Reclaiming English

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One hot day in July last year, I found myself on the guest-list for a meeting that would inaugurate the latest review of the National Curriculum for English. It wasn't held at Sanctuary Buildings — home of the Department for Education, with its layers of tumbling foliage and hushed tones of earnestness. Instead it was at an obscure backstreet outpost, a space seemingly used for commercial conferences and meetings, and here we gathered—a motley crew of people who had never met each other and weren’t sure in advance who might be there. It was a bit like an Agatha Christie house-party without the house or indeed the party.

And, I have to say, it wasn’t an especially uplifting occasion.

The gathering—led by Tim Oates, the assessment guru charged with driving the curriculum review—consisted of academics, consultants, and (in my case) humble teachers. All of us make our living, in one way or another, by writing or talking about as well as teaching English.

After a presentation which painted the now-familiar but nevertheless gloomy picture of how the UK education system performs poorly when measured against the international big boys, we were put into groups to talk about English.

And this was the bit that depressed me.

It wasn’t the underlying sense of political gamesmanship. Michael Gove, Nick Gibb, and the rarely-sighted Sarah Teather—the top team at the Department—wish to reshape what is taught in England’s schools. They want the English curriculum specifically to reflect what Mr Gove describes as ‘the best that has been thought and said’ through the ages.

And many will feel furious about one aspect of this. How dare politicians meddle and tinker with what happens in the nation’s classrooms, and who do they think they are wanting to define what should be taught?

But my complaint isn’t that we have a Government on a mission to redefine the National Curriculum for English. Politics is an egotistical
business in which careers quickly flush and fade; we shouldn’t therefore
be too surprised that politicians are in a hurry, wishing to visibly smear
their fingerprints across the national trophy-cabinet of education. It’s
what happens, and whether through a national curriculum, or through
defining what will be inspected by Ofsted or through setting the
boundaries of what examinations will cover, someone somewhere has
always shaped the curriculum of our nation’s classrooms, either overtly or
covertly.

So I’m not going to get unduly worked up about that. Instead I want to
lament the fact that in a room of thirty or so English experts there
appeared to be so little consensus about what English is and what it is for.

There were some people calling for inclusion of texts written in languages
other than English; some arguing passionately about the need to teach
things described as ‘multi-modal texts’; others wanted literature at the new
curriculum’s heart; others wanted English to eschew prescribed texts of
any kind; some felt English shouldn’t be defined or categorised at all and
that to attempt to do so would undermine its essence.

It was dispiriting because 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.

That’s why it seems an important moment, with a new editor at the helm,
to reflect on what we understand by the notion of the ‘use’ of English.
Because the meeting last July that left me feeling so gloomy appears to
xemplify what may have happened to English as a subject in our schools.
The most recent, and probably bleakest, assessment of the state of
English was Ofsted’s 2009 report, *English at the Crossroads*. It was based on
evidence from inspections of English between April 2005 and March 2008
in 122 primary schools and 120 secondary schools in England.

I’m always slightly wary of these ‘state of the nation’ summaries based on
a statistically small sample, but within the report there was something
significant that should lead us to pause for a moment and reflect:

Many older students complained that the Key Stage 3
curriculum had not been sufficiently challenging or
stimulating and that work in Year 7 often repeated what they
had learned in primary school. Too many secondary
teachers did not know what their students had learned at
primary school and were not able to build on their
knowledge, skills and understanding.
Although Year 10 students were normally given an outline of the GCSE course at the beginning of the year, those in Year 7 were much less clear about the Key Stage 3 programme. All the English departments visited had schemes of work for Key Stage 3 but, since they rarely showed them to the students, students could not see how individual elements linked together and supported each other. To many students, the Key Stage 3 programme seemed a random sequence of activities, such as the reading of a class novel, followed by work on persuasive writing, extracts from Shakespeare’s plays and the study of newspapers. 

(English at the Crossroads, Ofsted, June 2009, pp21–22)

The reason this feels bleak is because it echoes what my Department for Education meeting of English pundits showed: that we have lost our way when it comes to English, that we have lost our consensus about what it’s there for, our sense of what its ‘use’ is.

And partly—at school level at least—we have let this happen to ourselves. We allowed ourselves to become the ‘implementers’ of a curriculum which was formulated by someone else. We talked blithely and unquestioningly of topics and lessons that could be ‘delivered’. We allowed accountability systems to dominate our thinking, so that tests, examinations and performance tables would narrow the range of what was taught in the classroom and the diet of set-texts, especially at GCSE, became woefully thin.

Thus, in a subject which has at its heart an ongoing engagement with language and a need, as David Holbrook so explicitly put it, to be about ‘maturity’, we allowed it instead to become mechanistic and too often utilitarian. Nowhere is this demonstrated more than in the vogue for early entry of students for exams. In the desperate herd-like rush to get as many GCSE students their grade C, many schools adopted early entry as the means to achieve it. English exams became like burning hoops to be jumped through by half-trained police-dogs.

Maturity counted for nothing; it was all about notching up another set of results against which the school could be judged. And, inevitably, what flowed from the gruel-like GCSE offering, was an A-level provision that again rested on an often superficial encounter with texts rather than teaching depth and resilience and the joyful wrestling with language and ideas that ought to characterise Sixth Form English.

Which is why it’s time we reclaimed English —something we can only do, of course, when we’re more certain what it’s for. And that needs people
in schools who can answer some simple questions which were formulated by former English Adviser for Milton Keynes, Geoff Dean:

- What are the ‘core purposes’ of English in your department?
- What does English ‘do’ in your school?
- What 3 areas of English learning would be the most clear indicators of learners who have passed through your department for 5 years of compulsory secondary education?
- In which areas of English do you believe that your Year 11 learners have made the greatest progress after 5 years in your department?
- In what ways do you think that English has to change in the next 10 years to meet the immediate and long-term needs of your learners?
- What qualifies as ‘good learning’ in English in this school?

They make a good starting-point for thinking beyond any prescribed, pre-packaged curriculum offering served up by other people. They take us back to what we believe. Because, in an age like this, we need to rediscover the values and principles that led many of us to become English teachers. My guess is that it wasn’t to be the mere deliverers of someone else’s lesson plans or strategy. That’s why there was something so poignant about Thursday 11 August 2011, the day when a link to our roots as English teachers was lost. It was the day that David Holbrook died, and my guess is that many younger teachers will be unfamiliar with his work and even, perhaps, his name.

Holbrook was an impassioned teacher of English. He read English at Downing College, Cambridge, at the end of World War II, studying—somewhat uneasily, it seems—under FR Leavis. He subsequently taught English to what were described as the ‘D-Stream’ teenagers at Bassingbourn Village College, Cambridgeshire, and later to undergraduates at various Cambridge colleges (King’s, Jesus and Downing). He was ebullient, independent-minded, and passionate about English.

Since learning of his death last summer, I’ve read much of what he wrote. Most notable was *English for Maturity*, his reflections on English in the secondary school, published in 1961. It’s a crusading text powerfully arguing that English needs a fresh approach. As the author of his Guardian obituary wrote:

> Rather than being put through a series of grammar and
comprehension exercises based on inert extracts from dull authors, children were encouraged to explore the relationship between language and feeling, and, above all, to write for themselves.
(Tom Deveson, Guardian, 1 September 2011)

I’ve got the revised edition of the book from 1967, and there’s something immensely powerful and poignant about the way Holbrook reflects on the shifting sands of English in the years between writing, publishing and reissuing the book. He writes in his introduction:

I had come to distrust the self who made such sweeping statements about the beneficial relationship between English work and personal growth, yet on the other hand I wasn’t prepared to give ground to those who wished to cling to beliefs that the English teacher’s work had nothing to do with the development of individual personality but with a subject or ‘structure’.
(English for Maturity, Cambridge University Press, ix)

This, we must pinch ourselves to realise, was an age before any national curriculum or national strategies. The quality of your English experience would rest largely on the quality of your English teacher—for good or ill.

And these teachers, argues Holbrook (himself hugely influenced by FR Leavis and Denys Thomson) were often shaped in their understanding of English by The Use of English.

Holbrook praises the influence both of The Use of English and formation of the National Association for the Teachers of English in consolidating ‘the sense of professional coherence among English teachers organisationally.’

He lambasts the emergence of the new Certificate of Secondary Education (CSE) for generating ‘mediocrity and stereotypes’, and with characteristic attention to the values of English rejoices in the fact that ‘thousands of children in East Anglia are reading Where Angels Fear to Tread, An Outpost of Progress, Oliver Twist, Childhood, Goodbye to All That, Huckleberry Finn and Pudd’nhead Wilson, rather than ‘second-class fiction by such writers as Nevil Shute, Nicholas Monsarat, and Margery Allingham’.

Now, it may be that in these more cynical times, there are elements of Holbrook’s views that we see as outmoded or irrelevant. But what is so refreshing—at a time when the prevailing ideology appears to be some clunky form of utilitarianism—is that someone speaks with such passion
about a subject that evidently means so much.

It has been instructive and timely, too, because it feels to me from where I write—headteacher of a happy and successful state secondary school and still a teacher of English—that we’ve never been more in need of voices like Holbrook’s and of journals like *The Use of English*.

The reclaiming of English has never been more urgently required, and it’s something we owe to the next generation of young people as they move into our schools and colleges and universities. The pressure to compete with cultures very different from our own, based often on superficial comparisons, plus a stick-waving approach to inspection and accountability, plus a pervading wind of utilitarianism—all of these could lead us to keep our heads down, to hope that all might blow over, and we’ll surface into a better time.

In reality, this is the very point when English teachers at all levels and in all places need to come together to argue with a passion for what English is and what it can do for us all, to re-ground it in principles of vitality and civilisation and discrimination, to make it once more the hottest ticket on the school and university curriculum, and a subject which—as many of us believe—we know we couldn’t do without.

Holbrook spoke with that urgency in the dark days of 1961. It’s over to us to do the same now.