Teaching Dickens in the Modern Classroom

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‘NOW, what I want is, Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else. You can only form the minds of reasoning animals upon Facts: nothing else will ever be of any service to them. This is the principle on which I bring up my own children, and this is the principle on which I bring up these children. Stick to Facts, sir!’

*Hard Times*

When Charles Dickens ironically penned these words in 1854, I sincerely doubt that he would expect his works to be used in just that way less than 200 years later. The current education trend of using sections of his novels, most frequently *Great Expectations*, as the basis for Controlled Assessment essays and as an examination text is, at best, disingenuous to his memory and, at worst, an insult to the study of classic literature. Whilst Dickens’ novels may have been written in instalments, they were meant to be taken as a whole. The themes in his novels were sustained; his characters intricate, and the statements woven into his writing, profound. It should, therefore, be nigh on impossible to teach just one part of a Dickens novel and fully grasp his main points let alone the nuances of his style and humour, yet many schools do so.

When I started my first teaching practice, I remember being horrified to discover that pupils had written coursework essays based on the first nine chapters of *Great Expectations* and nothing else. Now, more experienced and slightly more jaded with the pressures of battling through a crowded specification, I fully understand why teachers are not choosing Dickens over more simple options such as *Animal Farm* and Hardy’s *The Withered*
Yet I still find it fascinating that we have an education system today that allows pupils to get to sixteen or even, in many cases, eighteen without having studied any of the classics that have shaped our literary canon. There is, of course, the well-rehearsed argument that Dickens’ novels are too long or too complicated or written about an era so fundamentally different from the 21st Century that they are now irrelevant, but that negates the popularity of such lengthy tomes as the later Harry Potter books which, incidentally, are set in a world equally removed from today’s society. Some would also argue, of course, that children are more likely to read the latter books in the series because they have become intrigued by the world of Hogwarts and the unique style of J.K. Rowling’s narrative in the earlier, shorter novels. My answer to this is that getting drawn in by any author and the worlds about which he write is a question of suitable scaffolding and introduction at the appropriate time in that reader’s life. No-one is suggesting that eleven year olds should be reading Martin Chuzzlewit, but there is no reason why they should not be encouraged to explore Oliver Twist or Nicholas Nickleby and experience a child’s view of Victorian society.

Having looked in detail at the GCSE specifications for the various examination boards, I was shocked to find that Dickens does not even feature on one exam board’s specifications and only sparingly in those of the other exam boards with either Great Expectations or A Christmas Carol the specified text. Even the supposedly more rigorously academic IGCSE specifications only make passing reference to any other Dickens novels—suggesting David Copperfield as a coursework comparison text and including ‘The Signalman’ in their short stories anthology. A brief survey of secondary school teachers from around the country, across both the maintained and the independent sectors, echoed these findings—that is either not teaching Dickens at all, or a few using Great Expectations as a Controlled Assessment text after having studied ‘The Signalman’ in a year 8 Ghost Stories unit of work.

This creates a cyclic problem for the teaching profession—the same titles appear again and again, yet the introduction of different Dickens texts would cause so many problems for teachers and departments that they would not be chosen anyway. There needs to be a de-mystification of Dickens—teachers need to be shown that there are straightforward ways of sharing his novels with their students.

Nick Gibb, the Minister of State for Schools, stated recently that ‘every young person should have read at least one Dickens novel by the end of their teenage years’.1 In the main his speech was written to highlight the
falling literacy levels of our young people. I would agree with him on that particular point. Dickens’ bicentenary in February this year inevitably led to extended discussions about the appropriateness of teaching his work, and many would agree with Jill Berry’s argument that ‘readers need to come to an author like Dickens when they are ready [because] the danger is that we foist such fiction on young readers because we are convinced it is “good for them” and we risk putting them off for life.” To an extent, this is of course true, but as teachers, our responsibility is to realise a student’s readiness for it. You cannot teach any text properly without a sufficient knowledge of it, but Dickens, along with many of the other classic authors such as Austen and Bronte, requires specialist subject knowledge of a society and an era so far removed from our own.

Whilst this argument can be made for any novel, the sheer length of many Dickens novels puts teachers off trying to construct a scheme of work for them. At the time of writing, there were approximately 30,000 secondary English resources on the TES website, and less than 2% of them are about the life, times and work of Charles Dickens and this sad statistic reflected in many other resource-sharing websites. Teaching Dickens is hard. Planning to teach Dickens is even harder. Claire Tomalin was not wrong when she said that ‘you have to be prepared to read steadily for a Dickens novel’, and I would argue that, in the majority of cases, time is too tight (either for the teacher to prepare adequately or to deliver the work within the confines of specifications and assessment).

I wondered if teachers were presented with a complete set of lesson plans, including historical context and differentiated resources, would they teach Dickens? This became the inspiration for our book.

Of course, even once teachers are adequately prepared, there is still the small issue of not losing their pupils when it is announced that they will be studying Dickens for the foreseeable future. It stands to reason that it is all down to presentation of, and enthusiasm for, the scheme of work. In each of the units in the 11-14 section of my book, where whole Dickens novels are studied, there is a hook, a modern connection to draw the pupils in, whether it is a media studies unit or self-reflective creative writing. Just because Dickens wrote in the context of the Victorian era does not mean our teaching needs to return to the same.

When I announced to two Year 9 sets (one Upper, one Lower) that we would be studying A Christmas Carol, I received a very mixed reaction. After a lesson discussing the setting of the novel and examining the differences between Victorian London and 21st Century London, their first
homework was to reflect on their reactions to and expectations of a study of a Dickens novel. Their responses ranged from ‘Yeah, it’s gonna be great, particularly when we watch the films’ to ‘I don’t know what to expect because I’ve never read any Dickens before’ to ‘Dickens wrote his novels a long time ago; I’m not expecting it to be that interesting.’

The hook for *A Christmas Carol* was the fact that after we had read and studied each of the five staves of the novel, we would watch that stave in an adaptation of the film. Whilst some may argue that this denigrates the impact of studying a classic novel, these were five 20 minute segments in a 24 hour teaching unit that otherwise included drama activities, ICT tasks, solo, pair and group work as well as specific language work in every single lesson. The key to teaching a long text, by any author, is variety of tasks. Across the two classes, the 50 girls to whom I taught this unit represented a huge range of abilities and learning styles, yet I would argue that all coped more than adequately with the demands of studying a Dickens novel.

This mix of ability and learning styles meant that different girls responded better to some activities than others, although all remained accessible for pupils of any ability. Perhaps the most successful activities were the drama-based ones as the girls felt that they were not doing any ‘real’ work. Using drama games to make a novel more accessible is not a new idea, but using a mix of Dickens’ actual language and a modern prose version in the lesson helped anchor the activities in the girls’ minds as an active part of their study of the novel. Ending the whole unit with a drama-based lesson also helped the girls reinforce their learning, demonstrating their understanding and synthesising their ideas.

The ICT activities helped anchor their understanding of Dickens’ language, particularly in terms of characterisation. Completing a Facebook profile or tweeting in role as a character is becoming increasingly popular with the study of many texts, but it also allows the pupils to show their understanding of the character in a modern idiom. Having to fill in Scrooge’s hobbies and interests forced the girls to interpret what they had learnt about his character and create relevant answers. On the whole, the higher ability pupils coped better with this than the lower, which suggested that they might need a higher level of structuring such as a starter that helped them deduce information about people from descriptions, although all managed to come up with answers of some kind. Obviously this kind of exercise depends on pupils being used to using deductive reasoning and independent thinking, but there is no reason why pupils should not be stretched and challenged by what they
are reading as well as by the work that they are required to do about it.

An exercise where pupils were given a section of the text and asked to come up with a way of relaying the story back to their peers ended up being a combination of these two approaches—two groups used ICT, including an interactive Powerpoint presentation and the other groups chose to use a drama-based approach. One high-ability group who wrote their own Whoosh! activity based on their section. Seeing the girls take such confident ownership of their learning of Dickens refutes the arguments that the youth of today lacks the attention span or intellect to understand and engage with Dickens.

It is essentially the teacher’s responsibility to engage and inspire the pupils. Of course, there is a limit to this, but I find it morally questionable to write off a whole generation of teenagers as being unable to access the work of Dickens and other classic literature due to the inability of a minority to concentrate. Whilst I am not suggesting for one moment that all English lessons should be all-singing, all-dancing multi-task performances that leave pupils in an incoherent daze, when it comes to introducing the youth of today, the onus is on us as teachers to create something engaging out of what may appear as merely page after page of Victorian writing.

Even when sitting in their own seats in their normal classroom, there was still a high level of pupil engagement in group tasks and paired and shared work. Take one of the tasks that worked most successfully: it began with a starter of word association games which asked the girls (who were in mixed ability groups) to look at quotations about Scrooge and discuss the extent to which they helped the reader understand his character more clearly. After they had presented their ideas back to the class, pupils were moved into ability groups and assigned a quotation to analyse in depth thinking about how Dickens used his words to convey emotion. These different groupings meant that the pupils began in the comfort of mixed-ability discussion groups, and were then challenged by the quotations they were asked to analyse closely. There is a large amount of planning involved in preparing a task like this, but if the work is tailored to the pupils’ ability then it is accessible to them whether it is about Dickens or TOWIE.

Having an ongoing piece of work was another important part of the KS3 schemes of work, and for A Christmas Carol there were two: a series of tension graphs for each stave plotting the rising and falling tension of the novel (leading to an overall comparison of the five graphs to find the
climax of the novel) and a Ghost Comparison Table to compare the different spirits that are introduced throughout the novel. Knowing that they would have to do this work ensured that many of the girls participated simply because they had to in order to complete the tasks, but also provided a level of scaffolding for those struggling with the language and style of Dickens’ writing because they started looking and listening for key words and phrases instead of trying to understand every single word.

Understanding Dickens’ language is, I suspect, the biggest stumbling block for teachers and pupils alike. I understand completely the dread of announcing a novel that has been planned meticulously just to be met with a class full of blank faces, or worse, vocal opposition to ‘a boring old man’. However, having spent a large amount of my teaching practice trying to engage a defiant group of Year 9 pupils with The Tempest, I have fast built up a tough skin when it comes to the ‘I don’t understand it; it’s stupid’ comments. Even then I endeavoured to encourage my pupils to see the words that they were struggling with in the wider context of the story, which is why it is important to do exercises such as predictions of what might happen based on titles or covers or character’s names or details rather than get bogged down in the minutiae of what every single word means. By all means, create a glossary for some of the era-specific language that will help with scene-setting or understanding what a character physically looks like, but there is far more educational benefit for pupils working out from ‘he was a tight fisted hand at the grindstone’ or ‘a covetous old sinner’ what Scrooge was like than simply being told what a word means. I routinely sent pupils away during our study of A Christmas Carol to look words up, and even if they simply went online and looked it up and wrote down the definition word-for-word, there was still a higher chance of them remembering its meaning. From the selection of quotations they included in their end of unit essays, it was clear that pupils had no problem whatsoever with finding appropriate evidence in the novel to support their points.

From the first task of matching pictures of Victorian London to their modern counterparts to the last of using a tennis ball game to ensure that each pupil was included in their recall of the novel, I did not once encounter a child struggling because they were studying Dickens. I worked with pupils struggling with their punctuation and ones who were working on improving their handwriting. I had pupils who were still confusing their homophones and others who found it incredibly challenging to structure their terminal essays. My upper class flew with
the work whilst my lowers ploughed steadily through it but by the end of term, all had completed a study of a Dickens novel without struggling with it because it was Dickens and, on the whole, enjoyed it. How do I know? Because I made them repeat their reflection from the first homework at the end of the course, and the majority in both classes expressed their surprise at how easily they had followed the language and understood the plot. Some were very grudging in their enjoyment, but at least half of the upper set wanted to read more, and most of the lower set ‘wouldn’t have minded’ studying some more Dickens. If teachers are confident about their subject knowledge and passionate about what and how they are teaching, then there is no reason why children of any age cannot engage with a Dickens novel. I know each teacher has his own circumstances, and believe me, I am no stranger to the pressures of grades and specifications and assessment data, which is why our book fills such a niche in the market—apart from reading the actual novel over the holidays, everything else is done for you. So why not give it a go? As Mr Dickens himself once said,

The most important thing in life is to stop saying 'I wish' and start saying 'I will.' Consider nothing impossible, then treat possibilities as probabilities.  

David Copperfield

References


