

## **THE PENAL COLONY OR THE MAKING OF ENGLISH TEACHERS: a polemic**

Mick Burton

As the recent survey commissioned by CCUE reveals, English as an academic subject is polymorphously glorious in its variety and coherence. Its orders of discourse range from the close reading of texts inscribed in a canon to the deconstruction of Thatcher's public utterances. Within this range 'the canon of English literature, a knowledge of the historical, intellectual and cultural contexts of literature, theoretical approaches and subject methodologies, presentational skills, oral communication skills, writing skills, powers of independent learning, flexibility of mind, a capacity for self-reflection, conceptual grasp, analytical skills, critical reasoning and the ability to engage in discussion of ethical and other human values' were all regarded as essential by the CCUE survey respondents. What is significant here is the breadth of a personal knowledge base, deeply embedded in a sophisticated epistemological ground.

However, because English as a domain of discourse is relatively new, its traditions lack the authority of law, science, and in particular, philosophy. Its brief history has been filtered through a screen of vested interest, so that it was, and is, entirely possible to predicate so many paradigms of the subject that its resultant realisations seem to denote conceptual incoherence, enabling the purveyors of temporary dominant ideologies to insert their version of English for public acceptance, occasionally as in recent media thrusts, invoking and citing royalty. Hence with the accession of Thatcherism and its concomitant desire for the word authoritative, the praxis of English in schools was first Questioned, and then reified as defective, being grounded in variety, both in literature and language. The eighties Tory government exercised power over the English curriculum in a haphazard but simultaneously disastrous way, with the misreading of the Bullock Report, *A Language for Life*, as defining the subject English in terms of basic literacy, with the ensuing fiction of sufficiency in transferable skills or competences. The source of the conflation lay, appropriately enough, in that unimaginable year, 1984, with the publication of English 5-16. The subject English, with discourse frames realised as exploratory domains of knowledge in the very diverse area of literary texts was reduced to 'the four modes of language'.

Since that document's publication, the making of English and of English teachers has been the site of conflict that at times seemed to be searching for the heart of the nation, in a final retrenchment of 'tradition'. This is not however Eliot's concept, but a much more etiolated version, deriving from the advocacy of Sheila Lawlor and John Marenbon, as empowered voices of the new right. The former asserts, for instance, that the National Curriculum should not set out a complete teaching scheme, but indicate the minimum fundamentals of knowledge and skills without which there can be no further progress in the wider subject. The title of the pamphlet from which the quotation is taken indicates the dominant ideology to which the new right, in its desire for a quasi-divine episteme, aspired as its ground for knowing: *Correct Core: Simple curricula for English, maths and science*.

Together with the earlier English Our English, reasoned Dr. Marenbon's judgement upon the almost total failure of the English curriculum, including such edicts as 'When children leave English schools today, few are able to speak and write English correctly..' this document flagged the right's heuristic drive for control of knowledge. The demonised included 'Her Majesty's Inspectorate', and in particular, 'those who theorise about English teaching'.

Within the labyrinth bordered by the above appeared the Kingman report, a document setting out to define the model of English language underscoring the English curriculum in secondary schools. The committee, headed by a mathematician (Sir John Kingman) contained, according to Harold Rosen, not a 'single member who can lay claim to having made a major contribution to the theory and practice of English teaching in the last quarter of a century.' Kingman constructed a model of the English language that was to influence English in the National Curriculum to the present day.

On its heels came Cox. Boxed or not, Cox was a remarkable carnival of the diversity of English teaching attested to in practice over the previous twenty-two years, focussed in particular by the Dartmouth Seminar which developed a fusion of discovery praxis and personal construct theory. It was the Cox Report that created English as a National Curriculum subject: what followed was a version of the subject to which the majority of English teachers were able to subscribe. Standard English, for example, was not, in Cox, a new right shibboleth, but a focus for empowerment/entitlement. 'A democratic society needs people who have the linguistic abilities which will enable them to discuss, evaluate and make sense of what they are told, as well as to take effective action on the basis of their understanding.' Such revolutionary proclamations from Black Paper Cox were unfortunately only part of the report which still insisted on the nature of English as being grounded in the division of four 'modes' of language, speaking, listening, reading, writing. The resultant confusion is demonstrated by reference to the 1990 version of the English National Curriculum; the following are statements of attainment;

*Demonstrate in discussion and writing knowledge of ways in which language varies between different types of texts.*

*Demonstrate, in talking about a range of stories and poems which they have read, an ability to explain preferences.*

The first is from the **writing** attainment target, the second from **reading**. Language is too complex a semiotic system to be reduced to apparently discrete functions; but the attempt at epistemological skimming will leave a rancid residue in future versions of the government's basic drive to impose a curriculum on teachers and teacher educators.

For all its confusions, however, perhaps even because of them, many English teachers and teacher educators were able to find in the English National Curriculum orders (1990) a challenge to their imagination, and a focus for developing innovative methods of teaching. The matter of testing, however, eroded the nascent sense of professional pride in meeting that challenge. The overbearing arrogance of the government's dictats in this period is well captured by Chris Davies; 'they (the tests) were administered in such a way that they forced the abandonment of a planned

curriculum; they introduced out-moded forms of study, such as anthologies of literary extracts; and they turned the study of Shakespeare from one element within the English curriculum to the very epicentre of all English activities.' 1992 was the watershed; the tests were boycotted by the profession, goaded beyond passive resistance by the bullying tactics of the education secretary. Finally, however, the screws were turned by the right on the purveyors of liberal nonsense in the form of a review of English in the National Curriculum. Thus 'we have given careful consideration to the argument that any decision to revise what is a popular order will undermine morale and prejudice the progress which has been made since the introduction of National Curriculum English.' The political unconscious of this document would narrate the opposite. The repressed 'Common Core' returns.

Children are to have the chains of Standard English, etched upon them by designers once known as teachers. In defence of my previous metaphor, it must be remembered that David Pascall, the chairman of the National Curriculum Council demanded that all children should be taught to speak properly (Standard English) even in the playground, and that teachers should act as linguistic police. Such Stalinist 'linguistics' had the year before shown a remarkable manifestation in the rejection of the LINC project, which had produced excellent, rational materials for in-service and teacher education, and upon which the government had spent £21,000,000.

By 1993 a draft version of English in the National Curriculum emerged, attracting universal opprobrium. The signifier of emollience, Sir Ron Dearing, duly smoothed out all the wrinkles so that by 1995 the current version of the orders for English was published. The bland minimalism of the Dearing version has lulled English teachers into passive, resigned acceptance of orders which enact strict social control through the insistence on standard English as the publicly validated medium of expression, the irrational prescription of unproven methodology in early stages of reading and the clear imposition of a literary canon for reading at Key stages 3 and 4.

Who then were these diabolical English teachers whose failings have brought the nation to its knees? The paradigm for the subject into which the London Institute of Education eased the way of many English teachers was dialogic, though the Bakhtin theories of language and society were not then common academic currency. Together with the personal construct theory of Kelly, the psycholinguistic frames of Vygotsky and Luria, was added the appeal of David Holbrook, whose work with 'remedial' children in secondary modern schools was inspirational. English was both a mediation of life and a meditation upon it, but it was not Life, Leavis -style. Inevitably, it was not controlled centrally, except by public examination and academe, and in the process there was no necessary common core, although the quality of experience in exploration was challenging. However the increasingly messianic obsessions of Holbrook's later work with literature as a psychotherapeutic panacea, were a return to the repressed Leavis, his teacher, and of diminishing value.

In contrast the work of the Schools Council Project in Linguistics and English Teaching began to offer an entirely different focus through its adoption of the first linguistic theory and description which systematically related language to society. Halliday's work has been a powerful influence, on many teachers of English, and on public discourse; it was his linguistics which underscored the LINC project. Because his paradigm for language is predicated on a democratic entitlement, thus entailing

empowerment, for all, the right reacted with its irrationalist recourse to prescriptive, bastardised grammar (mostly Latin, with small Greek). It is the case that the study of language as an integral component of English has a perfectly justifiable foundation, but its realisation was fogged by seemingly random intervention from the Tory government in power throughout the period of paradigm questioning that a subject normally undergoes. The experience of both English teachers and teacher educators has been to enact the Heracleitan flux of demand and resistance for too many years; in the process children and older students have been the ciphers for the exercise of power by politicians. In the middle teachers and teacher educators have attempted to transform inanity after inanity to meaningful learning, only forever to be pilloried as the sole cause of the imagined decline and fall; golden age myths die hard.

In 1998, today's myth, becoming a permeating issue in the whole diverse arena of public discourse, is the standard. There should be no objections to standards, since they are, qua standards, justified and verifiable by publicly testable procedures. However it is a serious category mistake to conflate the concept used for determining, for instance, electrical safety, with human performance in complex tasks such as teaching. In the discourses of education, however, the door has been ajar for such slippery transfer through the dominant models of learning, still resolutely cited by student teachers, which are or derive from, behaviourist theories. The gross attempt to exert total control over human behaviour entailed by the espousal of such models is manifested in the obsession with apparently quantifiable variables such as quality, or competence. To become a teacher of English in 1998 involves finding evidence, during your PGCE year, of reaching the standards for new teachers laid down by the TTA. A semantic shift has also turned your course from education to training; the implications in deskilling terms are considerable; one trains dogs, horses, pigeons. By metaphoric extension one also trains electricians, plumbers, carpenters; in this case the spectrum of skills needed to become a successful tradesperson are easily defined and regulated by the inscription of material reality within the discourses of action relevant to those aspects of the material germane to any particular trade. By contrast the recent history of teacher education/training is merely fabulous.

Alistair West performs an apt trope on the history of the LINC project by locating its fate within the discourses of Toy town, a radio children's serial dominated by the drive to establish and maintain boundaries without faultlines. He records having to explain to Mr Mayor (Major/Clark/Patten) his presence at a conference at Ruskin College in which the 'teachers' guru Terry Eagleton is fighting tradition with the cunning of a miners' leader.' West as an English adviser might, in a democratic society, have expected that such attendance at conferences on English teaching was part of his job.

For the making of English teachers, then, there has been no second coming; the epistemological anarchy loosed upon the discourses of education has radically deformed and reduced the courses in which students were prepared to teach to a series of competences to be portfolioed within the education inc. marketplace. Within the generic descriptions of standards for new teachers the following may be found: 'have a secure knowledge and understanding of the concepts and skills in their specialist subjects at a standard equivalent to degree level to enable them to teach it confidently

and accurately in KS3 and KS4, and, where relevant, post-16.' So as to ensure every bolt is tightened, every screw in place, 'required subject knowledge for those teaching English... at secondary level will be specified when the ITT National Curriculum is developed during 1997.' Toy town has thus become the penal colony; the punishment for failure to save the nation from its decline and fall, arguably the desired imaginary of the subject English since Matthew Arnold, is to have the subject inscribed, prescribed and processed upon the persons of the new English teachers.

The domain of subject knowledge and understanding comes first in the list of Standards for the Award of Qualified Teacher Status. To receive this award, student teachers 'must, when assessed, demonstrate that they:...' Filling in the check list involves a variety of predications of unequal epistemological consequence. Knowledge and understanding appear, as cited above, which but for the rider of 'required specified' would not normally raise an eyebrow, since critical knowledge and understanding of a subject domain creates experts within that domain. However, English is much less amenable to Gradgrindery, however disguised in pseudo-rational bureaucratism, than the authors of this document desire. For the categorical imperative of the subject has always been dialogical, its discourses fluid and malleable. No one has yet defined English as a subject domain satisfactorily, such that the definition could articulate its truth conditions in stable paradigmatic terms. This resistance is both its strength and its weakness in that the house of English appears to be constructed from sand. Appearance in current politics constitutes reality, and English as a subject has to be controlled and parcelled up into 'objective' standards, with well-pointed brickwork. Thus the epistemological horizons are rendered monochrome; not content to 'require' and 'specify' they demand that the subject be taught 'accurately'. Unpacking the dream of accuracy for English involves a journey via Coketown to pursue the word perfected, the sentence honed to zero tolerance. The unconscious of the concept of accuracy in its context for English desires on the one hand a monologic 'linguistics' to justify rote learning of some kind of 'grammar', closely allied to the formulaic production of standard English; on the other, an appreciation of Great White Male literature which does timid obeisance to the dominant moral technology. The standards of the TTA are of course the effect of the legal requirements of the National Curriculum orders. It is easy to browse through Dearing and find the bland requirements concealing their inept conceptualisation: In the Standard English and Language Study strand on p.24 pupils have to learn about 'discourse structure, phrase, clause and sentence structure, words, and punctuation'. Where is the problem? Don't we all wish we had students who understood and practised the implied skills in this list? Unfortunately, the list is given no theoretical underpinning; the concept of register, for instance, does not appear, and without it, or some equivalent notion of diatype, such as speech acts or language games one cannot teach about discourse, let alone those constitutive structures which, in the Dearing diminution, involve 'the structure of whole texts, paragraph structure, how different types of paragraphs are formed; openings and closings in different kinds of writing.' Yet on p.23 the specified range of writing activities, from e.g. 'notes...screenplays' is incoherent without linguistic framing of the Hallidayan sort, precisely the model which drove the LINC project. LINC finally hits target; £21,000,000 becomes a sentence of 33 words. Thus the Dearing prescription gestures towards a kind of language study in which 'accuracy' is a feasible concept, but its slack epistemology ensures the gesture remains ungrounded.

The desire for ideological control of the curriculum noted above in the publications of Lawlor and Marenbon has enfeebled the 'final version' of the English orders so that their incoherence functions, by enabling a weary consensus, to maintain an apparently self-evident reasonableness in the face of the monster theory. But for the intending English teacher 'accuracy' hovers, as a necessary condition of their admission into the guardianship of the National Curriculum. This concept has further entailments; if we leave the language problem for the moment, and turn to the study of literature, it is manifest that literary studies at secondary school level demand variety and extension, at the point of text selection, in the modes of delivery and learning, in the modes of assessment. In the case of assessment it is noteworthy that from the last government the fetishisation of the unseen exam was ritually inscribed into all public examination syllabuses; coursework was reduced from, in many cases, 100%, to 20%. One of the touchstones of GCSE was the use of coursework assessment to enable the best from pupils; it had the unfortunate consequence of allowing those below the threshold of desired elite performance to break that mould. It therefore refused to maintain patterns of expected domination; thus it had to go.

The required subject knowledge for new English teachers has now been revealed; it comprises Shakespeare, pre- twentieth century literature-these are different categories in the official discourse!-and a number of male poets and playwrights; it is the precise mirror of the National Curriculum for schools. Although the document from the TDA (TTA98) is inscribed Consultation Draft, the fate of such previously titled publications does not suggest much real change. Via a subject audit, 'gaps in trainees' subject knowledge' will be identified, and through 'supported self- study' they will become 'confident and competent in using the English specified in their teaching.' (TTA 98p.20)(28) What follows is alarming. In paragraph 26 'Trainees must know and understand:

a: and use correctly, terms which, in addition to those in the National Curriculum English Order, are necessary to enable trainees to be precise in their explanations to pupils, to discuss secondary English at a professional level, and to read inspection and classroom-focused research evidence with understanding.

b: the nature and role of standard English as the medium through which all subjects are taught' (my italics)

These injunctions upon standards appear to be realised in the following pages (21/2). However the epistemological banality of the document reaches its nadir in the discussion of lexis. 'Trainees must know and understand: **morphology and semantics** required as background knowledge to assist with the teaching of spelling at KS3 and KS4'

The manifold riches of these concepts in the teaching and learning of English are thus absolutely trivialised in this insulting reduction. To illustrate more from these pages would be otiose..

In the final section of this paper I shall develop an alternative framework.. Much of teacher education's preoccupation since 1987 is the notion of the reflective practitioner. Unfortunately, the concept is insufficient to carry the burden of critical professionalism it appears to endorse. In his recent study of learning in HE, Barnett argues powerfully that 'professionals have to be practising epistemologists. They have

to be able to interpret the world through cognitive frameworks and be adept at handling those frameworks in action.' But, most importantly, they have to be 'continually creative in the domains of knowledge and the world.' Given the catalogue of irrational oppression which has been the recent history of the making of English teachers- imposing a desired endstate of conformity to prescribed frames of 'knowledge', the creativity has been located in the avoidance of madness. In that resistance, we have taken on the discourse of the other and transformed it to patterns of action grounded in our knowledge of the expanding horizons which proper English teaching reveals. For in its best manifestations as the CCUE survey shows, English professional life 'possesses a triple openness: a cognitive, self and action openness'. Intending English teachers today face the unholy alliance of postmodernism in its shallow adoption of the later Wittgenstein (in the process trivialising a profound axiom concerning language and reality), and late capitalism, with its justification located in globalist unreality. Yet we have through our expanding paradigms begun to acknowledge, with the work of Said and Bhaba prompting us, the world, which as we remember in Coriolanus's bitter words, is elsewhere, and far more important than us. Our task as English teachers will not reside in easy formulations or in submission to political attempts to tame us into the candyfloss culture of competences.

Our challenge is to both understand and deal with incoherence. English as celebrated by the CCUE survey is well equipped to 'intervene purposely in the world' through its epistemological constitution, in which the discourse structures are not afraid to explore and examine 'large narratives-of freedom, equity, empowerment and emancipation'. We 'shall not cease from exploration' and the place to which we shall return will be a site of transformation, imbued with the potential of technology, but not subdued to its instrumentality. In Gunther Kress's words, English provides us 'with the means of seeing ourselves as the makers of our means of making meaning, and through this, giving children the possibility of seeing themselves as the makers of their futures.' We know and understand our subject as central to the development of critical being, from the initial delight of reading and involvement in other worlds to the metacritical distanciation and dialogical objectivity of literary theories and applied linguistics. Our voices must therefore not be silenced in the clamour of increasingly centripetal demands for standardisation in teacher education which are predicated on intellectual impoverishment. Our imperative is to mount and deliver a most robust defence of the carnival of engagement with being which grounds our subject.