

Getting the balance right: English as a humane discipline

Peter Thomas argues that we need to re-balance the curriculum to make it ‘connect with students’ inner worlds – and with the real world outside’ – and that KS3 offers us the perfect opportunity.

Since becoming Chair of NATE I have had dozens of conversations about the state of English today and where English should be going. This is partly because there are so many teachers in NATE with a passionate commitment to the subject, and partly because English is a subject of interest to non-teachers in government, the press and the public. NATE's place in all this is to defend and promote the best in teaching and learning in English. Since its beginnings in the 1960s it has done this by combining research and theory, both of them emerging from and tested by the practicalities of real classrooms. What has evolved as a NATE mission is a loose consensus as to what we value in English as a humane discipline. My personal observation of the territory this last eighteen months is that there is an increasing and worrying imbalance between the ‘humane’ and the ‘discipline’.

New GCSEs and KS3

A government intention to drive up ‘standards’ is bound to lead to extraordinarily high-stakes status for GCSE results. This will be reinforced by performance league tables and Ofsted inspection. In the recent case, the ‘standards’ agenda expressed itself in a ‘strengthening’ reform of GCSEs to make them more ‘rigorous’ in content and in assessment – in other words, emphasising the discipline. Some of this disciplinary rigour was achieved in English by a greater weighting on SPaG and in Literature by a greater emphasis on nineteenth century fiction. This has resulted in a major change in curriculum content, as well as of learning focus. Despite the advice of the Awarding Bodies, this change in learning focus has most notably been evident in a strong impetus towards a newly-valued discipline of memory learning and a reinforced valuing of specialist terminology.

The benefits of the new rigour are not yet clear to see. This August saw the first award for the new GCSE, following two years of radical change to classroom teaching and

learning towards the all-exam, end-of-course assessment and a radical change of a nine point alphabetic scale of A*–U to ... a nine point numerical scale of 9–1. This change necessitated much explanation of the new ‘good’ (later ‘strong’) pass equivalent of the old grade C at 4, and the new top grade of 9. August brought some clarity to all this. The share of ‘strong’ passes was the same proportion as in the previous model of GCSE and the share of grade 9 was about the same as the previous A* at about 4%. So much change, then, for so little change... It is hard to resist the feeling that the ABs and Ofqual had the satisfaction of achieving fairness and stability, the drivers of GCSE change had the satisfaction of impressive sound bites and Daily Mail headlines, and teachers had the satisfaction of a humane conclusion to the turmoil of a discipline boost.

Whether students are now better at SPaG or whether they get as much from *Jekyll and Hyde* or *A Christmas Carol* as they got from *Of Mice and Men* is debatable. I'm not so much concerned with the relative merits of a short sensational or sentimental novella in convoluted prose vs a short neutrally objective novella in lucid prose. What concerns me more is the shift in teaching and learning caused by the reformed GCSEs.

My main concern is with the erosion of Key Stage 3 as schools start GCSE exam practice in Year 9 – or earlier. Key Stage 3 is 60% of all students’ secondary English experience. It offers scope for enterprising educational planning unrestricted by SATs, GCSE assessment objectives or preparation for Paper 1 Question 3. There have been some pointers to making Key Stage 3 a more interesting and demanding experience in the form of two Ofsted publications. ‘*Key Stage 3 – The Wasted Years?*’ and ‘*English – the Way Forward*’ gave a steer to a more humane model of English. HMCI Amanda Spielman has followed these by shifting the Ofsted focus to curriculum width and depth rather than GCSE spec narrowness. KS3 is ripe for

an expanded English curriculum that is free from exam practice, though establishing the knowledge and skills later selectively assessed in exam specs. It is ripe for teacher initiative and English enrichment.

Re-balancing the curriculum

I think what's needed is a conscious and explicit curriculum re-balancing in which the humane part of the subject has parity with the discipline part. That humane part is more than instruction in grammatical features, punctuation and the identification of devices in writing. It is what has always made English different from other subjects – its engagement with social and ethical issues, with emotional and personal responses, and with promoting empathy, creativity and criticality. These are what make English connect with students’ inner worlds – and with the real world outside.

I can understand why teachers sometimes feel that they must drill students into spotting fronted adverbials, asyndetic lists, anaphora, anadiplosis and synecdoche, or enjambement – but these things have limited currency and relevance in the adult world of work, family and relationships. They are small fragments of the discipline's knowledge store, and their acquisition tends to be a stronger sign of receptivity than of creativity in use. Likewise, dependency on acronyms like PEE, PEAL, PETAL, DAFOREST, and the like, support a discipline of Lego Linguistics but do little to develop a humane version of the English curriculum or improve students’ real writing.

False binaries based on notions of ‘hard’ skills of reading and writing contrasted with ‘soft skills’ of empathy, collaboration, imagination do not help. I do not see these as ‘soft skills’: they are, instead, harder to develop than the mechanics of literacy – as colleagues may know from relationships with other colleagues. I think these are a more valuable part of English than the exotic content fragments above but they are harder to teach and harder to assess. They are also more necessary for life beyond GCSE.

Knowledge v skills?

All of this might seem a traditional plea for woolly liberalism, but I've found support for the humane dimension in an unexpected area. I've recently been working with the Ideas Foundation (see the resource 'Creative Persuasion' created in collaboration with IF at www.ideasfoundation.org.uk/content/resources/educator-resources/creative-persuasion), and talking to people in advertising agencies and companies like Canon and Burberry, and I have been struck by a common thread in their thinking – that recruitment puts personal initiative, creativity, resilience, imagination and communication above exam results. It's the so-called 'soft' skills that they are interested in. Even more persuasive is the view of the past Director of the CBI, John Cridland, who argues for a curriculum that is 'rigorous, rounded and grounded', and laments a serious false polarity in our education system:

'Lined up on one side – those for whom rigour is all. Stretching curriculums driven by stretching exams and a strong – mainly data-driven – accountability framework. On the other side –

those who emphasise developing the attitudes and aptitudes which will set young people up for adult life. These two points of view are consistently presented in our political debate as an 'either/or' choice. But in reality – this is a false choice. A false choice that we – educationalists, businesspeople, politicians – have allowed to determine the course of the education debate.'

Behind the notion of academic 'rigour' lies a false binary of knowledge versus skills, with knowledge promoted as the more valued commodity. I'm currently grappling with that implied binary in the DfE promotion and funding of schools committing to a 'knowledge-based curriculum'. It seems to me that all curriculum is knowledge-based: what matters more than a basic receiving and retaining of knowledge is *using* it to some purpose. Knowledge becomes valuable when it is applied, developed and made relevant to need or context. Otherwise, knowledge is for pub quizzes. In terms of a humane and disciplined English curriculum, *knowing about* is less important than *knowing how* or *knowing why*. Not for the first time in

my teaching career, I'm having to resist a simplifying tendency to polarise (traditional/progressive, instruction/discovery, knowledge/skills, humane/discipline) when effective dealing with human beings comes from a judiciously variable balance of the polarised possibilities.

Starting with KS3 ...

English teachers, if asked, would agree that creativity, communication, resilience, collaboration and empathy matter in English. What would really make them matter is embedding them in what students do in reading, speaking and writing. This means making space for these 'tough skills' when assessing students' overall profile in English. Narrowing the English curriculum to knowledge consisting of acronymically listed devices makes for easy assessment to feed the data monster, but it doesn't help to develop a 'rounded and grounded' curriculum. If English is to thrive as a humane discipline, we need to privilege the 'humane' as the justification and aim of the 'discipline'. There's no better place to start than the three-year open gateway of KS3, and no better time to start than now.

Director of Communication & Development



NATE is seeking to appoint a dynamic and creative Director of Communication and Development to undertake the administration required by the Charity Commission and to contribute to the fulfilment of NATE's mission. NATE's mission, as set out in its Charity Trust Deed, is to develop and disseminate the effective teaching of English in UK schools. It does this by fostering research, development and effective classroom practice in English in Education. Its credibility and relevance are based on understanding the grassroots experience of teachers and educators, and on its service to them in developing teaching and learning in English. Through its conferences and publications, NATE provides support for Primary teachers, Secondary teachers and colleagues in Higher Education.

The Director of Communication and Development will mainly work from home and be prepared to operate independently, but will liaise closely with NATE's board of Trustees, elected members of Management and the Chair of the Association, who will provide close and regular support in the early stages of the appointment.

Communication within the association is a vital part of the post, in addition to communication with outside agencies. Administration of activities and finances is also a vital part of the post. Both of these will contribute to the successful applicant's role in developing the Association as the professional voice and driving force of English in Education today.

Applications are invited from people with experience in communication and organisation, and an understanding of English as a core of the curriculum and a key part of young people's personal, social, emotional and intellectual development.

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Closing date for applications 2nd November.

Further details from The Hon Secretary, Mick Connell on m.j.connell@sheffield.ac.uk

For an informal chat about the role, ring

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