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Editorial: Knowing in English

> 'How does the knowledge you acquired as a university graduate connect with your work as an English teacher? What did you learn during your time at university? How does it inform your attempts to initiate worthwhile communicative activities in your classroom? …'

These are some of the questions we posed to authors in our call for contributions to a special issue of *Changing English* on the 'knowledge question'. Contributors focused specifically on the relationship between their knowledge as English educators and the meaning-making that occurs when students interact with one another within classroom settings. We chose this theme partly in response to current debates not only in English teaching but more widely in the field of curriculum studies about the knowledge that ought to lie at the foundations of the school curriculum. Those debates have largely been prompted by Michael Young's claim that the role of schools is to impart 'powerful knowledge' that takes children beyond the 'interests and experiences' of their local communities (Young [2014] 2015, 28-29). It seemed timely to provide English educators with a space in which to grapple with the challenge posed by Young's work, not necessarily on his terms, but through raising anew the question of 'knowing' in English and specifically how that 'knowing' connects with the worlds of language and experience that children bring with them into a classroom.

Questions about knowledge or knowing in English are hardly new to English teachers, though such questions have obviously assumed different degrees of urgency depending on the historical circumstances in which teachers have felt impelled to make claims about the place that English ought to occupy within the education of young people. To encourage contributors to think again about 'knowing' in English we provided a variety of quotations, stretching back to the Newbolt Report (BoE [1938] 1921) that illustrate how English educators have at various times grappled with this question. The Newbolt Report itself can be located within an even older debate, going back to the English Romantic critique of Newtonian science, of what Wordsworth characterises as a mindset that multiplies 'distinctions', then deems 'that our puny boundaries are things/That we perceive, and not that we have made'.

Marjorie Hourd quotes these lines in order to distinguish between the generalising claims of scientific knowledge and the kind of focused attention on the particularities of classroom situations from which reflective practitioners learn so much in their day-to-day work (Hourd [1949] 1968, 18). Her work might thus be read as illustrating what Ian Reid (2004) argues is the pervasive influence of William Wordsworth and English Romanticism on the formation of English and the way English teachers have understood their work. This influence can similarly be traced in the Newbolt Report. Yet it is also significant that Hourd goes beyond Wordsworth to draw on Martin

Buber and Gestalt Theory to argue the centrality of interpretation, of a heightened sensitivity to the relationship between words and their meaning, to everything that happens in an English classroom. The importance of cultivating such a disposition has its justification in a wider and more multifaceted range of intellectual and artistic traditions than simply English Romanticism. We might consider, for example, debates within European culture in the 19th century, such as Dilthey's attempt to argue the legitimacy of the hermeneutic activity in which historians engage vis-à-vis the knowledge claims of science (Gardner 2010, 49-50), a struggle that was to have a decisive impact on a subsequent generation of philosophers, including Lukács and Heidegger. Or Walter Benjamin's celebration of the capacity of children to bring 'materials of widely differing kinds' together 'in a new, intuitive relationship' that always exceeds the way adults understand the world around them (Benjamin [1996] 2004, 450). Or Paul Ricoeur's critique of 'the prejudice that only a datum that is given in such a way that it can be empirically observed and scientifically described' is 'real', as opposed to the experience of 'Being-in-the world' that becomes available to us through narrative (Ricoeur [1984] 1990, 79, 81). Or Bruner's distinction between two 'modes of thought', one directed towards developing arguments that 'convince one of their truth', the other comprising stories that command our attention because of their 'lifelikeness' (Bruner 1986, 11).

These insights emerge out of diverse philosophical positions – we don't want to imply that these writers are saying exactly the same thing – but they can nonetheless be read as affirming the ineluctability of experience and a human impulse to make meaning from the world as it presents itself to us. This is in contrast to the privileging of an 'objective' knowledge that somehow exists outside history as providing the foundations of a school curriculum. By privileging the latter we diminish the significance of whole realms of creative and intellectual expression in response to experience. This can only amount to an impoverishment of the school curriculum. To treat schooling as primarily directed towards enabling students to 'acquire knowledge that takes them beyond their experience' (Young [2014] 2015, 10), as Young conceives 'knowledge', is to deny young people any opportunity to give form and meaning to their experiences through language and the other semiotic resources available to them.

And yet when you review attempts by English educators over the years to argue the value of English vis-à-vis the claims that might be made on behalf of other subjects within the school curriculum, it becomes difficult to avoid the impression that many have a rear-guard character, as though they are being made in protest against powerful interests over which they have little chance of prevailing. This is so even with the Newbolt Report, which might lay claim to setting the parameters for subject English in the 20th century. Its advocacy on behalf of the value of a liberal humanist education takes on an ironical character when set against the backdrop of the carnage wrought by mechanised warfare in World War One and the class conflict that followed it. But we are also thinking of the way that, vis-à-vis the claims made by other subjects for a place within the school curriculum, the Report makes a case for a subject that is somehow not a subject at all, simultaneously accepting its terms of reference 'to consider and report upon the position of English in the educational

system of the country', while demurring from any supposition that 'the present education system of the country was to be accepted as a fixed framework and that our concern with English was limited to the manner in which it is fitted, or should be fitted, into its place in that framework' (BoE [1921] 1938, 4). This characterisation of the status of English inside/outside the school curriculum anticipates subsequent claims made by English educators, most notably that English has no 'content', unlike the other subjects that comprise the school curriculum (Shayer 1972, 19, Dixon [1967] 1972, 1, 73).

To define English primarily by saying what it isn't inevitably renders it vulnerable to take-over by others who don't have any problem in declaring what its content should be. It is as though the very sensibility that English tries to cultivate – a disposition to make provisional judgments and to remain open to other ways of interpreting the words of a poem or a play or a story – will inevitably lose out to declarative judgments that admit of no ambiguity or uncertainty. Such negative formulations of subject English recur in various guises throughout the twentieth century, including Britton's (in)famous characterisation of English at the Dartmouth Conference as being equivalent to the pastry left over when his mother had finished cutting out tarts for baking: the tarts constitute the key subjects that comprise the curriculum (Science, Mathematics, Geography, etc.) while English is what is 'left over' (Britton 1966, 12). This is one way of explaining why the space that English occupies within the curriculum has easily been filled by a functional conception of 'literacy' on the one hand and a reified version of a literary canon on the other – both a consequence of government interventions that are radically hostile to the project of generational renewal and democratic participation embodied in key landmark texts in the history of subject English: the Newbolt Report, Marjorie Hourd's *The Education of the Poetic Spirit*, Dixon's *Growth Through English*, Medway's *Finding a Language*, Kress's *Writing the Future*.

It would have been too much to ask of any of the contributors to this special issue of *Changing English* to point beyond the contradictions and complexities reflected in various attempts by English educators to articulate the kind of 'knowing' that is distinctive to subject English. It is even questionable whether such an attempt would be desirable, as there seems to be good reason for saying that English is its history, that the multidimensional nature of the subject is reflected in the conversations that have been prompted by new challenges posed by a continually evolving semiotic landscape and everyday culture as they are experienced within particular local settings. In *Finding a Language*, Peter Medway reflects on why English teachers are reluctant to use 'two key terms in the language of teachers of the other subjects, "knowledge" and "learning"', noting that these words are 'tied in people's minds to facts and information', things that English teachers do not see as being at the forefront of their concerns when they are initiating meaningful language activities in their classrooms (Medway 1980, 3-4). Many of the contributors to this special issue likewise step back from any attempt to say prescriptively what students should 'know' by doing English, preferring instead to highlight the nature of classrooms as social spaces in which meanings are continually transacted, that is to say, to accentuate English as a form of knowing as they engage in the social interactions of

the classroom rather than as a formal body of knowledge that constitutes the subject.

The diversity of responses to our call for contributions to this special issue reflects continuing debates about ‘knowing’ in English. This diversity matches the diversity of quotations we originally collated in our call for contributions, which in turn might generate reflection as to whether English educators are any more secure in their sense of the nature of their work than has historically been the case. Yet perhaps the paradox is that this very diversity emerges out of a focus that characterises all these essays, namely how English teachers might most effectively respond to what they perceive to be the needs of their students within the specific contexts in which they are working.

The question of generational renewal lies at the heart of English teaching. You might want to say that this applies to all school subjects – this was certainly Hannah Arendt’s view when she claimed that ‘the essence of education is natality, the fact that human beings are born into the world’ (Arendt [1954] 1968, 174). A common feature of these essays is nonetheless a sense of ethical obligation on the part of English teachers to the students in their classrooms, at the heart of which is a recognition that the world belongs to them, not to us. This ethic of care isn’t one dimension of their professional practice amongst many – it certainly isn’t a discrete item that can be listed amongst the other items that typically make up professional standards. The focus on language in English classrooms inevitably means a focus on both the things that bind us together and those that divide us. It highlights the way what ‘I’ say implicates others, reminding ‘me’ of my obligations towards other people who share this world with me.

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