

Pedagogical and Disciplinary Positions in Secondary English

Janice Wright
Bill Winser
Anne Cranny-Francis
Pat Muir

University of Wollongong
Northfields Avenue
Wollongong, 2522

A paper presented at the AARE Conference, Hobart, 1995
Introduction

In 1992 we were funded by the ARC to carry out a study investigating the contribution of institutionalised discourses to students' success and failure in Secondary English. Three years on we have amassed a considerable amount and range of data. While the analysis of teacher interviews has been ongoing (see Wright et al 1992) it has only been in the latter part of this year that we have begun to systematically code the teacher and student interviews using the qualitative software package NUD•IST), and we have as yet addressed very little attention to the transcripts of classroom interaction, so what we have to say at this juncture is only one part of a much larger picture. In this paper we will specifically focus on the notion of 'personal response', how the meaning of this concept is linked to the institutionalised discourses in secondary English and how its meaning changes in relation to different sites. Of particular interest is the ways in which students negotiate the major shift in the expectations and practices associated with teaching English in Years 7 to 10 to those in Year 11. The ability to unravel these expectation as they relate to the notion

of a personal response is one of the major challenges for senior students particularly those doing 2 and 3 Unit English.

What is clear from the analysis so far is that it is a complex and 'messy reality'. Unlike Ian Hunter's 'messy reality' which derives from an historical analysis of documents and key writers in and about English, our 'messy reality' derives from classroom practices and teachers and students' subjectivities as they engage with secondary English in New South Wales secondary schools. It also derives from the very different experiences/subjectivities which students bring to their study of English and how these intersect with the knowledge and expectations of their teachers and ultimately assessors in the Higher School Certificate (HSC). This is compounded by differences in schools,

faculty cultures and the material circumstances of students and to a lesser extent teachers.

Certain theories/discourses have been more powerful than others in influencing the shape of English and in defining what constitutes the good English subject. Eagleton has pointed to the influence of a Leavisite perspective in University faculties of English: 'the fact remains that English students in England today are 'Leavisite' whether they know it or not' (Eagleton, 1983, 31). Cranny Francis (1992) describes English as a contemporary university discipline as a dialogue between many different theories and practices - Leavisite, New criticism, feminist criticisms, deconstruction, post colonial theory and so on. However she also argues in an earlier paper that there has been (and in some cases continues to be) an enormous resistance to the teaching of literary theory in university departments and that up until the 1970s a common sense approach (Belsey 1980) to the interpretation of texts was widespread. Such an approach was informed by the Leavisite 'notions of reading as a finely honed response to the experiences represented in the text' (Cranny Francis 1991, p.4) and the pursuit of universals through an objective analysis espoused by the New Critics. An analysis of the Year 7- 10 and the 2 and 3 unit English syllabus demonstrates the close relationship between these discourses (particularly a Leavisite discourse) and a progressivist pedagogic discourse which locates meaning making with the imaginative humanist subject (in the case of English both and at different times the student and the author of texts). Such discourses, as has been pointed out elsewhere (Wright et al 1992), privilege a middle class subject who brings to their study of English the cultural resources (Bourdieu 1983) to decode the valued meanings and expectations of the subject. A brief introduction to these discourses is therefore useful to understanding the expectations which teachers, educated for the most part in University faculties of English which took a traditional approach to the discipline, bring to the production of English lessons and to their assessment of students.

The discipline of English¹.

F.R. Leavis

The influence of F. R. Leavis in the development of the discipline of English has been enormous and enduring. For Leavis it was the reading of literature that provided a potent basis for the necessary social harmony that was required in the debased cultural environment of a mass industrial society. His central argument was that the older, organic cultural life, the 'traditional culture of the people' that was the basis for the literary culture, must be restored and reawakened. This was essentially a liberal and individualist stance, that needed a moral and intellectual elite to promulgate it.

The humanely perceptive, actual and potential, are those that matter; they may be a minority, but it isn't from minorities that the creative stimulus comes. A minority can change the spiritual climate. (Leavis 1972, p.204)

The strategy that he adopted was to build up the departments of English in the Universities so as to increase the numbers of graduates who would then go into the schools and bring the liberating message to the students. This strategy was underpinned by two guiding principles: a realignment of the 'Great Tradition' of English literature and careful purging and filtering of the canon, and some pedagogical guidelines for English.

The first principle was embodied in Leavis's careful choice and

promulgation of specified texts that demonstrated the values and moral vision he stood for. Aesthetic and literary judgments were allied with his choice of moral and political issues in such a way that literature, the literary and society were entwined inextricably. The texts chosen were presented as valued simply by the process of assertion, with any supporting argument merely provided by opaque and self-corroborating terms such as 'immediacy' and 'richness'. Evidence for the judgments being made was extracted from the text itself, despite the fact that the text's superiority was what was under examination in the first place. The texts were chosen to celebrate life and an organic spontaneity, the individual's uniqueness and creativity - a set of expressions that now may be seen to have been powerfully valorised in the discipline English. But what is important for our purposes is that his approach tends to ignore the social, historical and political movements of these authors and texts, a tendency that is carried on in some of the subsequent movements that built on his work.

The second issue is a pedagogical one: how were English teachers to carry out the great missionary task? They had to be equipped with moral vision, with the canon of texts and the necessary techniques to raise the levels of consciousness and discrimination of their students, so as

to fight the cultural impoverishment of mass industrial society. This was to be done by encouraging individual response, by a constant awareness of moral values and making suitable prescriptions for appropriate social behaviour. It is noteworthy that such a catalogue of strategies is a rejection of the political elements of liberalism. What this approach wanted was the development of discrimination in the reader, the ability to sense the banal, the trivial and the downright vulgar, in bad art and literature, the cinema, advertising and the popular press. And what emerged was a series of discursive formulations: 'imagination', 'perceptiveness', 'sympathy', 'creative reflection' and 'responsiveness' (Goodson & Medway, 1990). The good student of English was to display these qualities to the utmost.

Leavis's influence reached its heyday in the post second world war period. Especially important were the rapidly emerging grammar schools with their highly selected sixth forms of talented students. The ethos of secondary school English still, at least in part, maintains these values and emphases; the schools see the task of English as the education of students to withstand and to survive technologically oriented society, not to change it.

Some of Leavis's followers, such as Holbrook and Thompson, followed up his work within the context of the Labour government's comprehensive schools in the sixties. This was seen as an extension of Leavisism to the 'less able' students, and later the same applied to those who worked in the Secondary Modern schools that appeared at the same time. Many of Leavis's ideas live on in the climate of Secondary English teaching, and the sample studied in our project are no exception. English is regarded as a means of transformation of students, lifting them to new visions of their world, as sensitive, discriminating and perceptive readers. The discourses about English are essentially political discourses, incorporating literary ideologies with practical outcomes, evident in the teaching for and assessment of the HSC2, in the degree structures of teachers and in the patterns of their professional lives and careers.

New Criticism.

Parallel to Leavis's work in Cambridge was the American New Criticism, to which Leavis's name is sometimes linked (Eagleton, 1983). The literary text was seen in functionalist terms, as a means of coming to terms with the harsh realities of the world, by contemplative means.

The meaning of the poem, the central literary genre, was something public and objective, to be found in the language of the text. These critics encouraged stringent investigation of the text, scrutinising its structure closely and carefully and avoiding notions like intention or subjective response. They developed a substantial critical apparatus which they believed was compatible with the dominant empirical sciences of the time. In the colleges this approach was readily accepted, and

resulted in an approach to English teaching where the poem was at the centre of teaching, and disinterested, harmonious and balanced interpretation was the task of the students. Such activity was, like the Leavisite approaches, divorced from the social and political specifics of the time, which were regarded as undesirably pluralist and likely to disrupt the harmonious balance of structure

It is apparent that, like Leavisism, New Criticism was not prepared to be linked with the social and especially the political life of the times. Pressing problems associated with the Cold War were simply to be regarded as merely partial pressures that needed to be balanced with other forces elsewhere in one's life. It is not surprising that this movement has been described as bordering on the formalist (Eagleton, 1983). It is also clear that it cuts the text off from its social context and thus divorces literature, and hence the discipline of English, from the social and political life of the time.

Progressivism as an English pedagogy.

Leavis's insistence on the centrality of response to literature remains an enduring perception of what is necessary in the construction of the good English student. It is the notion of response that was taken up by progressives in English teaching, to which was added the equally important idea of personal growth. English, for the progressive movement, was not a body of knowledge about literature but involved activities that stimulated the imagination. The literature that was used was selected because it reflected the world of the readers, not because of some a priori value it may have. John Dixon's contribution was to present English as a means of individual growth of students, and ultimately as a service subject for all the other sections of the curriculum - the language across the curriculum model. The personal growth of pupils was constitutive for English, and the underlying model of individual growth highlighted the individual's response to the world as unique and creative.

The metaphor of 'drawing out' implied that English consisted of a set of inner resources, and Holbrook, for one, pursued his views by using psycho-therapeutic principles in his thinking about literacy development. The expression of emotion through writing had therapeutic value, enabling learners to come to terms with themselves and thereby develop into healthier persons. Roslyn Arnold, in a discussion of learning to write, refers to the 'natural flow of development' (which schooling can 'thwart'), of the 'innate expressive energies of the writer involved in creating personal meanings', of 'an increased awareness of the self at the centre of the writing experience' and concludes her chapter by pointing out that students write better when they are 'encouraged to do what comes naturally' (Arnold, 1983, p.124, p.137). So English can be seen as the basis for the formation of subjectivities, but the transformative role of the subject and discipline is not as clearly foregrounded as in Leavisite models. There also remains in progressivism strong echoes of the discourse of liberal

humanism: personal growth is personal; it is not socially oriented nor is it likely to strongly engage the learner in political or ideological activity, since it operates in the privileged sphere of universal truths and values. The association of literature with personal growth removes this movement from the domain of politics, and therefore from

matters of power and control.

This partial survey of some of the major forces at work in the development of the discipline of English over the last five or six decades reveals that the discipline, contrary to some teachers' perceptions, has been historically sanctioned³ as a powerful means of transformation of the individual subject. It functions as part of the social and political framework of the culture, enabling control and surveillance to be maintained, and relies heavily on an identification with literature as its means of influence and in the construction of subjectivities. The subject English, we argue, is inherently a part of the functioning of the state, and therefore teachers need to be able to demonstrate its connections with such organs of power and of ideology. But we shall see that this is problematic in the case of the teachers in our sample. The discourses of what can loosely be called progressivism appear to be the dominant ones in their professional lives and in their perceptions of themselves as proponents of the discipline⁴

Introduction to the study

Since one of the main purposes of the study was the identification of differences in students engagement with English on the basis of social class as indicated in large part by the cultural capital, three government schools were invited to participate on the basis of their student population. Two of the schools were characterised by a wide variation in parental education and socioeconomic background. The third school was classified as disadvantaged under the DEET classification, its population was also varied but the culture of the school was very much linked to its location in an area with high unemployment and high geographic mobility; the parents of those students participating in the study were more likely to have non professional and unskilled occupations and to have left school without completing the HSC. The top and bottom classes in Years 9 and 11 and two unstreamed year 7 classes from each school participated in the study.

Information about parents' occupation and years of education was collected using a questionnaire which was administered as one of the components of the study. Students in the top classes in all the schools in year 9 and 11 were predominantly girls, were more likely to have at least one parent with a middle class occupation (judged on a combination of income, responsibility and skill) and education beyond

HSC in comparison to the lower classes where there was a preponderance of boys, students with parents working in low skilled, low income and/or low responsibility occupations and with parents who had left school before the HSC.

The culture of the English faculty and to some extent the approach to teaching English varied quite markedly from one school to another. The English staff of the two coast schools were generally older, more experienced and most had been at the same school for over ten years. They both had experienced head teachers who had been teaching English for over ten years. At the third school, Campbell, only one of the staff had been at the school longer than ten years, three out of eight had been teaching for less than four years and the Head teacher had himself been teaching for only a relatively short time. At Spender, most of the staff had settled into a fairly independent mode where teachers used the freedom afforded by a non-prescriptive English syllabus in Years 7-10 to plan units of work independently with very little reference to a Faculty program. In contrast, at Kennedy High the head of the English faculty took a strong leadership role in faculty

meetings and discussed pedagogical and other issues and the staff were encouraged to share units of work. At Campbell, some teachers worked collectively to plan units of work in new areas on new areas of teaching such as the media but more often teachers planned and often struggled independently with little collaboration with other members of staff. This is not to say that the staff were not supportive of each other generally, but there seemed to be no institutionalised system of support especially for the less experienced members of staff.

English in Years 7 and 9

There was a notable difference in expectations in the curriculum and in the pedagogy associated with years 7-10 as compared to years 11-12. The senior years were dominated by the demands of the HSC and the transition from year 10 to 11 was marked for most students and teachers by a shift in emphasis from a relative freedom to choose topics and texts unconstrained by syllabus requirements to a highly constrained course of study in 2/3 Unit English. For many students, year 11 was the first time they were required to write an essay in English and the first time they were introduced to texts as 'literature'.

Another way of looking at this is to engage the notion of the good English subject as defined by the pedagogic and disciplinary discourses operating in secondary English - that is, how students are described; what expected to be able to do and how expected to be (attitudes and values to subject and related areas). The ways in which most teachers and students talked about the expectations in the junior years would seem to indicate that in Years 7-10 their desire was to develop an student (an English subject) who enjoyed reading, read widely,

profusely and sensitively and who could write lengthy pieces of work imaginatively and creatively. This is evidenced in teachers comments and by activities where students had to put themselves in a character's or author's shoes and write from their point of view and through the study of texts such as *To Sir With Love* and *A Patch of Blue* which dealt with social issues. Important in this is the notion of the sensitive reader, the reader who reads for the authors' message, the human issues in the text and who by this means develops a broader perspective on the world and thus becomes a better person.

This way of describing the ideal English subject was more marked for the teachers who had been teaching for more than four years and for the teachers in the coast schools. At Campbell, the younger teachers in particular were more concerned with literacy skills and with developing students' ability to resist media messages. Their concerns were more closely located in the lived experiences and futures of their students' lives .

In some way or the other almost all of the teachers identified a transformative aspect to their teaching. For most of the teachers this was attributed to the ways in which students were encouraged to engage with novels or short stories - for some few, poems and Shakespeare. In talking about other inspirational teachers and for many of the more experienced teachers this was also attributed to a certain style of teaching which imparted the teachers love of literature (and presumably their insight and sensitivity to textual meanings) to the students. Drawing on what is clearly a Leavisite heritage, literature (or more specifically a good author) was imbued with the power to transform students perceptions of themselves and the world.

I just think that the ideas that you have in literature, that English is about self-expression and that's always interesting, to see what people are thinking, to see how they respond and to me again it's this

idea of, the ideas, that literature, is a form of ideas. It crosses all different kinds of people and cultures and times and it's clichéd but you get a bit jaded and then you give out something to read and ... a few of them will go "wow that's really interesting" and it changes their life; that's a bit of a buzz. (male teacher, Campbell)

It is more like theme work and encouraging discussion and actually getting into identifying issues in the book and encouraging the kids to do their own creative writing and being in the place of those people or trying to see those issues. Basically what I think is happening now is to encourage the kids to think for themselves, to take the risk in thinking and coming up with an opinion and not be afraid of doing that and just be prepared to experiment a bit more. (female teacher, Kennedy)

Whether this was possible with popular literature was less clear. There appeared to be some disagreement about what constituted appropriate literature and what did not. For most teachers it was important in choosing texts for the junior students to 'start from where they were at'. Other teachers lamented what they saw as the restrictive horizons of some adolescent novels which took the students no further than their immediate experience.

Most of the students who talked in the same way as the teachers about English were senior students in the top classes: e.g. "when you read the book you understand people in a different way". On the other hand students in the junior school, in the lower streams and in most of the classes at Campbell, while they were very likely to say that story writing was the activity they preferred above others, were also more likely to point to the acquisition of skills as the main purpose of English.

In junior school then, 'personal response' applied to the two main sites of reading and writing and for both these sites it was closely associated with creativity and imagination. Two main forms of writing seemed to dominate the junior years : personal response which usually took the form of a response to a novel or short story and creative or story writing which covered a number of genres but where there were usually few restrictions so long as the story was 'imaginative'. Journal writing was also encouraged in several of the Year 7 classes.

What was assumed by both teachers and students was that ideas for a story come from, are created by the student. Students and teachers appeared to share an understanding of expectations, at least at a superficial level, though neither were terribly clear about the criteria for evaluation except that writing should be reasonably long and 'imaginative'. Teachers rarely commented on the substance of stories, and even more rarely on their meaning as they drew on particular cultural discourses (see Gilbert 1991 for a discussion of the consequence of such a position). The following quote suggests that for individual students, although they might recognise that they themselves draw on other texts, they see this as being less the case for others who have more imagination.

S:I don't really because I can't really think up ideas. I just seem to get my ideas from books I may have read. I sort of add different books together so it doesn't really work very well.

R:Where do you think other people get their ideas for creative writing?

S:I don't know. I suppose they can transfer their thoughts from picture to paper; it's the same with writing they think up a good idea and then put it down.

The second main English site for self-expression in the junior years was in response to novels or short stories. Here what seemed to be

intended was a response which imaginatively engages with the characters/ideas/issues of the text to construct a meaning from the text. This response might be expressed through writing by taking on the persona of one of the characters. or by writing a short piece about why you like or disliked a text or how you would change it. In most cases this seemed to be drawing on a combination of a Leavisite and progressivist positions whereby the student ideally becomes sensitised to the moral messages, the social and moral themes in novels and to a lesser extent plays through a close discussion of their meaning.

English in Year 11

The shift to senior studies, at least for students studying 2 and 3 unit, signaled a major shift in positioning - a shift to a relation with English studies as the study of literary texts. As was the case with the junior years there were differences from school to school and more obviously between the top, studying 2/3 Unit and bottom year 11s, studying Contemporary English. However, the main shared concern of the teachers was to have students do as well as possible in the HSC, although this was far more marked for teachers and students in the 2/3 Unit as compared to the Contemporary English classes. In the latter classes the purposes of the syllabus allowed for a concentration on communication skills which accorded with teachers expectations of students' capacities and needs. For at least some of the teachers of 2/3 Unit classes the demands of the HSC conflicted with their desire to develop a love and appreciation for 'good literature'. There were also marked differences in the talk about English from students in 2/3 Unit English and those in Contemporary English.

2 and 3 Unit English

The transition to Year 11 was described by most of the students as a major shock for which they had little preparation, particularly for the top year 11 classes. Essay writing rather than creative or story writing became the main form of writing and a 'personal response' took on a whole new set of resonances which they had to translate to be successful in the assessment tasks which came with increasing regularity. For some students this was the first time they had studied and certainly seriously studied poetry, Shakespeare and other forms of canonical literature. Where 'freedom' (from assessment, from restricting topics, to write) enjoyment of reading and self-expression were the main motifs of their junior years, Years 11 and 12 were clearly dominated by the need to be successful in the HSC.

In the senior school and particularly in the 2/3 unit classes, for both students and teachers two powerful but contradictory discourses were at work: a discourse which defined future success in terms of a high TER score achieved through a competitive examination and a Leavisite discourse whereby the study of literature was designed to enhance students appreciation of and deep engagement with valued cultural

texts. This latter position was shared by many of the top level students who had taken English because they loved reading and had been good at writing in the junior school. These two discourses did not sit easily together.

It is not surprising given the rather different practices which these discourses assume that the most striking theme from interviews with year 11 students was their confusion as to what English was now really about and more importantly confusion about how to do well. Important to their success in English was their ability to negotiate the ways in

which these discourses came together in the assessment tasks. Most of these tasks were still predicated on the ability of the student to demonstrate an appropriate sensitivity to literary texts, to arrive at the meaning and the literary value of the text through a close textual reading and to demonstrate the ability to show how the author of novels, plays and poems constructs meanings in terms of their structure, use of linguistic devices and characterisation. While the term 'personal response' is still a major feature of this discourse it soon becomes evident to students that an imaginative/creative response is far less valued than was the case in earlier years; rather the student's response needs to closely coincide with the interpretation of the text arrived at by the teacher and other experts. At the same time the student's response must be supported by detailed evidence from the text(s) and written in an appropriate essay form.

R:You said something about analyzing, is that not something you enjoy?

S:They say "give your opinion" and I just have my opinion and somebody else says "oh, that's not right, it's this" and you think "well, you said your own opinion".

R:This is a common thing, this notion that you read the poem and you bring your interpretation to it but that's not really what is meant.

S:Yeah.

R:Where is the interpretation supposed to come from then?

S:Study guides, I don't know; they hand out study guides and say "don't write what these people write, they're just there to help you" or something and sort of read them and then that's what they expect you to write; it's pretty confusing. They say "they're just there to help you" but if you write something else they'll say, "where did you get this from"? (female student Kennedy)

S:I think that's another thing I don't like about English 'cos they always tell you you're allowed to have your own opinion but you get marked down if you don't follow what you've been told; like if they've been saying all this stuff in class or something and you in the tests it's something totally different and you still get marked down, even if you can support it.

R:So you've got to follow a line? How do you know what the line is to follow?

S:Just listen to the teacher. (Female student, Kennedy)

R:How do you see people getting good marks? What do you think people in assessment tasks get good marks for? What is the teaching looking for do you think generally?

S:I don't know; I've asked a lot of people how to improve my work and someone who does get good marks told me that they just read a lot; they read a lot of books to find other people's way of writing and just to read, but I don't read that much. (female student, Campbell)

R:What do you think you need to do to get a good mark?

S:Well, I think you have to be able to express your own opinions but to express them well, because I think they place a lot of emphasis on style, because I've seen things that had the same content and had totally different marks so it's gotta be the style. I think they want you to be able to quote bits from it and to know the poems well enough to be actually able to quote passages from the poem and to be able to analyze the use of the language like using dark () and the connotations that go with that. I think you get extra marks for understanding the connotations of each part of the poem; to have some sort of background knowledge of the time you're looking at so you've got an historical context. I think there could be marks in that because that's something you'd have to do yourself a lot of the time and it would show sort of a deeper understanding of it.

R:You said a personal expression or a personal response to it; to what degree can it be a personal response when all the stuff you've had in class is?

S:If you read all that stuff lots of them are different opinions from one to the other and I think your personal response is the opinion you agree with most, because I know you can read poetry and you can get anything from it but once you actually find a basis there's not that many different things you can get so your personal response is the one that you decide is most rightworthy because I mean if you get that feeling for a poem then you'll probably have a feeling that it coincides more with one than with another because I had one and I totally disagreed with one of the things what they said; I mean I could see where they got it from but it wasn't my feeling for the poem, but my feeling did coincide with another reading so I think you do have a personal response inasmuch as the way you respond to the poem and then what's written about it. (Female student, Kennedy)

As the last quote above suggests, year 11 Students were often given or required to research material written about an author and his or her works. This material was generally taken as a resource to collect 'factual' material about the author - their life and times - and to access 'expert' opinions about meaning. The power of the 'personal response' or Leavisite discourse meant that the use of such resources had to be reconciled through the notion of assimilation and personal

choice - that is that the student chose from the resources those opinions which most closely matched his or her own. Essays were rarely referenced and it seemed to be understood that in HSC essays, references to critics or texts beyond literary texts was inappropriate - the understanding is that the response must be the student's 'own'. The following quote from a teacher and HSC marker illustrates the tensions and contradictions which the students must negotiate.

Int: That's right. How do you take account of, as a faculty or an individual, the HSC demands you know the questions themselves? How do you interpret or come to understand what the HSC expects of students?

Resp:Well. What I see that it expects is that they come to terms with the literature themselves and that the responses they give should be ones where the teacher might give them access to the text but given that you get them a certain distance, from there on it is their response. They shouldn't be mouthing my opinions or text book's opinions or somebody else's. But once you get them to a certain point then they should be able to give their own response. So it is a sort of limited own response because they cannot have a ... if they didn't have some sort of direction they wouldn't be able to respond, I feel, in a way that would be advantaging them.

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

Resp:Well, I think that is probably a hard question to answer. I have to just think for a moment on that one. Well generally speaking, I give them some limited notes say or we will discuss it and I will give some of my ideas but to get us on the right track or then we have plenty of discussion anyway when I say something and the class doesn't necessarily agree with me and we go to and fro. But still you have got to have a certain amount of direction. 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, but what we are going to do is we are going to get into groups and each group is going to have something to do, one group is going to look at the letters, somebody else is going to look at the marriages and somebody else - so four or five different things. So I have sort of given them the starting point and

now in groups they are going to look at the book and come up with their ideas and then I hope they are going to surprise me. That way.

Int: And what then, you give them feedback on their writing, do you?

Resp:Oh yes. Sometimes I give them something to write and then they give each peer an assessment, they do that sometimes. But then the peer assessment may not necessarily come to grips with some of the things that still have to be looked at even though you would like you know a Utopia sort of situation. You would like them to have more opportunity to decide what's right and what's wrong, but you can't quite, you've got to still give them some feedback I guess on their

essays. But I don't give them ... I believe, even in English, provided a student can support what they say with evidence from the text then that is a good answer. That's what I'm always on about, that whatever you say you have to support it with evidence. So therefore, it's not me telling them completely ... I'm telling them that they have got to do that but they can chose their own evidence and they can, within limits, chose the direction they are going to go.

Int: In teaching for the HSC do you take account of marker's comments?

I mean they come out don't they?

Resp:Oh yes. I mark anyway.

Int: Oh so you mark? Oh well that helps.

Resp:That's right.

Int: You think that's a pretty ... I mean that's an advantage don't you think?

Resp:Oh yes, I know what is expected I suppose so that's right. In the HSC the markers expect if they are writing about literature, they expect the student to give some sort of personal response. They don't want you regurgitating lots of chunks out of cribs and things like that, no. And the sort of response they want is a response that shows that the student has come to grips with the novel and has worked on it and it has some kind of understanding.

Int: And, as you say, supported it from the ...?

Resp:Yes, yes. You support it from the grass roots. That's the way I see it.

(female teacher, Spender)

Most of the 2/3 unit English students at Kennedy and Spender recognised that the notion of 'personal response' encrypted a range of contradictory messages - that not all 'personal responses' were equally valued and that valued responses were often recoverable from the teachers notes and study guides. This would seem to leave those who were unable to decode the implicit requirement for a researched intertextually rich essay, that is those who took messages about a personal response at face value, at a disadvantage, unless they had accrued the cultural resources to respond personally without recognising the capital upon which they drew. For such students the success of some of their peers looked effortless, natural; their own lack of success due to some inherent limitations.

At Campbell this was less of a dilemma for the 2/3 Unit students. The contradictory requirements implicit in a discourse of appreciation combined with a discourse of achievement was in part reconciled by the pragmatism of their teacher. As an ex student of the school and with a socio-economic and cultural background not that dissimilar from his students he seemed to be less influenced by a Leavisite discourse than one whereby his students life chances hinged on their doing well in the HSC. His responsibility as a teacher then was taken to be to deconstruct what this meant in pragmatic terms. This was best achieved through a thorough discussion of texts, good notes and intensive practice at essay writing with detailed and specific feedback. For

instance the teacher regularly stayed back after school with those students who required extra help with essay writing.

Most of the students from the top year 11 class at Campbell talked very differently about English when compared to the interviews of the Kennedy and Spender students. They were much more appreciative of the efforts of their teacher, they were willing to work hard but at the same time at least some of them expressed a strong sense of alienation from English canonical texts. English was valued for its utilitarian purposes in assisting them to communicate orally and in written forms but they questioned the study of Shakespeare and other literary texts. It would be fair to say that many of the students made few connections between the nature of their study of English in their senior years to anything other than the need to pass the HSC.

S:I'm not sure; I don't like the way people read into all the poems and that 'cos I think they probably just wrote it to write a poem. When I write a poem I don't sit there and think "like I really want people to think this" so I think people read into it a bit too much, like she could have just been writing a novel. I suppose we have to do it.

R:So do you resent having to do that sort of stuff?

S:Not really resent it but sometimes I don't understand the reason for doing it, like I don't know what I get out of doing it.

R:So what do you see as the purpose of English?

S:To me it's just speaking and writing better; I don't really know why we have to do Drama and everything. I like the essays though because I never knew how to write an essay. Mr. W has helped me with that and he helps me in art, with my art essays and everything.

and later in the same interview

S:I think media was one of the hardest things to understand.

R:Do you think you got anything out of it personally? Was it relevant to you personally?

S:Not really; I don't understand why we done it, like there's a lot of things like that in English. Like I mean I'm never gonna learn. I'll never need to know how to read Shakespeare again or with the media, like it doesn't really. I don't really think I'd benefit that much apart from the essay writing.

R:So you didn't learn anything in particular from the Media Unit?

S:No.

R:Nothing stayed with you?

S:No. (female student, Campbell)

R:How is English for you? Do you really like it?

S:Not overly; it's not a bad subject. I learn things from it and everything but you can't see the direct result of what you are learning, other than your spelling. All the things that we do doesn't

seem to have any relevance like that I'd really notice. Like it all helps in the end but you can't see how.

R: So you can't see how you get better at things.

R: What do you think the purpose of English is then and what would you say Mr. W would see as what you should be learning eventually in English? What is it meant to teach you?

S: I don't understand why we have to study all these novels all the time; the spelling and stuff like that's important and your grammar; learning all those things you need for later life and stuff but things like your novels and stuff.....I know when you do researching in other topics it helps but doing all this extra stuff with the novels doesn't seem to really have any relevance to me.

(female student Campbell)

Contemporary English

The discussion so far has focused primarily on the expectations and

student comments in 2/3 Unit English. At both of the coast schools in particular, despite the students concerns about the ambiguity of expectations, teachers and top year 11 students understandings of the value of English and what constituted a study of English were more or less in accord⁵. On the other hand, students at Campbell were much more likely to contest the value of studying literary texts and to situate the study of English as preparation for their future work lives.

These was even more marked for students in Contemporary English. In many ways Contemporary English was designed to address the resistance of students to literary texts/to take up those students for whom 2/3 Unit was judged to have little relevance. Contemporary English was developed for two groups of students - those from non-English speaking backgrounds and the growing number of students stay on to year 11, who before increases in youth employment and apprenticeships would have left school for work. In other words, it was designed for those students who did not have to be prepared for University study and a high TER as indicated by an academic response to canonical literature. Rather Contemporary English was designed to be 'practical', to develop communication skills and the enjoyment of reading through an appreciation of the ideas conveyed in texts.

Compared to 2/3 Unit English there seemed to be a far greater degree of continuity between the expectations of Contemporary English and English in Years 7-10. Students were not expected to write extended essays which recognised the literary technique of authors, rather they were expected to look for the ideas/themes, the author's message. Indeed some students said that they had moved to Contemporary English because of their problems with essay writing.

Contemporary English was not intended to be a watered down version of 2/3 Unit English rather it was intended to take a different approach

altogether, and so it does. Inevitably, however it has become the least valued study of English, the one in which those students judged to be less able by the school system are likely to find themselves. In some ways however it is not an easier, more transparent form of English study. As one teacher points out it requires a greater diversity of skills. The questions in the exam require a 'process' response which are in some ways more difficult to anticipate and prepare for, in comparison to the 2/3 Unit English exam where texts and to a certain extent questions are predictable, model answers can be prepared and quotes learnt by heart.

Contemporary English has the potential to take up a cultural analysis of texts, but the question might be asked how well-equipped are most teachers, given their preservice training and their positioning in relation to Leavisite and progressivist discourses, to go beyond the text in their analysis of issues. Rather, traditional analyses are more likely to be drawn upon which examine issues through recovering the author's message/meaning and through characterisation where characters and what they do and say are taken to embody specific conflicts, issues and moral stances.

Conclusions

The notion of 'personal response' is a dominant theme in secondary English, where a 'personal response' is taken to be the imaginative product of the humanist meaning making individual central to both Leavisite and progressivist understandings of English. In years 7-10 the lack of syllabus prescription allows for an emphasis on the process of learning and the provision of opportunities for creative self-expression through story writing, an imaginative identification

with characters and authors and through journal writing. In years 11-12 however there is a marked shift in the meaning of personal response where what is required is a distanced critical comment⁶. The institutional discourses of English continue to privilege those students who can draw on the cultural capital to demonstrate their appreciation and understanding of literary texts through a richly intertextual (although unacknowledged) analysis of those texts. The junior years do little to prepare students for an engagement with literary texts or the ability to write 'an essay' - that is, a sustained piece of analytical writing.

It is in Contemporary English that we might look for the potentially most radical contestation to the hegemony of a Leavisite approach to the study of literary texts within the existing school system. Despite the increasing numbers of students taking (and being advised to take this option) it remains to be seen, however, whether it can go beyond a needs based practical approach to reading, writing and speaking to a more critical reformulation of these tasks and whether approaching

texts through a focus on issues contributes to a recognition of the way in which cultural meanings are constructed. On the other hand, the debate about what a cultural studies approach has to contribute to secondary English itself has yet to be adequately engaged. It seems important to avoid replacing one elitist system with another. What seems to be crucial here is that any new approach be put under careful and critical scrutiny to examine its effects on all students. Cultural studies and critical literacy, like a Leaviste study of literary texts has the potential to confirm as well as change the existing disparities in the effects of schooling on students' life chances.

References

Belsey, C. (1980) *Critical Practice*, London: Methuen.

Bourdieu, P. (1983) "The Forms of Capital" in J.G.(ed) Richardson, *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, NY: Greenwood.

Cranny-Francis, A. (1991 or 2) "The Value of Genre in English Teaching" in F. Christie (Chair) *Teaching Critical Social Literacy*, Project of National Significance on the Preservice Preparation of Teachers for Teaching English Literacy, vol.2: Papers. Canberra: Government Publishing Service.

Cranny-Francis, A. (1992) "Technology and/or Weapon: the Disciplines of Reading in the Secondary English classroom". Paper presented at the International Systemic Functional Linguistics Congress, Macquarie University, Sydney.

Eagleton, T. (1983) *Literary Theory: An Introduction* Oxford: Blackwells.

Freebody, P. (1990) Cultural positioning in the assessment of students' writing: On the impossibility of tenor free assessment.. A plenary paper presented at the Language in Education Conference, University of Wollongong .

Gilbert, P. and Taylot, S. (1991) *Fashioning the Feminine: Girls, Popular Culture and Schooling*, Sydney: Allen &Unwin.

Goodson, I. and Medway, P. (eds.), (1990) *Bringing English to Order*, Sussex: Falmer Press.

Hunter, I. (1994) "Four Anxieties About English" in *Interpretations*, Vol. 27, No. 3, December 1994.

Patterson, A. (1992) "'Personal Response' and the English Teacher". Draft chapter in Meredyth, D. and Tyler, D., (eds.) *Child, Citizen and Culture: Genealogies of Australian Education*, Griffith University: Insititute for Cultural Policy Studies.

Wright, J., Cranny-Francis, A., and Winser, B. (1992) "The Construction of Teacher's Subjectivities in Secondary English". Paper presented at the AARE/NZARE Joint Conference, Deakin University, Geelong, November, 1992.

1 See Eagleton (1983), Belsey (1980) and Goodson and Medway (1990) for a more detailed discussion of the historical background to Leavisism and New Criticism

2 Assessment tasks in 2 and 3 unit English in the HSC continue to be reworked to more successfully elicit a 'personal response' to literary texts which avoids the demonstration of a theorised critique (see Freebody 1990 but also conversation with a HSC marker, November 1995).

3See Patterson, 1992 for an historical analysis.

4 See also Wright et al 1992 for a more detailed discussion of this aspect of the study.

5 What we haven't done at this point is to relate students' SES and parents' educational background to resistance and compliant positions in relation to the acceptance of literary texts as valuable sites of study.

6See Freebody ,1990 for a more extensive discussion of this.