‘Pondering Life by Metaphor’: 
David Holbrook and the Work of 
English Teaching

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David Holbrook’s death last year coincided with the fiftieth 
anniversary of the publication of his most influential book, 
English for Maturity. This polemical and practical treatise on 
teaching English in secondary schools helped to shape the thinking and 
teaching of a generation of teachers. In its pages Holbrook, who had read 
English at Cambridge under Leavis, developed a philosophical approach 
to the teaching of English which saw no need to apologise for the subject 
or to deny its centrality within the curriculum. At the same time, and 
equally importantly, Holbrook argued that the work of the English teacher 
in the secondary modern school (this was just before the arrival of the 
comprehensive era in 1965) was every bit as important as the work of the 
teacher of English in any other kind of school and, indeed, at university 
level. He saw no essential difference:

This book is offered to those who profess to teach English, 
or who have to teach English in the secondary modern 
school, to help them consider that their work is part of all 
English teaching—whether in the university, in the grammar 
school, primary school or secondary modern school—and as 
of equal value.

This became an important theme through all his future writing, and he 
got so far as to argue that teachers of English in secondary modern 
schools were as much in need of sabbatical leave as academics in 
university English departments. In his view, keeping up with the subject, 
revitalizing your interest in it and extending your knowledge of it mattered 
as much for the school teacher as for the university lecturer. In English for 
the Rejected he argued that teachers of the lowest streams in a secondary 
modern school should bring to their reading of students’ work the same 
passion that they would bring to the authors they studied at university, and
still read after they had left:

Read their pieces as you would [Molly] Bloom’s soliloquy at the end of *Ulysses*, or *Finnegan’s Wake* or the poetry of e.e. cummings, or the rich wild prose of Dekker, or Nashe. Listen to its rhythm and voice...Encourage them to struggle with the reality of experience, and don’t substitute for this the struggle with mere problems of graphic layout.4

It was one of his core pedagogical beliefs that the correcting of students’ work should not be a matter of underlining every error of spelling, grammar and punctuation. ‘Mankind,’ he wrote, ‘cannot bear very much reality.’ This echo of T.S. Eliot’s Thomas Becket in *Murder in the Cathedral* was not accidental: following the example of Leavis (whom Holbrook eventually succeeded as Director of Studies in English at Downing College, Cambridge) he acknowledged throughout his life that Eliot and D.H. Lawrence were the touchstones by which teachers and their pupils should assay literary value. Describing the significance of the novel in the teaching of English, Holbrook wrote:

The novel, as D.H. Lawrence said, illuminates many secret places of life—the unspoken workings of the mind and being.... The themes of the greatest novelists have been largely those concerning the uniqueness of each individual life, in a society which has become more and more complex, impersonal and indifferent to the individual. To have thought and felt this problem through the good novel is almost an essential qualification for a member of a democracy. (*EM*, p.166)

Holbrook’s admiration for Leavis had been tempered by his disappointment at Leavis’s reluctance to admit to an underpinning philosophy behind his work. Holbrook himself was nothing if not a synthesist and he was one of those teachers lucky enough in the course of his career to have taught at every level of school and university. In his last book, *English in a University Education*5 as in all his writing from the 1970s onwards, he situated his teaching of English at school and university within a theoretical and philosophical framework embracing the existentialism of Martin Heidegger and the concept of personal knowledge expounded by the philosopher Michael Polanyi. Describing English as ‘a discipline which attends to the imaginative exploration of human experience’,6 he argued that
beneath every human manifestation is the recognition that all our life is a question of being-unto-death, a flowing away towards nothingness: and our deepest satisfactions are in constructing something upon which to rejoice, something which holds a meaning. … (EUE p.131)

Again, the echo here from Eliot’s _Ash Wednesday_ gives a hint of Holbrook’s lifelong convictions and allegiances. And there is something impressively consistent about his rejection of positivism, his belief in the value of literature to the individual and to society, and his commitment to the literature of value. He saw nothing elitist in insisting that all students, whatever their background and ability, should have access to Shakespeare and Jane Austen and T.S. Eliot. However, he also believed in the vitality of the oral and vernacular traditions: he argued that teaching English should build on children’s earliest experiences of poetry and song, and his first book, _Children’s Games_, was published as early as 1957. He went on to edit an influential poetry anthology for use in schools, _Iron, Honey, Gold_, which contained a range of poetry and song far more diverse and more radical than any previous school anthologies.

Given his faith in poetry, it was inevitable that the publication of the Bullock Report in 1975 should have dismayed Holbrook. Officially endorsed and ultimately forming the basis for developments such as the National Curriculum, Key Stage Testing and the National Literacy Strategy, the Report ignored poetry almost entirely and led English teaching, in Holbrook’s view, in a direction opposed to everything his philosophy of the subject had led him to value. He rejected the emphasis _A Language for Life_ gave to linguistics (for instance, its recommendation that student teachers of English should be taught theoretical linguistics and should introduce abstract linguistic concepts into their teaching). Holbrook’s objections are clearly signalled in an article published in the _Proceedings of the Polanyi Society_, ‘A Note from David Holbrook’:

> The child uses language naturally, and puts together sentences which linguists would find it extremely difficult to analyse—yet the child knows no linguistics. Dogberry was right—reading and writing come by nature. Moreover, meaning points beyond the words, so that explicit attention to the words in an analytical way may have as much of an inhibiting effect as the old kind of analytical grammar teaching. There are disciplines in using language, but they
are those of the literary critic and the creative artist, who can collaborate with the mysterious powers of our capabilities for symbolism, and examine meaning in a phenomenological way, that is, as a manifestation of consciousness and being-in-the-world.\textsuperscript{10}

By the time this article appeared, Holbrook had taken up a fellowship at Downing College; for the rest of his life his educational writing focused on higher rather than school-age teaching and learning. He was, however, always a poet and novelist as much as an academic and teacher of English (though he saw no essential separation between these activities). As a poet, he featured both in A. Alvarez’s notable anthology, \textit{The New Poetry}, and in \textit{Penguin Modern Poets 4}. Some of his poems appeared in \textit{The Use of English}, and in his books he frequently and approvingly cited articles about pedagogy from this journal. His teaching and writing alike were always animated by that conviction expressed in his final book, of English as ‘a discipline which attends to the imaginative exploration of human experience’. He knew what teaching English was about:

\begin{quote}
Our work is with poetry, the pondering of life by metaphor.
And it is the poet who asks, How to live? The more we read literature ourselves, the better sense we should gain of how rich life may be and could be. (\textit{EM} p.9)
\end{quote}

How different is the situation now! It must be admitted that some of Holbrook’s ideas would not speak comfortably to teachers in today’s classrooms: his own experience of teaching was largely monocultural, and it predated the National Curriculum and the ultra-centralised, dirigiste, climate in which English teaching struggles (but mostly manages) to flourish. And it does flourish, for if English teachers did not still inspire their students and help them to discover a delight in reading, how could English still be by far the most popular arts subject studied at university, even in such times as ours?

But who now writes for teachers of English, rather than about them? Holbrook spoke to teachers about ‘our work’, and his use of the pronoun ‘we’ was not coercive but inclusive. Teaching was for him, as his books make clear, a shared enterprise undertaken by people with a passionate belief in the possibilities of language and in the centrality of literature within English teaching, indeed within life. He believed that teaching children to write creatively was the key to helping them to read...
responsively. Beyond this, he wanted teachers of English to understand their responsibility for training young people to use the imagination with precision. His major books, not only *English for Maturity* and *English for the Rejected* but also *English for Meaning*, were full of pedagogy: they were manuals for teaching in practice. But at the same time they were underpinned by a philosophy of English that saw the subject as an integrated discipline.

By contrast, most of the books written about English teaching today dwell on the fragmentation of the subject, and are nearly all written (there are exceptions) not by practising teachers on the basis of their own experience in the classroom, but by academics in departments of education talking to other academics about the theoretical principles and the research evidence which should determine the future activity of teachers of English (usually referred to as ‘they’ not ‘we’) in schools. These books are, on their own terms, often valuable and thought-provoking. On the one hand, what they say sometimes resonates quite strongly with what Holbrook was preaching fifty years ago, and does so in ways that might surprise the writers themselves. On the other, however, their tendency is to present the debates and issues in oppositional terms, and their preoccupation is with identifying and analyzing the different layers of discourse that surround them; all of which serves often to confound rather than to clarify.

Two recent books illustrate these tendencies: *Rethinking English in Schools* (2007) and *Debates in English Teaching* (2011). Both already feature prominently on the reading lists of student teachers taking PGCE courses. Holbrook had had the aim (and perhaps the luxury) of writing a book such as *English for Maturity* for a specific reader—the teacher of English in certain types of secondary school—but his ideas echoed outwards to transform thinking about what his contemporary Raymond Williams was calling ‘the intellectual project of English’ as a whole. By contrast, *Debates in English Teaching* is written for all those with a professional interest in their subject, and, in particular: student teachers learning to teach the subject in secondary or primary school; newly qualified teachers; teachers undertaking study at Masters level; teachers with a subject coordination or leadership role, and those preparing for such responsibility; as well as mentors, university tutors, CPD organisers and advisers of the aforementioned groups.

Any book aiming at such a wide target readership risks missing the mark entirely. But within this book, as within *Rethinking English*, individual
writers present pictures of how things are and how they could be which individual teachers will recognize and welcome. Here is Sue Dymoke, for instance, on creativity in the English curriculum:

Operating within an education marketplace, English teachers have been increasingly seen to deal in knowledge rather than in meaning-making, being expected to ‘deliver’ the goods rather than to teach young people to engage in deep learning…. Fortunately, however, this bleak picture does not reflect the picture in every classroom. Creative English teachers continued to find ways to teach imaginatively and to inspire young readers using active approaches. (DET, p.145)

Indeed, the whole of her chapter is essentially an analysis of how creativity is finding ways back, officially and also subversively, into the curriculum and into assessment. But her emphasis is on reporting the politics of creativity rather than on exploring its philosophy and its practical application. Holbrook would have agreed with her when she concludes that ‘creativity should be at the heart of English’, but she ends by saying that in ‘developing further reflections on this topic readers might want to consider creativity in relation to the English departments they have observed or taught in so far’. She sums up her argument by asking first, ‘Has the term creativity been watered down or even hijacked by policy makers?’ then signs off by inviting teachers to ponder ‘What other questions should now be asked about creativity in English?’ (DET, p.155)

This sounds like an agenda for a forthcoming student seminar rather than an encouragement to make creativity the keynote of the teacher’s next English lesson. Such encouragement, backed with practical advice, is what animates, still, every page of English for Maturity.

The editors of Rethinking English in Schools hope that their book can ‘play a small part in setting a new, constructive stage in the development of English in schools’:

Our hope is that those who work in English in schools can once again come to regard the subject as an intellectual problem that can be actively worked on rather than a set of routines that just painfully work on them.15

Does such a stark binary opposition really reflect the situation teachers struggle with today? Is it one Holbrook would have recognized in the Sixties? He would, I think, have preferred Raymond Williams’ more positive definition of English as ‘an intellectual project’. The phrase ‘a
new and constructive stage’ also comes from Williams—from his 1965 book, *The Long Revolution*—so the terms of the debate were certainly familiar to Holbrook. Indeed his early books themselves contributed powerfully to the development of English teaching in schools: that is part of his legacy. What he would have deplored, since he excoriated it in those same books, was the rhetoric with which much of the current debate is conducted. Here, for instance, in a chapter from *Rethinking English in Schools* entitled ‘The multiple languages and literacies of English’, Suzanne Miller argues that

> treating literacy practices as identity-making endeavours respects student agency to draw from multiple modalities, languages and texts in making and remaking their lifeworlds.

*(RES, p.177)*

When she goes on, however, to say that ‘this formulation works against the reduction of human dignity and value in this era of new capitalism where human worth is too often defined by business in terms of profits’ she is at one with Holbrook who also argued that it was the job of English to preserve and enhance ‘human dignity and value’ in the face of such pressures. (Fred Inglis, writing Holbrook’s obituary in *The Independent*, 12 August 2011, recalled how Holbrook had ‘set himself the giant task of contriving a psychoanalytic existentialism with which to oppose the worst that consumer capitalism could do to people’.) But when Miller asks, ‘What exactly is the role of English classes, then?’ and answers her own question by asserting that ‘Besides a focus on social practices of language and literacy, the field needs to focus sharply on ‘critical reflexivity’ about languages, literacies and modes…and develop their uses more consciously’ *(RES, pp.177-8)*, Miller advocates a strategy which contrasts starkly with the phenomenological approach to language advocated by Holbrook. One has to ask, too, whether such a sharp focus by ‘the field’ on literacies is ever going to stimulate the sort of imaginative creativity by teachers and students in the classroom looked for in *Debates in English Teaching* by Sue Dymoke (who is also a contributor to *Rethinking English in Schools*) and advocated fifty years before by Holbrook in *English for Maturity*.

The contrast between these two recent books, read by young and prospective teachers today but not really written for them, and the earlier books of David Holbrook, speaking directly to teachers of English and eagerly purchased and debated by them, is too marked to need further emphasis. Michael Gove is proposing to present a copy of the King James Bible to every school in the kingdom. It might be no less quixotic,
and could do much more for the quality of English teaching in schools today, if he would present a copy of *English for Maturity* to every English department at the same time.

**References**

6. *English in a University Education*, p.120. Future page references given thus in text: *EUE* p.120.