Reclaiming Our Pedagogical Territory

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Last summer, inspired by a learning day on multi-modal texts,¹ I ignored my scheme of work and experimented with a year 9 project. I placed students in differentiated groups and gave them sections of ‘The Ancient Mariner’, Blake’s ‘London’, Ralph McTell’s ‘Streets of London’ and ‘Kubla Khan’. They recorded their speech as they discussed and interpreted their sections, then produced and presented their own multi-modal versions. The sound effect of a dripping tap for ‘nor any drop to drink...’ was amazingly powerful.

It was revealing to take their learning further by getting the groups to analyse their discourse using some spoken language terminology. Unintentionally I had left some of Lakoff''s theory on the handout. They applied that as well! The most rewarding moment for them and for me was the final discussion groups huddled over their recordings and transcripts. One student who found it difficult to sustain a line of argument in a literature essay was surprisingly concerted in her thinking, referring naturally and in detail to what was in the shared discourse. She applied skills of selection, structuring and synthesis—because the context and process meant something to her. Some realised that what they had seen as interruptions were actually affirmations. Others explored the way that keeping face and not threatening another’s face was of prime importance to them. Because I work in a single sex school, there was a lot of speculation based on Lakoff about how boys would work together.

According to the draft consultation,² I would be ‘compliant’ by teaching Romantic poetry and getting students to discuss spoken language with precise and confident use of linguistic terminology. But how could I have done anything so rash as to hand over whole lessons to students and, worse still, publicise it? (Have I got an early-retirement wish?) These days...
the collective nightmare is the inspection looming round every corner: could I be certain of producing obvious progression of learning within the fabled ‘twenty minute’ slot that might be all the time an inspector spends in my room?

In this climate, disastrous inspections are kept at bay only by schemes of work microscopically detailed to fend off any criticism. We are regularly kept on our toes by in-house observations. There must be a ‘winning formula’ that should keep us safe by enabling us to deliver results that improve year on year.

Except that this year it didn’t—and the tracking devices that used to be fed by regular modules won’t have anything to feed them when assessment goes terminal. The English GCSE débâcle has compromised the credibility of GCSEs; and even though the Secretary of State for Education has had to abandon the name ‘EBCs’, most of his stringent proposals will still go ahead.

By contrast, the introduction in 1986 of GCSE was a remarkable innovation and changed the pedagogical landscape radically with its emphasis on criteria-related assessment. The 100% coursework models provided considerable freedom. Teachers set questions; they chose texts; they assessed and moderated; and they met in local consortia to discuss, absorb and apply the new descriptors for each grade. Grade Review took place at exam board headquarters, where serving teachers would work in pairs to review samples and pass judgement.

With teachers working in partnership, and genuinely sharing responsibility for assessment, not only was their subject expertise increased, but the outcomes were more likely to be fair and accurate. This was the defining moment of my career, when I was more autonomous as a professional than I would ever be again.

And, as Joni Mitchell sang in ‘Big Yellow Taxi’: You don’t know what you’ve got till it’s gone!

Where did it all go so wrong?

In his topical article, ‘Reclaiming English’, Geoff Barton blames our lack of consensus for the disempowering of teachers:

If we don’t know what we think English is for, then we leave the way open for others to seize the territory and reshape it in ways that may be unrecognisable from the subject we love. Zealots or technocrats will fill the vacuum.
Personally, I have no problem with our subject being a broad church. I relished every minute of the English 21 debate: never had our subject seemed so alive. For me, the debate’s the thing; which is why the way in which we currently organise and assess our subject—the technocrats have already got there!—is such an unhealthy contrast to the mind-opening, life-enhancing experience that I want English to be.

I am not so sure we have the ability to seize back control of our territory when I examine the correspondence between Glenys Stacey (Head of Ofqual) and Michael Gove—or rather Ofqual’s side of it. Reading between the lines (a very helpful English skill) we can sense that there is a formidable ‘shopping-list’ for the reformed qualifications, which should:

- provide a good, internationally respected curriculum and assessment for the whole ability range to stretch the top end, and engage those of lower ability, develop the skills and knowledge needed for employment and further study, encourage higher quality teaching, and provide a signal of achievement to employers, colleges and universities...to provide reliable data for accountability purposes, be immune to distortion from accountability pressures, enable standards to be maintained year on year, be deliverable safely and reliably to the whole cohort...

The problem of conflicting uses of English is partly recognised. But the inherent contradiction—the idea that a qualification can provide data for accountability purposes yet be immune to distortion from accountability pressures—seems not to be.

It shows a lack of understanding of the consequences of a qualification that should sit at the centre of the secondary accountability system.

Politics and accountability would appear to override the intrinsic qualities of English, and seem very distant from the daily experience of most students. Most tellingly, Glenys Stacey continues: ‘our advice is there are no precedents that show a single assessment could successfully fulfil all these purposes’.

It is a great shame that this advice was not heeded over twenty-five years ago when the whole process of assessment became a benchmarking exercise in four key stages (in the language of the then Education
Secretary, Kenneth Baker). Since then we have moved from educational syllabuses to ‘specifications’. The terminology of precision engineering should have been an early warning of the micro-management to come—the increasing direction from government and its quangos in a quest for predictable regulated outcomes time after time.

What is so uncomfortable for those at the macro-level is having to acknowledge that political and organisational ends do not fit into real teaching and learning—or vice versa. English teachers, of course, know how very rarely our subject can be neatly channelled. We may feel wry amusement when we read Glenys Stacey’s warning:

> If qualifications (and by implication curriculum and teaching) are limited only to those things that can securely form the basis of good accountability measures, the classroom experience is likely to be more limited than you would wish.\(^7\)

Or we may be bracing ourselves for new English examinations containing even shorter questions and more fragmented mark schemes so that the curriculum can be reliably calibrated to ensure politically and organisationally desirable ends: students fitted into a clear rank order and teachers’ performance-related pay calculated.

Mechanisation of the marking process has already set in: more and more papers are marked on-line, answers have to fit into a box—even in AS Level English Literature (Section A Edexcel), and in AQA English Language GCSE from 2010. The structure has to suit the convenience of IT.

Straitjacketing human teaching and learning, with all its exciting varieties, into technological pathways, divided into chunks to suit a statistical and political purpose rather than an academic one, can only be dysfunctional. The blurb of Professor David Jardine’s fascinating work, *Pedagogy left in Peace* encapsulates it: ‘The idea of fragmentation has transformed the living, convivial pursuit of knowledge into something akin to an industrial assembly line.’\(^8\)

How else than by the *assembly line* analogy do we categorise the way AQA English Language GCSE units are constructed and their impact on teachers and students? I cannot have been the only teacher in the land finding my lesson starter hi-jacked by anxious questioning about which sub component of which unit we were on, how many marks it was worth
and how that fitted into the whole total. At the time, I dismissed this as over-fussy, but now I understand. The search for coherence is very necessary for students and teachers as we try to make sense of the processes that direct and bind us. But what a distraction from the business of learning!

English Language Unit 3 (CA) is the most bitty structure I have ever encountered: Unit 3a out of 30; Unit 3b has two creative writing pieces each marked out of 10 with a mark out of 10 for accuracy and structure across both pieces; Unit 3c out of 15. The devil is certainly in the detail! Compare this with the first marking of GCSE in the mid-'80s, where scripts were placed within clearly identifiable grades, and we see that for controlled assessment, there is an intention to keep the final boundaries from teachers for fear they will manipulate results. (That is for the statisticians to do.) It is a strange contradiction, therefore, that teachers are expected to predict grades for units. Never has a crystal ball been more necessary!

The use of a more holistic, generic mark scheme, such as the one used for the IGCSE English Literature offered by Cambridge International Examinations, makes it easier to compare judgements across questions. Nor am I sure that it relies any more heavily on the expertise of the marker than the AQA GCSE papers. What it does though is speed up the marking and treats the marker as a professional whose judgement counts. Anyone who marks papers 1 or 4 will have decided 75% of the final mark. By contrast, the process of ‘fragmentation’ is made worse in papers where individual questions are marked on-screen by separate markers. This means that markers do not get to see the ‘whole’ candidate—just a few of their disembodied skills.

In my department there are differences between teachers. That is a normal and very healthy state of affairs and I believe our combined judgements are the stronger for it: certainly our GCSE marks have never been disputed. There was something more human and democratic in the 1980s consensual structure than in the fragmented processes of today, which treat teachers as potential cheats, and consequently de-skill them.

Many problems arise from the subjective nature of English, which cannot be completely subdued by even the most technological and industrial of assessment regimes. As Glenys Stacey recognises: Good marking of unstructured essay questions is quite subjective and can never be entirely captured in structured mark schemes.
This subjectivity in itself need not be so disastrous were it not for the weight of accountability measures. Along with the recognition that English is very different from sciences and mathematics there needs to come a greater investment in time for marking and stronger supervision in face-to-face meetings. This is where English teachers can re-claim their pedagogical territory by challenging the current marking-on-the-cheap. Inaccuracy is not inevitable. Nor should we sign up for brief answer qualifications that will be techno-convenient but not invite complex argument.

Michael Wilshaw expresses concern that in the classroom HMIs ‘don’t see enough extended reading and extended writing.’ Indeed the new framework document includes just such a requirement to write accurately, fluently and at length at KS3. Our students need to learn skills of extended research and essay-writing, otherwise they will not be well-prepared for university, report writing and business communications. The clearest indication that the current curriculum does not work is that university departments appoint writing Fellows to teach fundamental writing skills.

However, if schools are to take the Chief Inspector’s advice then inspections have to adapt to 21st century needs. Extended reading and writing require more open lesson structures in schools. Ofqual and ISI need English specialists to assess more than twenty-minute ‘niblets’. The inspection process should suit the needs of the students and the subject: for too long pedagogy has had to be shaped to the economies of our inspection system.

And even if we combine to produce more flexible, long-term thinkers, can their achievements be accommodated within the final grades? We are subject not just to government and regulatory pressures, but also to the unpredictable effect of market forces.

Is it a coincidence that, in the same year as rising university fees, some HE provision shrinking and the government allocating extra places to ‘top universities’ for the top-performing students, both A-Level and GCSE results fell? A-Level A/A* grades went down by 0.4% from 27% to 26.6%; in GCSE the percentage of A* grades fell by 0.5%? In boom-times, when universities were expanding, results were seen to go up; we now operate under contracting market conditions. So, when Glenys Stacey wants to ‘enable standards to be maintained year on year, be deliverable safely and reliably to the whole cohort’, should we and she understand that
this laudable aim is qualified by the distribution of Higher Education places?

Michael Gove has indicated that we should expect more pupils to ‘fail’ exams. If we stay with the government-approved package, we will always be as subject to external pressures as we are to the intrinsic difficulty of accurately assessing our subjective discipline.

There is no sign of a change at the top. Too much political capital has been invested simply in bringing about the rapid and wholesale reform of existing qualifications. These shifts are based on no conclusive evidence of structures in themselves raising standards, but a rather blind faith that a system will work whatever the circumstances. As Professor Jardine shows:

Such systems are bent on the belief that if we only select the right standardised procedures, enacted the right institutional structures, get the right funding, forms and assessment regimes, and so on, teachers’ and students’ futures will be finally secured and assured and peace will reign.  

So what can we do?

So far in this article I have considered the effects and causes of the industrialisation of education, especially the confinement of teachers and learners within centrally-induced fragmentation of curriculum, assessment and planning. The coercive instruments of funding and inspection embed teachers more deeply into this rather arid mindset, and it is not at all surprising that there is so much dependence on websites such as Teachit and TES resources, endorsed textbooks and exam board electronic materials.

We might prepare for changes by making our year 9 schemes all the more prescriptive in preparation for the skills and sub-skills packaged into the re-written GCSEs. Some departments are very adept at doing just this to smooth the transition. Utilitarianism is still in the ascendency so functional skills will be strengthened.

With 100% terminal examination Year 9 and year 10 summer examinations could become the order of the day in all schools, preparing students for the structure as well as the course content. We can be assured that we are then compliant and any inspection regime will see an obvious link between key stages 3 and 4.
Alternatively, at the moment, maintained schools can take an approved CIE IGCSE. This still allows for coursework and the internal assessment of speaking and listening. Many have already taken this route and have been very satisfied as they have embraced old freedoms; but others express understandable nervousness in case at any point the government or Ofqual pull the plug.

However, simply seeking escape in another syllabus, such as IGCSE, will not re-capture relevance and autonomy if all we do is depend too heavily on exam board schemes of work and endorsed textbooks that can lead to a closed system whereby we teach and are tested on examiners’ digest of the content of specifications. Planning too closely round the specifics of a new examination only lasts the lifetime of that qualification.

IGCSE is a curriculum with more spaces which can initially feel daunting so planning for key stages 3 and 4 has to be about allowing students to fill the gaps, and all of us coping with the insecurity that sharing control brings. So far my students don’t seem as dependent on my delivery as they used to be; and they itch to get into discussion groups to explore their texts. I see great virtue in layering tasks and involving students in the evaluation of their learning processes and results through a variety of methods. My colleagues initiate ideas and share material; they are inspirational!

We cannot re-capture the autonomy of 100% coursework, but we do not have to chain ourselves to the over-prescriptive. That way madness lies—or at least mine does!

I would argue that the mind-forged manacles are not wholly the making of our managers and politicians, but are also self-imposed. We have our own ideology to challenge: how we see our subject, our relationship with our students and our mediation between the two. The cost of a centrally-dominated, assessment-led modular curriculum has been far too high. It is worth remembering that our students should be learning for life, not just for exams. Much of what we teach may not reach maturity until many years later, when the collaborative experience of learning may be just as important as the content.

What do I think English is about? On the evidence of this article, it is about people more than procedures, debate not dogma, and enhancing personal relevance for both teachers and students. We always operate within uncertainties. Rather than retreating into a shell of restricting detail, we should experiment. Our planning needs contingencies because contexts change—and governments change their minds. We may struggle
for consensus about the content; but we should all aim to re-humanise the current assembly-line processes and thus re-capture our professionalism.

References

1. GDST Training Day for Heads of English May 2012 including Multi-modal presentation by Dr Ruth Page (University of Leicester).
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
9. AQA GCSE Specifications for English Language and English Literature 2010 onwards.
10. CIE IGCSE Syllabuses English First Language and English First Language Literature and First Language English, First Language (UK), English – Literature (UK).