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A critical evaluation of my own developing philosophy and practice in relation to the rationale which justifies the inclusion of English in the school curriculum

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Vincent Byrne
University of Wolverhampton

Abstract

This evaluation uses the Cox model as a framework to consider my evolving view of the teaching of English in the context of an inner-city grammar school for boys. I consider how the experience of teaching across Key Stages 3 and 4 led me to recognise the value of adopting an 'adult needs' approach in order to allow students to flourish in the other areas of the English curriculum.

Paper

My desire to teach English arises from a love of the English language (as expressed through its rich and varied literary heritage) and a conviction that by studying great texts of the past, students of today will develop the written and linguistic skills necessary to become effective and productive members of society in the future. Indeed, the latest governmental guidance that teachers should develop students' ability to read a variety of 'high quality works' in order to 'develop an appreciation and love of reading' (DfE, 2014, p. 4) resonates strongly with my philosophy as an educator. I feel particularly invested in using education as a tool to help empower students from working class backgrounds similar to own; I believe that giving them the opportunity to access the 'best which has been thought and said' (Arnold, 1869, p. 7) will aid their future social mobility, powers of imagination and capacity to emphasise with others.

Reflecting upon the five approaches to the teaching of English posited in the Cox model (Cox, 1989, pp. 60 – 61), I believe that a functional approach to studying English (that is to say, one focussed on acquiring employable and transferable skills) needs to be combined with the fostering and development of students' appreciation of literature, cultural understanding and personal growth in order to be truly effective.

As the central medium through which learning takes place, language has a 'pre-eminent place in education and society' (DfE, 2014, p 1) and there are increasing work related challenges for students who leave school without a formal qualification in English (Clayton, 2016, p. 14) in a culture that places high value in qualifications and, at worst, an 'obsession with [constant] assessment' (Barton et al, 2011, p. 19). As a Music graduate, I recognise the considerable 'cross curricular' skills Secondary-level English provides through the study of classic literary texts, which allows students to access a common 'cultural heritage' (Cox, p. 60) in other disciplines more easily. The methodology used to analyse the form, structure and content of a text is directly transferable to the analysis of, for example, a painting or piece of music; in my teaching practice, I regularly make use of resources from other disciplines to highlight to my students the interconnectivity of the National Curriculum and, by extension, the world in which they live.

Teaching at a boys' grammar school in 'one of the most deprived areas in the country...with 27% of its pupils eligible for free school meals' (BBC, 2016), I have encountered a pervasively utilitarian approach amongst my students towards the study of English. This is particularly acute during preparation for the GCSE; many students become conscious of a need for specific grades in order to realise future career aspirations. Their attitude could be said to most closely correspond to the 'adult needs' view listed in the Cox Report, in which the primary focus of teaching English is to 'prepare children for the language demands of adult life, including the workplace' (Cox, p. 60). From my experience, students respond well to teaching when they are aware that their learning has clear and beneficial implications for future employment opportunities.

Citation

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However, I believe that an overly formulaic approach to English, one that can lead to 'itemising desired competencies in certain linguistic and generic conventions' (Marshall, 2003, p. 83), and 'subject content...being reduced to sets of measurable skills and outcomes' (McIntyre and Jones, 2014, p. 27) can negatively influence students' perception of the subject because it denies a fuller appreciation of literature and personal growth through texts. As a teacher, I endeavour to challenge the opinion that academic success in English is just another necessary conduit leading to preferable employment opportunities and, ultimately, acquisition of financial capital. In my teaching practice, I seek to develop a synthesis between developing vital, quantifiable skills and the study of the best literature in manner relevant to students' lives today.

Teaching seminal literary works like J.B. Priestley's *An Inspector Calls* (1946) for GCSE gives students access not only to cultural heritage (developing their 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu, 1979)) and the opportunity to develop valuable essay writing skills, but also develops skills in 'cultural analysis' through varied discourse about how key themes can be related to present-day realities. By adopting a text-based approach, I am developing students' technical skills, whilst also fostering an appreciation of cultural heritage.

An English curriculum based on texts creates the medium through which students explore the craft of writing and begin to understand pressing contemporary issues. Robert Swindells' *Stone Cold* (1993), for example, explores issues of ideological extremism, poverty and youth unemployment in a precarious world; issues that many children recognise through their own life experiences. Through reading and guided discussion, such texts engage students' imagination and provide a framework to help them 'read' contemporary society and, in relation to *Stone Cold*, understand the aesthetic of survival in the context of homelessness. Bethan Marshall supplements my view that the teaching of English should be 'predominantly aesthetic' (2003, p. 83) and this philosophy relates to the view of 'personal growth' that seeks to develop 'children's imaginative and aesthetic lives' (Cox, p. 60).

Amidst the pressure of preparing students for the GCSE, it can be all too easy to place a greater emphasis on skills. One experience that has greatly informed my pedagogy, was the delivery of a Year 10 GCSE lesson which considered the impact of Priestley's authorial voice in *An Inspector Calls* – although there was a clear rationale for spending time analysing the exam mark scheme and thinking about specific skills, it proved difficult to motivate the students in a meaningful way because the lesson tasks were driven by improving skills in an explicit manner. The following lesson, I adapted my teaching strategies to include a wider variety of tasks with a number of short activities that placed an emphasis on imagination (such as role play and problem solving) rather than explicit development of exam-based skills. It was clear that, through these creative activities, students felt empowered to tackle the more conceptual consideration of authorial voice in an academic context later in the lesson.

This experience has highlighted the importance of Vygotsky's (1987) 'child centred' approach and also the need to engage students' imaginative skills through a variety of learning styles; the difficulty arises in maintaining this balance in an increasingly exam-oriented culture. Focus on important examinations can lead to the neglect of important connections between English and wider life issues; Marshall lamented the 'bleeding out' of a 'connection... between art and life – a kind of harnessing of the imagination through words to create meaning.' (Marshall, 2003, p. 82) over a decade ago, and it is still a pertinent issue today. If English teaching is to be truly successful in helping students to prepare for life after school, all elements of the Cox model need to be balanced and the desire to make relevant connections between life and art should be of paramount importance.

An imaginative, text-centred approach encompasses not only the concept of 'cultural analysis' (in which students are being led to an understanding of the world in which they live) and opportunity to explore literary 'cultural heritage', but also 'personal growth' because students are developing their individual imagination and aesthetic appreciation through lively discourse in which the text is the central stimulus.

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I believe that the five areas of the Cox model can be well balanced through such a text-centred approach to English teaching, hardly a 'coexistence of five apparently disparate and even oppositional views' (Goodwyn, 1992, p. 5), but rather a holistic attitude in which I view all five elements as useful tools to aid the development of my pedagogy. My individual inclination is to emphasise the connection between literary texts and life through 'cultural heritage' and foster the pastoral development of children through 'personal growth'. However, my undergraduate background as a Music specialist also provides me with a strong understanding of the way in which the communicative and analytical skills that are developed in the study of English feed into a wider curriculum. It is my belief that if these four elements of the Cox model are used to provide a balanced curriculum, students will develop the 'adult needs' necessary to become successful members of society.

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A critical evaluation of the extent to which one aspect of my developing rationale for English has informed my practice. Part 2

In my initial consideration, I argued that in order to prepare students effectively for their future 'adult needs' (Cox, 1989, p. 60) the other four elements of the Cox model needed to be balanced and built around a text-based approach that placed an emphasis on classic literature from the past and relevant literary forms of the present. Whilst recognising the 'collective strength' (Goodwyn, 2011, p. 71) of all elements of the Cox model, my initial experience led me to believe that an approach based on acquiring employable skills would lead to a 'bleeding out' of fundamental connections between 'life and art' (Marshall, 2003, p. 82) something that I was keen to avoid based on a fear of making the study of English 'overly formulaic'.

Throughout the second half of this term, the aforementioned focus on 'high quality works' remained central to my pedagogical philosophy; something encouraged in the present National Curriculum (Department of Education, 2014, p. 4). However, recent experience has led me to the conclusion that a specific focus on 'adult needs' is often necessary in order to allow students to 'unlock' challenging texts and, by extension, the other

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elements of the Cox model. The need for students to be able to demonstrate key skills in relation to literacy is echoed by the reality that 'writing remains the dominant mode for accessing education success ... [and provides] students the power to voice themselves' (Myhill and Watson, 2011, p. 58) and the increasing need for school leavers to demonstrate literacy-based skills (Clayton, 2016, p. 14). The concept of helping students to gain 'power to voice themselves' resonates strongly with my previously stated commitment to empower all students in my care and, in particular, those from working class backgrounds.

The experience of marking a half-term common assessment task for my Year 7 class at a grammar school for boys revealed that, whilst the majority of students were able to make informed verbal contributions in class and complete guided activities with specific learning outcomes, many struggled to employ good spelling, punctuation and grammar in an independent and sustained manner during the exam-style assessment. Initially, this reality prompted me to reflect on my own personal teaching practice: I had been pleased with the progress students had made during their first term at the school, but it seemed as though many of the 'adult needs' skills they had developed discreetly in classroom tasks (such as writing clearly and concisely for a 'bid' to write the next James Bond film, or using formal language in the context of a letter to C.S. Lewis) were not always directly reflected in the common assessment.

Having sought the advice of experienced English teachers, I was reassured that often the first common assessment task saw students' grades taking a 'slight dip'. Through this advice and my own reflection, I was able to see a way forward based on earlier experience: whereas previous written tasks in class had been supported by my teaching, modelling and resources, it was evident that there were some prevalent errors in key English skills that needed to be addressed specifically in order to aid future development. Therefore, I introduced a starter activity to each lesson that was based around issues that emerged over the course of the term. For example, the common assessment led to the implementation of starter activities based on the correct use of contractions and conventions surrounding direct and indirect questions, whilst a consultation with the group's German teacher (in order to see if there were grammatical issues common to their work in both subjects) led to sessions on use of nominative and accusative cases, prepositions, and work surrounding tenses. Another fruitful aspect of this 'cross-curricular' collaboration with my MFL colleague regarding skills relating to 'adult needs' was the introduction of dictation exercises (still common in German schools) in order to help students practise the process of transcribing the spoken word – this directly relates to the aforementioned barrier some students encountered when attempting to formalise (via the written word) their spoken ideas in class discussions. The impact of sustained work on these skills saw benefits to students' 'personal growth'; towards the end of term, students entered the Young Writers 'Wonderland' competition in which they had to compose a 100 mini saga; they were more confident in refining their aesthetic and imaginative ideas to fit a very specific language requirement (i.e. summarising ideas, whilst still maintaining dramatic impact).

Overall, this skills-based approach has had a positive impact on the independent written work of my Year 7 students; primarily because I have been able to 'quality assure' written work by providing specific criteria in relation to spelling, punctuation and grammar. At this stage, it would be premature to make conclusions regarding the long-term effect of this explicit 'adult needs' approach; at the end of the next academic term, I will liaise with my MFL colleague to discuss whether the inclusion of specific 'adult needs' skills has aided the students' progress in German and this will guide future teaching strategies. However, for the moment, the experience has demonstrated that elements of targeted 'adult needs' teaching have aided students 'personal growth' in both the written and spoken word.

'Adult needs' skills have also influenced my teaching of Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (Jekyll & Hyde hereafter) with a Year 10 class; particularly with regard to vocabulary and comprehension – key skills for the workplace. The text studied previously, J. B. Priestley's *An Inspector Calls*, presented very few comprehension issues for the students; it was possible, therefore, to move quickly onto building skills relating to 'cultural analysis' and consider how the core themes of the play related to relevant

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issues today. This experience affirmed my view that 'adult needs' should not be the starting point when approaching a new text. However, upon teaching *Jekyll & Hyde* it became apparent that the novella's sometimes archaic vocabulary created barriers to students' ability to analyse the text from a cultural perspective.

During a lesson in which the key tasks depended upon students reading a chapter independently, student motivation quickly became an issue and, despite my adapting the task to include a full class reading, it was clear that scaffolds for vocabulary and comprehension needed to be put in place for future lessons. Careful to remain true to my philosophy that learning should be centred on the text and the key issues which emerge from it, I began the next lesson by showing a clip of CCTV footage of a recent real-life murder of a London teenager; the resulting class discussion raised issues around the theme of unprovoked violence; this led us on to consider the murder of Carew in *Jekyll & Hyde* and helped the students to have a greater degree of empathy with the actions in the text. Having begun with a 'cultural analysis' activity, the next task built students' vocabulary for adjectives relating to violence; enabling them to use more adventurous vocabulary in a written task later in the lesson. Then, before we started reading the chapter in detail, students were tasked with highlighting unfamiliar vocabulary in the chapter; having prepared a 'definition bank', I was able to pre-empt most of the unfamiliar vocabulary that caused a barrier to students' comprehension of the plot. Now that we had addressed the 'adult need' of being able to comprehend challenging vocabulary and considered the text within the context of 'cultural analysis', students were able to read the chapter independently and gave an informed written response. As result of these preparatory tasks, students were able to access 'cultural heritage' by having a fuller understanding of the nature of the text and the significance the chapter would have had in a Victorian context. Following the success of this lesson, I have addressed 'adult needs' areas regularly for the remainder of the term. This experience will serve to influence my practice in teaching *Macbeth* to the same group next term and has highlighted the reality that 'adult needs' encompasses not only skills for examinations, but also in helping students to have a greater appreciation for seminal works of literature.

Having reflected on my earlier view that 'adult needs' was something that would be catered for once the other areas of the Cox model had been implemented, I have come to the realisation that I was reluctant to take an explicit 'adult needs' approach to teaching based on the fear that it might lead to 'itemising desired competencies in certain linguistic and generic conventions' (Marshall, 2003, p. 83), and 'subject content...being reduced to sets of measurable skills and outcomes' (McIntyre and Jones, 2014, p. 27). More recent teaching experience has demonstrated the necessity of developing students' adult needs', but also that such an approach need not be sterile or contradictory to my underpinning philosophy. Indeed, by including tasks in my teaching that relate specifically to the development of vocabulary and comprehension, I was able to help students 'unlock' the more challenging aspects of *Jekyll & Hyde* and, therefore, empower them to gain a greater appreciation of this classic text ('cultural heritage') and begin to relate the themes of the novel to their everyday urban experiences ('cultural analysis'). My experience in attempting to raise the literacy standards in Year 7 has proved that an 'adult needs' approach has close links with other academic disciplines ('cross curricular') and can help to scaffold creative tasks ('personal growth'). Therefore, I can say that my rationale has perhaps 'inverted'; I would maintain my initial conviction that all elements of the Cox model are of equal importance, but have discovered that students often require specific subject-based 'adult needs' teaching in order to flourish in the other four areas.

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