

Knowledge, anyone?

Peter Thomas is all for knowledge, but the English curriculum, he argues, is about far more than just knowledge.

There's a lot about knowledge and curriculum in the edu-media these days, but not knowledge as we have, er, known it. Knowledge-Rich is, apparently, a new kind of knowing, contrasted with (presumably) Knowledge-Lite or Knowledge-Free. I've never come across a Knowledge-Lite or Knowledge-Free English curriculum, so I'm not sure why Knowledge-Rich is making waves. I think I can see where it's coming from, though, and maybe where it's going.

It seems to me, from the way Knowledge-Rich is promoted by DfE, OFSTED and enthusiasts for Direct Instruction, Cognitive Load Theory and Zero Tolerance policies, that it's a proxy for a familiar educational agenda – one going back to the Black Papers and PM Callaghan's Secret Garden speech. It's an agenda that is mistrustful of 'progressive' values, such as child-centred learning, group-work, classroom talk and 'skills-based' teaching and learning, and which conflates these as an ideological bundle.

This opposition draws validation from a 'research-led' approach. Now I'm not against evidence-based practice. My complaint against various Secretaries of State for Education is that they have initiated and pontificated on the basis of personal experience, party dogma or selected 'experts'. So I should be pleased that the 'DfE' agenda is based on research. Except...

Knowledge and culture

Except that when I hear E.D. Hirsch ('5000 facts, dates and names that make you cultured') cited as a force for social mobility, and Hart and Risley (1995) cited as a basis for vocabulary drilling, I am reminded of the old Reader's Digest feature 'Improve your word-power' to impress colleagues and neighbours. Both sources offer valuable data and interpretations, but neither is enough to form a whole or even main agenda for English.

What I think is going on here is a form of politically slanted cultural appropriation. When Conservative speakers justify the 'DfE' package as compensating for cultural deficit and enabling social mobility, I recognise the linking of education with meritocracy. My own experience as an 11+ 'failure' given a second chance by comprehensive reorganisation makes me welcome views affirming humane values. But a suspicion persists that this may just be a crafty pilfering to justify Old Right values: 'This is what you must learn, and this is how you must learn it'.

Knowledge and pedagogy

It worries me that selective research may lead to some mechanical operations of limited cognitive demand, and minimal affective engagement. Low-stakes memory testing and memorising quotations or vocabulary are not intrinsically without value, but they do reinforce a compliance model of learning. That's OK when students have to receive specialist knowledge, but active use of knowledge – application and adaptation – requires more than compliance. As James Durran puts it:

Teaching should be about imparting knowledge. That's simple. But it should also be about bringing pupils into a particular relationship with that knowledge. That's not so simple.

I'm not against testing recall of Knowledge Organisers: there's a place for such tactics in the wider repertoire of strategies for different learners and different learning. I'm not against exposure to Level 2 or literary vocabulary in context, unless it results in ambitious but inappropriate and ineffective use of knowledge. As EMC's Barbara Bleiman observes:

Teaching terms as labels is the wrong way round. Teach strong, valid observations about texts & find ways of explaining them, using terms only if helpful. Look at exam scripts to see how seldom terms like this are employed well, despite ubiquitous use.

Knowledge and the curriculum

More importantly, these tactics may reduce the wider reach of English. Having spent most of my life in curriculum development and assessment, I am now thinking that there is more to English. It's a view as much shaped by the Channel 4 series 'Educating.....' as by research, and recognises that perhaps the most valuable thing a school can do is care for the whole child in terms of self-esteem and capacity to deal with social, emotional and cognitive diversity. English is uniquely suited to this, if its curriculum is richer than its knowledge content. Literacy knowledge and skills matter, but more important for life-long well-being are the 'soft' skills of empathy, collaboration and reflectiveness – those 'soft' skills that some adults, even adults in senior educational positions, may still be needing to develop.

Over-valuing literary terminology or vocabulary can diminish the subject's wider repertoire of human attributes. There's not much point in knowledge-rich learning to identify fronted adverbials, asyndetic lists, anaphora and anadiplosis, or assonance and enjambment, if youngsters don't then enjoy independent reading, and forget these things when GCSE is over. And I'm not persuaded that enlarged vocabulary makes kids cleverer. A quick test: Boris Johnson...?

Knowledge and pleasure

Knowledge of phonetic and morphological regularities is valuable, but so is reading pleasure – something beyond decoding and comprehension of explicit meaning. Reading pleasure is often triggered by language which is wilfully non-standard in accent, dialect or grammar. Irony and ambiguity are rich ingredients of pleasure in language. Try 'He created a deep impression when he sat down' or 'What, you took the last bus home?!' (Thanks, Brian Bilston.) Try 'This door is alarmed', or 'Beware – shallow drains'.

Much of what turns youngsters on in English involves irregularity, non-conformity or subversion of linguistic or social order. Stories, poems, jokes and puzzles that exploit oddity, or words and grammatical functions misbehaving can delight, intrigue and develop readers. Watch youngsters enjoying Jabberwocky. Recall your own delight in Milligan, Python, Mollum or Rosen. A special pleasure of reading is the gap between the ostensible meaning of text and the context of visuals – think of *Rosie's Walk*, *Not Now Bernard* or *A Walk in the Park*. These provide pleasures of sly inference and subversive wit that lead, if you want, to Jane Austen.

English as a humane discipline has, dare I say it, a rich knowledge component – but the humane part of the discipline needs firm prioritising of its affective, aesthetic, personal and social potential. Pragmatism avoids false oppositions like 'knowledge-rich'/'knowledge-poor', or 'traditional'/'progressive'. It suggests two progression models of English, each of which has value at different times, for different learners and for different learning: progression from pleasure to knowledge or from knowledge to pleasure. Take your pick.

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