English Teaching and the Uses of History

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I came to thinking about history as a way of (re)reading English in an attempt to reach a more complex understanding of many aspects both of what literacy and English teaching are, and of the ways in which they are debated and enacted, both now and over many years. Initially concerned to understand more about the nature of English teaching, and the forces shaping the kinds of priorities and agendas English teachers resist or embrace, more recently I have found historical perspectives increasingly pertinent in working to reconceptualise the things English curriculum and teaching might do and be, and the reassessment of old values and certainties for English in the twenty first century.

To be writing and reflecting on such things in May 2003, is to be irresistibly reminded of the mono-dimensional view of history, or outright a-historicity of these times, and of the perspectives we are offered on world events. It is to be reminded of the globalised, multiracial and multicultural world in which we live, and of the knife’s edge balance that can tip national identity into fear and xenophobia at times like these. It is to be reminded of the diversity of ways in which arguments are made, using visual, symbolic, and electronic means as well as those more soberly print based. It is to reflect again on whose arguments are made and whose heard; to think about what kind of education, what kinds of English curriculum can best equip young people for times like these. Now, if ever, we, and our students, need critical and informed understandings on the ways arguments are presented and rationales constructed, in the media and elsewhere. More than this, we need curriculum that will respond to a present shaped and coloured by the past, but qualitatively different from earlier times – what Kress (2000) describes as an ‘education for instability’. An examination of past issues and priorities, past constructions of literacy and of the child, past expectations of relationships between curriculum and society, and in the case of English, literature, literacy, citizenship and identity, can help tease out what we want to keep as central and what needs to change. History thus becomes a way not just of looking (differently) at the past: it relates also to the future and present.

I first turned to historical perspectives, however, not in an attempt to prepare for the future, but to understand the present – specifically, the forces shaping the way Literature teachers valued what they did and the ways this might be challenged by different theoretical underpinnings of the Literature curriculum. The occasion for these questions was my PhD – a three year interview-based study undertaken with nine teachers, looking at how English teachers experienced the process of curriculum change in teaching literature with senior forms (Beavis 1998, 2001). I wanted to explore what happened when a new version of the subject was centrally mandated and superimposed over older and more familiar traditions of the study of literature. In exploring the ways teachers did and didn’t change in the three years after the subject was introduced, I became increasingly interested in the ways in which their ‘heritage’ as English teachers shaped not just
their views of the subject, and its component parts, text and response, but also their classroom practice, their engagement with students, their stance towards the new subject and even their subjectivity – their sense of who they were – as teachers immersed in and produced by particular configurations of what Literature should be.

In that research, two kinds of perspectives on history were particularly valuable. One set came from curriculum history, particularly that research which takes a social perspective on curriculum subjects, and stresses the contested and constructed nature of both schooling and subject disciplines. Such approaches ‘emphasise conflict and the way curriculum becomes an increasingly sophisticated means of preserving the status quo’ (Kliebard & Franklin 1983, cited in Seddon 1989, p. 3). Curriculum subjects are seen as selections from the culture, which must prove themselves and be accepted before being institutionalised as school subjects. They are seen as subject to a life cycle of kinds, with the possibility of decline as well as rise, so that some subjects eventually disappear.

To view curriculum as ‘a selection from the culture’ (Goodson 1985, cited in Seddon 1989, p. 7) is to see it not as a series of givens, with subject boundaries which are unchanging and unproblematic, but rather, to see curriculum subjects as politically and ideologically based, with particular interests within society served by the definition and maintenance of specific subjects in school. Studying school subjects, Goodson argues, ‘provides us with a window on the wider educational and political culture of a country.’ (Goodson 1992, p. 25) Current debates about tensions between Literacy and English, the identity and relative merits of each, and their place in the secondary curriculum are a case in point. The rise of critical literacy, fears for the endangered status of literary texts and forms of reading, and the attention given to ICTs and multiliteracies are indicative of the fluid nature of the English subject(s) and their location in broader arguments and ideologies. The view of curriculum as a struggle over meaning and resources would seem to be particularly pertinent and illuminating here. Debates about the nature of the subject, in its present and future forms, as argued in this journal recently (Kress 2002, Green 2002, McIntyre 2002, et al.), all draw on history and what we have done previously as the starting point for reconfiguring what English should and might be now. Political and ideological dimensions are foregrounded in charting where ‘subject boundaries’ have been drawn previously and where and how they might need to change for the twenty-first century.

A second perspective I found useful for thinking about history and the present was the Foucauldian notion of history as ‘an archaeology of the present’, – ‘the making of histories that locate the present as a strange rather than familiar landscape, where that which has gone without saying becomes problematic’ (Tyler & Johnson 1991, p. 2). Foucault’s view of history as the archaeology of knowledge, of ‘histories of the present’ (Foucault 1972, Tyler & Johnson 1991), has been taken up by a number of writers in the field of education. In their radical recasting of traditional priorities and purposes, his views are both fundamentally challenging and susceptible to misunderstanding from historians and others embracing more traditional or conservative positions. Foucault’s view of history, the relationship between past and present, and what the use of history might achieve are not readily summarised. As Tyler and Johnson (1991) point out, there is no simple version of ‘Foucault on history’. What is constant, they argue, is his concern to expand the boundaries of possible approaches to contemporary problems by using historical investigations to permit a thinking of those problems in different ways. It is this understanding of the use of history which has come to be understood as the project of the ‘history of the present’. (Tyler & Johnson 1991, p. 1)

Tyler and Johnson urge the value of historical writing as an intellectual tool for the present, recognising the role of historiography and history writing in shaping/producing what counts as knowledge, and in allowing exploration of how present realities have been produced. Histories of this kind provide for ‘attention to specificities and contingencies and thus examine the production of our current realities rather than seeking to explain or interpret the past’ (Tyler & Johnson 1991, p. 2). Mitchell Dean argues for a similar position in advocating ‘critical histories’, with their ‘tireless interrogation’ (Dean 1994, p.20) of the given, and in viewing the purposes of historical writing as intimately linked to the present.

Both approaches, that of curriculum history and that of ‘histories of the present’ take as their focus the local and specific, as real life instances of the ways in which more far reaching issues, debates and discourses are played out. Foucauldian perspectives on reforms like the introduction of the VCE see such movements as located within, and themselves products of, the ‘discursive ensembles’ that obtain specifically in that time and place. My attention in my VCE Literature research was
on the specifics of those teachers’ experience, particularly in relation to identity and curriculum change, situated in the context of Victorian secondary schools in the years 1992–1994. My aim was not to generalise from them to all teachers, or even to all Victorian Literature teachers, but rather to illuminate, through their discussions and thinking aloud, some of the dilemmas, priorities and practices these teachers faced. I wanted to understand more about how they saw themselves and the world in which they worked, how they were constituted and shaped by the conflicting discourses out of which they worked, and how they also worked to act on and change these discourses through the process of their everyday activities as Literature teachers.

Until recently, there has been little expectation that preservice teacher education should teach beginner teachers about subject history, the baggage that comes with the subject and the ways that history, and accompanying paraphernalia, often positions them. Writing of the teaching of English in England, Margaret Mathieson, wrote of our ‘formidable historical ignorance’ (Morgan 1990, p. 231) and the role of that in contributing to the ‘martyr’s preparation’ all too often provided to novice English teachers (Mathieson 1975, p. 210). Formal histories of English teaching are both salutary and illuminating. Amongst other things, they show the persistence of key debates, polarities and anxieties across time, so that debates today about the role of grammar, the place of literature, the best teaching methods, the sensitive teacher, or what the subject might achieve, all have their parallels a hundred years ago, constructed not so very differently from today. Such debates and their parameters significantly shape contemporary versions of the subject, yet too often we know little of this, or pay it little regard. Critical and historical perspectives on the discourses and culture of English teaching therefore have an important role in pre-empting this ‘martyr’s preparation’ through preservice teacher education. Work with tertiary students who are becoming English teachers needs to introduce them to the norms and practices characteristic of English teaching, inducting them into English teaching culture, equipping them not only with the requisite sets of strategies, resources and understandings, but also, as far as possible, with a set of powerful questions and an orientation towards critique.

The expectations prospective English teachers bring to their preservice teacher education foreground the subject as socially situated, ‘English’ as social practice. In conjunction (and often collision) with their own experience of the subject at school, the ways English is spoken of, written about, enacted and described in classrooms and curriculum documents can powerfully shape beginning teachers’ constructions of the subject and of the teachers they might be. What they hear, and are asked to write, what they are set to read, do and see, all become part of the ways they frame their readings of the schools and classrooms in which they teach, and the other English teachers and versions of English that they meet. What they make of these, in turn, will contribute to the ways they in turn both enter into and reconstruct what the subject is and will become.

I say this not to make grandiose claims about the lifelong influence of English Method, alas, but rather to underline the complex nature of this phenomenon of ‘English’, and to stress the usefulness of historical perspectives in understanding different constructions of the subject, and the issues and agendas at stake. Historical perspectives on what English is and has been foreground the ways in which claims, pressures and debates experienced as pressing and immediate are endemic to the subject, and have been over time. They provide understandings of the ways that teachers, students, schools and subjects are positioned in relation to each other and to larger players, and help clarify prevailing attitudes and expectations in ways that provide more room for negotiation and agency. The development of a book on English curriculum histories in Australia with Bill Green (Green & Beavis 1996) for one of our Masters units at Deakin University, provided a set of specific and contextualised accounts of the ways these debates have been enacted here.

Which histories (and why)? There’s a sense of urgency and unparalleled problems, even crisis, that characterises most media reportage of education, and many teachers’ experience in schools. Paradoxically, in public comment and ‘analysis’ of literacy, history is both everywhere and nowhere. Cries of crisis, whether to do with standards, technology, popular culture or linking literacy and unemployment seem to be situated in an eternal present, with unprecedented change produced by unprecedented times. Yet in the rhetoric of apocalyptic societal decay the solutions presented are – what? More often than not, a return to a golden age – history: mythologised, simplified and commodified, what Green, Cormack and Reid describe as ‘the curious play of amnesia and nostalgia that marks many of our forums’ (Green, Cormack & Reid 2000, p. 113). The recent political refusal of ‘the black armband view of
history’ in favour of something more comfortable is one example of such commodification of history. A similar fantasy of a culturally homogeneous and highly literate past provides the counterpoint to a degenerate present in data purportedly showing a decline in literacy standards in Australia. This brings me to a third dimension of historical approaches to research – the use of narrative theory to analyse histories themselves.

When narrative theory is brought to the study of history, histories, like other narratives, can be seen of necessity to be both partial and constructed. As narratives, they are partial in both senses – as selective (and therefore incomplete), and as an argument for the veracity of a particular view of the world. Narrative form brings with it implications for the writing and telling of history as well as for how it is read. Narrative structures and conventions determine something of the way the story is shaped and told. Further, narrative brings with it the impetus to moralise, to provide the point of the story, to have embedded in it the story’s own evaluation (Labov 1969).

Provided one recognises what narrative entails, this shaping need not be problematic. As Hayden White observes, ‘[f]ar from being a problem … narrative might well be considered a solution to a problem of general human concern, namely, the problem of how to translate knowing into telling’ (1981, p. 1). Among the consequences of this translation, however, are the effects of superimposing narrative structures, which, like Procrustes’ bed, conveniently elongate or cut short perspectives and dimensions not readily amenable to story structure, or even omit them altogether. Histories, like all stories, are shaped in turn by the knowledge and intentions of writers and readers, constructing arguments even when they purport to be most objective. As Barthes observes, ‘between our experience of the world and our efforts to describe that world in language, narrative ceaselessly substitutes meaning for a straightforward copy of the events recounted’ (1977, cited in White 1981, p. 2)

Histories of English teaching are no exception. As partial accounts they need to be read for their arguments, for what is naturalised or unspoken, for what is omitted as much as for what is retained. This applies to both the reading and writing of history. My study required me not just to read and evaluate English curriculum histories, but to write one of my own. In putting together a history of the role of literature in Victorian English curriculum, perspectives on the construction of history as narrative helped provide a reflexive and critical eye.

This sort of perspective is equally valuable on the smaller scale. It applies to action research individually undertaken in the attempt to do things ‘better than last year’, to the stories we tell ourselves there of what happened then, and why, and to the analysis we make, and the way we think through what we are going to do. It applies to the ways we read media reports of education when an idealised past and its practices are implicitly or explicitly invoked. It applies to private research projects and to institutional revisions and reviews of specific subjects and their assessments, and to perspectives on the balance and composition of contemporary curriculum.

This last point brings me back to the usefulness of history, for research and for classroom practice. I’ve canvassed three approaches – those of curriculum histories, of histories as ‘archeologies of the present’, and of narrative theory frameworks as a way of reading history. All three are clearly valuable as research methodologies in formal and informal settings, particularly and most obviously in academic research. The broader significance and value of historical perspectives, however, for me lie elsewhere. The chief value that I see they have to offer is in providing a context for imagining the future, and a broader picture against which to read contemporary crises, pressures and priorities. They provide positions of resistance in troubled times, through providing alternate readings to those presented in the media or by government and department policies which restrict the breadth of student learning through too narrow an emphasis on outcomes and accountability.

Such perspectives increase our agency in the way we see and present ourselves, in a climate that undervalues teachers. They make the simplistic complex.
They remind us of where we have been and of how things have come to be seen as they are today. They show us broader agendas at stake in current debates over education, and let us see those debates as part of an ongoing pattern of conflict and contestation over time. They show us past and present differently, and remind us that ‘that which is has been made and can be unmade’. They shift us if only a little from that sense of paralysis that sometimes threatens to overwhelm. They help us to keep working to construct a present and future for the subject that will serve the needs of all students, by contextualising the immediate and demanding present, within a broader scene.

**Note**

An earlier version of this paper was given at the ‘Debating Histories’ forum organised by Bill Green at the 1998 AATE conference in Canberra, and was published as ‘Histories, narratives and English: perspectives and possibilities’ *Opinion*, 27 (4) pp. 15-18.

**References**

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