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ABSTRACT

When crucial issues of text teaching were researched from "both sides" of the teaching context in 1999, findings dramatized the demands of teaching text in years seven to ten English in Australia and suggested some ways that it could be done better. Interviews were conducted with 14 secondary English teachers and 53 of their students (in the Melbourne, Australia area) about their experiences of texts during their English classes. The novel, especially the "contemporary, adolescent" Australian novel, reigned supreme in English classes in the study. The general approach to text choice was remarkably uniform across schools in all contexts. Conversations with the English teacher participants revealed that they shared a commitment to bringing students to an "enjoyment" of reading, meaning, in most cases, the novel. One of the core goals in the English curriculum as seen by participants was that the text must be suitable for the whole range of students in the class. A question that arises from considering teaching of text is whether the final text choices and the way they were approached were too often a rather uninspiring compromise. Teachers in less affluent contexts often read novels aloud in class since they felt this was the only way students would read them. Interviews with students from the participating teachers' classes asked students about their reading practices in their spare time as well as their view of school texts. The talks revealed that lack of enthusiasm for book reading cuts across class barriers. Findings suggest that: English curriculum should be less dominated by the novel; secondary English teachers should devote some class time to students' reading preferences; poetry is invaluable for developing students' language skills; and many students are highly computer literate. (NKA)

# SHARING CULTURE? SHARING TEXTS IN SEVEN TO TEN ENGLISH.

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## How useful are the set novels for teaching English literacy to students?

Many of our ambitions for student learning in English are bound up in our text teaching. It takes the majority of our teaching time. Are we spending it well? Christie (2000) argues that we are not. For Christie, the centering of English curriculum around "a novel or perhaps a set of stories or a film" often means that teachers do not focus on the "essential knowledge of language and literacy" that students need. In 1999 I researched the crucial issues of text teaching from 'both sides' of the teaching context. In the project I interviewed 14 secondary English teachers and 53 of their students about their experience of texts during their English classes, and about their experience with texts and reading in their leisure time. The school contexts in which I interviewed ranged across Melbourne so that I saw text teaching in various social contexts from high fee paying private schools to schools in more working class areas. The findings dramatise the demands of teaching text in years seven to ten English and suggest some ways we could do it better.

The novel, especially the *contemporary, adolescent* Australian novel, reigned supreme in English classes in the study. 13 out 14 teachers I spoke to taught at least two novels per year in their seven to ten classes and a couple of schools studied three novels per year. 16 classes out of 28 classes taught by participants read a contemporary Australian novel. The general approach to text choice was remarkably uniform across schools in all contexts. Novels were part of a text list which nearly always included a film. Eight teachers also had plays on their list; of these, seven were Shakespeare, one was a more contemporary play: *Twelve Angry Men*. Nine teachers had more 'classic' novels on their lists; for example, North American texts like *Of Mice and Men* or *To Kill a Mockingbird*; or British ones like *Animal Farm* or *Lord of the Flies*. But rarely was a contemporary text from outside Australia studied. At one school the biography *This Boy's Life* was studied. Poetry was almost always studied but usually at the discretion of the individual English teacher. Only in one school was a study of a specific aspect of poetry (in this case ballads for year eight) made part of the formal English curriculum for a year level of students. Despite the digital revolution computer texts had a limited place in secondary English programs: one school's year ten students looked at a multimedia CD Rom text but in other places computers were only used as research or writing tools.

**Why was there such commonality?**

My conversations with my English teacher participants revealed that they shared a commitment to bringing students to an *enjoyment* of reading. And reading in most cases meant the novel. Teachers' text choices showed their experienced judgements about what novels would appeal to greatest number of the varied groups of students they had in

front of them. One of the core goals in the English curriculum as seen by participants was that the text must be suitable for the whole range of students in the class.

Kay: Once again we've got a real issue of choosing texts that suit a huge range of abilities.... But we're catering to the television generation too.... And that is so hard. Yes, a lot of kids don't read. They are literate but a lot of them don't like reading.

**Compromises**

As well as the balancing of the various reading skills of class members, teachers in co-educational contexts also had the challenge of addressing what often seemed the competing interests of boys and girls. The task of finding texts which fitted such a range of student interests and capabilities seemed to mean that difficult texts were avoided and long proven favourites like *Of Mice and Men* were retained. Texts which raised issues that students liked to talk about were popular: *Looking for Alibrandi*, *Lochie Leonard Human Torpedo*, *Peeling the Onion.*

In other words, teachers did not respond to the many students who had difficulties with novel reading by seeing these students as unsuited to participation in literary culture; instead they looked for ways in which they could facilitate their participation. "With kids who struggle to read especially, I want them to enjoy the story, the reality of the experience of the book." Teachers often used strategies like reading texts aloud in order to meet the needs of students who did not read well.

**Too much compromise?**

A question that arises from considering teachers' teaching of text is whether the final text choices and the way they were approached were too often a rather uninspiring compromise, not representing the best that could be done. In seeking to explore these questions, a key finding was that while there were broad similarities between schools in terms of text choice and approach, there were equally important differences. Not surprisingly, social class and cultural/ethnic background affected the way teachers taught. One private girls'school broke the mould of adolescent fiction very clearly in setting *Jane Eyre* for year ten study and expecting students to come to class having read it. Whereas, students from an inner suburban boys school were judged as not able to manage Shakespeare. Teachers in less affluent contexts often read novels aloud in class since they felt this was the only way students would read them. In other words, it seemed that teachers in more working class schools were occupied with simply getting students to read whereas teachers in more affluent contexts were able to assume this skill. Wheat (2000) also argues that there is a huge unaddressed reading problem among working class students.

**What did students read?**

My project, in talking to students as well as teachers, aimed to look at this alleged reading 'problem' from students' points of view. My interviews with students from the participating teachers' classes asked students about their reading practices in their spare time as well as their view of their school texts. The talks revealed that the lack of enthusiasm for book reading is one that cuts across class barriers. Students confirm their

teachers' perception of them as not committed book readers. The largest group was those who expressed limited enthusiasm for reading books. Some of the participants said that if they found a really good book, for example one of John Marsden's *Tomorrow* series, they would read but this didn't happen very often. Furthermore, with some exceptions, most of the confident, committed book readers were girls. My experience reflects the findings of larger Australian (Thomson, 1987; Australian Council for Youth Literature, 2001) and British (Millard, 1997) studies which found that boys were significantly less likely to be book readers. The boys talked in some awe of their mothers or sisters who read voraciously.

**Class and gender**

However, as others have also found (Alloway and Gilbert, 1997), this finding was not an undifferentiated pattern among boys or girls. Alienation from the book reading culture, especially the school book reading culture, was more intense in the less affluent contexts. Boys in working class contexts were most likely to profess indifference to reading and all that went on in English. However, my study found that this need to distance themselves from the literary culture was not as strong among boys from more elite schools. One reason for this was that these boys from more affluent families had parents who encouraged, and sometimes guided, their participation in the literate culture of school. Paul: "*The Power of One* I enjoyed. It was just at home." On the other hand working class boys' parents could do little to guide them into reading. Alloway and Gilbert (1997) argue, using data from various states of Australia, that working class girls are more likely to fail at literacy than more affluent boys (p. 38). Similarly, my data revealed

a world of difference between girls from English as a second language or working class backgrounds and girls (or boys) from high-fee paying schools.

**How can we teach texts better?**

Despite the seemingly intractable barriers of class and gender, the project did highlight some ways in which teachers in all circumstances were unnecessarily limited by conventional teaching practices.

- English curriculum should be less dominated by the novel. Historically, we have inherited the study of the novel as the main object of study in English. Studying two or three novels per year with students takes up too much of class time and fails to involve many students. Especially for working class and English as a second language students, who do not come from families who are confident with school literary culture, class novel study does not convert them to reading.

- Secondary English teachers should, without the present anxiety about 'getting on with' the curriculum, devote some class time to students' reading preferences. If our aim to make life-long readers, this will only happen if students are encouraged to find reading material that interests them. Many teachers presently do this but it tends to die out as students move up the school. Primary schools and some secondary schools successfully have small groups of students reading from mini-sets of books. This is a reading practice which allows more room for individual reading preferences.

- This is not to say that schools should cease to share complex and challenging texts with their classes. In fact the most liked school text among the year ten students I

interviewed was Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. Students liked it because they could act it out. Boys, especially, do not tend to want to read novels of character and feeling such are often the stuff of English curricula. More drama and visual ways of responding to texts (Wilhelm, 1997) may be ways of drawing the "*television generation*" into print texts.

- Poetry is often left out of the prescribed list of texts and studied when the teacher has time, but it is invaluable for developing students' language skills. Poems have the advantage of being short and are ideal for classroom study. One school in the research project had a unit on ballads for year eight students. The students loved reciting these action poems.

- Many students, both boys and girls, are highly computer literate. Schools need to look for ways to build on students' skills within the English curriculum. This is already happening in many contexts, but some teachers do not feel confident with such activities and poorer schools often lack the resources for such work.

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