A View from the Chair

Rebuilding English

Given current difficulties, English needs to rediscover its identity, says **Peter Thomas**. Along with others in the English teaching community, NATE seeks to help the subject restate its vision and build a renewed consensus for a humane discipline.

Building English

The comprehensive school programme in the 1960s and 70s created a national all-ability education service, with a major impact on teaching, curriculum and assessment. Teachers previously divided into those bestowing scholarship upon a selective minority in grammar schools and those preparing the rest for trades and unskilled work in secondary moderns had to cater for all students. Some found this a worthy challenge: others found it a nightmare. Schools found ways to manage the change: setting and streaming took some pressure off teachers who found the whole ability range difficult.

Then, in the 80s, O Level and CSE were replaced by GCSE, providing the same curriculum and examination for all. This required more of teachers than subject knowledge: motivating, managing and valuing a wide range of talents, ambitions and cultures called for a wider teaching repertoire for a more student-centred approach.

Through the 90s, GCSE evolved with teachers consulted by Awarding Bodies about text choices and assessment tasks. Coursework allowed teachers to devise their own curriculum. I recall a term spent on the films *Jaws* and *High Noon* and Ibsen's *Enemy of the People* to investigate social morality, then *Great Expectations* to investigate personal growth.

Eventually, coursework and terminal examinations were yoked together to match the varied competencies required by higher education and the workplace. Preparing youngsters for the communicative needs of adult life and work led to Speaking and Listening as a major part of English. This alignment of English to life and work in the 21st century continued with media studies, different cultures literature and Spoken Language Study – all providing challenge for the ablest and engagement for the less able. This alignment owed much to the rationale of the Bullock report and the materials provided by Ron Carter and the LINC project – both independent of Government policy and influence.

English was consolidating its status as the school space where all could find stimulus and satisfaction, academically and personally: self-esteem grows when personal opinion and experience are valued in language and literature study. It was a curriculum triumph to embed multi-textual relevance in the English experience. It was an assessment triumph to replace the term 'essay' with 'response', and to create mark-schemes with a skills hierarchy of 'identify, explain, sustain, develop, and explore'. It was a triumph of collaboration between Awarding Bodies, education academics and classroom professionals. English as a humane discipline came to maturity, giving equal weight to the 'humane' and the 'discipline'. The humanity was in valuing students' own cultural capital, and the discipline in the cultural capital transmitted.

Dismantling English

Of course, not all saw these as triumphs. Some saw a retreat from education as they knew it into 'progressive' methods. A political agenda with different values and priorities began to dismantle thirty years of academic and professional consensus. The national education service became fragmented by Academisation and Free Schools. GCSE became two-tier, and then exam-only. It had stripped out of it those parts that students (and teachers) found most engaging and relevant: media studies, different cultures texts, Speaking and Listening and Spoken Language study. In their place came nineteenth century fiction and a greater emphasis on SPaG, justified by an official mantra of "raising standards".

As the scope and appeal of English diminished, retention became a crisis as experienced teachers took early retirement. The resulting recruitment drive boosted numbers, but the drop-out rate after four years made it no permanent solution. Symptomatic of that short-termism is Teach First, nominally acknowledging that bright graduates tempted by rapid promotion can be expected to move on to something else, probably more lucrative and less demanding. Meanwhile, local apprenticeship models of training eroded the national influence of universities in moulding academic and professional understanding.

All of this has led to an English curriculum and exam system offering little for the least academic third, and so unappealing to the more able that there is an alarming drop in the take-up of English A Levels. Teacher satisfaction is undermined by a regime of league-table accountability, reduced *per capita* funding and factory-style Academy chain lesson content and delivery. English, formerly the subject where all were welcome and all could feel valued, risks becoming three (four?) years of instruction in GCSE exam protocols. It's understandable. Teachers are conscientious. The GCSE exam has become increasingly formulaic in rubric, mark tariff and questioning lexicon, promoting formulaic drilling in preparation. It's ironic that the years of change in the name of 'raising standards' in a 'challenging' curriculum with a more 'rigorous' assessment framework have resulted in the same share of 'good' pass and top grades as before.

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New ideas?

So where can we look for hope that English can regain a confident identity? New ideas? Some of the notions in current vogue seem in sympathy with those that have eroded English. Direct Instruction revives a classroom model reminiscent of 1950s grammar schools. 'Knowledge-rich' programmes privilege content over process, reversing Vygotsky's notion of starting from the child in favour of starting from what the child must learn. A faux-left appropriation of Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital, remedying the child's cultural void justifies versions of E.D. Hirsch's 5000 items that make a 'cultured' American. Similarly, 'word gap' solutions assuming that big words make children cleverer are justified by the thin and problematic US research of Hart and Risley. Then there are the Zero Tolerance penalties for talking in the corridor. A lot of the new looks rather old – certainly not very 21st century.

Some of these ideas gain currency through agencies such as ResearchEd, and some are built into Teach First training, both displaying signs of closeness to Government. ResearchEd was originally proposed by Sam Freeman, an adviser to Michael Gove and an executive Director at Teach First. He also proposed as lead Tom Bennett, later appointed to lead the Government's Behaviour strategy. ResearchEd's 2016 conference was warmly praised by Schools Minister Nick Gibb. Links to Gove are evident in other organisational voices: Parents and Teachers for Excellence (Director, Conservative Party donor Jon Moynihan) and the Free Schools Network, (Rachel Wolf, another Gove adviser, and DfE funded). And it's not difficult to see another Gove adviser, D. Cummings, involved in the birth of such bodies.

Perhaps there is hope in Amanda Spielman's revision of Ofsted, opposing 'teaching to the test', with curriculum and students' personal growth more important than data and exam scores. This is a welcome sign of independence from Government policy and favoured pedagogies. It would be even more welcome if Ofsted downplayed some DfE orthodoxies, such as defining learning as *'an alteration in long-term memory'*, or *'knowing more words makes you smarter'*, or accepting phonic decoding as a synonym for reading. Then Ofsted could counter the political distortions of headlines like *'Almost half of children leave primary school unable to read and write properly, performance tables reveal'*.

Restating vision and consensus

In judging what's part of the problem and what's part of the solution, it may be individuals not institutions that matter. And potent individuals combining independence, intellect and experience there are: Barbara Bleiman, Robert Eaglestone, Kate Clanchy, Michael Rosen, James Durran, Emma Smith, to name a few. They represent humane values and practices rooted in the Renaissance rather than the 1950s. So do the subject associations, including NATE. On many issues raised above, there is independent vision and consensus in the Common English Forum (**https://commonenglishforum.wordpress.com**: the Forum unites the English Association, the English and Media Centre, NATE, National Association of Advisers in English, the United Kingdom Literacy Association, and nine other organisations).

English teachers, too, should make themselves part of the solution. Ofsted's advice to embed 'intent' in what students are to learn should prompt a redefining of *why* we teach English, as well as *how* – and making the *why* about personal growth and meeting the multi-literacy needs of the 21st century. Our subject needs independence, creativity and trust in subject specialism. If these can make English better for all those you teach, NATE is a supportive community, with publications, events, resources and people to help.

Peter Thomas
is Chair of NATE

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