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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the status of literature in contemporary English K-12 curriculum in a national agenda that values skills, outcomes and benchmarking. This paper is divided into two parts. The first part argues that the role of literature in the primary classroom should not be underestimated, and that educators should keep a sense of balance of the relationship between the reader, the read, and the practice of reading. In the past two decades, children's literature has pushed its boundaries into new sub genres and through experimental texts has contributed to the body of postmodern literature. How does this relate to the current primary English curriculum? The second part looks at the place of literature in secondary English curriculum in New South Wales, which is undergoing a substantial paradigm shift. While primary syllabi (1994 and 1998) have committed themselves to a particular view of language and have remained largely silent on the issue of literature, secondary syllabus revision has opted for a theoretical pluralism. Is this eclecticism really a post-structuralist move in disguise? What does eclecticism really mean, especially for the teaching of literature? To what extent does it produce theoretical tensions and contradictions which are incapable of being resolved in practice? Through an exploration of a number of literary texts and syllabus statements, this paper takes a fresh look at the literary in living literacy. (Contains 20 references.) (RS)

COUNTING LITERATURE IN? BALANCING THE NATIONAL LITERACY AGENDA.

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Paper presented at the Joint National Conference of the Australian Association for the Teaching of English and the Australian Literacy Educators' Association (Hobart Tasmania Australia, 12-15 July 2001).

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the status of literature in contemporary English K-12 curriculum in a national agenda that values skills, outcomes and benchmarking. This paper is divided into two parts. In the first part we argue that the role of literature in the primary classroom should not be underestimated, and that we should keep a sense of balance of the relationship between the reader, the read and the practice of reading. In the past two decades children's literature has pushed its boundaries into new sub genres and through experimental texts has contributed to the body of postmodern literature. How does this relate to the current primary English curriculum? In the second part we look at the place of literature in secondary English curriculum in NSW, which is undergoing a substantial paradigm shift. While primary syllabuses (1994 and 1998) have committed themselves to a particular view of language, and have remained largely silent on the issue of literature, secondary syllabus revision has opted for a theoretical pluralism. Is this eclecticism really a post-structuralist move in disguise? What does eclecticism really mean, especially for the teaching of literature? To what extent does it produce theoretical tensions and contradictions which are incapable of being resolved in practice? Through an exploration of a number of literary texts and syllabus statements, this paper takes a fresh look at the literary in living literacy.

Key Words

Literature, syllabus, literacy, eclecticism.

Introduction

Curriculum reform in English in New South Wales at both primary and secondary levels has raised questions about how literature is perceived and taught. Unlike primary English where English-as-literature has not been significant since the 1920s, secondary English, especially at HSC level, has been dominated up to 2000 by Leavisite and New Critical perspectives, which have emphasised the value of studying literature for its own sake as part of a cultural heritage. At a time when national and state agendas in relation to subject English have been dominated by various versions of literacy, this paper considers what has happened to literature as a result.

Literature and Primary English in NSW

Historically, at the primary level, the role of children's literature has oscillated between literature being seen on the one hand as a means of moral development, a way of controlling thinking, of producing a trained but docile workforce and, on the other, as offering individuals the opportunity to explore ideas, think critically and broaden understanding. In the contemporary classroom, two major forces, the theoretical underpinnings of the current syllabus and the changing nature of children's literature itself, have influenced how teachers see the role of children's literature in their English program. The diversity of ways of looking at the reader and the text creates enormous problems for the development of a meaningful English syllabus. An emancipatory approach argues that the real function of English is to offer an understanding of life where it can provide opportunities to develop critical thought and gain knowledge of the world and of texts. Scholes (1985: xi) explores this notion further when he claims that texts are an important part of English because 'texts are places where power and weakness become visible and discussable', where what he calls 'textual power' can be gained. How texts are perceived and used in the classroom, it may be argued, are of great importance. By contrast with this emancipatory view, the 1998 NSW *English K-6 Syllabus* presents a normative approach and challenges the privileging of literary text and revalues the nonliterary text. It gives support to functional literacy, where knowledge of language and text types is central. With it, comes reading programs that provide skill builders to support the necessary levels of literacy and, inevitably, contest the place of literature in the English program.

Concurrent with policy changes, the publishing, study and criticism of children's literature have undergone enormous developments. Children's texts function as advocacy, resistant and reacting to culture. The boundaries of definition of what constitutes a children's book are being challenged, and consequently offer the reader new experiences. Contemporary children's literature adopts what Hunt (1995:42) has labelled 'a female-oriented view', which he sees as holistic (as opposed to the male-oriented hierarchical power structure represented by the Leavisite view), allowing for experimental stylistic and ideological perspectives. Some of this literature may be considered as postmodern where the text explores ways of challenging existing literary forms and accepted ideologies. The study and criticism of children's literature has become a coherent discipline in its own right in universities throughout the country. The critical discourse of

children's literature, it seems, is constantly evolving as the significance of text is perceived in different ways. Early critical practices in primary school borrowed from the secondary and tertiary education world's approach to literature, adapting Leavisite methods. In the past twenty five years, the transfer of emphasis from text to reader and an increase in the number of texts which challenge interpretation, what Eco (1979) calls 'open' texts, has made significant changes in critical practice.

The problem for the primary English teacher is to respond to the changing nature of children's literature and its accompanying critical discourses and, at the same time, to meet the needs of the syllabus. To do this, it is useful to identify the limitations of the syllabus in terms of the reader, the text, and the approach to the interpretation of text and to consider possible solutions.

While the syllabus acknowledges the diverse purposes of reading and the many practices of the reader, there is concern that it fails to suggest how the reader might develop his/her skills fully. How the reader moves beyond uncritical reading: for instance, hopefully learning to question that which our society deems valuable and acceptable is unclear. The syllabus offers a linguistic interpretation of text but does not, it would seem, address adequately narratological process which involves the cultural context, the text and the ideology. The choice of functional-linguistic terminology to describe literary texts can be reductive, and leaves the reader with inappropriate vocabulary to explain text. This formulaic approach to analysis of text has the potential to restrict a reader's understanding and critical interpretation of literary texts. It also offers an incomplete view of the subtleties of literary devices used. As Giroux (1987:175) points out, meaningful learning is the essential formulation of a sequence of *critical* and finally *emancipatory* learning. There is a paradox that, while the syllabus supports critical literacy, its benchmarks and an assessment-driven paradigm run counter to this and do not embrace context and new textual practices (Luke and Kraayenoord 1998).

The syllabus outcomes have been criticised as presenting a rather simplistic view of what a reader needs to learn about reading. While the syllabus acknowledges the importance of audience and how that audience might respond to text, it does not consider the significance of ideology and the changing cultural context in which the young reader operates. It focuses on identifying language structures and features but does not go a step further to explain the impact of literary structures. Children's literature, as the syllabus views it, is a construct of socialisation. The selection of literary text types fails to acknowledge the complexity of most picture books, junior fiction and adolescent novels. Contemporary children's literature texts need to be examined within a broader framework than previously considered acceptable. The syllabus, for example, fails to acknowledge the complexities of *narrative structure*, the use of *multiple plots*, and the degree of *narrativity* and *focality* to be found in much contemporary children's literature.

The syllabus' treatment of ideology might be questioned. Ideologies, Ang tells us, 'organise not only the ideas and images people make of reality, they also enable people to form an image of themselves and thus to occupy a position in the world' (1993:410). To understand the ideology of a text is to know *how* to read it. As Hollindale (1988:3) points

out, the didactic text relies on passive ideology. It does not begin where the reader is but where the writer would like him/her to be. The most effective ideology, Hollindale says, 'is a living thing and something we need to know as we need to know ourselves' (1988:20). Readers need to be able to select the ideology. They need to be aware that ideologies are embedded in certain representations. Many of the outcomes in the syllabus focus on activities which distract from what Meek calls 'fictive actuality' (Meek 1992:27) of the reading experience. The reader needs to discover the reading act before 'doing' the exercise.

Kress states that 'a curriculum is a design for the future' (1996: 1). The place of contemporary children's literature in this curriculum has the opportunity to draw on the rich textual practices available. It also raises questions about the possibilities in the literary for an expanded view of literacy in that the reading of new, experimental texts can challenge the strategies of the reader. Ironically, while the current primary syllabus emphasises the importance of addressing these values, it does not highlight the literature that will most enhance them.

Literature and Secondary English in NSW

Given the high reputation of the 1987 syllabus for Years 7-10 in NSW, and the recurrent sense of crisis and problems associated with the senior HSC English curriculum, it was not surprising that the latter was perceived as having greater priority in curriculum reform. For this reason, I will concentrate in this paper on the HSC English curriculum and the way in which literature is used in it. While English was caught up in the general changes to the HSC initiated by the Carr Labor Government after 1995, a Draft syllabus of 1996 had already indicated that substantial changes to the nature of the subject were to be expected. Chief among these was a decisive shift in the way literature was to be seen and taught. The original proposal in relation to reforming HSC English calling for a stand-alone literature course for the more able students was soon renamed Extension, ending any notion that literature was to be studied as an end in itself.

The new HSC English syllabus was released in 1999, to be examined at the end of 2001 for the first time. In May, Barry Spurr, senior lecturer in English at the University of Sydney, described English as 'an increasingly modish cultural studies syllabus with far too many texts of ephemeral relevance and little literary distinction' (Spurr, 2001:12). He posited that syllabus writers were suspicious of 'literature as literature', preferring instead to place study of the classics within larger topics such as Powerplay', 'In The Wild' or 'Consumerism'. He was supported by the poet John Foulcher, who argued that the syllabus designers 'have decided that the great poems, plays and novels of our literature are of no value in themselves but in what they have to say about arbitrary module topics (Foulcher 2001:13). President of the Board of Studies, Professor Gordon Stanley, responded that there was a greater number of students actually studying Shakespeare, and asserted that 'HSC English continues to place a high value on the study of literature and Shakespeare' (Stanley 2001:13). Far from lacking rigour, the new courses were presented as making more complex demands on students than ever before (Parker 2001:18; Gazis

2001:54), especially in the areas of evaluating the contexts within which literature was produced and responded to, and understanding 'theories and philosophies of English' (Parker 2001:18).

This controversy should be seen in the light of the persistence of New Critical and Leavisite dogmas about literary texts in senior English in NSW long after their apparent eclipse in the tertiary sector. The new HSC can legitimately be seen as bringing the school subject theoretically up to date and reflects a growing abandonment by teachers, both in Australia and overseas, of cultural heritage perspectives in favour of personal growth and critical literacy/cultural studies approaches (Peel & Hargreaves 1995; Goodwyn & Findlay 1999). However, there has also been an unwillingness on the part of syllabus and policy writers consciously to privilege any particular theory or construction of the subject, thus constructing secondary English as an eclectic and diverse kit-bag of approaches from which teachers choose as best befits their particular purpose.

The 1982 syllabuses distrusted theory and literary criticism, preferring instead a direct encounter between student and text, as if that were not the espousal of a theoretical stance. The National English Statement (1991) acknowledged a number of perspectives of English and included them all within its framework. The Board of Studies consultative forum with the English education community in 1998 began with four models of English (cultural heritage, personal growth, skills and cultural analysis) and its report noted the profession's preference for an eclectic approach in which all models were represented (BOS 1998). Thus, the oppositional nature of these models was overlooked in favour of a view that they overlapped significantly, and a coherent practice based on their synthesis could be developed - indeed, was not unlike what teachers already did. The DET's HSC English internet Discussion page, for instance, asserted that there was no incompatibility between personal growth and cultural analysis nor between cultural heritage and cultural analysis (Creenad 1999). Perhaps the Spurr controversy suggests otherwise, not only in terms of the status of literature, but also in terms of the pedagogy traditionally associated with it.

The great difference between the old HSC English and the new is the latter's insistence that texts cannot be studied in isolation from context, itself a departure from the cultural heritage approach, where context was subsumed within the universality and unity of the literary text. In the new syllabus, the literary text is rarely divorced from its context or its relationships with other texts or particular organising topic. Only in the Standard course Module B: Close Study of Text is it possible to study a text as an independent entity. Everywhere else the text is coupled and focus on it is quite directed, often in terms that endow it with a factual, theoretical and historical content, rather than requiring merely personal response.

A good example of this occurs in the Advanced course. In the elective Telling The Truth, students may study six poems from *Birthday Letters* by Ted Hughes. These poems deal with Hughes' tragic relationship with Sylvia Plath. They are designed to form a starting point for 'further explorations of the representations of the truth' (BOS 1999:21). The study of the Hughes/Plath marriage represents a fascinating subject, potentially involving

history, biography, literary scholarship and poetry. The challenge for the student, teacher and examination marker here is to become an expert in the events themselves, the 'truth' which is represented, or constructed by the agglomeration of representations. Again, there is a content to be mastered.

Such content in the old syllabuses was marginalised as background information, useful for gaining access to the world of the text, but then ultimately to be discarded once such access had been gained, and the student could engage with the text directly. The Specimen Examination Papers for the new courses, as Sue Gazis (2001) demonstrated, reveal few places where personal engagement with the text will be enough.

Conclusion

In both primary and secondary English in NSW, a socio-cultural perspective dominates. In the primary school, the K-6 syllabus imposes a specific ideology of English which challenges the place of literature. In senior secondary English, the supposed eclecticism and even-handed coverage of the various models of the subject are problematic as it becomes evident that cultural analysis provides the lens through which texts are to be viewed. As in the tertiary arena, literature, while still a substantial presence, has largely come to be shorn of its claims to universality and seen instead as a cultural product and an indicator of socio-political, philosophical and cultural trends and tendencies.

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