RETHINKING ENGLISH IN ENGLISH SCHOOLS: ASKING QUESTIONS OF A 'SACK OF SNAKES'

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At a conference of philosophers of education in 1964, participants were invited to discuss the 'substantive and syntactic structures' of English, mathematics and science. Taking on English, G.C. Wilson complained this was an especially difficult task and suggested that it was akin to discussing a 'sack of snakes' (Wilson, 1964). A few years later, in his influential account of the development of the 'personal growth model' of English teaching, John Dixon came to a similar conclusion but put it rather more positively: the subject was 'a quicksilver among metals – mobile, living and elusive' (Dixon, 1969). What both metaphors illustrate is that English as a school subject has a dynamic problem as its core:

> The point about 'English' as the name of a subject is that it is an adjective being made to serve as a noun. So 'English' is always pointing toward an absence – the noun. Is the subject English literature, language, society, culture, people? (Evans, 1993, p.84)

'Not for a clear gain of knowledge'

This absence (or sometimes unexamined presence, at least) has driven the subject's histories. Histories of English have become something of a successful cottage industry over the last twenty years. Terry Eagleton's account of the 'rise of English' as a subject in the mechanics' institutes and extension colleges of the mid-nineteenth century – providing an alternative force for social cohesion to an organised religion in decline – continues to be widely cited (Eagleton, 1983). Gauri Viswanathan traced the earlier institutionalisation of the study of English literature in India by the East India Company under contract to the British government from 1813 onwards (Viswanathan, 1989). Here, the purpose of teaching English literature was, literally, to colonise and therefore

'civilise'. And perhaps the classic study of the use of this form of 'cultural training' in surveillance and discipline at the level of populations was provided by Ian Hunter in *Culture and Government* (1988). English from these perspectives was understood as a means for making governable 'English people' – whether in Yorkshire, Jammu Kashmir or Hawkes Bay. A more recent study by Phil Cormack shows how what Hunter referred to as the 'governmentality' of English operated in the education policies of New Zealand and the colonial Australian states in the early years of the twentieth century. Referring to the teaching of English literature, this report from a speech by the Chief Inspector of New Zealand schools in 1922 clearly demonstrates its governmental function:

> What higher aim can the schools have than to implant in the minds of boys and girls those principles that will lead them to become worthy citizens of a great Empire! (Chief Inspector Strong, *Education Gazette* 1922, p.109; in Cormack, 2003, p.7)

Although many of these histories of English were principally concerned with the institutionalisation of the study of the vernacular literature in *the universities*, there are similarities to be found in the evolution of the school subject. George Sampson, for example, the schools inspector, who in 1921 wrote *English for the English* as a proposal for the reform of the elementary school curriculum, declared that English was:

> . . . the one school subject in which we have to fight, not for a clear gain of knowledge, but for a precarious margin of advantage over powerful forces of evil (Sampson, 1921, p.14)

The social mission of school English for Sampson was to ensure that working class children were provided with a "common share of the immaterial"' (culture) so that they wouldn't "grow into men who demand, with menaces, a communism of the material" (ibid). This was English as prophylactic.

Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to regard the development of English in universities and schools as identical, as sometimes happens. From this perspective, school English is inevitably seen as a minor version of the university subject, with a 'proper' emphasis on the study of literature and the promotion of a particular form of cultural politics. What is often ignored is the institutionalisation of reading, handwriting and composition, and grammar on the elementary school curriculum earlier in the

nineteenth century and the important contributions made by what Hunter called the 'machinery of teacher training' (Hunter, 1988, p. 111). Teacher educators from the day training colleges of the nineteenth century (see Gosden, 1969, Chapter 8) to the University of London Institute of Education during the 1960s and '70s (for example, the seminal contributions of James Britton, Douglas Barnes, Nancy Martin, Margaret Meek Spencer, Harold Rosen, and others) have variously shaped the school subject in highly significant and enduring ways. And what is also lost in the argument that school English is somehow descended from the university subject is the inconvenience that school English has had a longer relationship with what some would call literacy. Rather than ignoring this aspect of the school subject's evolution, it would be much better to confront the question of what we mean by literacy.

Definitions of literacy – functional and otherwise

Reading, handwriting and composition, and grammar were subjects on nineteenth century curricula. They might have appeared to be 'functional' in that they could have been understood as ideologically neutral skills. This appears to be the way in which the 'functional core' of the Tomlinson Report was conceptualised. But the last twenty years have seen a proliferation of research into literacy from a variety of perspectives that has generated at least two important new understandings of the term: first, that the 'fond illusion' (Levine, 1982) that becoming literate will make you rational, productive, economically independent, etc., is just that. Brian Street referred to this illusion as the 'autonomous model' of literacy (Street, 1984); Harvey Graff as the 'literacy myth' (Graff, 1987). Becoming rational, productive, economically independent, and so on, is about more than acquiring the ability to decode and occasionally encode print (arguments for 'functional literacy' usually emphasise decoding; writing – of anything more than the most rudimentary transaction – never seems to be as important).

The second important understanding from the research into literacy is that literacy is more than a discrete set of skills; rather, it might be understood as a set of socially-situated practices. There are *literacies* rather than a single literacy based, as Lankshear suggested, "upon print and organised around beliefs about how the skills of reading and writing may or, perhaps, should be used" (Lankshear, 1997, p.58).

Linguists such as David Barton (Barton, 1994; Barton and Hamilton, 1998) and James Gee (1996) have dared to state the obvious: literacy involves reading and writing *something* that has been written or is read by *someone, somewhere*. Gee argued that:

> . . . the traditional view of literacy as the ability to read and write rips literacy out of its sociocultural contexts and treats it as an asocial cognitive skill with little or nothing to do with human relationships. It cloaks literacy's connection to power, to social identity, and to ideologies, often in the service of privileging certain types of literacies and certain types of people (Gee, 1996, p.46)

Effective educational practice has therefore come to accept an enriched definition of literacy such as that provided by Peter Freebody and Allan Luke's 'Four Resources' model: the person becoming literate in a particular domain must develop and sustain four related roles: code-breaker, text-participant, text-user and text-analyst (Freebody and Luke, 1990; Freebody, 1992; Luke and Freebody, 1999, etc.). The 'resources' required of these roles are those of decoding/encoding, semantics (the cultural knowledge), pragmatics (the use to which the text might be put socially) and criticality (the ability to interrogate texts, to understand them ideologically). The aim of literacy education has therefore generally come to be understood as the development of *critical* (rather than functional) literacy, specific to one form of activity or social practice.

Understanding the relationship between English and literacy from this perspective means accepting that literacy is more than one school subject like English could ever hope to be. This is a somewhat different argument to those like Brian Cox who suggested that "literacy is not enough" (Cox, 1998). This isn't to argue that English is just a part of literacy. Far from it. Like other subjects, English offers a set of social, intellectual and cultural resources that are selected and used in practice by people who 'do English'. Neither is it to claim that English can or should deal with all of the modes of communication and representation – linguistic, visual, aural and so on – or take on every literacy. There is a whole school outside the English classroom door and, as proponents of a 'pedagogy of multiliteracies' (e.g. New London Group, 1996; Cope and Kalantzis, 2000) acknowledge, a 'multiliteracies' approach involves major structural change for educational institutions and for society. Perhaps, however, English is unusual in that both the selection of its resources and concepts and the way in which English is 'done' are very explicitly informed by sets of values and beliefs with an explicitly social purpose. As the values change, resources change, society changes – what it means to be British, Pakistani, Kiwi, etc., changes – so does (or *should*) subject English. It is at the same time a 'language art' and a literacy and a form of citizenship education. So, if to this already dynamic situation we also add seemingly perpetual policy changes emphasising vertical accountability, market competition, and instrumental approaches to assessment and testing, it is certainly possible that, for

many teachers and their students, English at the moment in England is indeed a 'sack of snakes'.

Where are we now?

Ofsted recently published its five-year review of inspection evidence for English (Ofsted, 2005). It makes interesting reading. The picture it paints is one of rising standards of attainment over the years 2000–2005 (but at the same time not achieving the targets set by government). It talks of English being 'one of the best taught subjects in primary and secondary schools' (Ofsted, 2005, p.6). But it also comments directly on the impact of recent centralised initiatives such as the National Literacy Strategy and the Key Stage 3 English Framework: learning objectives are being used "inflexibly", with teachers "seeing them as a set of requirements to be ticked off" (ibid); there has been less attention to speaking and listening; too often, pupils are not encouraged to read widely and independently (the report notes that teachers themselves "struggle to keep up-to-date with good quality texts" [ibid]); pupils' writing has often become characterised by adherence to teacher-specified 'text types' with less attention to understanding audiences and purposes for the writing; bilingual pupils do not always reach their potential; the gap between boys and girls attainment is 'significant' and increasing; teachers' use of assessment is a cause for concern. The theme of the concluding section of the report is 'developing independence' and although independence for whom or by whom is not specified, there is a clear statement that there needs to be "more imagination, creativity and flexibility" in English (ibid, p.41).

Ofsted's comments on assessment are interesting in that their report is referring to the way in which teachers engage with pupils and their work in English rather than their operation of national assessment criteria. I was struck a few months ago by a feature in the Education supplement of *The Guardian* in which an 11 year-old boy wrote about his favourite lesson. He had recently won a competition organised by the BBC TV programme *Newsround* and his prize was to join the jury for the Whitbread literary awards. His favourite lesson was English and in the article he described how, in English, he was currently "learning how to use more adjectives" and "spotting metaphors" in a novel. The disjuncture between this young man's reading and writing activities outside school and those within the English classroom couldn't have been starker. It is, of course, facile just to blame English teachers for this sort of gap and

the state of affairs reported by Ofsted; teachers in England (eager to achieve the best for their pupils) have simply become very good at doing what they have been told to do. The National Literacy and Key Stage 3 Strategies have sometimes been implemented mechanistically in the ways that were prescribed by central government; the GCSE and new post-16 examinations have also been accommodated by teachers and 'standards' have continued to rise; and Ofsted cannot escape from this complex situation unblemished as teachers have not been rewarded for taking risks during inspections and schools have also become very good at performing the approved routines in ways that encourage inspectors to tick the box provided – and then leave.

As if it wasn't difficult enough for teachers to work with the concept of a curriculum as something that is *made* in relation to learners and diverse bodies of knowledge, they are also criticised from within the educational establishment by those who say that English must deal more in young people's popular culture, especially those in which new digital technologies figure prominently, and with a special emphasis on a fetishised visual culture (as if print itself was anything other than a visual medium). Those who peddle these assertions (and more often than not, that's all they are) sometimes also assert that literature is just a minority pursuit capable only of the kind of institutionalised moral training Hunter (1988) described. There are at least four important points to be made here: the first is that exponents of this position often focus on curriculum content alone, divorced from pedagogy, and omit to mention that a predominantly visual curriculum 'delivered' through what Barnes (1976) referred to as a transmission pedagogy would be just as repressive as one that seeks to transmit a narrow and exclusive literary heritage. Secondly, they operate with a restricted definition of literature and don't understand it as a dynamic concept that embraces a wide variety of texts that includes young people's own speech and writing as well as texts from diverse cultures and in diverse genres. Thirdly, young people are essentialised into a single, homogenous category: video game-playing, chat room-lurking, digital video-obsessed drones with thumbs grown large from their text-messaging addictions. And, fourthly, if indeed all young people are highly expert in these various forms of cultural activity outside school, why should they bother to come to school to get more of the same? What should schools and English teachers in particular offer that *builds* on what young people already know but then draws them into developing knowledge about something that they don't?

At the moment, the choices for an English teacher seeking to reflect on their practice and pursue a line of thought about the purpose of English as a subject in schools appear to be fairly limited. They are either criticised for doing what they were told to do (and what they were told would be good in particular for those less successful in English) or they are berated for not teaching enough visual culture and ICT. And whereas it seems young people are often involved in all kinds of exciting spoken and written language activities outside schools (blogging, MC-ing, creating fanzines, writing lyrics, reading novels, being on the Whitbread jury, etc.), in school they have increasingly become 'entitled' to a 'core curriculum' in English that stresses narrow competence in decontextualised, purpose-free reading and writing skills and the recall of bits of linguistic terminology.

Rethinking English: Generating some questions

The time seems ripe to review the teaching of English in schools in England. There seems to me little point, however, in pursuing the prevalent binaries in debates about the 'future of English': canon vs popular culture; the grand project of English vs a narrowly-defined literacy; or, at its most ludicrous, the cultural practices of the teenager's bedroom vs those of the school classroom. It also seems important when making claims about what English is and could or should do, not to allow it to become too big for its boots. As committed and enthusiastic English teachers, we often forget that we are not alone in the educational enterprise and that our colleagues in Art, Music, Drama, Media Studies, ICT, Geography, History, etc., etc. – all of whom would also make claims for creativity, criticality, diversity and productive identity-work – are also having conversations equally as important as our own.

That said, I would suggest that the following three questions are indicative of a direction for debate about English in English schools, about why (or why not) it might be an important area for study:

1. What is the nature of the literacy developed by subject English?

2. What values should inform the selection of concepts and cultural resources under study in English?

3. What is the distinctive contribution of subject English to the multiliteracies education of young people?

My impression is that these important questions haven't (at least in England) been addressed for some time. And my belief is that it is the perceived 'problem' of literature that needs to be sorted out if any review of English teaching is to stand any chance of success.

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