

The write kind of knowledge in English

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INTRODUCTION

Something very odd is happening to school English. There has been a subtle imperceptible shift whereby what was once the lifeblood of the subject is in danger of being drained from it leaving it devoid of the spirit it once contained. What is bleeding out of English, for want of a better way of describing it, is that connection, however loose, between art and life – a kind of harnessing of the imagination through words to create meaning. How precisely this manifested itself in a body of knowledge to be taught is quite hard to describe. Indeed, the nature of that corpus is more evident in its absence from lessons than in any exact definition of what knowledge in school English actually used to constitute. In other words, it is only clear what was there – this curious interplay between language, life and the imagination – once it went missing.

In a sense it has been the desire to lend a precision to defining the teachable content of the subject that has led to what might be called an epistemological shift within school English. For as we shall see, the attempt to outline the content of the subject has led to a concentration on knowledge that is apparently factual and formulaic – through itemising desired competencies in certain linguistic and generic conventions – rather than an understanding which is predominantly aesthetic – through the interplay between literary appreciation and creative writing, the relationship between reader and writer.

But before continuing to discuss what I am calling an epistemological shift in the nature of the subject, I would like to make it clear that this is no apologia for some mythical, halcyon past where all was as it should be and to which we should return with all possible haste. Indeed, my own desire to become an English teacher had nothing and everything to do with my experience of the subject at school. Nothing, because I loathed the way in which it was taught, spending most of my time bored and distracted by the endless parsing of sentences and multiple choice tests, as well as frustrated by the tedious trawling through poems, books and plays at the pace of a snail with a limp. Everything to do with it, because I never wanted anyone else to experience it in the same way as I had. For I knew there was more to English than these lessons ever imagined.

At home, and I confess beneath many a desk, I inhabited a totally different world. A curious, typically melancholic teenager with romantic leanings, I became transported by lyrical language that I did not fully understand and stories of as many varieties as I could find. Some of this reading did come from school. We began *Wuthering Heights* and I had finished it by the end of the weekend. My love of the novel remained intact through the subsequent weeks of reading around the class and comprehension questions. Hamlet also survived the ravages of an exam syllabus by my staying up till the early hours only to discover that this most romantic of heroes dies. But it wasn't just that he died, it was Horatio's last words that assured my response. Along with Hamlet's "noble heart", I "cracked".

In similarly elegiac vein I read *Adonais*, this time unprompted, and wept alongside Shelley for the departed Keats. A couple of years later it was Gatsby whose poignant dream swept me away from a London suburb to the tragic glamour of Twenties New York. And then there was the divine Jane. I was Elizabeth and Darcy was mine. These were the experiences that took me to university to study English and American Studies. Only there did I find teaching commensurate with my capacity to wonder.

Many have been luckier and found such experiences at school, and it is a desire to replicate these moments of empathy or epiphany that drives them to teach. Every year they troop through my office and confess their motivation at interview or in the first week of term. They see English as inspirational and in turn wish to inspire others. How this translates into a programme of study or means of improving in the subject either remains elusive or swings wildly between basic skills and flights of fancy with little or nothing in between. Moreover, the models we have for this type of charismatic English teaching often appear as self-indulgent twaddle.

Take Robin Williams in *Dead Poets' Society*. As he wafts around a very privileged boys' school shouting "Seize the day" and standing on tables reading poems aloud, it is unclear what he is actually teaching his pupils about the subject or how he is enabling them to improve as readers and writers. The key to the success of such individuals seems to lie less in the lessons themselves and more in the frame of mind they encourage. It is this that Robin Williams shares with the English teacher in *Kes* and, too, with the idle character in the Channel 4 series *Teachers*. Whether reading and writing has made them more empathetic or arrested their development at around the age of fifteen, these teachers communicate with their adolescent charges and manipulate the subject to do so.

The question we have to ask in education, however, is whether pupils in their classes actually got better at whatever it means to be good at English. Yet to answer this we need to have some idea not only of what progress in the subject might look like but also some notion of what constitutes knowledge in English against which to mark that progress. And it is to this question that I now want to turn my attention, as it seems to lie at the heart of what might be considered the damaging epistemological shift we are currently witnessing in English teaching.

FROM THE ART OF LANGUAGE TO MASTERING FEATURES BY ROTE

In a sense it could be said that English teachers have avoided defining the content of their subject too closely and have been happy to keep it vague. As we shall see there may be good reason for this, but for now it is worth noting that the original motivation may have been to find a pragmatic solution to problems that arise out of the competing views of how English might be defined.

Brian Cox's intelligent version of the first national curriculum for English in 1989 fully acknowledged these views in his report (DES & Welsh Office, 1989) and claimed that they were not incompatible. Indeed the warm reception which greeted the arrival of this first attempt to frame an English curriculum suggests that he may have had a point. And yet it is equally possible that the relief with which the profession received his curriculum and the opprobrium which was heaped upon it by conservative politicians and pundits alike, indicated that a much clearer philosophical position as to the nature of English underpinned Cox's enterprise than would at first

appear. Dominating the 1990 national curriculum for English is a belief in the art of language (DES & Welsh Office, 1990)!

This view is most evident in the way in which the curriculum was to be assessed and, in particular, the descriptive language used to identify the levels of attainment as a pupil progressed through the years of compulsory schooling. And this is not without significance, for it is within assessment that our views of what should be known and understood within a subject, as well as how this might be made manifest, are most clearly revealed.

It should be noted, before we embark on an analysis of the language of assessment in the first English curriculum, that providing any kind of description of attainment that would suffice for the whole of a child's career in compulsory schooling proved controversial (Cox, 1995). To begin with it was, and still is, possible to gain a level 4 as a precocious seven-year-old, an average eleven-year-old, a struggling fourteen-year-old and a poor school-leaver (though the levels now stop at fourteen). How the same description would prove comparable for each of these disparate children, completing different tasks and with widely different levels of maturity, was not resolved with any degree of precision. Thus the carefully outlined "statements of attainment" at each level, which connoted clearly defined objectives, had from the beginning a degree of unacknowledged fuzziness which depended upon interpretation when applied.

This, and the fact that a pupil's progression in English was in all probability going to be idiosyncratic and individual, led to the idea of "best fit" and broader level descriptors (instead of itemised statements of attainment) in the two subsequent incarnations of the national curriculum for English (DfEE & Welsh Office, 1995; DfEE, 1999). But these first statements of attainment, found in Cox's version of the curriculum, are instructive if we want to understand the changing nature of English. It should be noted that while my own apologia for the subject focuses on the pleasure to be gained from reading, it is perhaps in the teaching of writing that the changes are most evident. And, as we shall see, reading itself has to an extent becomes the servant of a kind of writing masterclass.

If we look at "Writing" in the Cox curriculum we see that spelling and handwriting, which are currently subsumed under one general heading of Writing, were, in the 1990 curriculum, separated out as different "Attainment targets". Punctuation, however, appears within writing as a subset of the ability to convey meaning and broader textual organisation. Heavily emphasised in the early levels is a pupil's ability to draft and refine her/his work and to be able to differentiate the conventions of speech from those of writing, as well as an understanding of the relationship between the reader and the writer.

At level 4, for example, pupils are required to "write stories which have an opening, a setting, characters, a series of events and resolution and which engage the interest of the reader. At level 5 they need to be able to "produce, independently, pieces of writing in which the meaning is made clear to the reader (DES & Welsh Office, 1990, p. 13). While at level 8 they must "punctuate writing so that meaning and structure are clear to the reader" (Des & Welsh Office, 1990, p. 15).

The effect of subsuming spelling and presentation into a general writing attainment target in the 1995 curriculum and in Curriculum 2000 gives the level descriptors a

much more technical feel. Of the five or six lines of description, typically over half is usually dedicated to features of technical accuracy. Moreover there is a subtly different flavour in the references to the reader-writer relationship. Level 4 requires that “ideas are often sustained ... and organised appropriately for the purpose of the reader” (DfEE, 1990, p. 6). While at level 5 “Pupils’ writing is varied and interesting, conveying meaning clearly in a range of forms for different readers” (DfEE, 1990, p. 7). And at level 8 writing shows “the selection of specific features or expressions to convey particular effects and to interest the reader” (DfEE, 1990, p. 7).

Creeping in to the Curriculum 2000 is a pre-occupation with mastery of specific forms rather than a more general reader-writer relationship. Phrases like “purpose of the reader”, “range of forms” “specific features or expressions” and “particular effects” hint at a specified body of knowledge that needs to be acquired in order to progress through the levels that is absent in the Cox version of the curriculum.

The literacy framework gives substance to these hints and in so doing the link between the relationship between writer and reader becomes even more remote. And it is this change, possibly more than any other, that has brought about the change of emphasis in English teaching from the use of the art of language to create meaning, as represented in the reader writer relationship, to a concentration on form, conventions and the naming of parts (DfEE, 1998).

If we look at the section of the framework document that considers text level work, we find only two references to the reader and even then one is only in terms of reviewing the impact of a text on a reader (DfEE, 2001). The other reference is in the presentation of factual information where the writer is asked to clearly guide the reader through the text. Instead, what is foregrounded in the document are specific forms of writing. It refers to four different types of writing that have become known as the “writing triplets”. These are writing to: “Imagine, explore and entertain”; “inform explain, describe”; “persuade, argue, advise” and finally to “analyse, review, comment”.

Each of these triplets outlines three or four ways in which pupils should be able to demonstrate their ability in these areas – there are eighteen in all. For example under “Write to persuade, argue, advise”, point 13 requires pupils to be able to “present a case persuasively, making a selective use of evidence, using appropriate rhetorical devices and anticipating responses and objectives.” (DfEE, 2001) Or point 18, under “Write to analyse, review, comment” reads, “They should be able to “integrate evidence into writing to support analysis or conclusions” (DfEE, 2001).

What is immediately apparent about these triplets, however, is that far from being discreet they overlap. When writing persuasively, for example, one should be able to integrate evidence. Moreover, good persuasive writing should present information clearly. Yet this feature is reserved for informative writing. Other oddities also emerge. Why, for example should it be impossible to inform entertainingly or describe imaginatively? Is persuasive writing more informative or advisory?

But it is not the arbitrary fun we can have in pointing out the anomalies of such divisions and subdivisions that is significant here. Nor is it, though it should be noted in passing, the dominance of transactional forms of writing. The problem is that from now on, pupils will be assessed on their ability to display the features, so described, in their writing. Far from the broad level descriptors of the national curriculum, the

assessment criteria in the exams for eleven and fourteen year olds are now built around this list, and parallel lists for word and sentence-level work.

AN EPISTEMOLOGICAL SHIFT

I would argue that we are seeing more than simply a change of emphasis within English. Indeed, the result of this change is the epistemological shift noted at the beginning of this article. In a sense which is most clearly evident in the way in which lesson plans are now being conceived and written. (It should be said, however, that this latter manifestation is as much a result of the inspection regime under OFSTED, which monitors the implementation of the literacy framework, as it is of the testing.)

Lesson plans are generally required to outline so called “learning outcomes, objectives or intentions”. Typically, these indicate the point or purpose of the lesson; what the pupil is meant to come away knowing or understanding by the end of it. Leaving aside the bigger question as to whether learning can be predicted in this way, these learning outcomes are suggestive of the teacher’s broader aims in English and their understanding of what constitutes knowledge in their subject.

If we analyse a fairly standard lesson sequence on “suspense writing” in the early years of secondary school, the point becomes clearer. For as we shall see, what predominates in the learning outcomes of these lessons, and thus in the teaching, is the acquisition and demonstration of specified knowledge of the features of the given form. This contrasts with what might have been an alternative starting point – the broader aim of appreciating the impact of writing upon the reader, beginning with the pupils’ own response to this type of story as a motivation for understanding what effects work for them and how these are achieved. Any ensuing attempt to recreate a similar impact in their own writing becomes more an experiment in how to manipulate language to a certain end rather than the reproduction of a formula.

The lesson under discussion was taught to a bottom set year 9 class (pupils are between 13 and 14) in a London comprehensive school. The majority of pupils in the class under discussion were around a level 4, the average expected for an eleven-year-old. In the first lesson, they read Roal Dahl’s “The Landlady” and their teacher, Bernadette, asked the pupils to find examples of the following features of suspense writing and comment on their effect:

- Setting and time of day; figurative language – for example adjectives, nouns, similes
- short sentences
- information about Billy (the central character)
- repetition
- narrative language – for example adjectives, nouns and verbs.

The aim of this lesson was to consider how writers create suspense. The learning outcome was that pupils would be able to identify certain generic features of suspense writing and comment on the effects that they produce. If we start by looking at this task, and how the pupils responded, we see that any notion of audience and purpose is absent. At no point, for example, did Bernadette attempt to engage the pupils in a discussion of their response to “The Landlady”. The conventions have been identified for them; their task is simply to spot where they are deployed by Roald Dahl. This

does require some analytic skill of the type demanded in SAT comprehension tests, as the responses below demonstrate, but as we shall see, at no point are the pupils encouraged to think beyond the given remit. Again, the responses are reproduced as written.

Figurative language – for example adjectives, nouns, similes	“Deadly cold” “ and the wind was like a flat block of ice on his cheeks”	negative image, creates a sinister tone
Repetition	“Briskly” “New”	emphasis – creates tense
Information about Billy	“Billy is seventeen” “He’s wearing a heavy blue overcoat, a new brown trilogy hat and a new brown suit”	He seems to be naive and innocent. A stranger in a strange place
Short sentences	“They might take you in” “ He has never been to Bath before” “ He didn’t know any one who lived there”	It makes the suspense build up because the person is a stranger doesn’t know anyone and don’t know anything about him

These responses are illustrative of the way in which the pupils are able to isolate the features within the text and provide some explanation of the effect, a technique often given the acronym PEE (point, evidence, explanation). But they have a curiously deracinated feel, precisely because each comment is designed to relate only to the specified convention rather than the general purpose a of suspenseful piece of writing. To this extent, responses seem almost encouraged to be circular, that is, suspense is created because a phrase “makes the suspense build” or “creates tense”.

The deracinated nature of the task is more evident if we look at how pupils attempt to avoid this circularity by referring to the actual content or meaning of the passage by way of explanation as to its relative suspensefulness. As one pupil notes, for example, the use of short sentences to create suspense is only meaningful because they tell you Billy is a stranger. Yet, in so doing, she does not specifically answer the question as to why the use of short sentences creates suspense. Rather, she is using the content of the sentence to provide the explanation. She is drawing on an implicit knowledge of a broader authorial aim – that of creating a sense of the vulnerability of the protagonist as a way of alarming the audience.

Yet the framing of the exercise, by limiting it to the detection of certain generic techniques, does not explicitly require the pupils to understand this or, more crucially, make connections with their own experiences. Pupils are not encouraged to consider how a writer uses the content or meaning of a story to engage or affect the reader. And in this way it reinforces the notion that knowledge in English is less about the reader-writer relationship, and the art of language, and more about the acquisition of knowledge about the specific, predetermined features of different genres.

Nor does the lesson build on the pupils’ own prior knowledge. Because it is designed in this way, Bernadette is less able to elicit evidence about what the pupils already know. Instead, the task Bernadette has devised requires her to transmit a body of

information. The completed worksheet tells her whether the pupils can identify that information when they see it and gives fewer clues as to whether they can apply it. In this way it is knowledge of the rules of the genre that are foregrounded in her planning, even though pupils are asked to comment on the effects these rules create.

The aim of the second lesson in the series was to produce a draft of the opening of their own piece of suspenseful writing, using as a frame the conventions they had identified the day before. One other verbal instruction was given as a result of a brief discussion of the previous day's lessons, which was that suspenseful stories often made the familiar strange and featured an innocent abroad. The learning outcome was that they would be able to deploy the "conventions of suspense writing". Part way through the lesson the pupils swapped over the work and assessed their peers' efforts, again using the generic features of suspense writing as a framework for their comments.

There are many questions that might be asked of this lesson before we even begin to analyse the pupils' work. Is "suspense writing" an identifiable form or is it a subset of other forms or genres such as the thriller or horror. And, even if it is an identifiable form, are these the generic features? But for now I want to put these questions on hold and look at what was produced by the pupils over a period of about two hours, because they highlight some of the problems with and limitations of this type of teaching. Here are three examples, reproduced as written.

I was only 15 years old running away from my family. I had a dad called Tom who had black hair and blue eyes with a bad temper and my mum had brown hair with brown eyes who look just like me, and my little rat for a sister, who had black long hair with blue eyes who all so had a bad temper like my dad. My mum had gone on holiday with her friends. So I got left with them. I am going to visit my old nan in the countryside. I have left the train station and on my way there, it is only 15 minutes walk. The trees are beautiful and the green grass with the lovely free air, ah there's my Nan's house the red bright door brings back some memories. I ring the door bell and ...

It was devilishly cold one evening in the Down borough shopping centre. He knew that something wasn't right. There was lots of innocent people getting there late night Christmas shopping. There was this shifty looking male lurching around with a Dark Brown hat, Brown swade suit and sort of looked like a cowboy. The man was looking around to see if any security guards was looking then started to run out. there was a security guard looking. He charged at him. The man turned a corner and disappeared without a trace.

It was a dark mysterious, blisteringly cold January night. This abandoned street before me held not a soul. No lights in the houses shone, nor did the street lamps. Litter was passed through the streets by the wild wind. And I was astonished. How could this be? Am I in the right place? Or have I just fled from one nightmare to another. The clock struck midnight...

To some degree, all demonstrate certain of the conventions identified in suspense writing and yet arguably the strengths and weaknesses of the pieces are not easily attributable to those identified features. For example, many of the failings, apart from the obvious technical errors, lie in the inability to distinguish written from spoken modes (a general criteria of good writing identified by the Cox curriculum), especially in the second piece – "there was this shifty looking male" and "there was lots of innocent people".

Moreover, the most effective writing is produced by using techniques that do not appear on the list at all. Although slightly clichéd, it is the choice of words, rather than the type of word that makes the last piece possibly the most suspenseful. That, along with the way in which the writer reverses the usual spoken syntax, conveys the impression that this pupil has greater command over the literary form. More significantly it is the sentence cadence that this reversal produces that lends the image of the empty street its hollow feel. And it is the complete lack of attention to the sound or rhythm of the description, along with the banality of the descriptive choices that renders the first piece so flat in tone. To this extent, therefore, the conventions are only partly relevant in assessing the quality of the piece.

BEYOND ADHERENCE TO FORMULI

But the difficulties in approaching writing in this manner – that is, entirely through the teaching of adherence to conventions – are compounded by the following two examples. To an extent, as we shall see, their apparent success as pieces of writing is indicative of the fact that pupils may be drawing on very different types of understanding and abilities than the reproduction of conventions. In this way the following two examples illustrate the possibility that knowledge in English can and should be produced by means other than the adherence to formuli, even if such knowledge appears to elude easy definition.

The first example was produced by an eleven-year-old in her last year at primary school in year 6, the second by a pupil in year 8. These two children were simply asked to write something suspenseful/strange that would make the reader want to read on. Both took about fifteen minutes to produce these first drafts. It should be said that in contrast to the year 9 pupils, both these children have been identified as good at English.

Example 1: Andy was the new kid in school. He'd just moved here from Lakewood elementary. He'd just started but he'd noticed that something was funny about this new town. They all walk around in straight lines and never look anywhere except at what's directly in front of them. They are always busy and never stop working. The weirdest thing of all is they never seemed to sleep.

Andy felt strange and uncomfortable. He didn't know how to act around these people because they seemed so unnatural!

Example 2: I walked swiftly and silently across the stone floor but stopped when I saw ahead of me a closed door. It had a menacing air: black wrought iron pikes protruded out of the frame, black metal bolts held black metal baracades onto the door and blood stained wood. My hand shook as it clasped the knocker. My breathing was becoming fast and heavy. I lifted the huge thing, it was very heavy then dropped it, a huge crash dented the wood. The door creaked slowly open and there a most horrific sight besieged my eyes and ...

The question we have to ask, then, is what is it that these last two pupils know how to do, to a greater or lesser extent, that allows them to produce pieces of writing that are as good as the year 9s, without ever having been taught the conventions? And what relevance this has to the wider debate about what it means to know in English? For while the first does struggle with tense control, the emergent plot echoes both the

Midwitch Cuckoos and the Stepford Wives. The other, though slightly over-written and not always sustained, has a distinctly Gothic feel.

What appears to be happening is that both these pupils are, in varying degrees, displaying an intuitive understanding of certain conventions, which they seem to have acquired by osmosis, possibly by reading this type of fiction themselves or, equally plausibly, by watching television programmes or films in this genre. Above all, what they know how to do is to enter the kind of imaginative space required by this type of writing. From nowhere, they can conjure up a narrative and describe a world that broadly fits the bill. This, if you like, is the skill they exercise. As an aid to the narrative, rather than an end in itself, they deploy, possibly unconsciously, certain literary devices – further to draw the reader into that world. Moreover, it is the quality and lexical density of the year 8 pupil that makes her work stand apart from all the rest – not so much the form but the choice of words to create the scene.

In addition, as with the last of the year 9 pupils, the key to both the year 6 and year 8 girls' relative success in this enterprise is, in a way, their use of prosody, or what might otherwise be called an ear for language. The second sentence in the year 8 pupil's piece does contain many clearly identifiable features of writing that could be discretely taught and are individually identified in the literacy framework. She uses alliteration, repetition and what are described as rhetorical triplets, only one of which is mentioned in the list given by the year 9 teacher. But it is the way these intertwine and build, combined with the choice of vocabulary, that creates the effect on the reader and produces the atmosphere that extends beyond mere description. In stark contrast it is the baldness of the opening sentence of the year 6 pupil, as well as its familiarity as a phrase, that makes this piece work.

KNOWING AND DOING IN ENGLISH

Yet identifying the shortcomings of the criteria, established by adherence to specified conventions, does not entirely reveal the nature of the epistemological shift that has taken place. It might be possible simply to say that, for example, in the teaching of any convention, prosody should always be an element. And anyway, given that both approaches to writing appear to produce work of a similar quality, why, we might ask ourselves, does the approach we take matter.

The answer to that question *has* to lie in what we think we are doing when we teach English and how we define knowledge in that subject. The differences may be barely discernible but they are significant because, while the end product of each of the pupils may be similar, they are not engaged in the same activity. They are not learning to exercise the same muscles.

As we have seen, the point of the first two lessons, their purpose, was the acquisition, application and mastery of the generic conventions of "suspense writing". In the second task, however, the pupils were attempting to engage the reader through an act of the imagination. Any adoption of certain literary devices was subordinate to this greater aim. Or, put another way, the whole in English – in this case trying to unnerve the reader by creating unease – is always more than the some of its parts – the techniques deployed to create that effect.

This is not to say that pupils should not be taught a variety of techniques for improving the quality of their work. They should. But they should always be taught in the context of extending the pupils' repertoire, the linguistic and rhetorical resources upon which they can draw rather than as ends in themselves. Analysing the work of others cannot be seen as simply reading an instruction text of a flat pack from IKEA in order to construct a given product, but must be understood as the development of critical and aesthetic thinking and appreciation. While the two are far from unconnected they are different enterprises

Significantly, also, the types of questions a teachers might ask to guide students in the development of a piece of writing will inevitably differ depending on their overall aim. In the case of the year 6 and 8 pupils, a teacher might ask them to consider what happens next or how the protagonist or narrator felt, and how that might be most effectively expressed. Such responses to a pupil's work, in order to encourage progression, are less available if writing is taught through a narrow focus on genre-specific conventions and techniques. Here, if pupils become stuck, they need to rely on recalling the conventions in order to improve. In so doing their learning becomes more reliant on memory instead of the development of creative thought and active experimentation with an ever-increasing repertoire.

Yet teaching and learning through the development of imagination and empathy is actively discouraged by the framework's extensive list of competencies for pupils to acquire. The shortcomings of the year 9 lesson I have analysed are replicated across a whole host of other predetermined genres and itemised skills. The effect on the English curriculum as a whole is, therefore, particularly corrosive because schemes of work and lesson plans are required to specify from the framework the competency to be covered in that lesson. It is the coverage of these competencies that OFSTED seeks out and the assessment of these competencies that the exams test. To this extent, knowledge in English, as in the year 9 lesson, changes from the broader aim of experimentation in the creative processes of reading and writing to the identification and demonstration of predetermined devices and forms.

Lessons where this is so, however, become a very curious beast and beg more questions than they answer. Why, for example, do pupils need to know the generic features of the horror story or suspense writing? What possible purpose can it serve? Is it important to know and be able to list the different types of figurative language that writers employ? Not necessarily. Why should children know how to write an information leaflet? The answer has to be that in the scheme of things, they probably don't. Robbed, if you like, of the big picture – the desire to create and shape meaning and experience through language – each activity begins to lose purpose and one is left wondering why pupils are being asked to engage in them in the first place.

Much of what is currently being undertaken in English lessons owes its origins to an Australian take on genre theory, which is in itself an outworking of Hallidayan systematic functional linguistics. The aim behind genre theory is, to an extent, laudable in that it aims to enable all pupils to write better by making the generic features of any given form explicit rather than implicit. The idea is to help those who do not have an ear for language to understand what good writers do. As Christie and Misson (1998) explain:

A great deal of recent work in the SF tradition has been devoted to identifying the text types or genres students learn to read and write in order to be successful in their

school learning. Genres are said to be structured in particular ways to achieve their purposes. In fact, a genre is said to be a “staged, goal oriented social process”. As it unfolds, its various stages all have a role in the organisation of information and experience ... Once people are familiar with them and competent in manipulating them, they can play around with them, often making subtle changes. Good writers in fact often play with genre, but they do it, of course, against the reader’s expectations of a more standard pattern (pp. 10-11).

But as we have seen, the problem is that the teaching of conventions becomes an end in itself. More significantly, by genre theory advocates’ own admission, it is an enterprise doomed to failure because, of course, good writers subvert the conventions in a manner that is of necessity unpredictable – not subject to a formula. Yet in a world of target setting, accountability and new managerialism, where all must be unequivocal and transparent, a framework that outlines in definable detail the apparently teachable substance of what is at best a very vague subject has its appeal. Moreover, it gives a certainty to the stages of progression.

In the end, however, we must reclaim the fuzziness of English and teach metaphor and imagery, or the efficacy of the subordinate clause, not because they are part of a checklist of facts to be known but because through these devices writers speak to us of their world, real or imagined. And, too, because in appreciating what writers are doing, we can add to our own repertoire in English. This is what constitutes knowledge in English, however vague and ill-defined. For the more we try to itemise the curriculum, the more pointless it becomes. Knowledge of the wrong kind is a dangerous thing.

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