

The Construction of Teachers' Subjectivities in Secondary English

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Introduction

One of the major catalysts prompting the specific formulation of the research study that is to be described in this paper was the reading of a short story, "The Weapon", arrived at by the Junior Secondary students at an inner city school. This incident had now been discussed in a number of different papers by Cranny-Francis (1992) and Martin (1992). The students' reading diverged markedly, and for the teacher at the time inexplicably, from what Cranny-Francis describes as the institutionally approved reading. The students' reading appeared to draw entirely on their personal experiences as adolescents. It took no account of the generic and intertextual resources drawn on to construct the text nor the wider cultural context in which it was written. It was a reading that would have been assessed as unacceptable and which the students would have had difficulty supporting in ways that explained the presence of all the participants in the story or most of the activities of those participants.

This reading is not an isolated example. In the same school, students were perplexed when asked to suggest explanations for the aggression of an Afro-American crowd against a sole white woman driving a car through their gathering. In an interesting reversal, Freebody and Luke cite an example where students from white suburban schools interpreted a passage about "sounding", a form of verbal ritual insult common amongst the black teenage community, as being about physical aggression "importing notions of race riot and a large scale fight" (1990: p.10). The black students interpreted the passage (correctly) as being about verbal play.

It is clear from these examples that "reading" texts is dependent on both an understanding of the way in which texts are constructed (for instance, how a narrative by its very organisation as a text leads to a particular reading) and

experiential cultural knowledge to decode the intertextual meanings of a text. While there is a particular and powerful discourse of English appreciation which holds that any reading is valid as long as it is supported by evidence from the text, from analyses of Higher School Certificate (HSC) examination papers (Freebody, 1990) it is clear, if implicit, that one reading is preferred over others - this is the institutionally preferred reading. This is a reading arrived at by and through a compliant understanding of the workings of the genre of the text and the intertextual resources which constitute its meanings. Again for most readers such a reading is one they take for granted and have arrived at through their interaction with many similar texts as participants in a particular culture. Those without these experiences or cultural resources on which to draw may often at best make a tactical reading - that is one that "express(s) their own interests and concerns rather than the interests and concerns of the institutional site in which they were involved" (Cranny-Francis, 1992: p.2).

Clearly tactical readings such as those described above leave students at a major disadvantage in terms of the assessment tasks in secondary schooling and most importantly in the HSC. It also says something about the range of cultural resources they have to draw on to make meaning of not only literature texts but texts generated by the electronic and print media, including text pertaining to the social, cultural and political milieu in which they live and act.

The notion of cultural resources draws on the concept of "cultural capital" developed by Pierre Bourdieu (1983). Whereas we have used the term "cultural resources" to refer more generally to the resources students (and teachers) bring to their understandings of the meanings constituted in school settings, Bourdieu's term "cultural capital" implies the value attributed in a society and in specific institutions to certain resources

rather than others. Compared to social capital or material wealth the accumulation and effect of cultural capital is more difficult to identify but none the less powerful in differentiating amongst groups and in influencing life chances. Cultural capital is convertible under certain conditions into economic capital, particularly in contemporary western society in the form of educational qualifications. The opportunities for the transmission and accumulation of cultural capital begins with the child's birth. However the extent to which this happens will depend on a number of factors including the strength of the family's cultural capital and the time available to members of the family for its transmission. The culture of families only serves as capital if it is valued or approved in specific contexts and/or in the wider society. In educational institutions the knowledge and values encoded in particular pedagogical and

instructional or disciplinary discourses determine what will serve as cultural capital and what will not - but, as Bourdieu points out, this process is implicit. Success in schooling is attributed more often to natural ability and intelligence than to the particular and different resources that students bring to school in order to make sense of the knowledge and practices they find there.

An understanding of cultural capital, however, must go beyond specific knowledges about objects in the world to the particular formations of subjectivities, the discourses from which subjects can speak and the language codes they can draw on to make sense of school meaning-making practices. In particular, following Bernstein (1971, 1990), it can be argued that some students rather than others are more likely to understand and utilise the elaborated code which is a prerequisite for academic writing and reading. Going back to the example above it is also more likely that some students rather than others will be able to draw on a wider experience of other texts (written, visual and oral) that will enable them to make the institutionally approved readings of school materials, not only in the English lesson but in other discipline fields as well.

The major assumption on which this study rests is that the cultural resources that students bring their to their learning in schools has a major contribution to make to their chances of success or failure in the education system as it is today. There are two major directions that critical research has taken in pursuing this issue. One is exemplified by the work of Freebody (1990) which examines the nature of the tasks and the expectations of assessors in HSC English exams. He draws attention to the extent to which specific cultural dispositions - those primarily of an Anglo-Australian middle class - are required to answer questions in ways which the HSC assessors find valuable. Following an analysis of the examiners' comments on responses to a writing task which asks students to write a letter to a well-known person or public figure or to reply to letters (provided in the lead up to the question) Freebody argues: What is needed here is an explanatory device similar to Bourdieu's notion of an 'aristocratic' and 'stylish' relationship to high (and low) culture (Bourdieu, 1974; and see Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). That is, not only do aspirants need to recognize and participate in a high culture that is oblique, esoteric, and alienating even to its most avid consumers due to the mystification of its appeal: they also need to display an aristocratic attitude to it - a detached potential for manipulating of that culture - a view from above, which does not display itself in an earnest devotion to high culture, but rather in a light-handedness, an irony, and a 'shrewedness' in not taking all this deep study too seriously. (1990: pp15-16)

Certainly it is important to critique the assessment procedures

themselves and to continue to push for changes that take into account the diverse social and cultural backgrounds that students bring to their learning. At the same time however, while these assessment procedures exist, it is important to investigate how students may be best prepared to achieve success within the existing parameters given the cultural diversity of their backgrounds. Such a position has been accused of being complicit with a system that privileges one set of values - namely white, middle class patriarchal values - and attempts to promulgate these values and knowledges as the only ones. This is not the case with this study. Further we might argue that such a criticism also grossly underestimates the ability of the audience to deal with the fact that the discourses encoded in assessment tasks are not from and of their culture. Rather than supporting the production of compliant students this study takes as one of its major assumptions that "critical literacy" or rather a literacy that is socially and culturally responsive is a major aim of schooling and in particular the English curriculum. Such a literacy goes beyond the demands of limited interpersonal and specific occupational abilities to provide individuals with the ability to recognise and challenge the way in which language and other symbolic systems function to construct particular realities.

In this sense then, the aim is to provide students with the ability to both perform successfully in terms of current assessment demands but at the same time to be aware that such demands are located in a particular cultural context - that is, that certain ways of writing and reading texts are preferred and valued ways of reading and writing not only for assessment demands but also for the demands of work and communication within specific institutional settings.

The study

The study to be described in this paper is concerned with explaining the differences in school success and failure of students from different social and cultural backgrounds. In particular it will focus on the ways in which the knowledge and attitudes (the 'discourses') and material practices operating in secondary English classrooms interact with the resources (the 'cultural capital') that students bring to their meaning making in classrooms. It will investigate how the outcomes of this interaction contribute to a student's ability to succeed in the school's terms.

We have chosen the secondary English classroom as the particular context of the study for a number of reasons. First and foremost is the recognition that while literacy is essential to success in all disciplinary fields, it is in English that the potential for teaching explicitly about language is most likely to occur. The

English classroom has also been chosen because of the history of English literature as a disciplinary field designed to establish and reproduce dominant cultural positionings (Eagleton, 1983). The students who are the focus for much contemporary concern and debate about literacy and achievement levels generally are students whose own subjective positionings are outside a dominant social/cultural positioning, which might be described as anglocentric, patriarchal and bourgeois. English as a disciplinary field, on the other hand, tends to construct that mainstream (anglocentric, patriarchal, bourgeois) positioning as a site of value, knowledge and power (which it undoubtedly is) and to construct other positionings as lesser, valueless, or at best powerless. This evaluative function of English is apparent in the curriculum texts, in teachers' reading(s) and in students' readings and non-readings, in pedagogical practices used in the classroom, and also in the assessment procedures employed. A number of specific objectives, focusing on interactions within the Secondary English classroom, will guide the study. These are as follows:

1. To investigate the systems of knowledge and beliefs (discourses) constructed institutionally by curriculum materials, pedagogical practices and assessment procedures
2. To identify how these discourses are incorporated into the belief systems of teachers and translated into their classroom practice and assessment procedures
3. To identify the resources which students bring to their reading of curriculum materials; that is, to map the 'cultural capital' available to different students through an analysis of students' extracurricular reading of media and other cultural texts
4. To examine the interactions between teachers and students in the classroom (classroom texts), with particular reference to the different ways in which students are positioned (by gender and class) in these interactions

The study has been planned to take place in three phases broadly equating with three years of study and each specifically linked to one or more of the objectives. The extent to which it can be extended beyond the one school which is the current site of the study depends on funding.

The school in which the first phase of the study is at present taking place is a co-educational technology secondary school drawing on a wide range of students from a diversity of social class and ethnic backgrounds. Of the fourteen teachers who teach within the subject area of English, ten consented to participate in the project including the Faculty Head. Most of these teachers had been interviewed twice for about half an hour by the time this paper was written. Further follow-up interviews will be conducted in fourth term. Thus these results should be regarded

as part of work in progress. With full funding it is hoped that the first phase will be extended to two more schools.

The first phase will accomplish two main purposes: to develop a procedural model for further work and to identify the main sources of cultural and institutional discourses affecting the practices of teachers in the Secondary English classroom. This will be achieved by strategies including the textual analysis of curriculum documents, curriculum texts, a review of current Departmental policy and commentary in New South Wales. Interviews with teachers will provide a means to identify how these discourses and practices become incorporated and transformed by teachers in their explanations of their own beliefs and practices. In this sense we will be exploring the constitution of interviewees' subjectivities as teachers of English. It is this aspect of the study which will provide the primary focus for the final section of this paper.

The second phase will focus primarily on the students and the resources they draw upon to make sense of the activities of the English classroom and the third phase will concentrate on the collection and analysis of texts produced in classroom interactions. In this phase we will be identifying how teachers and students negotiate meanings in the classroom and how this determines students' chances of success in school assessment tasks.

The context of situation: dominant discourses in the practice of English teaching

Commentary on contemporary developments in English literature and language teaching together with an analysis of syllabus documents identifies the dominance of two major complementary discourses (Cranny-Francis 1991; Rothery, 1989; Christie, 1989). A progressivist pedagogic discourse which places the child's experience and use of language at the centre of the teaching learning process and for the teaching of English literature, a Leavisite discourse that provides a "critical methodology" for the appreciation of plays, novels and poetry. A further discourse, drawing on the New Criticism approach to textual analysis also continues to be influential in secondary and

tertiary literature teaching (Cranny-Francis, 1991). This discourse valorises an "objective" appraisal of the text based on reading its universally available features.

Since the 1970's both primary and secondary teaching in the area of English literature and language has been profoundly influenced by a progressivist discourse and practice that argued for the development of language through use. The work of the Britten, Barnes, Rosen and Dixon has been particularly influential in the move away from a "old pedagogy" which was prescriptive and restrictive to a "new pedagogy" where the teacher facilitated the child's written and oral expression. Where the old pedagogy

was primarily concerned with knowing and using conventions where this involved "familiarity with forms and conventions of the major types of works" and "correct form and usage in speech in writing" (Bloom et al quoted in Christie, 1989: p.161); the new pedagogy or "new English" emphasised the importance of language development as occurring through "the innumerable opportunities for using language for many different purposes in the course of daily life" (Rothery, 1989: p.202). While such a model of teaching and learning provides an important break from the highly directive and formal teaching it replaced, it fails to take account of the social and cultural context in which children use and learn language. The teacher's role in such learning is primarily perceived as facilitative, as providing for a variety of writing and reading opportunities and particularly the opportunity for oral expression to occur. Moreover the emphasis in learning how to teach seems to be on the acquisition of facilitative techniques rather than on providing a way of talking explicitly to their students about language and how texts construct meaning.

Leavisite critical methodology rests on the assumption that the key to literary criticism lay in a finely-honed critical sensibility, a quality of mind and character which enabled a highly sensitive reader to understand, seemingly intuitively, what the writer was about in constructing a text. An appreciation and recognition of "good literature" was predicated on an intense identification with the characters and the story created by the writer. Leavis was totally opposed to theoretical knowledge which he believed would blunt critical sensibility or a personal response to a novel, play or poem (Cranny-Francis, 1992).

A combination of Leavisite and New Criticism discourses dominate secondary English literature teaching. An analysis of NSW Syllabus documents (Board of Studies, 1982) defining the goals of 2/3 unit HSC English confirms this (see Cranny-Francis, 1992 for a more detailed analysis). A personal response supported by evidence from an analysis of the text is valued above all.

However as Freebody's (1990) analysis of assessors' comments demonstrate, students who accept literally this demand for a personal response are doomed to failure. As Cranny-Francis also points out, and is evident from the interviews described in this paper, teachers do not slavishly follow the dictates of syllabus documents, which themselves often combine several different methodologies.

A Leavisite discourse of literary criticism which eschews theory and looks to a personal response clearly sits very comfortably with a progressivist pedagogic discourse which takes as its aim the personal growth of the individual through experience and language development through language use. Neither a progressivist, Leavisite nor a New Criticism discourse acknowledges meaning as ideologically and discursively constructed and operating in the context of a particular social

formation. While they might appear through their own rhetoric to offer an opportunity for personal growth, such growth serves to position the subject/student more centrally (or less marginally) in relation to the dominant discourses of the discursive formation of contemporary education. Nor do any of these

discourse provide for or indeed encourage a resistant or critical reading of text. They offer no challenge to institutionally-preferred readings and thus contribute to the maintain a status quo which fails those students whose cultural resources are incompatible with dominant meanings.

Teachers' subjectivities

Although we would predict that teachers would through their description of their practices and beliefs position themselves in a particular relation to the Leavisite and progressivist discourses described above, the nature of such a positioning could not be assumed. Thus the purpose of the interviews was primarily to build some sense of the teachers' subjectivities, of the discourses which constitute these and which are therefore most likely to inform their practices as teachers of secondary English. These discourses include not only those relating directly to the teaching of English but also to discourses of gender, ethnicity and class. We acknowledge that actual practices with students may not correspond with the teachers' descriptions of their practices - such dissonances and confirmations will emerge later in the third stage of the study. However, it should also be said that rather than taking the teachers to be phenomenological subjects creating new meanings as they speak, this study takes as an important basic assumption that individual subjectivities are constituted discursively and that to a large degree this happens through language. Such a notion of subjectivities takes the individual as located at the intersection of a multiplicity of historically and culturally specific texts. The individual is first and foremost social, able to reconstitute, transform and reproduce already circulating systems of meanings and social relations rather than the creator of totally new meaning and values. Thus our task as researchers is to identify the discourses, their continuities, contradictions and absences, in relation to what we already understand about the discourses constituting secondary English, its curriculum and pedagogy as they are expressed in what the teachers say (and at a later stage of the research do).

Constituting the secondary English teacher: influences and absences.

For most of the teachers participating in the study, their own experience of schooling and/or their tertiary and professional training had all taken place in a milieu profoundly influenced by progressivist discourses. In particular, their tertiary experience in Departments of English in Australian universities

was most likely to be located within the discursive practices of a combination of a New Criticism and Leavisite methodology which has dominated and continues to dominate tertiary English literature teaching.

For most of the teachers, from their own telling, it is indeed these discourses which have dominated their undergraduate studies of English and their professional training although for some of the older teachers a more traditional approach that emphasised grammar and conventional understandings of text was more likely to be the case. However all of the teachers acknowledged and appeared to prefer a practice that was informed by the Leavisite, New Criticism and progressivist discourses described above. They welcomed the freedom afforded by a more child-centred approach that allowed the teacher to shape their own curriculum to meet the needs of their students, where as they saw it, they could start from the student's own experiences and encourage a personal response to texts rather than imposing alienating conventions.

Teacher:...getting away from the teaching of language, grammar, comprehension which...I think the good thing about the way its (English) taught in high schools now is that it does encourage individuality and thought and questioning...

Interviewer: So how would you describe the emphasis now?

Teacher:The emphasis is on themes and trying, I guess to relate

it to the children experience, emphasis on looking at what, I suppose, literature can teach us and what we can learn...

Despite this recognition of a major shift in the curriculum and pedagogy of English teaching, the teachers generally did not directly speak about, or appear to recognise, the theories or discourses that informed their teaching. An analysis of their language use in the interview responses however indicated the pervasive influence of these discourses. Their lack of recognition is not surprising given that these as the dominant discourses are likely to be invisible; their practices taken for granted as right and appropriate. Certainly none of the teachers in the study appeared to be aware of the "genre debate" taking place in academic circles, in the professional literature and which is currently influencing the direction of the national curriculum.

Most of the teachers believed themselves to have learned how to teach through their practical experience - that is as the result of their own efforts and through experiences "on the job" and through age and maturity. For some they perceive their own understanding of texts as also being more a process of "self-discovery", their own love of reading and experience of many texts than the result of explicit teaching at either secondary or tertiary level. Where specific influences could be identified these were the few "inspirational" teachers who stood out because of their ability to make a dull text exciting and to help their

students “appreciate” it for “its value”. For the older teachers their own background included some work with Latinate grammar, however this was not the case for the much younger teachers. Their institutionally based professional training did not feature in their responses as a major influence. The following quote is generally representative of the attitudes of many of the teachers to their teacher training.

Interviewer:.What did you learn in your Dip Ed year

Teacher: Oh yeah, right...I had a good time in Dip Ed. I suppose I learned that a lot of the success in teaching depends on your own enthusiasm and your own treatment of the material. You can take... you can take a boring piece of material and a really exciting piece and make them both just as successful if your teaching approach gets the best out of them.

Interviewer:.So what kind of teaching approach, I mean how much of approach...what insights did you get into teaching English for instance?

Teacher: During Dip Ed specifically? I don't think Dip Ed is long enough to really get much. It's two three week pracs or something. I don't think I've really developed all my skills yet and that's after ten years, I think it's thirteen years of teaching, so I don't think six weeks...

Interviewer:.What about methods ()practice teaching help?

Teacher: We had Methods, yes. We went off to different high schools and we spent some time with head teachers, which I found fairly...useless, because they didn't really, they didn't really give us enough of their own style or they would give us too much of their own style, which, I don't want to teach like somebody else teaches, I can't teach like somebody else teaches and ah

Interviewer:.I know, I'm just trying to think, are there any, if from that time there are any principles that you can identify with teaching and teaching English, like 'this is the way to approach..Year 12...'

Teacher: I suppose sometimes its a little bit like teaching by example, if you're.... you give the class a novel to read and you show that you're enjoying it or that you love to read I guess you sway some of the children's minds by doing that. I do so many different activities I'm not quite sure what you mean... and a little later

Interviewer:.So you go in and you've got a text and you have some

kind of idea or inspiration the night before or the day before on how you will approach it. I mean where, where do you get the tools to think about 'I might do this tomorrow'?

Teacher: I suppose by trial and error. That over the time you build up an idea of what works and what doesn't. There are, there's a list of things you do look into in English, I mean you look at language and theme, plot and character and all that sort

of thing, so they're, they're set for you. How you look at them, I suppose, is where your own style comes in and the activities you think of to do .

From their responses it was apparent that teachers in their own teaching, were in the end pragmatic - they drew on whatever of their own experiences they could, their memories of working with texts at school and university and the models provided by "inspirational" teachers rather than on their professional training during their Graduate Diploma of Education year. In various ways teachers said that their learning happened through "trial and error", through the experience of being in a classroom. What this seemed to mean to some extent is how they learnt to manage children, how to develop a "rapport" with students, rather than how to approach texts. This last seemed to be absorbed during University study though again it provided little in the way of an explicit language with which to understand texts. Only two of the teachers had attended inservice courses directly related to English teaching. Those few who drew on materials relating to their subject read and used ideas from the journal of the English Teachers' Association or drew on the curriculum materials put out by the region for ideas about how to teach specific activities. Six of the teachers also examined for the HSC and they believed that this gave them important insights into examiners' expectations for their senior students. There seemed to be very little collegial sharing on a Faculty basis although individual teachers who were also personal friends did discuss their teaching with one another.

Freedom and liberal individualism:

A recurrent theme (or discourse) of individual freedom could be traced through the teachers' responses both in relation to their own education and training and to their teaching approach - freedom for the children to make their own meanings, self-discovery as the way a teacher learned to understand texts and as the way so many of the teachers perceived that they came to learn to teach, freedom for the teachers to teach how and what they wanted to teach. This was specifically related to the teaching of English rather than other subjects and although mostly viewed positively was also seen as making English more difficult to teach and to assess than for instance Mathematics.

It's actually a really difficult question to answer, how do you learn to teach? I don't know that I do it now. Does the fact that the students get over fifty or get seventy-five percent mean that I'm teaching or that they've got natural ability and they're teaching themselves...in Maths you have a much better gauge I guess than you do in English...there's a specific formulae and everything has a right answer, while in English nothing really has a right answer if you can support it with evidence and just

with your own gift of the gab if you like...

The teachers experienced very few constraints on what they taught or how they might go about teaching it, particularly in the Junior years. Restrictions were primarily felt in terms of resources and to a certain extent by the syllabus.

I'm not sure there's much I'd change in terms of what's available because it's just so broad, you can virtually teach anything. Although the school did have a programme prepared by the head of the Faculty, few of the teachers felt constrained by it. Some had not read it, one was unsure that it existed and in various ways it was dismissed as "a lot of words". Similarly the current syllabus (1987) was scarcely acknowledged as influential except in the Senior Years.

The references to personal expression and personal growth and to the freedom to determine a pedagogy and curriculum to suit the specific needs of the students in the class can be located as part of the 1970's move away from an old pedagogy that was restrictive and prescriptive to the "new pedagogy" described above. As teachers were expected to take a facilitative role in drawing out the individual potential of each child to express him or herself, professional training focused on how to do this rather than on specific strategies designed to help children write or read. As the one of the few teachers who actually attributed any learning as happening during his professional development year, says:

Well it was innovative you know new teaching techniques group work kind of stuff, drama, role play, trying to ... I'm not very good with the jargon ... trying to get the student to be able to relate to the novels on a personal level and you know re-enactments and you know so that you could participate you know feel like you relate to it.

It is not surprising then that most of the teachers have difficulty in attributing any particular learning of how to teach to their professional training. Their own talk is primarily about the process of facilitating student's personal expression independent of any explicit theories of learning or language or strategies to put such theories into practice. If teachers attribute their learning primarily to their experiences in their own classrooms then as Bernstein points out the reproduction of specific pedagogical practices must be very fragile.

In the old pedagogical practice, repetition is ingrained in the structure; it is not a property of an individual or individuals. The old structure carried within it, its reproduction. But with the new pedagogical practice - based in interactions between individuals in groups in a participated, negotiated relationship - we have yet to discover how this practice can be reproduced. It is very fragile - very fragile - not only because of the weakness of its material base, but also because when one or two leave a school it tends to collapse. (Bernstein 1979: pp.297-298 quoted

in Rothery, 1989: p 209)

It remains to the third phase of the study to discover the extent to which this is the case in this school - that is, the degree to which "freedom" actually produces diversity in pedagogical practice where at the same time teachers' subjectivities and experiences of teaching and curriculum are likely to be very similar.

Not only was English as a subject perceived to provide more freedom for the teachers but also for the students. Unlike other subjects "with English you can be original, personal (and) never wrong". As has been pointed out above what the teachers said that they valued was a personal response. Although teachers and students were more constrained by the demands of the HSC, the senior students were still expected to arrive at a personal response to the texts. Different teachers appeared to provide varying degrees of assistance at arriving or setting the parameters for such a response as is demonstrated by the quotes that follow:

Interviewer: So where are [the] limits set? How do you set those limits or how do they know what kinds of responses are appropriate?

Teacher: For example, if I gave them *Pride and Prejudice* without some discussion of the period in which it was written and a few clues as to how the author approached the writing of the book, so I would say: 'The dialogue is important' or 'The letters are important' or something...so I have sort of given them the starting point...therefore it's not me telling them completely...I'm telling them that they have got to do that (support with evidence) but they can choose their own evidence and they can, within limits, choose the direction they are going to go.

and from another teacher

Teacher: I guess I don't just draw on what I think of the texts. I use critics as well, so therefore if I've got five...critics saying: 'This is what the answer is, this is what it means, this is the point of the poem or the point of the book or whatever' then if there is a right answer then that's as close as I can get the kids to it, to look at what other people have had to say and to support it with evidence because the person who is saying it has supported what they've said.

In contrast to the senior years, in the Junior School there was much more opportunity to "have fun":

Teacher: Years 7 - 10 can be more fun I think. You can do a greater range of things. You can involve kids more in role plays, sort of making collages and posters sort of on say a theme of a book or something like that. Where in Year 11 and 12 you have to get through the course and you have only got a certain time

Despite the freedom afforded by the Junior syllabus, many of the teachers preferred to teach the senior years where they could engage their own love of literature. One of their main aims seemed, like the teachers who had been inspirations for their own teaching, to impart their own love of reading to their students through their style of teaching - that is by making it relevant to the student's own experiences and secondly to make learning exciting and fun. Not surprisingly, some of them lamented the influence of television which had "shortened children's attention span", "mak[ing] them lazy and ruin[ing] their spelling". One teacher felt that students were increasingly unable to listen. I suppose it's the media, they're not used to doing, just seeing things.

Another feels that the influence of the media is so great that teaching using chalk and talk doesn't work unless you are a tartar. If you can't beat them, join them.

The students freedom to read extended in some cases to Dolly fiction and other romances because it's better than reading nothing at all and there are kids who won't read unless they're reading something that's pulp but not to *Flowers in the Attic* because [it's] rubbish...I mean, who wants to read about incest...They're fascinated by it and at the same time I don't think it gives them the right sort of message

However, neither Dolly fiction nor *Flowers in the Attic* were

regarded as appropriate for study in the classroom. Although prejudice, racism, sexuality and drugs, with the aim of making the student "a better person", is part of the agenda in some classrooms, the critical analysis of meaning production in texts appears to be absent. The teachers from their own professional and disciplinary training have few tools at their disposal to deal with those texts they recognise as being so obviously "ideologically" unsound.

Just as they themselves were perceived to learn through experience so too they perceive children to learn. If students do not have the natural ability and particularly if they do not read they "aren't ever going to be successful in this subject". For the successful students:

it's just subliminal. Mostly they just pick it up and you know, spelling, punctuation, grammar, structure everything.

And in many senses this is the case. The students who bring appropriate or approved cultural capital to their learning can write essays because of their experiences of other texts. However those students who do not bring these specific resources to their learning are left in an environment where they are apparently free to express their own meanings in their own way but where in practice, certain institutionally and culturally valued ways of reading and writing are rewarded.

The syllabus (and the school program) requires that the children have the opportunity to develop the ability to write in different registers - that is to write 'to a purpose; to an audience; in different forms' (School Programme). Writing registers include letters, autobiography, personal experience and fantasy. Year 9 work includes reporting and reviewing and in Year 10 students should be writing essays to a plan. For some of the teachers teaching essay writing was the most difficult task of all. The response of one teacher illustrates the frustration evident when teachers do not have a way of talking explicitly about language and generic structures. The fallback position has again to be that it depends on the child's "natural ability"

Teacher: Yeah we do book reviews and ah, oh the seniors as well do essays and that sort of thing...I guess I try across from seven to twelve that they write in every different register that I can possibly think of, whether it be diary, letter, report, essay. The most difficult of all to teach is the essay because they really have to have writing skills before they even get to you. You can't really, in Year 11 and 12, impart to them the necessary writing skills, you can teach them how to put those skills together and possibly write an essay, but by the time they get to you then they're pretty well locked into...

Interviewer: .What..when you say writing skills, what are you thinking about?

Teacher: Ummm ability to express themselves clearly and in a more sophisticated manner than in junior school I suppose.

Interviewer: .mmmm I mean I must meet a few people who reach university who I () on structure but its just getting down to how sentences are actually....

Teacher: Yeah, yeah...actually that's the thing that I think was actually the gap. The kid goes from high school to uni, they're really very unprepared for the freedom they have to....to deal with themselves if you like, to write their essays without.... Some of them get through to year 12 without really writing a proper essay because they haven't been taught to do it but it's also one of the most difficult things to teach as I said because it's tied up so much with their own ability.

Interviewer: .How would you...what would you see as your way of going about teaching how to write an essay, if you were going to ()?

Teacher: Ummm, I start with plans. They must have a plan in mind when they get a question. If they don't have a plan of where they're going then it just becomes a hotch-potch of ideas and

with no real paragraph connection or anything like that. So we start with the idea, they look at the question and they make a plan, and from that plan they're guided into an introduction, body and their conclusion, and once they realise that if they make a plan and give themselves a direction to go in its going to

sort itself out pretty well anyway, and then you work on expression skills and that sort of thing.

Interviewer:..I know its very difficult to do..

Teacher: And I don't even know that anyone ever taught me to write an essay. I think it just comes through ...I can't remember in year 11 and 12 ever being taught to write an essay. I just wrote..I don't know, it's a bit hard to even...even remember how I wrote or what I wrote. I've got some, I've got all my uni work and sometimes I read my essays and think I'm quite surprised that I wrote that () where did I learn to do that?, I don't really know it's just...That's what I say it depends on the intelligence I suppose of the kids, natural sort of ability and that sort of thing.

Conclusion

This paper provides a description of a three phase project in the Secondary school and a discussion of some of the material which has been collected thus far. Although at this stage care should be taken in making generalisations, it is evident from an analysis of interviews that teachers in their talk about their practices are profoundly influenced by the emphasis on personal expression, both oral and written, that characterises the Leavisite and progressivist discourses described above. These discourses provide no explanation for differences in students' abilities to make sense of the tasks of the English classroom and specifically to succeed in the English exams in the HSC. Teachers are left to explain such phenomena in terms of students' "natural ability", a position which leaves them with few strategies to change the chances of those students who are not successful in reading or writing in the ways expected of them. Further a Leavisite appreciation of texts which eschews theory and privileges a reading through an intense identification with the author leaves little room for a critical understanding of the ways in which the language of texts construct a particular reality.

It is important before reaching any conclusions about the actual practices of teachers to recognise that teachers' descriptions of their practice omit so much. Teachers (and people generally) are not always able to describe what they do. The third phase of the study in which classroom interactions are observed and analysed will be much more telling. These procedures will provide the means for an exploration of the ways in which meanings are actively negotiated by students and teachers and thus bring us closer to an understanding of students' learning in English classrooms.

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Both this and "The Weapon" example are incidents described by

Joan Rothery in connection with her work as consultant with the
Write it Write Project.

that is, situating its reading in a particular social/discursive
formation

vyant break from the highly directive and formal teaching it
replaced, it fails to take account

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