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Keeping the Lights On: A Play in Two Acts

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Act One

A small office in the English department of a modern secondary school. There are five black leather swivel chairs, five desks in varying states of order, and two desktop computers. Wall-to-wall shelving groans with collections of novels, plays and poems. In one corner there is a small fridge, on top of which there is a kettle and an eclectic collection of mugs.

SAM (VP) and MEGAN (MC) are two English teachers. They both completed their Doctorates in Education ('EdD') just over two years ago and now teach in the English department.

MEGAN [looking nervously into a mug to check whether it's clean, then pouring in water from a kettle]: I bumped into one of our EdD tutors today.

SAM [sitting at a computer, typing quickly]: What, at Kingston Uni?

MEGAN: Yeah, Victoria. I haven't seen her for ages. [MEGAN sits down at her desk, but turns her chair to face SAM.]

SAM [swivelling in her chair to face Megan]: Me neither. How is she?

MEGAN [smiling and nodding]: Really well. Still crazy busy, still teaching teachers. It was one of those intense, chance meetings on a wet and windy morning that somehow seems to have been predestined.

SAM: Blimey, that's a bit Shakespearean for a Thursday morning in suburbia. What did she say, 'hail to thee, Thane of Cawdor?'

MEGAN: No, she asked me if I want to write a chapter for a book she is planning.

SAM: There you go, that's pretty much the modern equivalent: 'All hail to thee, thou shalt be published hereafter.'

MEGAN: I don't know about that, 'I have no spur to prick the sides of my intent.'

SAM: Well, I can be your Lady Macbeth and goad you into action. What's the book about?

MEGAN: It's about theory in practitioner inquiry and how practitioners interact with it.

SAM: Ha! We don't; unless we're doing a course. We're too busy laminating plenary cards and marking with three different coloured pens to 'think theoretically'.

MEGAN: Sad but true. You know, after I spoke to Victoria, I dug out some of the pieces of writing I did when I was working on my Doctorate.

SAM: And…

MEGAN: And I realised that when I started to read the theorists: Stephen Ball for instance, I was so excited to have found their work. It was like discovering amazing photographers who had travelled to all the places I'd been, but somehow they'd managed to capture everything with so much more artistry and flair than I ever could.

SAM: I'm glad your first reaction was excitement. I remember feeling angry that we hadn't been exposed to their ideas before. I'd spent over ten years teaching before … How can I extend your metaphor..? Before things started to come into focus. Anyway, I've got to run. [She stands up].

MEGAN: Oh don't go yet. At least wait till the end of break. I haven't had a properly intellectual conversation for at least eighteen months. [She stands up to get a biscuit from on top of the fridge.] Biscuit?

SAM [takes a chocolate digestive from the packet and sits down again]: Ta.

[There is a long pause].

MEGAN [dunking her biscuit thoughtfully in her tea]: You know … Speaking of focus … The reason Foucault could take better pictures than either of us was because he had the capacity to zoom in and out of history. His knowledge was so sweeping and deep that he could pan over great swathes of time, then focus with clarity on more modern events that we, with our relative ignorance, can only see fuzzily [taking a soggy biscuit out of the mug].

SAM: Yes, I do remember that clarity [examining her perfect biscuit], that mental sharpness that I felt when I looked out of the ivory tower, seeing through the eyes of giants. But now we've descended back into the fray, and my vision is blurring because tomorrow I've got five lessons to teach, two of which are being observed by the powers that be and if I don't get 'Outstanding' for both … [biting the biscuit].

MEGAN: What? You'll feel that your identity as an Excellent Teacher will be threatened?

SAM: It's more than that these days, isn't it? My livelihood will be threatened [stuffing the remaining bit of biscuit into her mouth].

Now, you may have time to ponder the niceties of educational research, but I've got photocopying to do.

MEGAN: Blimey, what's happened to you?

SAM: Nothing's happened to me. It's just that reading Ball and Foucault are not going to help me convince the Senior Leader that I am ticking all the latest sets of boxes. And while I might not have changed, the system we are working in has shifted enormously, in case you haven't noticed. It's suddenly much easier to lose your job. Look around you, there are ghosts everywhere. Colleagues who have been fired, teachers who have euthanased their careers after 'substandard' lesson observations. They are haunting every staffroom I know of.

MEGAN: Well yes, but if we'd collectively paid more attention to Ball, we may not have ended up with so much misery in our midst [taking her iPad from her desk]. Look, this was a passage from Ball that I cut and pasted into my notes. He wrote it over ten years ago yet it seems frighteningly prescient: 'there are pressures on individuals, formalized by appraisals, annual reviews and data bases, to make their contribution to the performativity of the unit. In this, there is a real possibility that authentic social relations are replaced by judgemental relations wherein persons are valued for their productivity alone. Their value as a person is eradicated. This contributes to a general 'emptying out' of social relationships, which are left 'flat' and 'deficient in affect'. Again, performance has no room for caring.

SAM: That's exactly what's happening. Staff don't feel cared for as people with lives and identities beyond the workplace. They are increasingly feeling like they are employed as a means to an end, the 'end' being the achievement of an 'Outstanding' inspection grade. And if at any point their practice is perceived to be at risk of not meeting the inspectorate's criteria for Outstanding, their jobs are at risk. We must compete or we'll be out of a job.

MEGAN: Yeah but you're not going to get fired. You've read Stephen Ball; you're going to create a 'fabrication' for the very purpose of being observed. At least you understand the unwritten rules.

SAM: Yes, I haven't forgotten what I learned, but Management got wise to that game didn't they? They understood that all-singing, all-dancing lessons were being produced performatively; for the purposes of inspections or observations. So now what happens is, they ask the students whether the lesson that is being observed is 'representative' of lessons in general. Which means we can no longer fabricate. That's why we're all working sixty-hour weeks. There is nowhere to run and nowhere to hide.

MEGAN: There we go, you're referencing Foucault.

SAM: Ah yes, the panopticon; the ubiquitous, hierarchical surveillance system.

MEGAN: Exactly. All that theory is deeply relevant. That's why I felt so energised when I discovered it. Brilliant thinkers were illuminating our experiences, describing them with an uncanny accuracy, making sense of our collective fear and compliance.

SAM: You're right. Back to the beautifully focused pictures. There is so much collective wisdom out there, but since finishing my studies, it's hard to stay in touch with it all. For a start, I no longer have library access, no Athens password, no keys to the ivory tower … We learn to think theoretically, to have our lives illuminated by brilliance and then, at the end of a Master's course or a doctoral programme, the lights are switched off.

MEGAN: Well, you could go and work in a university?

SAM: But then we're back at square one in terms of knowledge transfer. Professional doctorates are supposed to…

MEGAN: Supposed to what?

SAM: Well, they are supposed to bridge a gap aren't they? We are practitioners, but we've been schooled in theory. We should be crossing the moat every day, but since finishing my studies, it's hard not to feel that the drawbridge has been pulled up again and I am locked outside the tower.

MEGAN: And you resent that?

SAM: I don't know. Maybe I was being too idealistic, thinking that I would be able to share my theoretical knowledge more widely within the school. I imagined setting up a research group, having fruitful discussions about pedagogy…

MEGAN: But?

SAM: But look around you. The dominant political group doesn't like intellectualism in education. University education departments are being closed down all over the country. The dominant group values craft over theory and compliance over autonomy.

Y'know, you are one of the very few people I can talk to about what I am seeing. Am I going to bring up the problems of performativity or discuss the niceties of postmodern theory in a middle-management meeting? There is no scope for those kinds of ideas here, we mainly talk about numbers: which student is working at which level; which staff member is at risk of not getting the highest score in an observation, should an inspector call…

MEGAN: And at those meetings, we are mainly silent.

SAM: We don't want to engage in the discourse of data because we know that so much data is flawed; but we don't feel we can resist it. Wasn't your thesis on assessment?

MEGAN: Yeah, it was about assessment practices in secondary English in England and Wales. And what I found was that so many of the numbers are invalid or unreliable or just patently made up! Teachers are being pressured to demonstrate that students have made progress up a linear trajectory, so they make up the numbers. One teacher I interviewed was told by her head teacher to change her data five times, because the progress in maths didn't match progress in English, and because boys were not doing as well as girls!

SAM: It's enough to drive you bonkers. I look around and everyone is whispering that the emperor has no clothes; that the data is dodgy, but no one is saying it out loud.

MEGAN: English teachers well before us have known about this and articulated it with passion. David Holbrook, who wrote *English for Meaning* in the 1970s said [again referring to her iPad]: Every creative act, and every lesson, is a 'surrender to creative fate'. The other terminology – 'control' and 'competence' – avoids the complexities by implying

that we can deal explicitly with entities. This is to falsify. We can only make these capacities seem more accessible and controllable if we implicitly reduce them thus to mechanistic and functional dimensions by our terminology.

SAM: I know. We've been talking about this for years, the way in which English teaching has flat-lined, shifting in focus from the messiness and difficulty of meaning-making to the relatively facile but eminently more visible task of inserting linguistic devices in texts. But if we don't overtly demonstrate that every single child has made 'better than expected' progress in every twenty minute slot, we are judged to be Requiring Improvement and are at risk of entering the particular circle of hell that some of our colleagues are in: more judgements and more intense observations.

MEGAN: All the pressures of the panopticon, because progress is interpreted as linear, visible and measurable.

SAM: But progress in English is erratic and complex!

MEGAN [Sighs deeply]: I've been reading Eisner again [finds the book and flicks to page 110, which contains a scrap of pink Post-it]. He says 'some objectives one cannot articulate, some goals one does not achieve by the end of the academic year, some insights are not measurable; some ends are not known until after the fact'

SAM: Exactly, not everything that can be counted counts and not everything that counts can be counted.

MEGAN: Thank you Albert Einstein! [Still reading Eisner wistfully and lovingly]: Here, you'll like this bit. He says that rather than think in terms of narrow objectives, which can be checked at the end of the lesson, we need to think of an expressive objective which is evocative rather than prescriptive: 'In the expressive context the teacher hopes to provide a situation in which meanings become personalized and in which children produce products both theoretical and qualitative that are as diverse as themselves'.

SAM: Yes, Difficult to do this in classroom situations because…

MEGAN: Because we are all told to standardise, to share schemes of work, to narrow down the possibilities so that we can compare one child's work with another's and objectively level their work.

SAM: And we end up levelling out the differences.

MEGAN: But there are other ways of marking. Eisner covered this ground already; he said 'the evaluative task in this situation is not one of applying a common standard to the products produced, but one of reflecting upon what has been produced in order to reveal its uniqueness and significance'.

SAM: More wisdom. At least we've been exposed to these other ways of thinking and knowing, we've had the chance to spend time in the massive libraries of the universities. We've deepened our pedagogic knowledge so we can engage critically with the latest trend; not just swallow it whole.

MEGAN: But we are swallowing it aren't we? You're running off to photocopy something for a lesson in which you are going to demonstrate that a significant number of your students have made better-than-expected progress in a very short amount of time. Let me guess, you've probably planned something overtly measurable. You'll get them to show that they can use A-FOREST [counting on her fingers to emphasise the point]: Alliteration, Fact, Opinion, Rhetorical questions, Emotive language, Statistics and Triplets; and the observer – not a specialist English practitioner – will be impressed when all these techniques start appearing in the students' work.

SAM: OK, OK, I see what you are saying and my conscience is groaning, but what should I do instead?

MEGAN: Well, you could start by sharing some of Eisner's theories with your observer. Set up a rich situation, give the students an exciting stimulus to get them thinking and, instead of the bitty ten minute slots they usually get, where

the first chunk of the lesson is dedicated to success criteria and the last part is given over to checking whether the criteria have been met, ask them to *write* for a whole forty minutes!

SAM: Yeah, I could do that. After too many years of silent fuming, it would be hugely empowering. What did Foucault say? 'It's not a matter of emancipating truth from every system of power … but of detaching the power of truth from the forms of hegemony within which it operates at the present time'.

MEGAN: Exactly. Power is discursive rather than coercive, power is a 'regime of truth'; so we might as well start trying to shift the discourse.

SAM: It just seems such an enormous task.

MEGAN: Yes, but you're not trying to do it on your own. Think about all those authors we read and loved: Michael Apple, Nel Noddings, bell hooks, David Holbrook, Eisner, Elliott, Jeffcoate… All trying in their different ways to counter what Weber said was 'the disenchantment of the world' through the 'increasing scale, scope, and power of the formal means-ends rationalities of… bureaucracy'.

SAM: But Weber wrote that over a hundred years ago and, as far as I can tell, things have become progressively worse. Look at all the technologies we now have for weighing and measuring, all the spreadsheets and Excel formulae, all designed to chart our relentless, post-Enlightenment, post-enchantment march towards progress. And to be honest, as far as I can tell, most teachers (me included) are just falling into line; saluting Ofsted when they come; *goose-stepping* towards retirement, senior management or a nervous breakdown, whichever comes first.

MEGAN [Starting to laugh]: Sorry, I've now got an image of the entire staff goose-stepping.

SAM [Not sharing Megan's amusement] OK, that's an unhelpful image. But then so is the image that highly influential journalists and politicians are painting of people working in education, labelling them 'The Blob'.

MEGAN: Well, that's a perfect example of what Ball calls the 'discourse of derision'. If they mock teachers, call them moaners, dismiss any criticism of reform as emanating from the desire to protect vested interests, they are halfway to victory before we've even armed ourselves for battle.

SAM: But discussion about pedagogy shouldn't be an ideological battleground. It should be a grown-up debate between people who actually know what they are talking about.

MEGAN: Yeah, I have another image in my head now; I think it's from Fullan. He said that 'productive educational change, at its core, is not the capacity to implement the latest policy, but rather the ability to survive the vicissitudes of planned and unplanned change while growing and developing'.

SAM: But, as you so cruelly pointed out, I am just implementing the latest policy, occupying a place I didn't want to occupy, being someone I didn't want to be. I read John Elliott's critique of educational reform where he lamented the fact that teachers in the UK have been encouraged to view pedagogy as the construction of rationally ordered learning environments. He said that such a system leaves little space for the 'personal' and that it neglects the complexity of classroom life.

MEGAN: I know it, you know it, but what are we going to do about it?

SAM: Well, the very least we can do is be honest in our own classrooms, take our discretionary space and engage with the complexities that working with hundreds of unique individuals inevitably brings. We can plan lessons using expressive objectives and 'come out' as pedagogically educated. We can risk non-compliance – and we can write!

MEGAN: Ha hah! You have indeed been the spur to prick the sides of my intent! I am going to write that chapter for Victoria! I'm going to explore all the ideas we've been talking about: the joy of engaging with theory, the meaning and

energy we feel when we find theories that perfectly label and describe our lives; and the capability we have to engage in what we believe is best practice, in the face of reductive, dominant political discourses and (why not?) do our own sense-making, develop theories of our own.

SAM: And I'm going to do a free writing workshop without putting a single objective on the board.

[Bell rings.]

SAM: Ah, I go and it is done, the bell invites me.

MEGAN: Fear not, it is a knell that summons you to pedagogical heaven.

SAM: And Ofsted hell.

Lights off

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