‘The Land of Lost Content?’ A Teacher’s View of the Return to Linear A Levels

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I’ve called this session ‘The Land of Lost Content’, with an obvious allusion to A.E. Housman, but I want to begin with a story about a completely different poet. It’s an anecdote about what I want to call a Perfect Teaching Moment. My Year 13 students are studying Gerard Manley Hopkins. They’ve been drawing contrasts between the sonnets he wrote in a state of utter despair during his years in Dublin, and the beautiful celebrations of nature that were inspired by his years at theological college in North Wales. As part of this, we’ve looking at ‘Pied Beauty’. When they first read this, the students were struck by two lines in particular. One was that wonderful description of conkers straight out of the shell—‘fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls’—and I have to say that at a time when we’re constantly reminded of the cynical short-termism of today’s teenagers, it does gladden my heart that students can still get excited about the way a Jesuit priest described conkers nearly a hundred and fifty years ago. The other was the line in which Hopkins encompasses everything out of the ordinary—‘all things counter, original, spare, strange’. The students tried to reconcile their image of the guilt-ridden Catholic priest with a line that can be interpreted as a celebration of diversity and acceptance. This is, of course, particularly poignant given what we know of Hopkins’ own life, and his struggle against self-doubt. One student said that if Hopkins were alive today, in a more tolerant society, she’d like to picture him standing in a clearing in a forest, gazing up at the sky and spinning around until he was dizzy for the sheer joy of being alive. It was one of those moments that make everyone stop and
go quiet—a vision of a Hopkins who finally felt that he had a right to be himself.

The reason I’m telling this story is partly because it’s the kind of moment we store up to keep ourselves going—to refer to yet another poet, one of those fragments that we shore against our ruins. It’s also the kind of moment that, bizarrely, we sometimes feel guilty about. I don’t know about you, but I sometimes find myself teaching with an imaginary Ofsted inspector lurking over my shoulder like some kind of monstrous superego, saying, well, that was all very nice, Dr Atherton, but how could you evidence that all students were making the expected progress in that lesson? Where was your AfL? Why didn’t you build in any references to the assessment criteria?

I’ve been teaching for long enough now to know that of course, moments like these have a value all of their own—that they’re evidence of an engagement with literature that can’t be measured by mark schemes or performance indicators. But the wider point that I’m trying to make is that in the current educational climate, this kind of moment seems to have to fight for the right to exist. In many ways, it seems to belong to a ‘golden age’ of A level that exists in the collective subconscious of English teachers. In this golden age, A level classes were made up of small groups of enthusiastic students. They’d all made a positive choice to study English Literature. There was none of the drive for numbers that takes place nowadays—when students are steered towards subjects that they’re not necessarily suited to in order to allow them to stay on in the Sixth Form (this steering itself being guided, of course, by the fact that more students equal more funding). These students all read widely, without being prompted, and arrived at lessons bright-eyed and keen to share their ideas. As teachers we had time to explore texts and foster long-term intellectual growth, helping students to find and develop their critical voices. Sometimes (and this seems now like a real luxury) we even had time to explore texts that students weren’t going to be examined on. We didn’t have to worry about league tables, RAISE Online, the Fischer Family Trust, or any of those other tools for measuring institutional performance that dominate today’s educational landscape. Our teaching focused on books, not on mark schemes and examiners’ reports: I heard of one teacher recently who refers to himself as teaching ‘A Level Assessment Objective Studies (English Literature)’. To borrow an analogy from food, this was slow teaching. It was wholesome and enriching—
emphatically not a short-term sugar rush designed only to keep students going until the next lot of exams.

The end of all this—the end of the innocence, if you like—happened, of course, with the introduction of Curriculum 2000. Everything changed with the dawning of the new millennium, like a bad example of pathetic fallacy. We acquired a whole new vocabulary: exam boards were replaced by ‘awarding bodies’, and syllabuses were replaced by ‘specifications’, a word with dangerously mechanistic overtones. It wasn’t long before there was talk of ‘teaching to the test’, and dark mutterings about the emergence of a resit culture. These misgivings, it seemed, were not without foundation. In 2003, Ann Hodgson and Ken Spours of the Institute of Education voiced the feelings of many when they said that Curriculum 2000 offered ‘a tedious and uninspiring curriculum that encourages instrumentalism and game-playing to maximise qualification outcome rather than experimentation, creativity and preparation for lifelong learning’.¹ It seemed clear that whatever changes the new curriculum had brought about, they were certainly not positive ones.

Of course, this is all a highly simplistic narrative. If I think back to my own A level studies, back in the early 1990s, I do remember a huge sense of freedom at having a whole two years in which to read and explore. I read very widely, in a way that I probably wouldn’t have had the chance to do if I’d always been focused on the next set of exams. I remember lessons in which we spent a lot of time just talking about what we were reading—sharing enthusiasms and passing on recommendations. There was a genuine sense of privilege at having the chance to grow up intellectually and find out what I was interested in. But I don’t think for a moment that everything was perfect before Curriculum 2000. The old linear A level had a number of shortcomings. It relied very heavily on a Leavisian mode of literary study that produced a version of the subject that Robert Eaglestone has described as having been ‘pickled in educational aspic for far too long’.² Literature was supposed, unproblematically, to be an improving force. (It was quite telling, for instance, that we didn’t write analyses of texts, we wrote ‘appreciations’: our role was to show our understanding of the author’s genius). Sean McEvoy has said that this mode of study relied far too heavily on what he describes as ‘the unexamined personal response’,² but I’d modify this—if anything, it relied on students working out what kind of personal response they were supposed to have; on internalising the values of what, for many, was a very different culture. There was no formal recognition of the ways in
which meanings are created, or the ways in which they are shaped by our own historical and cultural situations. The subject hovered dangerously on the edge of what Catherine Beavis has referred to as ‘lovely literature’—a sense that reading great books was an unproblematic route to having a better life, being a better person. For some students, however, it wasn’t lovely at all: it had the potential to be deeply alienating. It was also, crucially, becoming increasingly divorced from the ways in which English was being studied in higher education. I’d argue that for all its failings, one of the most important things that Curriculum 2000 did do was to make a space for the exploration of the contexts in which texts are written and read. It began to engage teenagers in analysing the place of literature in the world and the values with which literature is often bound up—values that students often felt they had to assent to in order to be ‘proper’ students of literature. For many of our students—and indeed many teachers—this has been an enormously empowering experience.

Nevertheless, the land of lost content is a powerful image; and in the eyes of many people, the shift back to linear A levels will take us back very unproblematically to the blue remembered hills of the end of the twentieth century. The arguments in favour of a linear system have been very clear. We’re told that a move back to linear qualifications will allow for the development of the kind of intellectual maturity that’s been hampered by the assessment-bound regime of the last thirteen years. The schools minister Liz Truss has argued that ‘Pupils spend too much time thinking about exams and re-sits of exams that encourage a “learn and forget” approach to studying’. Kevin Stannard of the Girls’ Day School Trust has said that ‘The educational advantages of linearity and of learning within a coherent continuous two year course are clear, and will be seized on by schools like ours that seek to put teaching above testing’. And in January 2013, in a letter to Glenys Stacey in which he sets out his vision of A level reform, Michael Gove stated that ‘the modular nature of [current A levels] and repeated assessment windows have contributed to students not developing deep understanding of the necessary skills to make connections between topics...Moving to a linear A level assessed at the end of two years...will allow students to develop a better understanding of their subject through the greater maturity that will be developed over two years of study’.

I don’t think any of us would claim that the current system is perfect. There’s a lot that’s wrong with A level as it stands—a lot that needs to be
addressed if our students are going to have the opportunity for two years of genuine intellectual growth. What I want to do is to offer a note of caution—to argue that so much has changed in the world of post-16 education that we can’t assume that this will all be achieved by a linear system alone. I’m going to examine some of the conflicting demands that are placed on A level, from my perspective as a secondary school teacher. I teach both English Literature and English Language at A level. I also have a pastoral role as a sixth form tutor, something I’ve done now for the past fourteen years, and I mention this because it’s given me a very different sense of the journey students make through the 16-18 phase. I see young people who are genuinely engaged in their A level studies—who do read widely and strive to make connections between different areas of their learning. Their experience is certainly not of the undignified lurch from one set of exams to another that the politicians would have us believe in. Many of our students go on to read English in some capacity at university, whether that’s English Literature, Linguistics, or, in one case, Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic. Happily, a number of our students have now gone on to boost the ranks of the next generation of English teachers, so we must be getting something right.

I should say, at this point, that much of what I’m going to talk about will focus on progression to higher education. I know, of course, that most A level English students don’t go on to do English at university, and that many of them won’t go on to university at all. But one of the main drivers for the change to linear A levels has been progression to degree level study, so I do think it’s worth dwelling on. It’s probably worth saying, though, that when we talk about preparing students for higher education we’re talking partly about inculcating attitudes and behaviours that are important whatever students go on to do.

A key document that I’m going to refer to is an Ipsos-MORI research paper published in April 2012, titled *Fit for Purpose? The view of the HE sector, teachers and employers on the suitability of A levels.* It’s not the most attention-grabbing of titles, but it is worth a read, because it’s one of those rare publications that makes you feel that somebody actually understands. You know that Alan Bennett quotation from *The History Boys*, about those moments in reading when it feels as if a hand has come out and taken yours? I actually had one of those while I was reading this Ipsos-MORI report. This probably says a lot about how beleaguered the average A level teacher feels. What this report does is to explore the tensions that surround A level as a result of the multiple roles that it has
to play. I’m going to argue that these tensions, and their impact on teachers and students, need to be understood as a matter of urgency if the shift to linear A levels is to achieve its desired aim.

The first of these tensions concerns the role A level plays in both preparing students for higher education and acting as the main method by which they are selected for higher education. A level is, of course, about intellectual development, not just in terms of subject knowledge but also in terms of a more general set of skills: critical thinking, problem solving, persistence, flexibility, independence. In short, A level gives students the knowledge and skills that they need in order to progress to further study. Over the years, the expansion of higher education has meant that the results of these exams have become more and more important. Because of this, there’s huge pressure to achieve particular grades. I think many of will have noticed that entry to degree courses in English has become more and more competitive. The kinds of courses that wanted two Bs and a C when I applied to university in 1990 now want three As. Our highest achievers, applying to the most highly selective universities, often find themselves receiving a string of rejections—without necessarily knowing what more they could have done in order to be accepted. So there’s pressure to get the grades. And here we can see that there’s a tension between these two important roles A level has to play—between preparing students for higher education and selecting them for higher education—and this tension has dominated a lot of discussions about transition from A level to university that have taken place over the past decade or so. Many of us will have had conversations with academics who are dissatisfied with the quality of their first-year undergraduates. We’ve probably all heard complaints that students these days aren’t ready for the demands of degree level study, that they can’t work independently—and often these complaints are about students who’ve achieved very impressive A level results. We’re told that students arrive at university too dependent on receiving detailed feedback as to how they can improve—although giving this feedback to students preparing for important exams is a vital part of our role as teachers. The problem, of course, is that while we’d all like A level to be about intellectual development, we reach a crunch point where students have to get the grades, and where they want to be told what they need to do in order to get those grades because their places at university depend on them.
It’s easy to think of how this tension plays itself out in practice. We can probably all think of students who are very diligent and good at absorbing what they need to do—students who almost seem to have internalised the Assessment Objectives—but who don’t necessarily show a genuine aptitude for the subject, a love of learning for its own sake. Equally, we can probably all think of students who do show this kind of thirst for literature—but who sometimes come unstuck in an exam because they approach a question from a slightly different angle, or try to do something off-the-wall. As you might expect, this is a particular problem for students who need to make it over that difficult hurdle that separates an A and an A*. One point that’s highlighted by the Ipsos-MORI report is the fact that the A*, a grade introduced to enable finer distinctions to be made at the top of the ability range, is of little use in Arts and Humanities subjects in distinguishing between those who are genuinely able and those who are simply good at doing as they’re told—between those who take creative risks and those who are proficient but conservative. (As a side note, the report points out that there’s much greater confidence in the boundary between A and A* in STEM subjects—and that’s something that schools need to be aware of when they’re comparing the performance of individual departments). The irony, of course, is that it’s often the risk-takers who go on to have absolutely stellar careers at university. I remember one student who went on to get one of the highest Firsts in his year at Oxford. In terms of UMS points, however, his performance at A level was nothing special. This was before the introduction of the A*, and it’s probably a good job, because if he’d been doing his A levels today, he wouldn’t have passed the threshold to get an A*. He was, however, one of the most voracious readers I’ve ever met—the kind of student who loves the process of intellectual debate purely for his own sake. He did get a distinction in the Advanced Extension Exam, which many of us will remember very fondly as an exam that did genuinely test the most able students in a way that encouraged creativity and synopticity—and, moreover, didn’t require students to memorise the Assessment Objectives.

So there’s a clash, then, between the long-term and the short-term: the need to prepare students for the challenges of higher education whilst also making sure that they jump the hurdles they need to clear in order to secure their places. And it would be easy to say that if they’re not prepared for the long-term challenges—if they don’t have the kind of aptitude they need to cope with degree level study—then we shouldn’t
drill them to get the grades. But there’s another factor that comes into play: the fact that A level results aren’t just used as a measure of student performance. They’re also used as an indicator of institutional performance—and by extension, that means the performance of individual departments and individual teachers. In this day and age, the infrastructure that’s used to measure this performance often seems to dominate everything we do. There’s a lot of lost sleep each year when the results days in August come around. Many of us will have had the experience of having to explain why particular students haven’t met their target grades; and that’s particularly frustrating given that these target grades are based on relatively crude statistical predictors that don’t take account of the unpredictability of the teenage mind. Many of us will also probably have experienced those crunch points when we realise we’re going to have to sacrifice a point of principle to the demands of the mark scheme—when we have to focus on training students to pass exams, rather than on fostering the broader intellectual development and enthusiasm for learning that we’d all much rather focus on.

I’m going to give a concrete instance of how this emphasis on the demands of assessment narrows our teaching—how it has a direct impact on the choices we make in the classroom. One particularly unwelcome side-effect of Curriculum 2000 was the rise of the endorsed textbook, linked to particular specifications and often edited by senior examiners. I don’t know about you, but I don’t teach from textbooks—it goes against the grain in English Literature—but there’s often an immense pressure to use them. There’s that fear, isn’t there, that no matter how well you know your subject, you might just miss some nugget of information that’s then mentioned in the Examiners’ Report as being the vital thing that students needed to include, or that a particular concept is being interpreted in a slightly different but very specific way. For less experienced or less confident teachers, these publications can offer a support; and they are often suggested as a first course of action by helpful LT members when schools have a disappointing set of results. But they can also be a straitjacket, contributing to the deskilling of teachers and the narrowing of student responses. An over-reliance on textbooks can mean that students derive their understanding of particular concepts entirely from one particular source—and textbooks sometimes handle sophisticated concepts in a way that’s very reductive, or at best very partial. You’re then faced with a conflict—should you drill the students in the simplistic way that the board seems to want, or maintain a sense of
intellectual integrity? What if your intellectual integrity risks them losing marks? It’s very simple: the greater the emphasis that’s placed on results, the more we feel we have to drill students in what they need to do in order to get these results.

So we have a number of complications caused by the different roles that A level is expected to play. And there’s a further complication brought about by the fact that English Literature in particular has suffered from the vagaries of the examination system—from assessment that seems notoriously unreliable. It seems that everyone has some kind of horror story to tell about A level grades, when individual students and sometimes whole cohorts get disastrous marks that just aren’t borne out by the way they performed throughout the course. The worst example we had at my school was an AS level student who was predicted an A but came out with a low D. We got her script back from the board and the examiner’s comments bore no relation whatsoever to what she’d actually written. When her paper was re-marked, her mark on one question went up from 6 out of 48 to 22 out of 48. Her mark for the whole paper was increased by 176%. What was particularly alarming was that the comments made by the second examiner directly contradicted those made by the first. This kind of discrepancy is horrifying. If there’s one message I’d like people who aren’t actually involved in the day-to-day teaching of A level English to take away from this talk it’s that it’s actually really scary to be caught up in a system that places so much emphasis on grades that are so unreliable. The whole mechanism we have for deeming students worthy of places at university and for judging the performance of individual schools and individual departments rests on an assumption that grades can be trusted. I think English teachers’ faith in that assumption has been tested to the absolute limit over the years.

I’m going to go back to the shift back to linear A levels now. I think it’s significant that even though A levels are pulled in so many different directions, having to serve so many functions, the shift to linear A levels has been dominated by the rhetoric of personal and intellectual growth. We hear about ‘maturity’, about ‘deep understanding’, about opportunities for ‘a less prescriptive and more coherent style of teaching’, about ‘greater freedom to be creative’. If this was all that A levels had to do, then the shift to linear courses would be less problematic. I’d love the chance for greater freedom; to be able to engage my students in a more searching exploration of literature and its place in the world. I’d love not to have to make so many compromises—to teach without the constant
looming presence of mark schemes and targets. But, of course, it’s not all that A levels have to do; and my fear is that the need to play all these different roles will be all the more challenging when it takes place over a two-year course with high-stakes assessment taking place only at the end.

In the midst of all this it might be worth reminding ourselves of the role that’s actually played by AS levels. I’m going to highlight three important functions of AS level here. One is that it provides a staging-post halfway through A level that gives students the chance to check how they’re doing. Another is that it allows students to try out a subject without having to commit themselves to it for a whole two-year course. The third, related to this, is that it means that students who decide that a subject is not for them do at least have something to show for a year of study. These are all important functions, especially when we’re dealing with large numbers of students and a varying range of abilities.

The challenge that we face, then, is of how to balance all these differing demands. There’ll be the difficulty of managing a programme of study that lasts for two years—and it’s worth mentioning here that English teachers who did their own A levels after 2000, in other words the vast majority of English teachers under 30, will not have experienced this kind of system themselves—their experience will be of AS and A2, not of linear courses. There’ll be the need to handle the conflict between being given the apparent licence, on the one hand, to be less prescriptive and more creative—yet still knowing on the other hand that grades are important, that they’re the basis on which we and our students are judged, and that there will still be a need, at some level and in some form, to ‘teach to the test’. (With, of course, the additional difficulty that this test might be over a year away.) There’ll be all manner of questions as to how we cope with linear A levels alongside a decoupled AS level course. How will students know, at the age of 16, which subjects they want to study for two years, and which they want to give up after a year? What if they get it wrong—will they be able to progress from the decoupled AS level to the second year of a linear A level? (At the moment, of course, we just don’t know.) In the first few years of the linear courses, how are we going to manage the conflicting demands placed on students of doing some subjects that are linear and some that are still modular? And how on earth are we going to manage all of this at the same time as dealing with major changes in English Language and English Literature at GCSE?
There are lots of questions, then—and at the moment, of course, all of these questions are being asked in a bit of a vacuum, because we don’t know anything about what the new courses will look like. We don’t know what form assessment will take, what the assessment objectives will be, or how much genuine scope there will be for freedom of choice. It’s less of a land of lost content and more of a journey into the unknown.

I really hope that we, as a profession, can make our way through this—that we can get to the other side safely. I hope we can make the new A levels genuinely stimulating and challenging for our students, that they are an opportunity to grow, to learn, to discover. I’d love it if, at some point, somebody would listen to teachers when we talk about how dispiriting it is to be caught in a system that puts so much pressure on what we do, that dominates what goes on in our classrooms and judges us and our students by methods that are so unreliable. Maybe, in a few years’ time, we’ll find that all of this has actually happened—that things are so much better than we could ever have hoped, that we’ve entered a new Golden Age of A level. But the next few years are going to be tough—and rather than harking back to the past, we need to be realistic about the difficulties we face.

References