

English



CS The theory bases of Stage 6 English

A new syllabus makes new demands on teachers, but there is a sense in which a new syllabus follows and institutionalises what teachers have been doing. The syllabus should have the effect of refreshing our practice in certain elements of senior English that have always been important. I believe there are eight of these:

- Acquiring literacy skills
- Wide reading and viewing of a wide range of different kinds of texts
- The close study of whole texts
- Reading for interest and enjoyment
- Writing for different purposes
- Speaking and listening in a variety of situations
- Critical literacy
- Cultural literacy.

Some of these essentials have not always been explicitly accessible in the current HSC English syllabuses, even though teachers have been pursuing them in all grades. In this sense, the new syllabus is catching up with us.

There are also some things about teaching practice in general that have always been important and always will be. We have always tried, for example, to ensure that teaching is universally available, student-centred, purposeful, interesting and engaging. In addition, there is now a new and stronger emphasis on explicit teaching and valuing cultural diversity. This is especially applicable to the teaching of English and literacy. We now have the means to teach explicitly how language and communication work in diverse social contexts.

The syllabus writers were conscious of different approaches to the teaching of English which the syllabus had to accommodate. These approaches have been broadly identified and labelled thus:

- The cultural heritage approach, which emphasises the transmission of culturally significant texts, values and ideas.
- The personal growth approach, which emphasises the value of language and literature in enriching students' lives.

- The cultural analysis approach, which emphasises the fact that language and texts are all culturally constructed.
- The literacy approach, which emphasises the development of literacy skills.

Notice that all these approaches can be recognised in the eight essential elements I outlined above. This demonstrates how teaching practice has always synthesised a range of theoretical positions. The new syllabus merely demands that we continue to do this.

The syllabus has also synthesised some new considerations in the teaching of Stage 6 English, because it takes account of contemporary developments in critical theory and literacy education. These new considerations are the main subject of this article.

Language

Probably for the first time in Australia, developments in senior English have been influenced by K-6 English rather than the other way around. Teaching language, literacy and communication is now based on a social view of language, which simply recognises that the main purposes of language are social. Language is a resource for making meaning in all sorts of different social and situational contexts.

For teachers, this is an important consideration because it enables us to teach students how to ensure that communication works well. Basically, an act of communication works if it achieves its social purpose. This purpose might be aesthetic, as it is in literature, or it might be functional, as it is in everyday communication.

Associated with a social view of language is also a new and broader definition of "text". A text is now defined not just as a book but as an act of communication, of any length and in any medium. There are "texts" in media other than spoken and written language because we can and do communicate also in these ways. So, *Paradise Lost* is a text, but so is raising your eyebrows.

Moreover, a social view of language recognises that oral and written communication work in different ways, but both are important in certain contexts and situations. In fact, we speak of a "mode continuum", ranging from informal, spoken language at one end to formal, written language at the other end. However,



English

we also recognise that social purposes require a certain amount of mixing and matching. Sometimes, it suits us to write as we speak. Like this. See? At other times, we speak as we would write, as in a lecture. The syllabus therefore values all language modes, including the oral. “English involves the study and use of language in its various textual forms, encompassing written, spoken and visual texts of varying complexity ...” (page 6).

The syllabus also includes a wider range of social purposes. As a result, we continue to teach students how to produce written texts of literary criticism, but we now also teach them how to produce imaginative and creative texts in a range of communication modes. We are also expected to cover the range of contexts in which students will use language, which is why, for example, one of the Standard course outcomes involves “expressing complex ideas for a range of audiences and purposes in personal, social, historical, cultural and workplace contexts” (page 29).

Literature

The same emphasis on context and the social construction of texts is now applied to the teaching of literature, taking account of modern developments in critical theory. To understand these developments, and how we should apply them now, we can glance at past and current approaches to teaching literature. A new syllabus is an opportunity to stand back and examine what we value and what we do when teaching literature.

One thing we continue to value highly is cultural heritage. As they teach literature, English teachers have the privilege of passing on important parts of our cultural heritage, knowing that our social cohesion depends upon this heritage being enjoyed by all. However, while we teach students how to appreciate great works of literature, we also teach them to be critical readers. Also, in a society like contemporary Australia, this cultural heritage is diverse, global and widely inclusive.

Significantly, English teachers have always encouraged critical, personal responses to literature. The current 2/3 Unit Related syllabus, for example, said: “Students will be engaged in reading and in thinking critically about what they have read, defining their attitudes to the text” (page 2) and “Students should be encouraged ... to develop and justify their own views of the texts they study ...” (page 4).

Thanks to recent developments in critical theory, the quality of this critical engagement is now different. As always, however, criticism and appreciation go hand in hand. They need never cancel each other out.

A continuous theme in critical theory is where we look for the authority for the meaning of a work of literature. When students write about a literary text, they write about what it *means* in many senses. The concept of *meaning* is more significant than ever. The syllabus makes a particular point of this: “Meaning is central to the study of English” and later, in bold type, “**Meaning is achieved through responding and composing, which are typically interdependent and ongoing processes**” (page 7).

In the Romantic period, the meaning of a text was what the author intended. The authority for meaning lay with the author, implying that a work of literature was or should be the authentic expression of an author’s ideas or emotions.

F R Leavis was an influential critic who successfully promoted the view that great literature was the refined expression of ethical and aesthetic insights which conveyed universal human values. Studying such literature therefore contributed positively to the growth of individuals and society. In Leavisite criticism, the authority for meaning lay with these universal human values.

Another influential school of criticism known as New Criticism argued that the author was not the source of authority for meaning. The belief that the author’s intention was the meaning of a work was dismissed as the “intentional fallacy”. Instead, the authority for meaning lay only with the text itself.

The theoretical approaches of most English teachers practising in Australia today have been shaped by a combination of Leavisite criticism and New Criticism. This can be seen in much of our practice, such as our high regard for classical literary texts, our belief in the civilising influence of literature and our teaching practice based on prescribed texts.

New Criticism was followed by structuralism, which emphasised that works of literature are the product of deep-seated social conventions, “structures” or archetypes. Schools of criticism, such as feminism, Freudianism or Marxism, practise a sort of structuralism when they look at their own deep “structures”, whether they be social, personal or economic. In structuralism, the authority for meaning lay with these structures.

English



Which brings us to post-structuralism and the present. Generally, readers can assume that meaning is “out there” and language simply conveys it. The great insight of linguistics and semiotics, however, is that language does not convey meaning; rather, language creates meaning. The meaning is not necessarily “out there” prior to and independent of language. We don’t have the thoughts without the words. And when you write about a text in order to get at its meaning, you only create another meaning.

So, in post-structuralism, the authority for meaning lies nowhere. This is why the syllabus encourages us to value multiple perspectives, meanings and interpretations. Again, this is not radically new for English teachers, who have always valued well-informed, thoughtful, critical, original responses from students.

Post-structuralism gave rise to a method of criticism known as deconstruction, which emphasised that because all texts are constructed they can be deconstructed, that is, analysed with scepticism. In the process of their construction, while texts do not convey an ultimate meaning, they sometimes convey ideological positions. Often, they reveal ideological positions in unintended ways, or through omissions and silences. Sometimes, the reader’s own ideological position is the major influence.

The consequence of this for the teaching of English is not as dire as it might seem. Critical awareness enables students not only to negotiate such uncertainties but to appreciate them. As a teaching strategy, deconstruction is not far removed from sceptical analysis with a strong personal response. We have always encouraged our students to have their own personal responses to literature, and good English teachers have always valued such responses, even when they are different from the teacher’s own. Good English teachers have always discouraged the use of cribs and study guides when such resources purported to give the standard, authoritative meaning of a text.

Also, do not think that we must now force our students to struggle with contemporary critical theories in all their abstruseness. As always, the task of teachers is to understand and reflect on these theories in order to make their insights available to students. Deconstruction, for example, is an excellent tool for teaching students not to believe something just because it is in print or spoken by a radio commentator with a golden voice.

The syllabus does not, of course, institutionalise any one of the above approaches to the exclusion of others. Even though the syllabus values a “diversity of approaches” (page 6), it also requires that “students reflect on their reading and learning and understanding that these processes are shaped by the contexts in which they respond to and compose texts” (page 6). The syllabus places particular emphasis on context and the way in which texts are constructed.

The idea that language creates rather than conveys meaning is suggested in the rubric for the Area of Study: “Students explore ... the ways in which perceptions of this concept are shaped in and through a variety of texts” (page 72). This demonstrates how the concept on which the Area of Study is based is not simply a theme. Instead, the emphasis is on the different texts that result when language is applied to the concept. In other words, the object of study is language, not theme.

Teaching practice

All the above has certain implications for teaching practice: a wider range of texts, a new quality of emphasis on context, more explicitness about how language and texts are constructed and a focus on learning outcomes.

Since 1990, all NSW syllabuses are required to include outcomes. When we force ourselves to write down our intended learning outcomes, we are reminded that outcomes are the result of planned instruction. We are also confronted by the question: Which students will achieve these outcomes and to what degree?

In the syllabus these questions are answered thus: All students will have access to all outcomes, and the degree to which they achieve them will be reported systematically using a framework of six standards.

It therefore follows that programming and teaching activities should aim to ensure that all students are given the opportunity to demonstrate all the outcomes and are taught whatever knowledge and skills are needed to ensure this.

In the reformed HSC, students will be assessed according to how they achieve course outcomes, rather than according to their performance compared with other students, which was the case in the old HSC. The new type of assessment is called standards-referenced, while the old type of assessment is called norm-referenced.



English

Currently, good teaching practice has a greater emphasis on explicitness. This is particularly appropriate when teaching literacy skills to students from widely diverse language backgrounds, many of whom do not use standard Australian English at home. These students are entitled to learn about and be upskilled in standard Australian English, but they do not gain such skills and knowledge in the same way as students whose home language is standard Australian English.

Explicit teaching about the structures and features of language is necessary, rather than leaving it to chance. This is also important for students who need greater support.

As I said at the beginning, we have always tried to ensure that teaching is universally available, student-centred, purposeful, interesting and engaging. All students in NSW are now entitled to have access to all the knowledge and skills of at least Standard English. Understanding where we are coming from helps us to help them.

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CS Responding to film

Jane Mills is Head of Screen Studies at the Australian Film, Television & Radio School at North Ryde, NSW. Since May of this year, in association with the English Teachers Association (ETA), she has devised and delivered courses and seminars on screen studies to just over 250 members of the ETA. She has also served as an expert member to the Board of Studies for the screen and drama components of the new English syllabus. Jane is a former documentary filmmaker and an outspoken commentator on issues of censorship and cineliteracy. She is a frequent broadcaster on television and radio.

For some years now the screen education gap in the New South Wales HSC syllabus has been a source of concern to the more thoughtful cultural analysts in the worlds of education, academia, the film and television industries, and those in the political arena responsible for providing funding for both screen production and screen culture programs.

For some others, the whole notion of cineliteracy is alien and therefore suspect. Last September, when it was announced that the English syllabus was to include film, television and interactive media texts, one half of the mass media displayed a contemptuous attitude towards the other half.

“Is this HSC English?” fulminated one radio jock. “Haven’t teachers got enough to do? Teachers must just absolutely shudder, absolutely shudder. Isn’t there enough to be done and isn’t there enough good literature to be studied? Star Wars? I’ve no idea what that has to do with the study of English literature. None, absolutely none.”

Something like this was probably said when the novel emerged in the eighteenth century! But it wasn’t only the scandalmongers of tabloid journalism who were upset. In the *Australian*, Luke Slattery aligned himself with the barbarians:

“You don’t need a lesson in cinema theory to critically appraise a film. Did Graham Greene? Does Clive James? In fact you just need to be literate in conventional terms, alert to the texture and nuance of what’s before you. You want to be wise to the screen? Well, read more books. [Cinema] is all very now. . . the more time spent on what is passing, the less time spent on what has endured...” (The *Australian*, 9.9.98)

For those of us immersed in the academic analysis of the visual media, it is astonishing that a former education editor of the nation’s foremost broadsheet newspaper should reveal such ignorance about a cultural product with a history predating Federation. He appears unaware that, like all education, the point of a rigorous screen education is empowerment. As Emmy-winning children’s TV producer, Cecily Truett, said of the need for cineliteracy in a world where the image increasingly dominates:

“Children need tools with which to contextualise all these images... without these tools our children are going to be at sea in a storm of media images without the critical skills they need to digest, deconstruct and to make judgements about how image experiences are relevant to their own lives.”

The fear expressed by journalists (and others), that the teaching of film and television texts alongside Jane Austen and Shakespeare represents a dumbing down of critical analytic studies, is not one I have had to face before. If anything, I’ve experienced the exact opposite. A significant number of people in the screen industries believe the academic rigours of screen