

## Caught in the crossfire: Conditions of work in the English classroom in Scotland

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*ABSTRACT: In this narrative, a Scottish teacher of English reviews her experiences with two classes of pupils as she negotiates the twin demands of teaching for learning and teaching to succeed in assessments. It is argued that there are currently flaws in the Scottish curriculum and assessment structures, and these flaws are damaging learning for all except the pupils at the top end of the ability spectrum who will be able to move on after school to further success. Each day, Scottish teachers of English face pupils who are not being supported as learners and on whom the burden of inappropriate and excessive assessment of their learning is placed. It is argued that, for deep learning to occur, there needs to be a shift of focus, an adjustment in methodologies and for teaching to be paced to suit the readiness of learners.*

*KEYWORDS: English, assessment, Scotland, literacy, standards, social inclusion, special needs, teacher professionalism.*

I do not know if teachers of English in other countries than Scotland feel that they are “between a rock and a hard place” as regards their priorities in working with young people. In the last decade in Scotland we have endured pressure to raise standards in literacy while also taking account of the very diverse learning needs of pupils in mainstream state secondary schools. Often these two requirements have seemed to be contradictory messages of what schools should be doing at the start of the Twenty-First century. While neither priority is an unacceptable aim, it has been a challenge to combine higher attainment as evidenced by results in the national assessments of reading and writing, *and* to promote the policy of social inclusion.

In this narrative of my work as a teacher of English in Scotland, I propose that continuing professional development can be a supportive and energising way of navigating a route through this chasm. I have written in the form of a present tense reflective journal, in which I describe my difficulties in addressing these two priorities, and the refreshment and support I gained from participating in after-school courses.

### NOVEMBER 2001

I am teaching a class of 14 boys, approximately fifteen years old, in a class which has been created to take the pressure off the other eight, third-year English sections. These are all boys who have been disruptive, poor attenders and/or very low achieving in their first two years of secondary school. These boys arrived in secondary school with National Test results at the lower ends of the A to E gradings in both reading and writing.<sup>1</sup> Their poor behaviour or low attendance rates have held back progress and

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<sup>1</sup> Level A should be attainable in the course of Primary 1 to Primary 3 by almost all pupils.

Level B should be attainable by some pupils in Primary 3 or even earlier, but certainly by most in Primary 4.

Level C should be attainable in the course of Primary 4 to Primary 6 by most pupils.

they enter third year with grades well below the national target attainment grade of Level E for their age and stage. The 5-14 English Language programme (The Scottish Office Education Department, 1991) is the national guideline for language work from the first stage of primary school (aged 5 years) until the end of the second year of secondary education (aged 14 years).

As part of Glasgow City Council's rationalisation of secondary schools, the pupils are in the first group of an amalgamated cohort from two secondary schools so there are territorial and ownership issues simmering among the boys who do not wish to lose their school and area identities. As an education authority, Glasgow has attainment rates well below the national averages for literacy and Glasgow City Council hopes that building or refurbishing its schools will support better learning and teaching in improved schools, which have been purpose-built and have ICT support for pupils. At this stage we are in the last year of working in the old buildings, which will be replaced by a new building in the centre of our catchment area.

The pupils are working towards Standard Grade English to be completed in May, 2003 – when the Scottish Qualifications Authority examiners will have marked a portfolio of five pieces of coursework, consisting of textual study and creative writing for each boy, and also the close reading and timed-writing examination papers. The school managers, my employers in the Education Department of Glasgow City Council and Scotland's post-Devolution politicians are all exhorting me to raise the attainment of my fourteen boys as evidenced by General rather than Foundation grades for English<sup>2</sup>. The national guidelines for the 5-14 group – as described above – do not articulate with the national guidelines for the 14-16 group. This curriculum disjunction adds to the difficulties for progression and continuity in the Scottish secondary school and constitutes an additional problem for slow learners.

The policies of social inclusion, which I endorse, require that the boys achieve these grades within the same provision and support as experienced by state school and independent school students who are socially, materially and academically more advantaged.

At this point in the academic year, I choose to read and study some poems written about Glasgow life, many of the texts written using dialect and exploring experiences which my students are able to recognise. We all enjoy reading and talking about the language used and the incidents described *and* we all undergo individual and collective disintegration when we begin to study the poetry as pieces for critical evaluation for inclusion in our Standard Grade folios! The ability to engage in critical literary analysis of poetry or drama or prose is neither a life skill nor an academic challenge to which these boys aspire.

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Level D should be attainable by some pupils in Primary 5 to Primary 6 or even earlier, but certainly by most in Primary 7.

Level E should be attainable by some pupils in Primary 7/Secondary 1, but certainly by most in Secondary 2.

<sup>2</sup> Pupil work is assessed using grade-related criteria. Credit-level awards match the criteria for Grades 1 and 2; General match the criteria for Grades 3 and 4; Foundation for Grades 5 and 6.

**ALSO NOVEMBER 2001**

Enjoined by my employers and the afore-mentioned politicians to undertake 35 hours per year of continuing professional development, I am sitting in a class in the Educational Studies department of the University of Glasgow's at 6 pm and I feel as if I am breathing in pure oxygen. The lecturer is talking about the ethics of teaching the next generations and of stimulating a love of learning which will continue throughout life. In this small group of teachers, all enrolled on the Postgraduate Certificate for Effective Teaching for Learning course, at the dark end of the year and at the Thursday evening slump of the week, I remember what I am doing and why I am working with young people. What I am doing is investing in Scotland's young citizens and raising their expectations that education is enriching and empowering.

As the weeks and months pass studying for the four modules of the course, I am talking and reflecting and reading in the evenings and weekends. During my working days, I am experimenting and adjusting my routines and practices and conducting small action research projects with a range of classes. I realise that I have missed so much of the theorising and academic research on learning about learning, as I have focussed on honing my teaching skills and on developing materials and keeping pace with curricular change in the years since 1973 when I completed my training as a teacher. Though always an enthusiast, I have spent more time on preparing to teach than on considering how learning happens. However, though my studies energise me and refresh my practice I cannot change the structures to match learning needs with educational provision and this frustrates me.

**MARCH 2002**

The S3 English examination approaches when pupils have to produce, under formal exam conditions, one piece of timed writing from a choice of 25 unseen topics and to answer close reading questions on two unseen texts at two levels of difficulty. The boys struggle to revise for this "practice examination" a year ahead of the Scottish Qualification Authority examination, and I struggle to keep a perspective on the double life I am leading – teacher by day and pedagogue by night.

The "National Priorities in Education" poster, produced by the Scottish Executive Education Department in 2000, encompasses my dilemma with these boys (my bold italicised phrases should sustain concentrated discourse analysis):

## Achievement and Attainment

"To raise *standards of educational attainment for all* in schools, especially *in the core skills of literacy* and numeracy, and to achieve *better levels in national measures of achievement including examination results.*"

## Framework for Learning

"To support and develop the skills of teachers, *the self discipline of pupils* and to enhance school environments so that they are conducive to teaching and learning."

## Inclusion and Equality

“To *promote equality and help every pupil benefit from education*, with particular regard paid to pupils with disabilities and special educational needs, and to Gaelic and other lesser used languages.”

## Values and Citizenship

“To work with parents *to teach pupils respect for self and one another* and their interdependence with other members of their neighbourhood and society, and to teach them *the duties and responsibilities of citizenship* in a democratic society.”

## Learning for Life

“To *equip pupils with the foundation skills, attitudes and expectations* necessary to prosper in a changing society, and *to encourage creativity* and ambition.”

The National Debate on Education is launched. Cathy Jamieson, the Minister for Education, seeks the views of parents, teachers, school boards and members of the public, during 800 National Debate events. No one asks my boys what they think.

**APRIL 2002**

Excited by my reading of Edward de Bono, I teach the boys in my class the techniques described in the *Six thinking hats* (de Bono, 1999). I have an assessment to complete for my “Teaching Thinking Skills” module and choose the option of a small-scale action research project rather than an essay. My experiences of working on discursive essay-writing, as part of the Standard Grade English Writing purpose “to deploy ideas” with these pupils encourage me to construct a comparative approach for my action research proposal – what might be the differences in thinking approaches used by my pupils after practice in “the thinking hats” technique? Previous attempts to teach discursive writing have been unsuccessful, and generally the boys have found it difficult to see various sides of a case and to deal with abstract thought in written mode.

The boys are truculent and discouraged having failed the S3 exams and it being Scottish springtime, that is, longer daylight evenings of rain. Notwithstanding this generally negative mood, they enjoy learning about “the thinking hats”, and we engage in many, many group discussions. I organise a whole range of mini debates using the de Bono model, and we are able to incorporate “real life” scenarios as well as less immediate or concrete dilemmas. As we stray into discussion areas on the value of education, I decide to invite the boys to participate in the National Debate on Education by writing a letter to Cathy Jamieson giving their views on what they value and despise about schooling. All the boys who are attending school at this point write lengthy and sincere letters which become writing assignments for their Standard Grade English folios<sup>3</sup>. The Head Teacher congratulates the boys on the letters and they receive a very complimentary reply from Cathy Jamieson!

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<sup>3</sup> For the Standard Grade English portfolio, pupils send two types of writing to Scottish Qualifications Authority markers for grading: one piece of “transactional” and one of “expressive” writing. These two pieces are graded using the grade-related criteria and aggregated with the grade achieved in the timed-writing examination piece for the final writing award. There are also three critical responses to

**AUGUST 2003**

By the time the Standard Grade certificates arrive, my original group of 14 pupils has reduced in number to eight who complete the course and are awarded English at Grades 4 and 5.

The questions I face: Why do so few complete the course and why are the grades so low?

The questions no one asks: What have the pupils gained from their time in English and what attitudes to learning do they take into their post-school lives?

**NOVEMBER 2004**

Of the eight boys who completed, I know that four are working and engaged in vocational training as part of their employment. I do not know about the others. Two of the pupils who completed the course and gained certificates for English return to visit me and talk about how important it is for them to have found employment. They know that being employed is keeping them out of trouble. They describe others of the original group who are “running wild”.

**ALSO NOVEMBER 2004**

I am teaching a first-year class of sixteen pupils aged about eleven or twelve years old. No pupil in the class has a 5-14 grading beyond Level C and most have passed only Level B for reading and writing. Three of the pupils attend this school because it includes a Visual Impairment Unit, and two of this group use Braille for texts and for their own writing. Four pupils have specific learning difficulties, dyslexia and dyspraxia, and three are second-language learners. Two boys in the class are recorded as having histories of behavioural problems. I have no training in dealing with any of these particular areas of need.

The Disabilities Discrimination Act (2004) specifies the responsibilities of educators towards pupils with learning difficulties, but there are no extra teachers or classroom assistants or resources put in place to help us to make appropriate provision in the mainstream schools, which the children have the right to attend.

In the meantime, Glasgow City Council is conducting an investigation into the effect on attainment of the programme to improve school building and requires each secondary school head teacher to explain why schools in Glasgow continue to fall below the national levels of literacy (and numeracy). The English and Mathematics departments are required to find ways of moving more pupils to Level E in National Assessment results by the end of S2.

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literature sent in the folio and these are aggregated with the close reading grade achieved in the examination for the final reading grade.

However, as part of my continuing after-school studies, I have been learning about co-operative learning and formative assessment strategies, and my S1 pupils are developing as a co-operative learning community. We evolve our own systems of checking learning with pupils, showing a “high 5” when they have understood my explanations, a “3 fingers” if they are not so sure and a “thumbs down” when what I am teaching makes no sense. The Brailers teach the rest of the pupils how to Braille name labels for their jotters, and then everyone can take on the job of giving out materials, and also learning pairs can be formed with any combination of pupils. We employ cross-lateral stretching exercises when the pupils tell me at the beginning of lessons that they are not in optimum learning mode for whatever reason. At the end of lessons we score ourselves on our levels of “learning behaviour” for the period in English. Assessment of work is done in learning pairs and learning groups which constantly change and shift, and no one is embarrassed about giving answers or asking for further help or struggling with difficulties because we are all equal learners. This English class is one of the most fulfilling and exciting classes on my timetable, and the pupils comment regularly that they enjoy their learning.

## **DECEMBER 2004**

I am invited to write about “Conditions of work in the English/ Language Arts classroom” considering the changing situation over the last decade. I think about the period 1995 to 2005 in Scotland and about the issues and themes and classes which come into my mind. I reflect on the experiences which have made me glad to be teaching English and the areas which cause me frustration. And strangely enough, it is points of adjustment in my perception of my role which emerge most strongly from this period of consideration.

Scottish education, in general terms, has undergone very considerable change during the past twenty years. Since 1985, all stages of secondary school have been altered in relation to assessment procedures and the formal recognition of academic attainment. Accountability of schools has increased following these changes. In “post-Devolution” Scotland, however, issues of social justice have been highlighted and counterpointed with the drive for academic success. The wording of the National Priorities, detailed above, demonstrates that the Scottish Executive equally promotes attainment and inclusiveness.

At the level of the classroom teacher of English, there are further complicating challenges to deal with both the communication component of our subject and the literary study element. It is my personal opinion that we have a duty to develop communication skills to meet the needs of the next generations of citizens. I still believe, moreover, that reading and studying texts can open minds and hearts. These two areas of our work sit well with the priorities of: Inclusion and Equality; Values and Citizenship; Learning for Life (defined above). The procedures for formally assessing English, however, and the criteria of success in these assessments do not allow us to match the needs of all pupils with what and how we teach. It is my view that teaching for learning and exam success accountability (under present structures) are uncomfortable cohabiters of the English classroom. I am not claiming that these are mutually exclusive but I do claim that there should be balance in our aims for pupils.

The pupils of the two classes I have described in this narrative bring together my personal understanding of the dilemmas of teaching for learning and teaching to succeed in assessments. In Scotland there are flaws in the curriculum and assessment structures and these flaws are damaging learning for all except the pupils at the top end of the ability spectrum who will be able to move on after school to further success. Teachers also become jaded and demotivated as they attempt to fulfil the unattainable demands of a flawed system. If each day we face pupils who are not being supported as learners and on whom we place the burden of inappropriate and excessive assessment of their learning, then we diminish our sense of our professional integrity. For deep learning we need to shift our focus, to adjust our methodologies and to pace our teaching to suit the readiness of the learners; but the assessment structures currently in place do not take account of learner readiness. In many respects the assessments are barriers to learning rather than checks that learning has taken place. These were the perceptions I had in November 2001 when I enrolled for the programme of continuing professional development.

My experiences as a learner about learning, after thirty years of teaching, shifted my sense of failure. The classes and reading for the courses gave me the confidence to work with pupils' learning and to harness their and my energies more positively. I remembered that learning is a "long game" – that in many cases the impact of my work with young learners would never be known to me, if I was aiming to support lifelong learning, the "responsibilities of citizenship in a democratic society" and the "attitudes ... necessary to prosper in a changing society". I also came to realise again that the most important aspect of my role was to keep the doors open for my pupils so that short-term failure in school assessments did not prevent learners from returning to education at their right moments, whenever those might happen. In an ideal education world, learning and assessment would proceed in a natural continuum.

In conclusion, I have enjoyed this opportunity to share with teachers of English from around the English-speaking world my reflections on a decade of Scottish experience. To teach language and literature is such an enriching role and to engage with the young people of one's community is such a privilege – best wishes to all who are engaged in this special work in the decades ahead!

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