English in the Digital Age: MAKING ENGLISH DIGITAL

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Abstract: Despite the emphasis in the press and elsewhere on the print-based nature of English curriculum, opportunities to develop digital English, with attention to web-based and multimodal forms of text, literacy, location, and activity, are present in the draft national (Australian) curriculum for English, alongside more traditional forms. This paper examines the place of digital and multimodal texts and literacies within the draft paper for the Australian English curriculum, and the possibilities offered by a national curriculum, for exploring and imagining an English for the Digital Age.

Digital English and the National Curriculum
Thinking about English in Australia – about curriculum, pedagogy, politics and assessment – has been inevitably and inextricably linked with the National (Australian) Curriculum over the last four years. The politics and high rhetoric surrounding its introduction, coupled with a concern to pre-empt media criticism by avoiding the use of terms likely to trigger a familiar set of logics if not hysteria, created a curious climate for professional response. The early days – 2007 and 2008 – were remarkable for the levels of cohesion and preparedness to entertain debate across much of the profession, and from very different philosophical bases and experience. In that period and since, debates surrounding the conceptualisation, development and implementation of the proposed curriculum, the construction of the subject, constructions of teachers, students and ‘content’, and the extent and adequacy of the consultation process have dominated discussion within the profession, and in the media more generally. Similarly, relations between the proposed iteration of English and its historical antecedents and identities, and between the proposed national English curriculum and those that have developed over time into specific state formations, ideologies and practices, are of ongoing interest and concern. A further element significantly shaping the ways in which the ‘new’ English will be practically implemented and understood are the achievement standards and assessment requirements, and how these in turn articulate with NAPLAN.

Curriculum frameworks and externally mandated requirements are not neutral. The structures and regimes brought into being by curriculum and assessment frameworks and prescriptions clearly influence how curriculum subjects are understood and enacted in the classroom, shaping practice and relationships, and what teachers and students do. The naming of parts, what is included and excluded, in definitions of curriculum, what is privileged and what is marginalised, and how they are described, has always been inherently political. At the same time however, it is important not to succumb to an overly deterministic view. Written guidelines and assessment requirements are only part of the story, albeit powerfully shaping ones. English, like other subjects, is inherently both unified and diverse, with family resemblances, histories and commonalities but shaped and coloured in accordance with the specifics of context and orientation. An important component of the work of English teachers has always been to
interpret policy documents and requirements and to
remake the curriculum in ways that accord with their
own histories, contexts and priorities, and the National
Curriculum is no exception. Alongside the challenge
to recognise, dispute or claim elements regarded as
central to the subject’s ‘traditional’ identity, however
organised, or the version of English most familiar
in specific states and contexts, the occasion of the
National curriculum also provides an opportunity for
the continuing working out of broader questions about
what English might do and be in the 21st Century, in
Australia, but also elsewhere in the world. One of the
most pressing of these is how to take account of ‘new
literacies’ and what Kress calls ‘the changing land-
scape of representation and communication’ (Kress
2000, p. 6). How is the digital present in the National
Curriculum? How does the draft document work as a
site for imagining and developing a version of English
that encompasses the digital – to bring into being a
Digital English or English for the Digital Age?

The primacy of print literacy (and literature) is
repeatedly underlined throughout the document.
The unambiguous emphasis on Standard Australian
English within the document, the explicit and insistent
references to grammar in media reportage, the prima-
arily print-based set of skills and knowledge embedded
in the language strand and the reinsertion of ‘litera-
ture’ rather than ‘texts’ into the framing discourses
around the subject, all reassert a vision of English
that values words and verbal texts and knowledge
particularly. This is to be expected, and is consistent
with a vision of curriculum that values continuity as
well as change. But English, like other subjects, can
no longer be conceived of only in these terms. The
rhetoric of futures orientation, of Twenty First Century
curriculum, and the centrality of digital and online
technologies and new communicative forms scattered
throughout the Framing and Shaping papers for
English and for the National curriculum, means that
the digital is also an important element of English in
this ‘new’ form.

Most notable, in relation to English and the digital,
in the draft K-10 Curriculum released in May 2010,
are the ways in which multimodal texts and digital
literacies, and their place within the curriculum, are
described. Within the aims, strands and capabilities
the digital is present explicitly, and content level
descriptions for each year level particularly single out
areas for multimodal/digital attention. Under ‘Aims’,
amongst a cluster of points concerned most immedi-
ately with Standard Australian English, is the broader
aim to ‘to ensure that students … understand, inter-
pret, reflect on and create an increasingly broad reper-
toire of spoken, written and multimodal texts across a
growing range of settings (ACARA 2010 p. 1). Within
the strands, multimodal texts are part of Literature:
‘Students learn to interpret, appreciate, evaluate and
create literary texts such as narrative, poetry, prose,
plays, film and multimodal texts, in spoken, print and
digital/online contexts’. Multimodal texts and digital
literacies are also part of Literacy: students ‘listen to,
view, read, speak, write and create a growing repertoire
of texts [and] learn to comprehend, interpret and create
spoken, written and multimodal texts (ACARA 2010
p. 2). This definition of literacy is also present in the
General Capabilities, where it refers to both traditional
and more contemporary concerns:

Literacy is an integral part of the English curriculum.
Conventionally it refers to reading, writing, speaking,
viewing and listening effectively in a range of contexts.
In the 21st century, the definition of literacy has
expanded to refer to a flexible, sustainable command
of a set of capabilities in the use and production of
traditional texts and new communications technolo-
gies, using spoken language, print and multimedia.
In English, students learn to read, write, listen, speak
accurately, flexibly and critically, and to view and
create increasingly complex texts for a variety of
contexts. (p. 6)

Multimodal texts and digital literacies sit within
the description of Texts (p. 4) that integrates the
forms, purposes, structures and functions of print and
multimodal texts quite readily, and also their analysis
and production alongside print based forms. Within
the ‘Language’ overview strand descriptor there is a
silence, however, ‘concepts about print and screen’
appear regularly in year level descriptors for Language,
in addition to more generic points encompassing both
print and digital literacies.

The brief to address the digital, and multimodal
texts and literacies, then, is clearly present within
the National Curriculum, and will be part of English
curriculum as it is taught in schools. The important
next step concerns what we make of this – how we
advance English so that the digital and multimodal are
integrated part of English alongside more traditional
literate forms, not constrained by the limitations of
primarily print-based parameters, but at the same time
recognisably working within frameworks that have been
central to the subject’s concerns – what Kress (2002)
calls the ‘deep purposes’ of the English curriculum.
An Education Revolution?

It is sometimes hard to remember the excitement and sense of optimism that characterised that period late in 2007 when both National Curriculum and the Education Revolution were part of Labor Party policy, and the Digital Education Revolution part of that. The rhetoric of revolution was spellbinding – seductive and high-minded in a way reminiscent of the Newbolt Report, The Teaching of English in England (1921), close on a hundred years ago at the end of World War 1, on the promise of English and English literature to radically transform postwar English society. The key metaphor explicitly framing education policy at the launch of National Curriculum was ‘revolution’. The Education Revolution, the Digital Education Revolution – what does ‘revolution’ in these policies and documents mean?

The Education Revolution (Australian Labor Party, 2007) sets the scene for the present context. From the outset, the Education Revolution, as Labor Party policy and practice, has been located primarily within an economic framework as part of the productivity agenda. The document inextricably links education and productivity, with investment in education seen as investment in human capital. This has particular implications for how education is resourced – all to the good, but with implications, too, for how curriculum, and the student, is seen. In a human capital argument, education is linked explicitly to the economy and the production of an effective workforce:

Human capital investment is at the heart of a third wave of economic reform that will position Australia as a competitive, innovative, knowledge-based economy that can compete and win in global markets ... if Australia is to turn its productivity performance around as well as enhance workforce participation, the Australian economy now needs an education revolution ...

- A revolution in the quantity of our investment in human capital.
- A revolution in the quality of the outcomes that the education system delivers. (Australian Labor Party, 2007 p. 3)

The naming of the Education Revolution promised much. Alan Reid, in his keynote address to the Australian Curriculum Studies Association in 2009 (Reid, 2009) considered to what extent the Rudd Government’s education policy could claim to constitute a ‘revolution’. Taking the definition of revolution as a ‘fundamental change in the way of thinking about or visualizing something; a change of paradigm’ (Merriam-Webster, 2009), he argued that the term ‘clearly refers to a shift in policy and practice in education, orchestrated at a national level and implemented by the States and Territories – which is designed to meet the challenges of the 21st century’ (p. 1). Noting that ‘almost every announcement on education [is] couched in terms of its contribution to the revolution’ (p. 1), he focused on school education and looked at education policy under five themes: decision-making processes, aims and purposes, funding, curriculum, and accountability.

The decision-making processes, Reid argued, do constitute a revolution, with respect to the relationship between the commonwealth and the states, where there is a shift from what he calls the ‘coercive federalism’ of 2003–7 to ‘cooperative federalism’. However, as he points out, whether government policy will deliver a revolution that will reshape Australian Education (p. 4) is another question. In relation to aims and purposes, the explicit emphasis on ‘placing equity goals at the heart of Education policy does constitute a revolution’ (p. 7), albeit one ‘diluted by the dominant focus on the economic purpose of education and contradicted by some aspects of its agenda’ (p. 7). Increased funding, for example through the ‘digital revolution’ and the building program, while welcome and much needed, do not in themselves constitute a revolution. ‘Curriculum and pedagogy,’ he reminds us, ‘should be at the centre of educational change’ (p. 11).

A Digital Education Revolution?

The other ‘revolution’ that is of immediate significance to English is the Digital Educational Revolution (Department of Education, Employment, and Workplace Relations (DEEWR), 2008), and what, for all the difficulties that have accompanied the roll out of technology, it envisages and makes possible:

The aim of the Digital Education Revolution (DER) is to contribute sustainable and meaningful change to teaching and learning in Australian schools that will prepare students for further education, training and to live and work in a digital world. (DEEWR, np)

To do so, amongst other things, it promised

- Higher quality distance education for students in regional and remote areas, providing greater subject choice and helping overcome the lack of specialist teachers in schools
- Greater skills and experience in online research, and assistance from teachers in navigating the internet
• Access to a wider range of digital resources such as e-books that are not available in the school library or local library
• Communication and interaction with overseas students for foreign languages
• Digital media that enhances classroom learning such as documentaries, production of plays, historical footage, and science experiments
• First rate 'tools of the trade' for subjects such as computing, information studies, engineering, and science (p. 10).

While it has been clear from the outset that technology alone is not going to effect a revolution, the vision of what the Digital Revolution might provide is one with much promise for English, and English teaching. What it promises, (properly supported) are resources and access. Getting the technology right will be a big task, but the bigger task, in many ways, is what to do with this and how it is used. The vision of digitally enhanced curriculum outlined above is just that – a concern with how the digital might support and extend current practice. This is important. But Digital English, or English for the Digital Age, entails going further, to make digital texts and literacies themselves part of the curriculum under study, as well as (one of) the means by which it is made. The need is to find ways to work with the technologies that build on the best of what is already known and valued in relation to English curriculum, and a broad vision of what that might entail, to re-imagine English in this context, recognising both the opportunities afforded by technology and the complexity of students' 'always on' lives. As Ito uses it, this term is used to describe Japanese young people's use of mobile phones to address the ways in which text messaging makes possible a set of social relations which are 'always on', with a sense of being always connected, through technology (Ito, 2004). The phenomenon is indicative of a broader set of orientations, practices and expectations:

A set of social-technical-cultural characteristics ... a constellation of characteristics that must be viewed ecologically... The characteristics I have described as personal, portable and pedestrian are likely to find resonance in an increasingly linked set of international mobile cultures that both draw from and depart from the paradigm that incubated in Japan. (Ito 2004 np)

The term is a useful one, pointing both to contemporary orientations towards and experiences of communication and learning, and to the ubiquity of mobile technologies, including but going beyond more 'fixed' forms of technology such as desktop PCs.

There are then three challenges in thinking about English and the Digital. The first concerns issues of access and equity, the second, what kinds of activities and thinking are enabled and brought into being by teachers working with both fixed and ubiquitous technologies, and third, what Digital English might actually be – the place of both print and digital, how English is imagined – what might and might not be attended to, and in what ways.

**Equity and access**

As far back as 1999 *The Adelaide Declaration on National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty First Century* (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA), 1999) argued for a curriculum that ensured students were both active and critical users of information and communication technology (ICT):

When students leave school they should be confident, creative and productive users of new technologies, particularly information and communications technologies, and understand the impact of those technologies on society (MCEETYA, 1999, goal 1.6)

In the context of the Digital Revolution, and the opportunities presented by the reconceptualisation of English within a national curriculum, two points seem particularly pertinent. Technology alone cannot bridge the digital divide, and what teachers do – the tasks they set, the expectations they have, curriculum they enact – matter.

First, the digital divide remains. Provision alone does not create equity. The *New Millennium Learners* study (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Centre for Educational Research and Innovation (CERI, 2009) cites 2006 findings that 86% of 15-year-olds in the 30 OECD countries 'frequently' used a computer at home with up to 95% of 15-year-olds in 5 countries doing so. Extrapolating from these figures, the *New Millennium Learners* study estimated that, by 2009, frequent use of a computer at home would be almost universal amongst 15-year-olds in most OECD countries.” (p. 4). The 'first' digital divide – access – may be fading, but they observed a 'second and more subtle' divide 'related to the educational benefits that young people can obtain from computer use according to their economic, cultural and social capital’ (p. 7). The study found that while
computer use can make a difference in the educational performance if the student is duly equipped with the right set of competencies, skills and attitudes ... in their absence, no matter how intense the computer use is the expected benefits are going to be lost. (OECDCERI p. 8)

The report also made the somewhat acerbic observation that where information technology (IT) use did occur in schools, it was likely to be quite at odds with students' out-of-school experience and expectations. The report posits an eventual contradiction and perplexity that students may experience when realizing that digital technologies are so important in their daily lives, as well as they are also in the world of adults particularly at work, except when they are in classrooms - when even mobile phones are usually banned. Even worse, they can even see that an important technological infrastructure is in place, but underused. (p. 5)

Clearly then, it matters what the curriculum is, what teachers do with the technologies they have available, and the range of texts, literacies, and practices with which they are invited to work. In Australia, to date, evidence for the impact of ICTs in improving student learning has been limited. The National Assessment Program -- ICT Literacy Years 6 and 10 Report 2005 (MCEETYA, 2007) found that while most students could manage a basic level of computer tasks, many fewer could, or were, using ICT to support learning at a higher level. ICT literacy was defined as 'the ability of individuals to use ICT appropriately to access, manage, integrate and evaluate information; develop new understandings; and communicate with others in order to participate effectively in society' (p. 13). Consistent with the OECD warnings about a second digital divide, and distinctions noted elsewhere between 'thick and thin' access (Burbules & Callister, 2000; Nixon, 2001), the report found a wide variation amongst students with respect to ICT literacy and warned against assuming that students 'are uniformly becoming adept because they use ICT so widely in their daily lives' (p. 96). While superficially 'access' seems widely available, there are in fact significant differences in what access means for different groups of students, and what it makes possible. As Bruce (1999) and Nixon (2001) noted ten years ago, access and disadvantage have become almost 'unspeakable' topics in mainstream pedagogical discourses about ICTs. While 'access' at some levels has become more widely available, provision alone does not equate with equity.

Nixon cites Burbules and Callister to explain access as 'thick' and 'thin', linking together issues of access and credibility:

Users who cannot participate effectively across the full range of opportunities that the internet represents cannot be said to have access even if they have a computer and online connection; users who cannot gain a hearing for their ideas and point of view or who cannot discern what is and is not worthwhile, lack 'credibility' and the means to evaluate the credibility of what they find (Burbules and Callister 2000 p.195)

In the MCEETYA report, familiar patterns of socio-economic disadvantage recur. In addition to significant differences in achievement between the children whose parents were classified as 'senior managers and professionals,' and those whose parents whose parents held 'unskilled, manual, office and sales' occupations, remote and Indigenous students fell behind early and stayed behind. Two-thirds (68%) of Year 6 students and three-quarters (75%) of Year 10 students whose parents were 'senior managers and professionals' attained the proficient standard compared to around one-third (32%) of Year 6 students and almost half (49%) of year 10 students whose parents held 'unskilled, manual, office and sales' occupations. ICT proficiency was lower for students from remote locations and lower for Indigenous students than non-Indigenous students. Indigenous students fell dramatically behind early on attainment measures, and continued to fall behind.

What kinds of thinking and activities?
The report found that on the whole, when working in schools, students used ICT in a relatively limited way. The strong tendency was for them to be working at the lower end of the cognitive spectrum, to be doing lower order tasks, so that 'using the internet to look up information' or 'communicating with peers' were far more common than 'creating, analysing and transforming information' (p. xiv). Of course both 'using the Internet to look up information' and 'communicating with peers' can be highly demanding and transformative tasks, but the report suggests this was not the level of engagement by and large observed. The larger point remains -- the bulk of the activities and options given to students did not result in higher order activities.

These activities -- creating, analysing, and transforming -- are central to English teaching and curriculum. In moving into national curriculum, and into the digital age, it is essential to ensure they remain
so. Having an influence on the way English evolves necessarily entails strengthening such things, through adapting and re-imagining core principles, skills, and values to this digital world, looking closely at what students are doing with literacy and communication in their out-of-school online worlds, with teachers too becoming more technologically adept.

Digital English/English in the Digital Age
What might English be and look like in the Digital Age? How might it best be named? Digital English, or ‘English in the Digital Age’ (e.g. Goodwyn 2000)?

This is in part a question about cultural heritage and identity – of the subject, students and teachers – in part about textual experience and communicative forms, in part about the affordances and opportunities offered by both print and multimodal forms, and what is gained and lost in shifting ‘from the world told to the world shown’ (Kress 2003). Digital English should enable attention attend to both.

There has been a strong interest in the use of the digital, and digital English, and an increasing recognition, to use Donna Alvermann’s words, of the place in students’ lives of ‘literacies so powerfully motivating that young people are more and more willing to invest a substantial amount of time and effort in creating content to share with others online’ (Alvermann, 2008, p. 9). One of the great challenges and achievements of English and Literacy curriculum nationally and internationally, over the last few years, has been the way it has recognised and taken up the changing nature of the world, and of young people’s experience of it. The need to attend to visual and multimodal texts and literacies is written in almost all existing curriculum documents, including, in Australia, the Statements of Learning for English (MCEETYA/Curriculum Corporation, 2005), and most State documents at P–10 or senior secondary level. The need is written in to the shaping paper for English national curriculum: Shape of Australian Curriculum: English (National Curriculum Board, 2008), with feedback from the framing paper developed from it (National Curriculum Board 2009a) affirming high levels of support for the inclusion of a broad spectrum of texts, including digital:

Working across a spectrum of texts: a case study
The National Curriculum envisages an English composed of three elements: Language, Literacy and Literature. What might a unit of work look like that foregrounded the literary but utilised digital texts alongside others across the broad spectrum encompassed within the term ‘Literature’? The following unit, developed by student teachers Aiden Messenger, Alex Brown, and Simon Tyrell1 provides a sense of possibilities. Aiden and his colleagues developed their unit as a website (http://englishadd.host-ed.net/index.htm). It asks students to work with a range of texts that include an X-Box game, a World War 1 poem, a World War 2 modernist painting, a recruitment video, contemporary songs, and photos from the Iraq war.

The opening page presents an introduction and rationale (‘Multi-modal Texts – Creativity and Literacy’), and includes commentary under headings linking the unit to VELS (the Victorian Essential Learnings Statements, current when the unit was developed, VCAA, 2007): Thinking Processes and ICT. The aim of the unit, it explains,

is to simultaneously introduce and develop students’ critical literacy and creative skills. This should be achieved by analysing a number of multi-modal texts with particular consideration of purpose and audience and then using these texts to develop students’ creativity. In producing creative work students should be aware of their audience and purpose.

Within the game studies field, tensions between understanding games as narrative and games as actions mean that there is no settled approach to analysing games as text within English and literacy classrooms are emerging but embryonic (Buckingham & Burn, 2007; Carr, Buckingham, Burn, & Schott, 2003, Apperley & Beavis, in press). In this instance, Aiden and his colleagues call on filmic and literary lenses to provide the tools. Students are asked to reflect on and analyse what they have seen, to make comparisons across the modes, and to utilise the principles they have identified in designing a game that incorporates generic features and understandings about games alongside more traditional considerations of context, audience, and purpose.

Down the left-hand side of the website (see Figure 1), a series of links provides a map and access to components of the unit. From the initial, print-based page containing the rationale, the unit unfolds to a further series of screens. The first links to a Youtube
clip of a trailer for the X-Box game Gears of War 2 (Epic Games, 2008). Upon activating, against music and drumbeats, Seeger's poem 'I have a rendezvous with death' (Untermeyer, 1919) is read over the dark and ominous visual narrative.

The following screen presents the poem in written form, with similar questions, and a request for students to compare their responses to the poem with those related to Gears of War. This is followed by an image of Yea's desolate painting, Marines call it that 2000 Yard State (Yea, 1994), and a request to write a poem in response, together with a reflective paragraph on the audience and purpose of the poem. The next link is also to a Youtube clip, this time to the United States' Marine Corps recruitment video, Elite Warrior. Again students are asked to analyse the text, including a discussion of how it works to persuade its audience. Hero of War (Rise Against, 2008), the next link, provides an equally powerful anti-war statement, and, again, comparisons with earlier texts are invited.

The last activity asks students to design a game. This activity both assumes and respects students' familiarity with the genre, accompanied by similar familiarity on the part of the teacher.
The vision of English represented here is one that incorporates a wide range of modalities, but still sits within recognisably literary and literacy-based parameters. The unit draws on both film and literature to provide frameworks for analysis. The texts, while widely different, are all powerful in conventional aesthetic terms, and none would be out of place under the rubric of ‘texts’ and ‘literature’. The kinds of attention students are asked to bring to bear is similarly familiar – close and careful attention to the ways in which textual elements have been chosen and to what effect, attention to shaping, and the impact of the text upon the reader/player/listener/viewer. Issues of value and morality lie near the surface, and the sequence asks students to create as well as critique, utilising design. The unit works with words and images, screens and the page; cultural salience and design. It addresses the three dimensions of English proposed by Kress and others: ethics, rhetoric and aesthetics, and in this and other ways is recognisably ‘English’ albeit with multimodal forms. A more extreme version of digital English, taking further the qualities and affordances of the media involved, might move outside these familiar terms, to encompass for example the highly active nature of games. Such an English might be ‘revolutionary’ to the point that subject boundaries did not apply.

An awareness of the digital, globalised world in which students live, and the pervasiveness of digital and screen-based forms of literacy, needs to inform conceptions of English for present and future times. The next steps in moving further in the development of Digital English need to involve ways of building on existing practice and understandings about working with multimodal texts. We need to go further in finding ways to incorporate interactive web-based sites and texts, and in fostering the active production of students’ own texts in digital form as part of the curriculum. What is crucially needed is more information and guidance about ways to fully utilise Web 2 forms, and the development of multimodal tools of analysis and assessment that include but go beyond the visual to acknowledge and properly evaluate multimodal texts and literacies alongside more familiar print-based forms. We are beginning to see promising frameworks developing in this direction (e.g., Unsworth, 2008; Macken-Horarik, 2009; Wyatt-Smith & Kimber, 2009) that need to be actively incorporated into whatever assessment regimes accompany guidelines regarding curriculum, pedagogy, and policy.

The National Curriculum is strongly affirmative of print literacies, and the hopes held for it suggest a move towards a settled view of English. Yet, as Bill Green observes, ‘English is inescapably plural, and so are we’ (Green, 2004, p. 292). It may not be a ‘revolution’, but there is sufficient there for teachers interested to build a digital English to do so. Digital English, English in the Digital Age, needs to move into the future in ways that bring the best of the past into the present, that draw on core principles and values that have shaped the subject historically, but that are also expansive and responsive to change. The document should be mined for these possibilities.

Note
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References


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