Teachers' experiences of the HSC English syllabus in NSW

The newest Stage 6 (Years 11 & 12) English syllabus was implemented in 1999 and first examined in 2001. This new syllabus was intended to bring senior English back 'up-to-date' with current ideas about literary theory, student needs and pedagogy - as such it contains many new and exciting features, and seems to have drawn on a variety of theoretical perspectives to inform some innovative approaches to English teaching and learning. However, it can also be perceived that this desire to take a bit of the best of several literary and pedagogical theories has also resulted in a syllabus that lacks a solid theoretical standpoint and continues to neglect several issues of inequity and disadvantage.

My PhD research project has been borne out of a need to investigate the success of the stage 6 English syllabus in producing a program for learning that is relevant, useful and enriching to all students. It is essential that we determine whether the innovations of this syllabus are based in solid literary and curriculum theory, or if we are seeing more of an attempt to please ‘all of the people, all of the time’, while ultimately hanging on to outdated notions of what the ‘ideal’ English scholar actually is. It will also be of benefit to explore the extent to which the syllabus development was (and may in the future continue to be) constrained by the process of assessment and examination that characterises the senior years in New South Wales' schools.

The thesis aims to examine the current NSW Senior English Syllabus using a combination of historical theoretical analysis and ethnographic research. The final work will explore several problematic questions about the current curriculum, such as:

- How has the current curriculum come to exist?
- Within which theoretical frameworks is the current curriculum positioned?
• What impact do the theoretical assumptions behind this curriculum have on both teaching and student learning?
• Are the claims of this curriculum (i.e. that it has a more inclusive range of texts and develops contextual analysis of multiple texts) true?
• Do the perceived advantages of the new curriculum translate when applied to the reality of the classroom?
• Can the aims of the new curriculum be realised within the utilitarian, competitive ethos of the senior years?

OPINIONS OF THE STAGE 6 ENGLISH SYLLABUS

Senior representatives of the English Teachers Association (ETA), the professional body for English Teachers in New South Wales, have publicly praised the new syllabus for its “eclectic” range of texts. They have also, however, voiced criticism of the high difficulty level of the Standard English course, as well as the lack of time and resources given to teachers to learn how to properly implement the syllabus. In a Sydney Morning Herald Opinion column (March 4th, 2002, p.13), Sue Gazis criticises media “scaremongering about the introduction of postmodernism to HSC English”. Gazis claims that the new syllabus allows students to “find a place for English in their lives, no matter what direction it takes”, rather than limiting students to the study of canonical literature. ETA President and prominent curriculum theorist Wayne Sawyer extends this defence of the inclusion of multimedia and film texts in the new syllabus by stressing the importance for “students to be able to analyse the texts they are being bombardeed with everyday as well as the great works of their culture.” (SMH, October 23rd, 2002, p.17). Sawyer believes that the criticism of the new HSC has arisen from a “misplaced sense of nostalgia” for the ‘old ways’ of teaching English, and chastises commentators for wishing to hinder the advancement of the education profession.

A prime example of the kind of commentary that has been reproached by Gazis and Sawyer is featured in an Opinion piece written by Barry Spurr, a Senior Lecturer in the English Department of the University of Sydney (SMH, April 30th, 2001, p.12). Spurr contends that the new English syllabus can be seen as more of a “cultural
studies” syllabus, and notes that it contains “far too many texts of ephemeral relevance and little literary distinction”. Where Gazis and Sawyer argue that the range of texts offered is more “relevant” to students’ experience, Spurr argues that the ‘relevance’ that is being sought will not only be “out-of-date tomorrow”, but will also lead to the “dissolution of the discipline [through its submission] to socio-political concerns”.

English teacher Brenton Boswell also criticised the syllabus as being full of “guff” (SMH, October 21st, 2002 p.13), reprimanding what he sees as overly convoluted phrasing used in the syllabus document, as well as the replacement of literacy skills with a focus on “visual literacy”. Popular media columnist Miranda Devine presents a scathing view of the new syllabus (SMH, February 28th, 2002 p.13), especially of the way in which she sees “HSC [English] students…being trapped in a conformist box of postmodernist thought”. Devine cites Naomi Smith, a trained but not practicing teacher, as believing that the new postmodern approach is “creating an attitude of distrust towards language and the ability of language to convey truths and great ideas.”

While several media commentators and curriculum theorists have publicly voiced their opinions of the relative successes and failings contained in the new syllabus, perhaps the most important commentators on the syllabus have been the teachers themselves. In a study that collected survey responses from 102 Head Teachers of English in New South Wales, (Manuel 2001) a range of teachers offered differing opinions of the syllabus’ relative merits. While the majority of teachers (55%) surveyed were either ‘satisfied’ or ‘very satisfied’ with the content and philosophy of the syllabus, only 35% were ‘satisfied’ or ‘very satisfied’ with its structure. Many complained that they were “limited in choice by the mandatory requirements for studying the prescribed types of text” (p.72) and some teachers commented that the choice of texts had remained too conservative. Another common criticism was of the difficulty of the Standard English course, especially for students who would have studied the ‘Contemporary’ course under the previous syllabus structure. Also, although many have found the new syllabus exciting and challenging, there was also a definite perception of a lack of sufficient support in terms of professional development and resources, as well as a rushed implementation process. While this
concern is not directly related to an exploration of the syllabus’ theoretical grounding, the reality of teachers having a poor understanding of what is expected from students in the new syllabus may mean that the theoretical aims of the syllabus are not being achieved at the chalk face.

**SOCIAL POWER AND THE CURRICULUM**

Much work has been done on the relationship between knowledge and power, and the ways in which the sanctioning of ‘official’ knowledge has lead to the endorsement and perpetuation of dominant discourses in education and society. Through silencing of ‘other’ knowledge and limitations placed on people’s capacity to explore multiple understandings of mainstream knowledge, social oppression is perpetuated.

One of the most influential writers on the relationship between knowledge and power has been Michel Foucault – of particular interest in this research are the parallels he draws between prison discipline and school examinations (1977). Foucault maintained that:

> “the examination enabled the teacher, while transmitting his [sic] knowledge, to transform his [sic] pupils into a whole field of knowledge. Whereas the examination with which an apprenticeship ended in the guild tradition validated an acquired aptitude – the ‘master-work’ authenticated a transmission of knowledge that had already been accomplished – the examination in the school was a constant exchanger of knowledge; it guaranteed the movement of knowledge from the teacher to the pupil, but it extracted from the pupil a knowledge destined and reserved for the teacher.” (pp.186-187)

We can see then, that in relation to the teaching of HSC English, student empowerment perhaps cannot only be realised through a reconsideration of the content of the syllabus, but perhaps also will necessitate a rethinking of the examination process in the senior years. Foucault outlines to his readers the ways in which prisons discipline their subjects through constant monitoring of their activities; as long as our students are participating in a syllabus that constantly monitors them using regular assessments and examinations, perhaps it is not possible to argue that
we are striving to educate free-thinking, democratic individuals, as their learning only takes place in an arena of subjection.

Continuing with his analysis of the examination process, Foucault also questions whether a “science of the individual [is] possible or legitimate?” (p.191). The apparatus of examination has lead to both “the constitution of the individual as a describable object”, and “a comparative system that made possible the measurement of overall phenomena, the description of groups, the characterisation of collective facts, the calculation of the gaps between individuals, their distribution in a given ‘population’.” (p.191). As a result of this, it is possible to argue a familiar line – that dominant groups exercise power by excluding and repressing ‘others’ using descriptions of individuals as measurable objects. The way Foucault sees it, however, is that the exercise of power is strongest not in its ability to use the examination apparatus to exclude or suppress, but rather in its ability to produce; to produce “reality…domains of objects and rituals of truth” (p.194).

Another notable theorist on education and power is Paulo Freire, who argues in his seminal work Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1970), that people who are denied the freedom to become fully ‘human’ through injustice, exploitation or oppression, must be among the developers of a pedagogy that is truly liberating for both the oppressed and the oppressors. Freire himself anticipated that his work would probably be seen as idealistic or radical (p.19), and indeed much of his argument is both reactionary and revolutionary. Despite these aspects of his work, whether you are sympathetic to his revolutionary inclination or not, it is possible to extrapolate many of the views within his work and examine the syllabus in light of them.

One such point of view is that a truly liberating pedagogy cannot be arrived at by treating oppressed groups as “unfortunates and by presenting for their emulation models from among the oppressors” (p.36). The lack of texts available for study in the new Stage 6 English syllabus that reflect stories and images of self-affirmation for ‘minority’ groups is one clear point at which it fails to be a ‘liberating’ syllabus, in Freire’s terms. As such, the social capital of dominant discourses is reaffirmed, and oppression is perpetuated through, among other things, a simple lack of text choice.
In a more recent work, Michael Apple (1997) discusses the special status enjoyed by school curriculum, which presents knowledge codified in particular ways which has to be learned according to particular rules. The content that is respected as what Apple calls ‘official knowledge’ is assumed to represent the knowledge to which we want students to have access. Ideally, a syllabus should contain methods of demonstrating that the official knowledge that it sanctions should never be taken as given and questions about it and possible alternatives will always need to be asked.

In a research project looking at the link between examinations and inequality in Australia in particular, Teese (2000) explores the ways in which choices about syllabi and their examination result in increased social power for a privileged group that are more likely to gain academic success. The research project documents the way in which students with the “fewest family advantages entered schools with the fewest facilities and encountered the least experienced staff” (p.31) resulting in a low level of academic security for such students. Teese also argues the existence of a ‘curriculum hierarchy’, in which it is not just “any subjects that occupy the top levels of the curriculum, but those that give the greatest play to the economic power, cultural outlook and life-styles of the most educated populations” (p.197).

In the specific case of English, and of particular interest for research examining the ‘new and improved’ NSW senior English syllabus, Teese argues that the removal of canonical texts from the curriculum does not “free students from the cultural world in which Shakespeare was venerated” (p.45). This is a crucial point that often seems to be missed by those who are stricken by the fact that the Bard is no longer a compulsory author in the new syllabus! Examination requirements themselves can also be seen as discriminating between “sophisticated” and “pedestrian” styles of written response (a phenomenon that is also explored in the work of Rosser, 2002), preferring responses that demonstrate not just a mastery of skills and content knowledge, but also showcase creativity and moral sensibility. It is essential, therefore, that although many current English syllabi claim to be less culturally bias and more open to a diverse population of students that these syllabi continue to be scrutinised to discover any implicit forms of enculturation and oppression.
REFERENCES


