

## Curriculum/Assessment Knowledge/Power

**John Hodgson reports on BERA's recent day conference on curriculum and assessment in English.**

On 12 March, the English in Education special interest group (SIG) of the British Educational Research Association (BERA) held a day conference at Exeter University on curriculum and assessment. The conference was very well attended with an approximately 50/50 split between teachers and researchers.

Introducing the event, Annabel Watson said that OFSTED had recently made some promising statements about curricular richness, but the effect of assessment on the curriculum remained a deep concern. English feels the pressure not only of the current emphasis on STEM subjects but also of the detrimental effect on A Level enrolment of curricular changes at Key Stages 3 and 4.

Of the several presentations and workshops, I've given accounts of the first keynote session given by longstanding curriculum expert John Richmond, and a presentation by Molly Janz, a teacher at the Phoenix Academy in London, on the knowledge-rich curriculum, as well as a short account of the plenary discussion.

### **1. John Richmond: Curriculum and Assessment 3–16 – A Better Plan**

John Richmond gave the conference a witty if sombre overview of curriculum and assessment in English over the last 50 years. He revisited some of the 'best that has been thought and written' during that time on English, language and literacy: Halliday and Wilkinson on spoken language; Marie Clay on early reading and writing, endorsed by the Plowden and Bullock reports; Debra Myhill on grammar for writing; Nick McGuinn on educational drama; Andrew Burn's development of Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall and David Buckingham's work in media studies; Angela Goddard on English 16–19.

The 1970s and 1980s were years of optimism when teachers sought to raise standards in the language of all children. The introduction of the National Curriculum in 1989 was positive in principle, but progressive English teachers soon found themselves represented in the media and by government as a fifth column to promote leftist ideologies and undermine language and manners. Michael Gove replaced the sneer 'educational

establishment' by 'the Blob' and denied the need for experts. The importance of spoken language was downgraded; coursework was abolished at GCSE and much reduced at A Level; early reading was defined as instruction in phonic decoding.

The debate about curriculum and assessment in English is now a totemic battle between those with power but no knowledge and those with knowledge but no power:

- The debate about early reading has been going on for many decades, but zealotry backed up by money and power simplistically claims that any approach other than 'systematic synthetic phonics' is damaging.
- The grammar curriculum in Key Stages 1, 2 and 3 is the wrong way round: competence in spoken and written language precedes the ability to perform grammatical analysis. The balance of detailed grammatical learning should shift from the primary to secondary years.
- In Key Stages 3 and 4, spoken language is now focused on performance: there is little acknowledgement of a range of types of talk. KS4 does a slight backward turn here, but assessment requirements at GCSE will pressure teachers to neglect exploratory language.
- The hostility to coursework at GCSE and A Level denies students the opportunity to take a measure of responsibility for their learning.
- The writing orders at Key Stage 3 and 4 are on the whole good, with some acknowledgement of the importance of audience and purpose. But there is nothing about combining writing with other modes, such as sound and image.

John Richmond and his colleagues – Andrew Burn, Peter Dougill, Mike Raleigh, and Peter Traves – encourage teachers, especially those working in schools not bound by the National Curriculum, to take inspiration from their 'better plan' for curriculum and assessment in English 3 to 19. A summary is available on the NATE website, and the whole has been published as a series of booklets by Owen Education and in one volume by

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Routledge, reviewed recently in *Teaching English*. The late Ron Carter reviewed the project as ‘the perfect antidote to curriculum-meddling politicians worldwide. Simply outstanding’.

## 2. Molly Janz: Can there be a knowledge-rich curriculum in English?

Molly Janz of Phoenix Academy, London, made a stimulating contribution to the knowledge/skills debate in English.

According to Michael Young, ‘powerful knowledge’ is the ‘best’ knowledge, designed and delivered by specialists. It is the knowledge to which students, as future citizens, have a right. It helps us to predict, make generalisations, and have power in the world. It is also powerful in being a necessary element of social justice. Reflecting in *Impact 4* (2018) on the nature of a knowledge-rich curriculum, Tom Sherrington argues that acquiring powerful knowledge is an end itself; ‘we are all empowered through knowing things and ... this cannot be left to chance’. Knowledge should be taught to be remembered, specified in detail in advance, mapped out and sequenced coherently.

Literary knowledge, Molly argued, is not knowledge in this sense. In their paper ‘English and the knowledge question’ in *Pedagogy Culture and Society*, 26 (2), Doecke and Mead take issue with Young’s understanding of knowledge, arguing that it privileges propositional

knowledge at the expense of the interpretive activities typically associated with literary studies. It thus fails to provide a valid framework for supporting students as they read and engage with literary texts. Edward Said speaks in his essay ‘History, Literature and Geography’ of the importance of the ‘mind of the individual reader and critic’. Literature is not so much a source of knowledge as of meaningful insight. Knowledge in the propositional sense defined by E.D. Hirsch would not be poetry but paraphrase.

## 3. Plenary: Where Next for Teachers and Researchers

The plenary struck some pessimistic notes. Joe Nutt of the *Times Educational Supplement* told us that the utilitarians have a stranglehold on education. Angela Goddard said that the Russell Group’s endorsing only English Literature as a ‘facilitating subject’ for future university study had resulted in a loss of potential students of A Level English Language.

However, the overall spirit of the conference was positive and we look forward to future work together. If you’re a member of BERA, do join the *English in Education* SIG. If you wish to join BERA, go to <https://www.bera.ac.uk/join>.

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# Literary Signposts



Beth Tovey