

Battleships

LIONEL WARNER

Newlands Girls' School, Maidenhead, England

ABSTRACT: This narrative provides an account of one English HOD's response to a perceived sense that the English curriculum (in England) has become increasingly atomised by a determination to reduce it to a neat set of discrete learning objectives. The narrative argues that this atomisation can cause problems for teachers in approaching the teaching of writing and responding to texts. It also suggests that such atomisation, reflected in high stakes assessment practices, may be providing misleading information on standards of student performance and adversely affecting practices in classrooms.

KEYWORDS: English, assessment objectives, targets, curriculum, key stages, learning outcomes.

“When I was a little chap I had a passion for maps,” says Marlow in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (p. 33), ironically indicating a more worldly and less invigorating adult perspective to come. I too liked maps, and still do – the colours and designs, of course – but also the names, of rivers, villages, hills. At school I could “do” Ordnance Survey map references, but I’m fairly sure my imagination wandered from the precision of numbers to what the places would actually be like. The numerical co-ordinates do not sum up the totality of the experience; they are scarcely the beginning.

I teach English in a UK comprehensive school for students aged 11-18. I teach English at key stage 3, that is to say, classes in the 11-14 range preparing for their end of key stage test in May of Year 9. I teach English in key stage 4, that is to say, classes preparing for GCSE assessment in English (Language) and English Literature at the end of Year 11. And I teach Year 12 students preparing for AS exams and Year 13 students preparing for A2 exams, in English Literature (some call this key stage 5). In a typical day, I might go from teaching *Much Ado About Nothing* to my Year 9 class for their end of key stage test, to Year 10 where I am teaching Thomas Hardy short stories (for GCSE pre-1914 prose coursework including historical and cultural context), to Year 12, Chaucer’s *Miller’s Tale*, an AS set text with the emphasis on AO5 (“Context”; see below).

MAPPING THE CURRICULUM

As an English teacher I find myself increasingly having to use co-ordinates, charts and grids with letters and numbers, designed to “map” the curriculum and to “target” teaching and assessment objectives. When I observe lessons, objectives on the plans are expressed in terms like SL1, R3&4, W5, 6, 7. There is no *terra incognita* any longer, every area is mapped – the UK Curriculum Authority (QCA) has just “done” speaking and listening. A giant game of battleships is going on in our classrooms, where targets are being hit by lessons aimed like programmed cruise missiles. The

centralised attempt to codify and fix the English curriculum is, however, not unproblematic, as encounters with real texts and real students daily show.

Triplets permeate the 11-16 English curriculum in the United Kingdom. There are four of them:

- analyse/review/comment
- discuss/argue/persuade
- inform/explain/describe
- explore/imagine/entertain

They are otherwise known as the text types (notice the definite article). We study examples and students practise writing them. In their GCSE assessments, students have to demonstrate their writing skills in each of these “genres”. The first is assessed by means of Literature coursework. The fourth is assessed by means of a coursework assignment, which is usually a short story, although it could be travel writing or autobiography. The other two are assessed by means of pieces of writing done in exam conditions.

How best to prepare students for these is an interesting puzzle – past papers, of course, but conventional wisdom is that students should also be given the assessment criteria in order to maximise performance. I teach approaches to persuasive writing (rhetorical questions, rule of three, soundbites, and so on) but am acutely aware that argument and persuasion on paper usually involve information and explanation, that the best analytical writing usually has some rhetorical designs on the reader, and that the pieces of entertaining journalism which are selected for the English exam paper tend to combine features drawn from all of the triplets. My point is, then, that it is difficult to teach specific and discrete skills when the target is so potentially protean.

So what seems at first sight helpful and user-friendly, turns out to be conceptually dubious. It is also ideologically loaded. Official pronouncements have expressed the view that that too much story-writing was going on, and so the triplets were constructed to “demonstrate” that narrative (triplet four, presumably) is only a quarter of your programme of study. They seem to ignore the fact that children are still, despite Her Majesty’s Inspectors sounding alarm bells in the 1970s, writing pages of non-narrative in other subjects.

Even when you give ground and decide to work with the approved framework, you can still be faced with a moving target, or, to use a favourite metaphor in the education service (and no doubt other areas of public service), moving goalposts. I have recently been to a consortium meeting for A-Level English Literature to represent my school, at which the main agenda item was the assessment of standardisation exemplar coursework folders. English Literature, as a subject at Advanced Level, has five Assessment Objectives (AO’s). They are as follows. (I have simplified their official, somewhat cumbersome descriptions):

- AO1 clarity and accuracy of communication
- AO2 knowledge and understanding of texts
- AO3 analysis of language detail
- AO4 independent opinions

- AO5 understanding of contexts

Although the “specification” (formerly known as the “syllabus”, but renamed in order to promote harmony with vocational qualifications) admits, in a rare moment of common sense, that it is impossible to assess the objectives in isolation, the AO’s and their relative weightings appear at every stage, exam question and coursework, in the assessment process. The “dominant” AO for final-year coursework comes under AO2, the ability to compare texts. Yet the “official” verdict on the standardisation exemplars was that AO3, the ability to quote detailed evidence, was key in arriving at the “agreed” mark.

Inevitably, some teachers left the meeting feeling that there were qualities in some of the essays which may have altogether transcended the AO grid. When teaching *The Miller’s Tale*, I understand that in this particular examination the question will not ask for opinions, since that would be targeted on AO4, but that its dominant objective is AO5, so will ask something like “What impression of the church does Chaucer create in this poem?” This does not rule out consideration in the classroom of such fruitful topics as “Do the characters in the poem get what they deserve?” But students must not be led to expect such open-ended questions in the exam. It is possible that students, brought up on syllabus requirements and examination technique, find the whole notion of a dominant AO unproblematic, but I find the emphasis unhelpful and restricting, since virtually everyone agrees that it is ultimately impossible to separate out the different objectives in actual students’ responses, especially to separate AO4 and AO5 concerning a text written six hundred years ago.

GRIDLOCK AT KEY STAGE THREE

The key stage 3 tests are the examinations in English, Maths and Science for all 14-year-olds in state schools in England. The English test comprises four tasks, two testing reading and two writing. One reading test uses unprepared material. The Test Development Agency’s brief from QCA is to construct a test on the foundation of five Assessment Focuses (AF’s).

The official focuses for reading are as follows (again, I have abridged them):

- AF1 reading for meaning (not covered in this test);
- AF2 select information and refer to text;
- AF3 deduce, infer, interpret;
- AF4 comment on structure and organisation;
- AF5 comment on use of language;
- AF6 comment on purposes and viewpoints;
- AF7 relate texts to contexts (not covered in this test).

Key AF’s at this level are AF4, which is about text structure, AF5 (writers’ use of language), and AF6 (writers’ purposes). It will be immediately evident to English teachers that it may be difficult to separate these focuses in a pupil’s response to reading, even if it were desirable. But the “diagnostic” aim is that the test will reveal pupils’ strengths and weaknesses in terms of the AF’s, which can be addressed by subsequent teaching. Indeed, software to present a pupil’s reading profile as a kind

of circular map, making weaknesses instantly visible as sharply pointed fiords, is currently available (see <http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/performance/pat/>). But can these strands be taught discretely?

Consider this test item, taken from 2003. The question, based on an extract from *Treasure Island*, is “Explain how the choice of language in ‘swallowed up their previous terrors’ shows the ways the men are affected by the thought of the treasure”. The answer on the mark scheme is “It suggests the fears the men had before have completely disappeared.” You can tell by the wording of the question that its intended focus is AF5, but AF’s 3 and 6, and possibly 2 are there too. A pupil who failed to gain a mark here might do so because of a failure to acknowledge the metaphorical force of “swallowed”. But there *might* be a failure also to recognise the writer being dramatic, or a failure to understand what is happening at this point in the story (or, in a clever pupil, a failure to understand how easy this question is). Using this kind of test data to diagnose weakness and to frame lesson objectives strikes me as building foundations on sand.

And then we have Shakespeare. The controversy which has dogged the English key stage 3 tests since their inception has often centred on Shakespeare. The tests were first launched in 1993 but boycotted for two years by the great majority of secondary schools. In 1995 they were widely taken but marking and administrative problems gave them a reputation for unreliability which has never left them, exacerbated by well publicised problems in 2004. A significant sector of the English teaching profession has always maintained that the assessment of Shakespeare should be undertaken through teacher assessment and not an exam. Ironically, the testing of Shakespeare has been relatively reliable, compared to the assessment of writing, and much vivid teaching of Shakespeare to 14-year-olds has taken place throughout the land. But Shakespeare, too, must be mapped.

There are four “areas related to the study of a Shakespeare play”: character, theme, language and performance. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with these as focuses of assessment and indeed teaching, although I would like something about personal response or the ability to develop a coherent view to appear alongside them. But there remains the question of how a test might address them. You might think that the cue would be taken from the A Level to say that ultimately they cannot be tested in isolation. But no. QCA tell us “in 2004 the areas targeted for assessment are: *Henry V*, the text in performance; *Macbeth*, ideas, themes and issues; *Twelfth Night*, character and motivation” (QCA, 2004, p. 21).

For me as a teacher, this procedure raises some questions. Do we know in advance which “area” is being “targeted” in which play? The answer is no, so what is the point in telling us afterwards? Isn’t there the danger that the *Macbeth* question will be harder than the other two? (This turned out to be the case in 2004.) The performance focus takes the form of: “Imagine you are directing the scene”. This is an approach in the classroom which many English teachers will use, only if that kind of question “comes up in the exam”. Here they are faced with a kind of lottery. What difference does it make, anyway? The Mark Scheme does not genuinely distinguish between the “areas” at all. The ability to comment on language and its effects are what is sought in this test, which is about reading after all. The academic community in the UK have slowly begun to respond to this issue (see Coles, 2003). Whose interests does it serve

to even attempt to fix, nail down, set in concrete all the possible outcomes for learning, especially in English? Not the interests of our students, that's for sure.

I suppose my grouse is fundamentally about not liking being told what and how to teach. I am not a golden age romantic about this. I know that there was apparently a time when the school curriculum was a secret garden into which politicians and parents never ventured. In fact, when I started teaching, I had considerable freedom to choose texts and approaches, but I always felt that the English curriculum engaged with the individual and the community in a host of ways. I know that a tide turned in the 1970s in Britain, partly because of the economic downturn and an anxiety about the relationship between school and work, and there began a centralising and codifying process which led to the birth of the National Curriculum about ten years after that. I remember the dismay caused by the imposition of programmes of study, levels of attainment and a new, fierce testing regime. I remember the squeals of pain in subjects other than English caused by the new curriculum prescription. Science suddenly had seventeen attainment targets to teach and to test. Geography suddenly faced extinction, divided up between physical geography which went to science and human geography which, if it went anywhere, went to humanities. History had its own civil war between the modernisers who favoured the new skills approach to the subject and the reactionaries who lamented the loss of historical knowledge.

My first major inspection as a head of department came in the late 80s, and the headline judgement from the inspector was a comforting "You are teaching the National Curriculum", although I doubt whether we were doing anything very different from the pre-NC era. In English a huge amount of time and energy was expended in inventing ways to demonstrate coverage and delivery. All rapidly became redundant. Comparisons were made between New Zealand's National Curriculum, which was a booklet, and ours, which took up a bookshelf. The 1990s can be seen as a long unpicking and simplification of some of its excesses. But, in spite of reforms and slimming down, the centralising tendency is still there, like the noise of the big bang radiating through the universe. Britain is no longer in a recession, the curriculum is public property, but my professional life is still ruled by grids, tick boxes and the battleship mentality.

The charm of Garrison Keillor's (1990) *Lake Woebegone* is that it does not appear on the map because of incompetent surveyors: 'Why the state jobbed out the survey to drunks is a puzzle' (p. 91). The map-makers in Brian Friel's (1981) play *Translations* are colonists who distort what they attempt to record. I find hugely attractive the prospect of teaching off the map.

REFERENCES

- Coles, J. (2003). Alas, Poor Shakespeare: Teaching and testing at key stage 3. *English in Education*, 37 (3), 3-12.
- Conrad, J. (1988). *Heart of darkness*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Friel, B. (1981). *Translations*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Keillor, G. (1990). *Lake Woebegone days*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA). (2004). *KS3 English test mark scheme*. London: QCA/DfES.