

What Matters in English Teaching

Collected Blogs and Other Writing

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Barbara Bleiman

Foreword by Andrew McCallum



English
&Media
centre

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Barbara Bleiman, English & Media Centre

Barbara Bleiman's collection of writings on 'what matters in English' is a refreshing reminder of the conversation that is English. She sets her considerations in the historical and contemporary contexts of English education, engaging with wider discourses of English as a school subject. Absolutely essential reading for anyone involved – or interested – in the teaching of English.

Dr Rachel Roberts, University of Reading

This book is exactly what I needed! It has clarified my thinking (especially about how and what we read with young people), made me both ask questions about my practice and think carefully about what I want to develop and do more of in the future. I love how well it situates current debates in the history of English teaching, whilst also being so up to date. The balance between very personal, anecdotal experience and wider research makes it a collection which is helpful, thoughtful, insightful and engaging.

Myfanwy Edwards, Head of English, Richmond upon Thames School

This is a book which should be read by all teachers of English. It is published at a crucial moment for the subject, when reflection is more important than ever. And Barbara Bleiman is uniquely well-positioned to analyse the forces acting on how the subject is conceived of and taught, whether from academia, from government and official institutions, or from grass-roots movements and social media.

Framed by two seminal speeches on the state of the subject, from 1991 and 2019, this collection of articles, blogs and specially-written pieces is at once a lesson in history and a manifesto for the future – an objective survey of what is, with passionate advocacy for what might be.

All of the pieces here are rooted in a deep knowledge of theory and of the literature around English teaching. However, they also draw on rich, personal experience and recent, important work with teachers in schools. Descriptions of practice provide persuasive evidence of – and a remarkably practical guide to – what matters in English.

However, what perhaps most powerfully pervades the book are the words of pupils themselves. Glimpsed in extracts from written work, and in transcripts of recorded talk, these are the authentic voices which Barbara puts at the heart of her practice and of her vision for English.

James Durran, Local Authority Advisor North Yorkshire

This book should be essential reading for all student teachers of English. English teachers know in their hearts what English is, and 'what matters', but staying true to that conviction can be challenging when working in increasingly prescriptive, 'one-size-fits-all-subjects' contexts. Barbara presents powerful arguments to counter much of today's narrative around 'what works' by returning to the fundamental question of 'what matters,' while simultaneously offering tried and tested, practical approaches to implement in classrooms right away. I know I will dip into it again and again. To have Barbara's extensive wisdom and experience compiled into one highly readable volume is invaluable, and English classrooms up and down the country, not least my own, will be far richer for it. A lighthouse in the storm for teachers at all stages of their career. Thank you, Barbara!

Amy Druce, Lead English Teacher, School 21

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Foreword

The first blog that Barbara Bleiman wrote for the English and Media Centre was *Is 'what works?' the only question educational research should be trying to answer?* For me, it's one of the key pieces in this brilliant collection. Early on, it challenged a growing orthodoxy, now fully embedded across swathes of the educational landscape, that was leading to a narrowing of possibilities for young people. Nowhere was this more the case than in secondary English. In the name of 'what works?', prominent, often reactionary voices in tune with government thinking, were placing limits on what students could do: *don't read that; don't write like that; don't speak like that; don't even speak at all!*

Modestly, with intelligence, rigour and determination, Barbara advocated an enlightened alternative. This alternative is based on her phenomenal understanding of how language and literature work and, more importantly, how this relates to teaching and learning. Its starting point is the expectation that young people can read challenging texts; they can write for a range of audiences and purposes; they can think and speak for themselves and express their ideas cogently. They need guidance and intervention from a teacher along the way, and they need to be immersed in language and literature that will help develop what they already know, but they bring an array of riches to the classroom which we ignore at our peril. One of the joys of this book is that it so insightfully critiques deficit models of English teaching that diminish the humanity of our young people, while simultaneously offering valuable alternatives.

It's a mystery to me that approaches of the kind promoted by Barbara (not just in this book, but in her published classroom resources that have been used by millions of students during her four decades in education, and in the courses she has run for thousands of teachers) are not in the ascendancy. That's not to say that they aren't currently being practised in classrooms up and down the country. They are. English teachers are a resourceful bunch and will always find ways to teach that which they know to be valuable and important, whatever the external pressures working against them. But it is to recognise that we operate in strange times: times when much of what goes on in secondary English classrooms is unrecognisable from the vibrancy and variety of the discipline at university level. And where rich traditions of language and literature pedagogy – stuff that really works – are overlooked in favour of general educational theories that are at best irrelevant to English, at worst damaging to its long-term future and the future of our young people.

The title of this book clearly offers a gentle riposte to the 'what works' agenda critiqued in that first blog. There need not, of course, be a discrepancy between 'what works' and 'what matters'. But the latter has to be our starting point. We need to recognise (and continuously debate) what matters and then make sure we implement this in ways that work. Anyone looking for a blueprint for how to do this is holding the solution in their hands.

Andrew McCallum, Director English and Media Centre, March 2020

2. What English Is and What It Could and Should Be

This section starts by questioning what English as a subject is, and how it's been characterised in the past. It goes on to explore what it should be like now, looking at the direction that it has been going in more recently, arguing that it is in danger of losing its way. This is followed by a recent piece highlighting the dangers of a focus on small procedures as opposed to bigger concepts and a much earlier article, from 1997, looking at the teaching of literary texts, asking what we mean by offering challenging texts in English classrooms. This last piece is interesting for the way it gives a window onto an earlier period of English teaching but it also offers some ideas that are applicable to today's dilemmas – about the canon versus diverse texts, about classroom pedagogy and what we consider to be rich experiences of the subject.

2.1 Where we've come from and why it matters

When the English Centre was set up in 1975 to support all English teachers in Inner London schools, it was founded on a set of principles and practices that were remarkably uncontentious among English teachers themselves. While some individuals or groups of teachers may have dissented, there was nevertheless an extraordinary commonality of thinking about the big questions facing teachers of the subject, especially among those teachers who were most active and engaged in their work – the Teachmeet, TeamEnglish, ResearchED teachers of their day. This homogeneity of views may seem rather surprising from today's perspective, where almost everything is contested, teachers (English teachers not least), are in different camps and pin their flags to very different masts.

These are just some of the kinds of things that an English teacher in the 1970s and early 1980s¹ would have been likely to take pretty much for granted:

- That students' own creative writing was a rich source of self-expression and nourished their broader personal and educational development.
- That students' interests and enthusiasms should be capitalised on, in the selection of topics and texts; they would enjoy the work, work harder and learn more if they felt 'engaged' with what they were doing.
- That canonical texts were important but that offering students diverse texts from their own worlds and cultures was a vital bridge between home identity and school learning; in valuing the one, you made it possible to extend out into the other.

1. *English for Ages 5 to 16*, known as the Cox Report (1989) identified five ways of characterising the subject: Personal Growth; Cross-curricular; Adult Needs; Cultural Heritage; Cultural Analysis. Which of these has been foregrounded has fluctuated over the years but until recently all have informed English teachers' thinking. It's interesting to see how these ideas were embedded in practice in English teaching of the 1970s and 80s. See 'Real English versus Exam English' on page 26 for more on this.

- That students had a voice in the classroom that needed to be heard, in classroom dialogue, in group work, in performance, in the development of oracy as a tool as well as an essential means of developing thinking in the subject.
- That the spoken language of students needed to be respected, since the way we speak expresses who we are, and though students needed to learn how to adopt new voices for new occasions, students' own language, as influenced by their class, gender, age or cultural identity, needed to be accepted, celebrated and valued.
- That English was the subject, more than any other, where students would find their identity.
- That knowledge about language was about much more than just correct spelling, punctuation and grammar, and that developing understandings about language in use should be at the heart of what we do.
- That understanding the media and exploring media texts were fundamental aspects of the English curriculum.
- That English was the subject where students would learn to love books and that one of the key purposes of English was to allow them to become confident and enthusiastic readers in their adult lives.
- That in English students would make strong relationships with each other and with their teacher, because the subject itself was all about identity and human experience.
- That English was a subject that students loved. If asked, many, if not most, would say English was their favourite subject.

Could one say the same of today's English teaching environment? Almost certainly not. The demands and constraints of the current educational world, with its high stakes testing and accountability culture, have meant that many of these aspects of teaching English are under pressure and no longer taken for granted. In their hearts, teachers may well believe in many of these things but will be subject to powerful forces that mitigate against them. Equally, some of these previous 'givens' have become grounds of serious disagreement and debate. Ideas about a literary canon, student engagement, pupil voice and 'correctness' in spoken language, for instance, are all hotly contested areas.

Where did these givens come from, and what has happened to disrupt the dominance of these views? You could read a book like Simon Gibbons' *English and Its Teachers: A History of Policy, Pedagogy and Practice* to find out all about this long and fascinating story. This book, on the other hand, isn't a history; it's a practical and committed look at the subject and how it's being taught now, with a glance backwards to see how current approaches have changed. So instead of telling the whole story, in the first part of this chapter I'm going to give a lightning tour of some key thinkers, influences and ways of thinking about being an English teacher

from that period. Later in the book, in discussing particular aspects of English teaching, I'll come back to some of them in more detail.

In the 1970s and 80s, as is the case now, some of the key thinkers and influencers were not academic researchers but rather teachers with their ideas firmly rooted in the classrooms in which they taught. That may come as something of a surprise. Yesterday's 'experts' were, in their own way, very much like today's teachers wanting to inform themselves and develop their practices online, in blogs, on Twitter, in self-supporting groups of teachers. Harold Rosen, for instance, who went on to become professor at the Institute of Education, developed his ideas about English teaching in the 1950s as a Head of Department at what was then Walworth School, an inner city comprehensive. Michael Simons, who set up the ILEA English Centre, had been a classroom teacher in Wandsworth. He went on to have a hugely significant role in the development of the subject, through his work at EMC, including setting up the *English Magazine* (later the *English and Media Magazine*), starting to create resources for English classrooms that could be shared widely, and acting as a guiding light and advocate for media education, both in English and as a separate subject.

Just as with the current highly active, enthusiastic teachers using social media platforms, who offer each other ideas online or who meet voluntarily on their weekends to share expertise, teachers like John Richmond, the many teachers who attended LATE conferences or started up the magazine *Teaching London Kids* or went to NATE conferences, or met up at the English Centre (later EMC) for after school interest groups, were all fervently working to develop their practices. Some were investigating their own classrooms to do research of their own, or contributing to projects run by the English Centre. This classroom research had some of the same flavour as current teacher-led research but perhaps with more emphasis on trying to understand what's happening in the complexity of classrooms, rather than trying to apply and test out single strategies and solutions – an investigative rather than a 'proof of efficacy' orientation. This kind of research was rooted in underpinning ideas drawn from the work of sociologists, psychologists, linguists, child behaviour experts and educationalists, in much the same way as today. Harold Rosen's contributions were multiple. The most important centred around his passionate advocacy and understanding of storytelling, in all its varieties both written and oral, his valuing of students' own experiences and language in the classroom, his recognition of the social nature of learning, his understanding that language should be at the heart of learning not just in English but across the curriculum (the language across the curriculum initiatives of the 70s morphed into a rather differently focused 'literacy across the curriculum' that resurfaced as part of the National Literacy Strategy of the late 1990s.²)

The work of Harold Rosen, Douglas Barnes, John Dixon and others drew on thinkers, linguists and psychologists like Vygotsky but they also put a premium

2. The National Literacy Strategy was introduced by the Labour Secretary of State for Education, David Blunkett, published in 1997, introduced into primary schools in 1998 and extended to Secondary in 2001, as the Key Stage 3 National Strategy Framework for Teaching English: Years 7, 8 and 9.

on classroom research, alongside philosophical or theoretical thinking on a more abstract plane. Dixon's major work, *Growth Through English*, emerging from the Dartmouth Conference of 1966, placed a fresh emphasis on pedagogy alongside content and involved a re-thinking of what was meant by knowledge. Classroom transcripts and film clips were regarded as highly valuable, and were the subject of close scrutiny, in CPD and in departmental discussions. Barnes, Britton and Rosen's *Language, the Learner and the School*, showed learning in action not just in English but in other subjects and was seminal in revealing what dialogue between students can do to develop knowledge in English and across the curriculum.

Looking at student work, whether in group discussion or student writing, was a vital element in understanding what was involved in English the subject, how students learned and what constituted 'good work'. To that extent, the English teacher of the late 1970s and 80s was a privileged one. They were likely to attend weekly, or fortnightly, departmental meetings after school, dedicated wholly to talking about the curriculum content and methods of teaching in the department. They would be regularly engaged in looking at examples of student writing (through coursework moderation in particular) and in constant dialogue with colleagues about their practices. It was a time when teachers could open up about uncertainties and insecurities, could ask for help and make judgements about their students' progress that were largely devoid of fearfulness of terrible repercussions. Whether they were judged to be good teachers by their peers, their students or their students' parents mattered a lot, but not in the same way as now. It was a question of professionalism and pride, not fear of retribution from on high. Constant observation and assessment, linked to performance and pay, alongside league tables and performance measures, had not yet laid a cold, dread hand on the teacher's shoulder. Teachers did not need to justify their students' achievements, spend disproportionate time on exam preparation to get them to achieve in external assessments or worry unduly about how their results would impact on them and their school.

The idea that students' own identities are worth taking seriously in English classrooms has a long history. It emerged out of two different traditions, a linguistic and a cultural and literary one, which overlapped. In the 1970s there were fierce arguments between Basil Bernstein, who argued that working-class children had a 'restricted code' in their use of language, and Harold Rosen and academic linguists like William Labov, who resisted this 'deficit' view.

Rosen, Labov and others argued that all varieties of English are 'correct' and of equal value linguistically (if not socially and politically). They recognised that the ways in which people speak are bound up with their sense of who they are and their confidence in themselves, in much deeper ways than simply being 'schooled' in order to shift from one way of speaking to another.

These same debates are now being played out in discussions of vocabulary and language 'gaps', in decisions about how to treat students' use of non-standard varieties of English in both talk and writing, in the classroom and even the playground, and in a more modern revisiting of the deficit debate in discussions

of a cultural capital ‘vacuum’ among working-class children. The work of many contemporary linguists negates the idea of a deficit, but rather suggests the flexibility and range that is available to young people that they are capable of exploiting to the full. Rob Drummond’s (2018) research into the language of students in a pupil referral unit explores the ways in which their rich uses of language in their own groups is subject to shifts and changes in different contexts. Sali A. Tagliamonte in her introduction to *Teen Talk: The Language of Adolescents* (2016), a book based on a vast database of young people’s talk, goes as far as to say that, rather than being a cause for concern, ‘teenage language is critical to the advancement of language evolution and society itself.’

Rosen’s work from a more cultural and literary perspective, emphasised the importance of starting with students’ own experiences and cultures, respecting and valuing everything they brought with them into the classroom. We can see the influence of this approach in the radical shifts in thinking about which texts are worthy of study in English classrooms. When I was at school in the 1960s, I read George Bernard Shaw, George Eliot, Elizabeth Bowen and pre-twentieth century poetry at KS3. For O Level, the contemporary poets I studied were all white men – Clifford Dymont, Ted Hughes, James Kirkup (only one of whom has turned out to be a major figure, by today’s reckoning.) By the time I started teaching in the 1970s, I was able not only to teach canonical texts but also bring in local young writers, *Best West Indian Short Stories*, writing by Alan Sillitoe, Beverley Naidoo, Farukh Dhondy and others. Joan Goody, who chaired NATE’s Multicultural Education committee played a huge role in valuing students own heritage and identities, championing knowledge about books written in English from other cultures. In those days, given patterns of migration to the UK and London in particular, texts from the Caribbean featured strongly. Community literacy initiatives sprang up, with bookshops like Centerprise in Hackney publishing the work of writers who would normally not have even thought of themselves as writers, let alone have access to a publishing house to publish their work. This movement to celebrate and publish ordinary people’s writing and value both their lives and their creativity, spilled over into schools, with many schools publishing anthologies of their own students’ work and making the students’ own writing part of the reading curriculum of the school. EMC published several collections of stunning student writing – authentic, powerful, well-written accounts of the lives of young people and what mattered to them. They included real-life accounts and fictional stories, poetry as well as prose. For teachers of those times, it’s hard to forget the powerful impact on classes of reading Chelsea Herbert’s *In the Melting Pot* (1970s), or sharing Saroeun Ing’s extraordinary account of suffering in Cambodia under the rule of the Khmer Rouge and her family’s flight to Thailand and then on to England. These student stories became the stimulus and inspiration for other students in classrooms up and down the country to both read for pleasure and write their own stories. EMC’s *In the Melting Pot*, *Our Lives* (1980) and *More Lives* (1987) were bought in sets by schools and were among the most popular texts in the history of the Centre.

This sense of greeting the students and taking them on a journey that started ‘where they were at’ has been part of a pretty solid consensus between teachers, students, government and Awarding Bodies, till relatively recently. In all the earlier versions of the National Curriculum, however much one might argue over number of texts or the labelling as ‘other’ or ‘different’, the idea of texts from diverse cultures was firmly embedded. Even the current iteration of the National Curriculum for KS3 and 4, slimmed down as it is, cites ‘seminal world literature’ as a curriculum requirement. And yet many English teachers are now embracing an idea of ‘cultural capital’ that includes predominantly or even exclusively canonical English texts from past eras and excludes diverse texts that might represent the cultural worlds of students in their classrooms. Text choice is just one example of the ways in which English validates or invalidates, includes or excludes, students’ own identities, experiences and starting-points.

A further key figure from the 1970s whose work continues to resonate is Douglas Barnes. He was hugely influential in demonstrating, through classroom research, the ways in which children learn through exploratory talk, using extensive transcript material to analyse how and why such talk helps students to take school knowledge, incorporate it into their existing frames of thinking and make it their own. His work was based on ‘constructivist’ views of the nature of learning, where the participant is an active ‘constructor’ of knowledge. The social nature of learning, developed in the work of Vygotsky (for instance in his seminal work *Thought and Language*, 1934) was key to Barnes’ thinking and finds its successors in much of the work of EMC from the 1970s to today, in the work of academics like Neil Mercer and his colleagues and in the newer initiatives of schools like School 21 with its associated Voice 21 project.³

Key thinkers and influencers about language teaching came from the field of linguistics. Michael Halliday’s work on functional grammar gave us a new way of thinking about how grammar works and how it could be taught – not through fixed word classes and labelling exercises but through thinking about the grammatical functions of words and syntactic combinations.⁴ Ron Carter’s seminal work in the LINC project (1989-1992), arising from the Kingman Report on the teaching of language, demonstrated how well-founded linguistic knowledge could be translated into classroom study, introducing students to ideas about the differences between spoken and written language, the origins, features and status of standard English as compared with other varieties, the ways in which language varies according to purpose, context and audience, as well as class, gender, race, age and geographical location. The LINC resources included classroom activities and transcripts of dialogues between children, exemplifying the ways in which they could further their knowledge through talk. The legacy of the LINC project can still be found in most English classrooms, even now that explicit teaching about

3. School 21 in Stratford, East London was opened in 2012 as a free school, with a vision to do education differently and re-think how to prepare students for life in the 21st century. Voice 21 arose out of it as a wider initiative to support oracy education in other schools.

4. Halliday’s groundbreaking work of the 1960s and 70s gained wider recognition in 1985 with the publication of *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*.

language, for its own sake, has largely disappeared from the KS3 and KS4 formal requirements.

Media Studies was a relatively new discipline in the 1970s, carving out a niche for itself in the universities and in schools too but media *education*, alongside subject Media, was also seen as important for all students and found its ‘natural’ home within English, where discussion of literary texts could easily, and fruitfully, be extended to texts of all different kinds, from newspapers and magazines to photographs, films and TV programmes⁵. Textual analysis and cultural studies engaged in many similar practices and processes and could inform and enrich each other. Equally, creating media texts was closely related to creating traditional English texts. Writing stories *and* newspaper articles, screenplays *and* plays, stories *and* comics or photostories, writing comment and opinion *and* making photodocumentaries could draw on the common features and also flag up and make use of the distinctive and significant elements of the different media. Media was an enrichment not an optional add-on. And as it developed, it was also seen as something that all students should be entitled to, not just for the creative opportunities it offered but also as a necessity to teach media ‘literacy’ in a world in which critical understanding of the media was ever more vital. At EMC, it was also always a source of jokey ribbing between the media ‘experts’ and the rest of us that the media activities always seemed like such good fun, for students and teachers alike – from storyboards, simulations and advertising campaigns to short films and photographic montages. We all wanted to be doing the media work – and so did students.

Mostly, it was educational material about the subject itself that English teachers read in the 1970s to early 2000s but there were a few broader influences. For instance, in the 1960s, the educational psychologist Jerome Bruner put forward the notion of the spiral curriculum, suggesting that students don’t learn in entirely linear ways but need to revisit concepts in different ways in order to consolidate learning and come back to ideas in new, more sophisticated ways. One contemporary descendent of that may be the whole idea of ‘interleaving’, returning to an idea rather than assuming that once taught everything is learnt and remembered. That link to Bruner and his work, interestingly, is rarely made.

Another important thinker in the early years was Paolo Freire. It’s certainly not the case that all English teachers at the time were radical thinkers, reaching for their copy of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* at every opportunity, but as a group, they were probably more interested in ideas about the empowerment of their pupils than most, and would have been likely to have known about movements to democratise schools and give students a voice.

5. Media education is not fully represented in this book. This is not because I don’t think it is a very important part of the English curriculum. I do. However, it has never been an area of particular expertise for me, either in my work as a teacher in schools or in my work as a consultant at EMC. I have always deferred to the greater knowledge of others, most especially my colleague of many years, Jenny Grahame, whose understanding, wisdom and immense practical inventiveness in the field of Media Studies and media in English are unparalleled. More recently, Claire Pollard has taken over this role and continues to inform and enrich my thinking about everything to do with media education.

The 1970s and 80s are often seen as the ‘progressive years’. It’s interesting to think what it meant to be a progressive English teacher in that period. Sometimes I can see little relationship between the progressive teacher I aspired to be, and the term that is bandied about now – often pejoratively to describe all kinds of beliefs and tendencies that are just as alien to me now as they might have been then, when I’d have happily accepted that label. Ideas like learning styles, no teacher talk, brain gym, growth mindset, WALT, WILF, SOLO, flipped learning, ‘whizzy’ lessons or anything else that claimed to be worth doing just because it was fun, would have been as much of an anathema to me and my colleagues then as they are now. They did not emerge in the so-called ‘progressive’ era but much later, in the period during and after the introduction of the primary National Literacy Strategy (1998) and the KS3 Framework for Teaching English: Years 7, 8 and 9 (2001). Many of them, ironically, emerged much more recently, promoted by not very progressive tweeters and bloggers who became interested in generic ideas about pedagogy promoted by international educational writers and ‘gurus’.

Interestingly, while talking about progressivism in the 1970s, it’s worth pointing out that the majority of schools – with some rare public exceptions that regularly made the press – were not really all that ‘progressive’. A narrative that suggests that all schools were doing project work, cross-curricular activities, discovery-based learning with the teacher contributing very little, or happily allowing students to run riot, is far from the truth. Most schools were striving to achieve orderly, disciplined classes in which children learned. My first school, a comprehensive in Tottenham, had school uniform, desks in rows, students lined up outside the door to come in and expected to stand up when adults entered and a Senior Management Team who strongly favoured silent classrooms and looked askance at group work. It was not to my taste, and I moved quickly to what I saw as being a more conducive environment (where teachers talked a lot but students did too). It is probably fair to say that the general mood *was* a bit different, in particular because there was more scope for English teachers to create a strong ‘ethos’ of their own and take professional responsibility for the way the subject was taught. The views of a good Head of English on how the subject should be taught were generally listened to.

Why does it matter to think about this past and these ideas? It seems to me that it offers a broader perspective, and perspective is a vital thing in a fast-changing world. Every teacher comes into the profession at a particular moment. It is easy to imagine that your particular moment is what teaching English *is*. But with the swings and roundabouts of change in education, not least of all the massive rethinking involved in the National Literacy Strategies of the early 2000s, English has undergone seismic shifts. Those teachers who entered the profession as trainees in the early 2000s, for instance, some in their particular brand of training going into a single school and then continuing their careers in that same school, may well have encountered English teaching of a radically new variety that had thrown away much that came before; it had abandoned some of the givens I have listed above and added new ones, in response to a much more target-driven, anxious

culture of accountability. Many of these academically able trainees were placed in schools in special measures, at the toughest end of that accountability culture; rightly they baulked at some of the givens they were expected to accept and bizarre practices they were required to undertake. But they didn't necessarily have the historical understanding of the subject to be able to make full sense of the shifts, nor were they necessarily in departments with stable long-term staffing, where well-established, confident Heads of Department could help steer a sane course through the curriculum upheavals and assessment pressures, in the light of their understanding of what was best (and worst) about the English of previous periods. These new teachers simply found themselves doing things that didn't make sense to them, for reasons they couldn't understand, and in ways that were not necessarily effective for their students. This is also true for anyone starting out as an English teacher in today's schools, entering into a set of practices and conventions that have arisen at a particular moment. Whether it's PEE⁶ and its associated acronyms – or a rejection of them – or triple marking of books, or no marking at all, or putting learning objectives up at the start of lessons, or always having a plenary, or never having a plenary, teachers need to be able to see what's ephemeral and what's likely to last. Knowing that the subject can be something else, and has been something else, and undoubtedly will be a little different in the future, can give you this perspective and a chance to question – it wasn't always like this; is this how it should be now?

And if the answer is no, or we have grave doubts, then we have to ask, how *should* it be now? English is undoubtedly a complicated subject that it's hard for others, not working within it, to fully understand. However, I would argue that its messiness is part of what makes it what it is. There is a glue that binds the seemingly disparate elements together; in my view that glue is the interrelationships between things – the fact that reading makes us better writers and writing makes us better readers, for instance. It's the relationship between talk and writing. And it's the connection between literary understandings and non-literary knowledge – that we read and write functional texts better, with more acuity and insight if we are also engaged in literary reading and have the kind of linguistic sensitivity that comes from that. And it's also the relationship between knowing about language and learning how to use it well. English is, indeed, a bit of this and a bit of that, but the this and that, when combined in a sustained and well thought-through curriculum, add up to make a highly patterned, intricate quilt, rather than random scraps and threads. A warm one too.

6. PEE stands for Point Evidence/Example, Exploration. Other more elaborate variations abound, including PEEL (Point, Evidence, Exploration, Link) and PETAL (Point, Evidence, Technique, Analysis, Link).

2.2 Real English versus Exam English – the case for authentic experience

This article was originally published in *The Use of English* (Volume 69, No 3, Summer 2018) and subsequently on EMC's blog. It seeks to offer a rationale for teaching the subject in ways that are authentic, allied to practices in academic English, and likely to engage the interest of students sufficiently for them to choose to study it at higher levels, rather than being a distorted version focused mainly on examination results at GCSE.

In a wide-ranging report commissioned by the government in the late 1980s, Brian Cox led a working party that surveyed and commented on the state of English teaching, in order to make recommendations for the first ever National Curriculum.¹ As part of the report Cox identified five different ways of conceptualising English: Personal Growth, Cross-curricular, Adult Needs, Cultural Heritage and Cultural Analysis. He set out what teachers and the educational community understood the role of the subject to be and recognised the importance of all of these things. Different schools, departments or even individual teachers within a department, might give greater weight to one or other of these aspects of the subject and that seemed to be tolerated, in those more 'permissive' times. Personal Growth perhaps looks like a rather dated phrase now. This may be not just because there's been a swing away from that kind of language in relation to education but also because the focus has shifted somewhat from 'what students get out of the subject' at an emotional level – what it does to them as an individual in terms of their broader development and sense of self – and more towards what knowledge they have obtained – what it has taught them in purely academic terms. It doesn't necessarily mean to say it's still not considered by some to be important, but perhaps it's become subsumed to some extent in newer terms like 'creativity' or 'critical literacy' and maybe it's seen more as a prerequisite for learning knowledge, rather than a 'good' in its own right. What isn't on that list at all, however, is 'Assessment' or 'Passing GCSEs and A Levels'. And yet, in the current climate of high stakes testing and accountability, surely this would have to appear, probably quite high up in the minds of the students themselves, as well as their teachers. We all have anecdotal stories to tell about Year 7 classrooms in which a GCSE question is up on the board as the starting-point for learning about poetry, or where students are thinking about what they will have learned before they have learned anything at all. Local authority advisor, James Durran, quoted an example on Twitter recently that can stand in for all of these kinds of experiences. On going into the classroom of a really good teacher and asking a Year 7 'What is English?' the student said, 'Analysing texts' and when asked 'Why?' the reply came 'To prepare for tests.'

1. The Cox Report (1989) *English for ages 5 to 16* is a key document in the history of English teaching. It took evidence from a huge number of individuals and organisations involved in the teaching of the subject, across all phases and including writers, linguists and other academics. The commentary on many aspects of the subject still resonates in today's world.

Amanda Spielman has noted this shrinking of educational horizons to assessment and only assessment. In a key speech in June 2017 at the Festival of Education at Wellington College, she said:

One of the areas that I think we lose sight of is the real substance of education. Not the exam grades or the progress scores, important though they are, but instead the real meat of what is taught in our schools and colleges: the curriculum.

The teachers we meet at EMC seem to feel as if they're between a rock and a hard place. They want their subject to be the enriching, rewarding and intellectually challenging subject that they themselves found it to be. They want it to fulfil many of Cox's purposes. But their schools' regimes for tracking pupils and the pressure towards results seem to run counter to that and departmental time is taken up with targets and data rather than allowing them to develop a consensus on what they want the subject to be for their students. On the courses we run, for GCSE and A Level (and now increasingly at KS3), there is always that tension between what teachers would like to be able to do and what they feel they have to do.

At EMC we have been drawing on our knowledge of the past, our close scrutiny of the full spectrum of examination specifications and our opportunities for broader thinking, to argue that the two are not as mutually exclusive as sometimes appears. Indeed, we'd argue that good results across all attainment levels are only possible if students are really engaging with the subject in ways that are valid and legitimate in terms of the wider practices that we know to constitute it, in the academic world and in literary and linguistic life beyond the classroom. If English in schools becomes 'exam English' or 'school English', with no real connection to the 'real English' or 'full English' that can be found in other contexts, then students will engage in ways of thinking and writing that will neither fulfil any of Cox's roles for the subject, nor get them the best possible grades in exams.

Let's take one practical example of this from A Level English – the assessment of students' use of contextual knowledge to explore literary texts in ways that illuminate the text. There's nothing wrong with teaching students to think about texts in their contexts. It's a central plank of much contemporary criticism, alongside the more 'intrinsic' critical approaches that are associated with close reading. However, the focus on contexts as an assessment tool, and an explicit assessment objective, both at A Level and GCSE, has brought with it a distortion of its true role in 'real English'. As critics like Peter Barry would argue, a large amount of 'distant' historical or biographical context turns English into History, and it is really the 'adjacent' contexts, where something is very closely relevant to a particular text, that can shine fresh light on the text itself.² Often those adjacent contexts are cultural, or generic or literary – part of the intertextual web in which any single text sits. But sadly, now that context is assessed, with a weighting given to it and a set number of marks, it is in danger of losing its way. Many students understandably come to believe that 30% of marks on context means 30% of an

2. Barry's *Literature in Contexts* (2007) distinguishes between 'adjacent' and 'distant' contexts. He takes up this same issue in EMC's book for A Level students, *The Literature Reader*.

essay spent writing about the context, often a rather distant one, often historical rather than literary, all too often including the kind of historical generalisations that would make a genuine historian turn pale and shudder. We've all read those paragraphs in essays in which all women were downtrodden in Shakespeare's day, every American text can be seen as exemplifying the American Dream and anything that happens to a woman in any Victorian novel is the result of patriarchy.

Interestingly, Examiners' Reports for A Level all recognise the problem, and have done so for a very long time, ever since contextual knowledge first appeared as an assessment objective as part of the curriculum reforms in 2000 (frequently referred to as Curriculum 2000). There has been a consistent message over the years, almost a plea from the examiners, to put context in its proper place, to value quality over quantity and to recognise that simply telling the examiner a great deal about the world beyond a text will gain students very few marks. Since 2000, we have been collecting quotations from Examiners' Reports to this effect and using them on courses with teachers. Nothing has changed – the message remains the same – except that perhaps now, with a new, higher weighting at A Level, the message has become even more urgent.³

Talking to colleagues who focus more on GCSE, and in conversation with some of the Awarding Bodies, the same seems to be true there.

So despite the Awarding Bodies' explicit statements in Examiners' Reports, and the training done by organisations like our own, there still seems to be immense pressure on teachers to be doing the very things that are neither helpful to their students in getting good grades, nor good practice within the subject itself.

One answer to this, for us, has been to try to encourage the teachers we meet to step back from the assessment objectives and to encourage their students, at the start of the course, to do the same. Just as a Year 7 doesn't need to see a GCSE question, so a GCSE or A Level student doesn't need to know that 30% of a component goes on context, right from day one. Rather, they need to start applying contextual knowledge in well-judged ways and learn what it means to do that. On a recent training day on 'Contexts and Criticism', my colleague Lucy Webster and I started the day with a broad consideration of what the subject English is, drawing on the work of academics like Robert Eaglestone and Peter Barry. Eaglestone (2017) describes the two fundamental literary critical approaches that characterise the subject, those that are intrinsic and those that are extrinsic.

Some critics claim that intrinsic types of criticism lead to 'objective' readings, the idea that texts can be independent of their historical, social and personal context, and that 'literary-ness' makes a text a valuable work of art, which is worth studying in its own right [...] In contrast, extrinsic methods of interpretation take it for granted that the literary text is part of the world and rooted in its context. An extrinsic critic considers that the job of criticism is to

3. Examples from 2017 A Level series: Edexcel: 'Contextual factors need treating with as much discrimination and subtlety as the play itself.' OCR: 'Some students, unfortunately, thought they had to force in all sorts of information, ideas or assertions about historical and biographical contexts, much of which was sweeping and not well understood.' AQA B: 'It is also important to guard against the use of over-simplified, contextual generalisations which often amount to nothing more than unconvincing assertions.'

move from the text outwards to some other, not specifically literary, object or idea. Such critics use literary texts to explore other ideas about things in the world, and, in turn, use other ideas to explain the literary text.

We argued that, if students are to understand what is legitimate and insightful use of contextual knowledge, they need to know what place contextual knowledge has in the subject at large. They need to read examples of what it can do to your reading of a text and see how critics can make brilliant use of it, not to show off, not as mere decoration, nor as proof of knowledge, but as a way of reading a text differently and better, constructing an argument that draws on ideas beyond the text. Before ever mentioning assessment, or AOs, before suggesting that you need to 'get a bit of context in to score marks' or say, 'contextually', in order to draw the examiner's attention to the fact that you're talking about contexts, it's worth offering extrinsic information on a text under discussion and asking students to think hard about the validity and usefulness of applying that information. They ought to be able to reject the idea of using it because it's not fruitful, as well as deciding that it really does help support a particular interpretation or give a fresh angle on the text. Later, as they begin to get closer to the exams, it will be worth looking at examples of student writing where it's done really well, in relation to a particular component, essay or mark scheme, at a point where they themselves will have some ideas about what kind of contextual comment really pays its way. But shaping all the teaching around marks and mark schemes is unlikely to produce good writing in any terms – in the broader world of 'real English' or in the narrower world of the exams themselves.

One very important reason for ensuring that students have an authentic experience of the subject, as the means by which they also achieve highly, is to do with the future of the subject as a whole. After some worrying reports that English A Levels were not recruiting well, EMC conducted a survey in September 2017. There are obvious structural reasons for the dip in numbers that all subjects suffered with the shrinking of AS entries, but it seemed, anecdotally, that English might be doing worse than most. Our survey of over 100 schools and colleges, of different types and sizes, suggested that these fears were justified. English Literature, in our surveyed centres, was down by about 16%, English Language by 17% and Language and Literature by 26%. We asked for teachers' views on the possible reasons for this. The reasons given were complex, and included the view that STEM is being highly promoted in schools, as well as at university level, at the expense of English and the Humanities. But there was a fairly significant number of people who expressed the belief that though the new GCSEs were in some ways rigorous and could be seen to be good preparation for A Level, they were also narrow in focus and students had not enjoyed them. The students viewed English as difficult, high pressure and unengaging. The teachers felt that the content of the new GCSEs had, in some cases, been a 'turn-off'. Now some of this might be the effect of the first two years of teaching and the first set of exams, always a difficult time for teachers and students. Some too might be to do with the pressure on English teachers being passed on to students. But whatever it is, it is clear that for the life cycle of English as a subject (from school to university to degree to PGCE

and back into school), we need to address the fact that students may be being switched off the subject.⁴ If the backwash from these new GCSEs begins to be felt at KS3 too, as seems to be increasingly the case, if KS3 becomes no more than an extended period of preparation for exams several years down the line, then we are in serious trouble. Stories of students disliking the subject or being unclear about its value will be heard more and more frequently and will put the subject itself at risk. Our students need to understand what ‘real English’ is, if they are going to want to take it further. They need to have the excitement of entering into the kinds of disciplinary conversations that make the subject what it is. Eaglestone (2017) describes this well for A Level students and new undergraduates:

Just as a mathematician (obviously) doesn’t learn all the (infinite) answers to all the (infinite) mathematical problems but ways of thinking about and solving them, and just as a geographer learns to think about space and locations in certain specific ways, so English teaches students to think ‘as’ critics. This may once have been, but is no longer, a sort of monolithic, fixed identity; rather, it is a mobile, developing sense of a range of questions and ideas about the literary, widely defined, and [...] characterised by dissensus.

At EMC, we’ve been arguing that this should be the case at every level – at KS3, as well as at GCSE and A Level. So, for instance, when students of all ages learn about poetry, they should be engaging with the big and exciting ideas about what poetry is and what it can do, how it differs from prose and the impact it has on readers – not just using it as a means of teaching literary terms like alliteration and metaphor, as labels to pin to examples. Though students are only examined on their knowledge about language at GCSE in limited ways, KS3 should be an opportunity to investigate and explore issues and ideas about language in use, in ways that linguists would recognise as consistent with their practices at a higher level, because it will increase their alertness to how language works and give them access to thrilling ideas about language that will spark their imaginations and thinking. They should read widely, read diverse texts and – as the American educationalist Arthur N. Applebee has said so eloquently – understand much more about the canon by seeing it freshly, through the lens of other, diverse cultures and traditions. If we want students to wow both us and their examiners with the cogency and validity of their arguments, the vigour of their thinking and the integrity of their approach, we need to teach them in that spirit. And we’d argue that that isn’t just idealistic fluff, or the thing that we’d all love to have time for but can’t do. It’s the pragmatic answer to high achievement, as well as the way of making students love the subject, so safeguarding its future.

4. The results of the EMC survey have been borne out in the most recent statistics for A Level entries. Figures published by the Joint Council for Qualifications (2019) show a 31% decline across all three English subject specialisms between 2012 and 2019, with a 13.5% decline between 2018 and 2019. The decline in A Level English Language and Literature is most alarming, with a 56% reduction since 2011. The picture is almost as bad for A Level English Language, where the figure is 42%. For A Level English Literature the number is 25%. Sources: Joint Council for Qualifications (2012 and 2016-19) and GCE Inter-Board Statistics for breakdown of figures for different subjects in 2012. EMC’s 2019 follow-up survey suggests a continuing, worrying decline.