Assessment: A Good Servant but a Poor Master?

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What was it like joining a secondary school English Department in the late 70s? This was before many of the things which today we take for granted: ten years before the National Curriculum; fifteen years before national testing; twenty years before the Literacy Hour and the National Strategies; and an age away from the four-part lesson, objective-led teaching and the widespread adoption of Assessment for Learning practices. There might have been some general statements of belief—‘we teach English literature and we teach English through literature,’ for example—and there might have been some indications of what should be taught in which year—Moonfleet in the 1st Form or Animal Farm in the 3rd Form, for example. Anything that even passingly resembled the schemes of learning central to the work of current English departments was rare; and not because departments could not be bothered to write them, but because the prevailing belief was that it was the inalienable right of all English teachers to teach the subject in the way that they wanted to. This was the age of the inspirational teacher and of the lesson that followed its own journey of discovery; but it was also the age of an ill-defined understanding of what English was, an unplanned curriculum, little sense of pupil entitlement and—at worst—of lessons planned between staffroom and classroom.

How different it is today! English teachers plan their lessons according to schemes of work that allow for steady progression across key stages. Lessons have pace, they have variety and they are flashy and interactive in ways unimaginable in the days of Banda machines and epidiascopes, moving seamlessly on interactive whiteboard from text to task to webpage to video clip and back again. Lessons are permeated with references to assessment criteria so that pupils know what it is that they can do and what they have yet to master, and so that teachers can plan whether to repeat or move on, to direct extra help or provide challenge and extension. Plenaries, sometimes more than one, reinforce understanding,
and marking informs pupils of what they have achieved, at what level and what they need to do to advance. And at the heart of the modern lesson lies the objective: the statement of intent and of what is to be learnt. Self-evidently, if pupils are made aware of what they are to learn, and ideally why, then they will make a better job of doing it and, critically, knowing whether they have achieved it. It would be difficult to argue that objective-led teaching is not a good thing. After all, we all like to know what it is we are learning, why, and how we are going to know when we have learnt it. Done well, it surely focuses learning and informs planning.

Are there, however, dangers with the objective-led approach to the teaching of English? Objectives, whether derived from National Strategy documents or from the pages of assessment criteria in GCSE and A-level specifications, are written for teachers and are not readily accessible for pupils—not always, in fact, readily accessible for teachers. The hope is that objectives are presented to pupils in ways that make sense and in language that they can understand. If they are not—if, for example, the language is too abstract or the vocabulary unfamiliar—then the objective ceases to help pupils in their learning and becomes redundant at best and confusing at worst.

There is also the danger of undue emphasis on the learning objective. A common model of good practice is for lessons to start with a statement from the teacher of the learning objectives for the lesson. It is by no means uncommon for schools to adopt a practice whereby all lessons start with pupils dutifully copying learning objectives from the board. One can see the attractions. It achieves the consistency of practice so beloved of school leaders, particularly when an inspection is pending, and it provides a baseline of good practice which all teachers can follow. Additionally, it provides a calming start to the lesson: a bit of copying to get the class quiet before the lesson proper proceeds. Whether it provides a stimulating and challenging start to the lesson, a sense of curiosity and expectation, is another matter. Clarity of purpose at best, but at worst a repetitive and deadening routine at the start of every lesson. As English teachers, we know only too well that lessons do not always go according to plan and are often all the better for it. Good lessons do not always follow neatly from glibly-presented learning objectives—the patronising We Are Learning To… (WALT) and What I’m Looking For… (WILF) that seem to have crept from primary to secondary schools—and learning objectives can sometimes emerge, or be planned to emerge, over the course of a lesson or series of lessons. Variety is all.

It is perhaps the reductive effect of objective-led teaching that poses the greatest concern, a model of teaching where the content of the subject is
subservient to the meeting of an objective. The teaching of literature is clearly vulnerable to this approach. Let us take as an example a recent local authority in-service training session for English subject leaders on objective-led teaching. The main thrust was that all teaching should be underpinned by clearly identified assessment objectives which should be shared with pupils. By way of an example, the speaker described a lesson based on Assessment Focus 3, \textit{inference and deduction}, using William Blake’s poem ‘London’ as the means by which this AF would be addressed because it contained many words and images that were rich in implication and suggestion. Further discussion focused on which words and images particularly lent themselves to inference and deduction and why. Now clearly in this ‘lesson’ the objectives were pursued in an effective way. Pupils would, for example, have grasped that ‘blackening’ refers to the moral shame of the church as an institution as well as to the physical appearance of its buildings, and done so through a process that they understood to be inference and deduction. What they might have missed out on is that ‘London’ is a mighty good poem in its own right, that the author is thrillingly angry at social injustice and establishment complicity in human suffering, qualities that might have emerged more readily had the objective of the lesson been the poem itself rather than the Assessment Focus, and qualities that might in any case have emerged through a process of inference and deduction despite their not being the stated objectives of the lesson. To illustrate the point, one might imagine a future chance meeting between a teacher and his or her ex-pupil. As they discuss old times, the pupil recalls one particular lesson. ‘I remember we read William Blake’s ‘London’,’ he or she says. ‘I loved the passion and mounting anger in that poem. It’s lived in my mind ever since and I’ve gone on to read a lot more of Blake’s poems as a result.’ Or alternatively: ‘I remember we had a lesson on inference and deduction,’ he or she says. ‘AF 3 I think it was. It’s stayed with me ever since and I can’t see a poem without feeling the urge to infer and deduce. What was the poem that had all that inference and deduction in it?’

The danger of an undue emphasis on assessment objectives can be seen at A-level, too. Introduced with Curriculum 2000, AOs were intended to be a move away from the generally accepted belief that there was an unwritten consensus over what constituted good literary response—a sort of you-know-it-when-you-see-it model of assessment. But how quickly these objectives became narrowing and limiting! And thus began the deadening practice of the teaching of literature through the teaching of the AOs rather than the teaching of literature through the teaching of literature. Successful A-level English Literature students agonise over the right balance of AOs in their coursework and teachers assess their work
by highlighting—sometimes literally with different coloured highlighters for each AO—where the relevant AOs have been addressed. Originally designed to provide candidates with the opportunity to explore their own areas of literary enthusiasm, and popular with teachers for this reason, this freshness of approach has been replaced by a formulaic writing-by-numbers exercise where candidates spend their time agonising over whether they have met the AOs and with the right weightings. The dialogue between teacher and pupil in the writing of coursework seems, depressingly, to have changed from one of suggestion, stimulus and inspiration to a routine of endless to-ing and fro-ing of drafts where the focus is less on engagement and enthusiasm and more on ways of balancing the competing needs of the AOs within the word count. No wonder admissions tutors from Oxford and Cambridge complain about the essays that applicants are required to submit as part of the selection process. All too often, they say, marking takes the form of excessive but unhelpful written guidance for the moderator consisting merely of extensive marginal identification of where an essay has met the AOs, with little sense of an engagement of minds over a shared reading of literature, or of the marking process being a critical dialogue between teacher and pupil.

It is, perhaps, in the A-level examination answer that the demands of AOs can be most strongly felt. With the reduction from six to four modules with the 2008 modifications to Curriculum 2000, single examinations now have to cover multiple texts in order to meet the subject criteria that awarding bodies are obliged to live by, and single questions have to cover all four AOs. The result is examination questions and responses that are tortured beyond belief. Take, for example, a recent A2 examination paper: in their answers, candidates are expected to demonstrate their understanding in all four AOs. So in answering a question on *Hamlet*, candidates are expected to write a literate and well-constructed essay in which they pay close attention to language and form—AO1 and AO2, and no problem there. However, they also have to show how their understanding of *Hamlet* has been ‘informed’ by their reading of *The Revenger’s Tragedy*, the ‘partner text’ (AO3), and how their understanding of both plays takes into account the views of other readers, or critics. As if that is not enough, candidates also have to show how their understanding of both plays has been deepened by an awareness of the contexts in which both plays were written and received (AO4). No wonder, then, if candidates see literary response as a completely artificial process of trying to meet equally all four AOs—and no wonder even good candidates end up writing rubbish. It is interesting that the National Association for the Teaching of English (NATE), in its recent survey of the new A-levels,
highlighted assessment as being ‘the major cause of concern’. Reporting findings in its journal, *English Drama Media*, NATE concludes that ‘survey and anecdotal evidence suggests that the apportioning of particular AOs to particular examination questions remains the greatest area of concern, potentially fragmenting learning’. It was perhaps the AOs that caught out poor old Sir Trevor Nunn, ex-artistic director of the Royal Shakespeare Company and the National Theatre. As part of a BBC Radio 4 programme investigating the awarding of the new A* grades in 2010, Sir Trevor sat an A-level question on *Hamlet*, a play with which we have to assume he was fairly familiar, though not in this case linked to *The Revenger’s Tragedy*. The result? A fairly average Grade B. In his defence, Sir Trevor complained that he had been set a duff question, (‘Hamlet avenges his mother rather than his father.’ How far and in what ways do you agree? ), but it may well have been a lack of familiarity with the AOs that was the main problem. Perhaps someone should have pointed out to Sir Trevor that a reference to his own highly acclaimed 2004 Old Vic production of the play might have helped him to meet the contextual requirements of AO4.

With top universities complaining of the difficulty of selecting the most able students from the increased numbers gaining the highest grade at A-level, it is perhaps worth considering whether the emphasis on assessment objectives has aided or hindered this process. The introduction of the A* grade in 2010 was intended to provide the answer to this problem, but already there are concerns among teachers over the validity of this measure. One of the main concerns is that the A* is awarded for performance not across the whole two-year AS and A2 course, but on scores for the A2 alone. So, the A* rewards not those who show outstanding qualities across the whole course, but just those who do so in the two modules of the second year. Given that one of these could quite easily be an endlessly-redrafted single coursework assignment and the other an examination at which candidates can have two attempts, then one can understand concerns about the validity of the A*. Added to this are reports of inconsistencies between awarding bodies in the proportion of A* grades in English subjects, and it is no surprise that many English teachers look back with regret at the abolition in 2009 of the Advanced Extension Award in English, an examination taken by the most able and designed to identify outstanding candidates. Marked holistically and—crucially—without rigid reference to assessment objectives, the AEA was designed as an opportunity for students to demonstrate flair and potential rather than mastery of assessment grids. As the English Association argued at the time of its abolition, the disappearance of the AEA ‘is being lamented by the increasing number of admissions tutors who have recognized
its value in identifying the most creatively and critically thoughtful applicants to read English at university.

It is not the intention of this article to suggest that assessment-objective based models of teaching, learning, and examining are not a good thing. After all, the Assessment for Learning (AfL) programme has generally been well received by English teachers, who have welcomed the sense of focus that it gives to planning and teaching; the sense of clarity of purpose shared between teachers and pupils, between examiners and examined; and, perhaps most of all, the promotion of an active engagement of pupils with their learning. It would be difficult to argue that a teaching model based only on tacit assumptions about the nature of the subject was preferable. What this article is arguing against is an uncritical and narrowing application of assessment criteria in teaching; and against the constraint on freshness of response when examination questions are over-burdened with the requirements of assessment objectives. Used well, assessment is an excellent servant, but misused it can also become a poor master.

References

2. ‘Much to admire? A position paper outlining the English Association’s response to the report A New Level (June 2009). Reform.