expectations. It is not without irony that I shall attempt to do

⁵ I can't get no satisfaction
I can't get no satisfaction
And I try, and I try, and I try, and I try
I can't get no satisfaction

When I'm drivin' in my car
And that man comes on the radio
He's tellin' me more and more
About some useless information
Supposed to fire my imagination
I can't get no, oh no no no
Hey hey hey, this what I say...

so by making an explicit and selective appeal to a higher authority, namely the political theorist Hannah Arendt.⁶

In an essay entitled *Thinking and Moral Considerations*, Arendt (1971) explores the distinction between thinking and knowing in the context of the “curious, quite authentic inability to think” demonstrated by Adolf Eichmann during his trial in Jerusalem in 1961. Arendt recalls how she had coined the term the “banality of evil” to describe the phenomenon she had observed in relation to Eichmann, namely that “evil deeds, committed on a gigantic scale ... could not be traced to any particularity of wickedness, pathology or ideological conviction in the doer” (Arendt, 1971, p. 417). Eichmann’s main characteristic, she had concluded, was his “extraordinary shallowness.” She noted his tendency to rely on “clichés, stock phrases, adherence to conventional, standardized forms of expression and conduct” that “have the socially recognised function of protecting us against reality, that is, against the claim of our *thinking attention* which all events and facts arouse by virtue of their existence” (Arendt, 1971, p. 418, my emphasis).⁷

According to Arendt (1971, p. 421), “man [sic] has an inclination and, unless pressed by more urgent needs of living, even a need...to think beyond the limitations of knowledge, to do more with his intellectual abilities than to use them as an instrument for knowing and doing.” In a particularly illuminating passage, Arendt contrasts the need to know with the inclination to think. “Our desire to know,” she explains, “can be fulfilled by reaching its intended goal.” The cumulative result of the collective pursuit of knowledge is “a growing treasure...that is retained and kept in store by every civilization as part and parcel of its world” (or in more mundane circumstances added to the repository of resources made available to students). In contrast, the need or the inclination to think, Arendt suggests, “leaves nothing so tangible behind.” In the context of the debate on student satisfaction, it is perhaps particularly important to note that it cannot “be stilled by the definite insights of “wise men.” The need to think can be satisfied only through thinking, and the thoughts which I had yesterday will be satisfying this need today only to the extent that I can think them anew” (Arendt, 1971, pp. 421-422). Jabès describes the thinker as a “seasoned fisherman.” “From the sea of the unthought he draws luminous thoughts—moonfish, globefish, pilotfish, flatfish—which, having swallowed the bait, wriggle for a moment between the blue of the sky and the blue of the sea before they stiffen, aliens, on the ground” (pp. 81-82).

⁶ The fact that Gillies (2016) draws upon Arendt’s work on judgement in an attempt to provide a sounder conceptual foundation for the notion of reflective practice adds a further layer of irony to the proceedings.

⁷ There is not scope to do justice to this point in relation to reflective practice and student satisfaction, those standardised, conventional forms of expression and conduct that lie at the heart of educational practice. Nevertheless, I trust that my readers’ imagination will take flight and begin to explore this largely uncharted territory.

Subverting the Notion of Student Satisfaction

In terms that recall Arendt's comparison between thinking and the veil of Penelope⁸, he gestures at the link between thinking and language:

Thinking pulls back the thick veil covering the universe, only to replace it with another so thin we barely guess it is there. We perceive the world only through this transparent veil....What if this veil were language? (p. 57)

In language that lifts a veil on the distinctions between knowledge and thinking, "knowingness" and "unknowing," Jabès describes the subtle interplay between the "unthought" and thought by posing the following question: "if the unthought is a blank, how could we help surmising that perhaps behind it a thought timidly prepares to be born?" (p. 58)

We can only speculate as to the nature of the thought lurking behind the student's question "*is it supposed to be this hard?*" I have tried to suggest that it may be that it is what the teacher did not say—and the very fact that she did not say it—that will allow the subsequent timid thought to come to life, and the student to come of age as a reflective practitioner. It is what the teacher does not say that allows the student to see. Jabès suggests that "thought forms by intertwining what is thought—its boiling past—and what is unthought, its problematic future: a plain knot or one with a brand name" (p. 58). As Arendt (1971, p. 423) reminds us, "thinking always deals with objects that are absent, removed from direct sense perception." Yet as my fellow contributors and I are all too aware, writing soon comes up against the arbitrary limits of the indicative word count. Sooner or later, as Jabès recounts, "the unthought resides in the image of a threadbare void revealed by a cut knot that a new knot is about to replace."

All I have been able to do for now is to land a pilotfish and watch it wriggle and stiffen on the ground. All I can do then is maintain my capacity to encircle what is offered next.

"Gone fishing," she said.

⁸ Arendt (1971, p. 425) explains that "the business of thinking is like the veil of Penelope: it undoes every morning what it had finished the night before."

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