Assessment of English at Key Stage 4: An Imaginative and Creative View

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An imaginative and creative view of assessment of English bespeaks imaginative and creative approaches to teaching and learning. Furthermore any assessment should be valid, not merely reliable, which is to say the assessment process should relate to what has been taught and learnt. If assessment is restricted to short, single examinations or multiple choice tests, how are students’ broader achievements to be judged? This paper highlights four key educational processes which I believe to be very important in English: attending closely; making connections; learning a craft; achieving sustainability. Separately, and together, they raise questions about what kinds of assessment might be not only reliable but valid as well.

Attending closely

In *Wildwood: A journey through trees,*\(^1\) writer and naturalist Roger Deakin recollects a particular feature of his sixth form education. Every year, the school’s biology teacher took a group of boys to camp in the same part of the New Forest. Although different students went each time, the map they ‘jointly drew and refined through gradual accretions of personal observation represented not only the complex natural ecology of the place but also an ambitious and entirely novel cooperation between several generations of sixth form botanists and zoologists’.\(^2\) Their efforts involved sustained close attention to what they observed within the foot-square frames they cast on the ground, a standard technique used by ecologists. Over a seven-year period, everything the groups discovered was logged. Thus, several generations of students gradually accrued an
extraordinarily detailed natural history of the area. Sometimes, intriguing questions arose. For example, one of the students discovered large amounts of mousetail (*Myosurus minimus*), a small, scarce member of the buttercup family. It was growing in April in the pony corrals into which, three times a year, the New Forest commoners rounded up wild ponies for auction. Why was mousetail thriving there in the spring and nowhere else nearby?

The secret, we found, lay in the heavy trampling and manuring of the ground during the pony sales. Mousetail is an annual, setting the seed in the early summer. It was later trodden in by the ponies at the sales, and germinated the following spring. The trampling of the ground destroyed the other competing plants without burying the *Myosurus* seeds too deeply, and the plant seemed to thrive in the copious manure... Here was a plant that had discovered its perfect niche. Here too was a wonderfully accidental lesson in the ways of ecology: a perfect wedding between the tiniest of the buttercup family, an ancient custom of the New Forest commoners and the wild ponies.

Deakin’s vignette shows how close and careful attention to detail, individually and collaboratively, illuminated by a spirit of inquiry, can deepen understanding. In this instance, the apparent disparity between the social, the zoological and the botanical turns out to produce a life-enhancing connection. In the study of English, what can students similarly learn from close and careful attention to detail in their own and one another’s texts? What happens when they adopt a genuine spirit of inquiry, for example about: different ways of enacting a scene from a Shakespeare play by rehearsing it themselves; the effects of their own use of poetic language on an audience; intertextual connections between texts read independently and in school? And what are the implications for us as English teachers practising our profession and assessing students’ learning? We would need systems of assessment which allow for individual and collaborative exploration. Past experience shows that teacher assessment and coursework offer reliable and valid options.

**Making connections**

In *The Rise and Fall of English*, Robert Scholes outlines his collaboration with a group of teachers in the United States to develop a capstone English course for school leavers:
A capstone course in English should enable students to use all they have learned in their previous years of study, and it should help them to realize how that learning connects to the lives they hope to live. The goal of such a course should be for all students to attain the highest degree of literacy that they can.

The word ‘connects’ is crucial. For Scholes, literacy involves textual power, using knowledge about how texts are produced to inform how they are read and vice versa. A capstone course, whether students are planning to study English further or not, should be a rich, interconnected culmination of their learning to date. As students progress through their schooling, the potential for them to make such connections should be ever-expanding. Not only will they be exploring the relationships between the texts they read and produce in the present, but they will be strengthening their textual power for use in the future, based on how those texts relate to what they have read in the past. Textual power at GCSE is thus a continually growing web, looking ahead to future prospects but securely crafted from all textual experiences that have gone before. How might we assess this dynamic web? Assessment systems need to be suitably complex in order to be reliable and valid. Such systems might include teacher assessment and coursework, but also open-ended, interconnected examination opportunities such as have, in the past, been offered at post-16 by the Advanced Extension Award, for example, or are currently offered within the International Baccalaureate, opportunities which encourage independent learning or research as well as collaborative endeavour.

Learning a craft

Richard Sennett, in The Craftsman, argues the vital importance of developing skills as part of mastering a craft. The development of skills requires repetition and practice, but remains of limited value if merely undertaken as a means to a fixed end since the person in training will meet a fixed target but won’t progress further. On the contrary, the acquisition of skills, through close attention, practice and repetition, should enable people to feel confident about seeking out and solving problems beyond any narrow confines. Scholes, in The Crafty Reader, concurs. He argues that both reading and writing should be learnt as crafts not just art forms and, moreover, that they should connect
literature with life. In the past, a gap has been forced between, for example, poems and their subject matter if poetry has been admired as art but not connected with reality:

It is this gap that must be bridged if poetry is to resume its proper place in our culture and our schools. And I am suggesting that it is helpful to think of it as a gap between an art of reading that has turned itself into a technology and a craft of reading that should resist this process because it expects readers to read as different individuals and admits that poems, like other texts, may both please and persuade—that they may be for use and not merely for contemplation.  

Learning and practising the interconnected crafts of reading and writing should, therefore, continue to be overarching aims for students of English.

**Achieving sustainability**

Scholes's ideas about connections and textual power are interesting when brought into conjunction with the concept of sustainability. One of the key premises of sustainability is that learners should define what is meant by it for themselves, not merely be told what it might mean. Developing textual power in English is analogous to developing sustainable literacy. As Arran Stibbe suggests, it requires:

an understanding of the role that language and literature play in the construction of social, economic, cultural and religious systems, and the impact of these systems on the larger systems which support life.

Likewise, we need an assessment system that allows students at the end of their formal schooling to demonstrate their understanding of how English as a discipline interconnects with other disciplines. Therefore, they need and deserve educational experiences in English that bring the above processes together—for teaching and assessment—in ways which can genuinely be described as sustainable.
References