LITERACY AND LITERATURE:
PRIORITIES IN ENGLISH STUDIES TOWARDS 2000

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In 1983, five years before his death, Raymond Williams published Towards 2000, a collection of essays exploring issues arguably made both more pressing and more tractable by the approaching millennium. Those issues included questions of class; of industrial and post-industrial society; of culture and technology; and, as a final frontier of human relations, of war. The general sense of purpose underlying those essays - as in all of Williams's works, both of criticism and fiction - was that to plan constructively for a future, it is necessary at the same time to investigate the long historical record which underpins social patterns of the present. Despite vicissitudes Williams points out in the ways in which we calibrate time (and the illusions of segmentation, juncture and continuity these can create), he suggests that the round number 2000 invites renewed reflection on where we are, culturally and politically.

Such coupling of a historical sense with contemporary cultural analysis and a strategic eye on the future has set the broad terms of many of the most interesting ideas in literary and cultural studies over the last quarter of a century. Indeed specific leverage on issues facing English studies as a discipline can be found in Williams' own characteristic use of thought-provoking round numbers in the historical record. In another, slightly later article, 'The Future of English Literature', Williams points to a deep asymmetry in our accepted account of English language and literature with the understated but resonant observation that 'there have been 600 years of English literature and only 100 years of English literacy' (Williams 1990:153). The body of English literature, that is to say, which is so thoroughly and vigorously studied around the globe, has existed for considerably longer than any mass national readership to which it could have been addressed, or to which it might reasonably have been thought accessible.

There is an obviously chastening resonance in this fact, as regards the prevailing sense in Britain of the historical achievements of English culture and education. At least as important, however, is the way in which the quotation indicates how precarious, historically, cultural presumption of a balance between appropriate communicative skills and prevailing cultural forms remains. A paradox emerges from Williams' observation, too, given that English studies, at least in universities, generally means principally the study of literature. While almost all major varieties of literary studies have professed an aspiration towards improving or revitalising national social relations, there remains the historical fact to be accounted for of what must be considered a narrow, elite tradition of readerships and readings. Even now, the relationship between literacy and literature remains a loaded one; and my comments below attempt accordingly to explore implications of the distinction as regards current definitions of and future directions for English.

Through a brief discussion of the changing and unstable relationship between concepts of 'literacy' and 'literature' in English studies, I try below (1) to illuminate aspects of what amounts to a dialectic between, on the one hand, *social skills of language use and interpretation* (which are often dismissed as merely 'instrumental'), and, on the other, the complex concern in English literary studies with *a body of literature*, whose formation of moral and aesthetic values, and cultural judgements, is (in some formulations) deemed essential to national belonging or a sense of being cultured or civilized.

In the course of my account, I hope to outline continuing problems of identity and purpose which perplex English studies in higher education, and to speculate briefly about challenges the field currently faces. In Britain, those challenges coincide with the educational and cultural implications of a policy shift towards 'mass' participation in higher education introduced by a Conservative government happy enough to call time on custom and practice within the discipline. Internationally those challenges are presented by a difficult intersection between two forces: the historical idea of 'English' associated with the language and national literature of Britain, linked in many countries with colonial imposition; and an increased educational emphasis world-wide on English as a contemporary 'international' language, offering access globally to science, trade, diplomacy and technology.

The view I hope to develop is that English studies needs far more than at present to integrate linguistic, literary, and media work in a structured curriculum. That curriculum needs in particular to make provision for monitoring the learning processes which are thought to enable students to progress within their studies. Because my experience of the German university system in particular is limited, I will not seek to make points directly about needs or priorities in German universities; others are better placed to make such observations. My experience of university provision in English in many other national systems, nevertheless, suggests that there may be points of contact and contrast which can illuminate discussion of the German situation in the arguments which follow.

Literacy and Literature

My account of tensions within English studies as currently constituted begins with a series of familiar (if simplified) contrasts.

The word 'literacy', for many people, conveys a sense of activity, of processes of reading and interpreting, and of skills. By contrast, the word 'literature' usually indicates a body of what is read, or, more elaborately, a sense of continuity and commonality in what is read and written: a tradition.

Working outwards from such a basic polarity or binary opposition, it is possible to chart a set of closely related (if equally shorthand) contrasts:

LITERATURE	LITERACY
corpus/content	skill
elevated/advanced	basic
revered as cultural tradition	perceived as cultural problem
aesthetic/symbolic	referential
contemplative/critical	instrumental/utilitarian

What is interesting in these contrasting pairs is that, taken together, they invite what structuralists would call a series of homologies. When binary oppositions overlap they produce a grid, from which a network of meanings, structured in parallelism and contrast, typically emerges. A simple structuralist analysis of the grid above might point to a common general argument drawing on the first two pairs: that education dealing with skills is somehow basic or elementary, whereas education geared towards book-learning is elevated. This homology underpins conventional esteem for knowledge-based and value-based education which habitually contrasts with 'training'. The educational tradition of which this view forms a part confers on scholarship the status of dignified pursuit while decorating or plumbing - in many respects as valuable - are not dignified to the same extent.

Within English studies, two more specialised cases of homologies around the respective values of literacy and literature illustrate the pervasiveness of the contrast: firstly, the issue of syllabuses in TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages); secondly, the issue of the general orientation of university English teaching.

In TESOL, certainly until the end of the 1960s, the dominant paradigm was that of structural syllabuses. In that paradigm, elementary language work on vocabulary and structures ('language' work) continues until reading, writing and elementary conversation are mastered; such work then gradually funnels into the reading of literary texts, the selective, higher attainment of the field. Since the 1960s, this syllabus model has been displaced to some extent by notional-functional and communicative syllabuses, drawing on different educational philosophies which challenge the prestige of literature in a series of arguments appealing to the inverse value system: instrumental value and utility are prioritised by comparison with 'non-productive', 'contemplative', 'humane' or 'liberal arts' values. Both in the earlier syllabus forms and in challenges to them, nevertheless, an equivalent general network of connections and oppositions between language skills and literary studies is presupposed (2).

In most university English departments, to present my second illustration, English studies (for all its evident differences from TESOL) presumes a similar underlying contrast. While it is 'literacy' - reading and writing - which is taught at primary school level (or, if later, then remedially), in higher education it is generally 'literature' which is studied. The most common rationale for this is that performance skills in the language ('reading and writing'), and whatever basic metalanguage is needed for discussion, will already have been acquired by the student. For many professionals working in higher education, this organisational structure seems self-evident. In fact, there has been a widespread reluctance to introduce courses in essay writing, the development of critical concepts and terminology, or interpretative skills into many degree syllabuses, even where the specific, earlier educational experiences of students now admitted can be shown to warrant it. Those experiences typically reflect changes in British secondary education over the last three decades, which (described very informally) include: reduced or non-existent study of English grammar; little direct study of comprehension or paraphrase, with an emphasis instead on experiential, expressive writing and narrative rather than broad genre-based compositional work; the virtual disappearance of Latin or a presumable background of Classical or Biblical allusions; mixed approaches to historical understanding, combining received versions of British 'national' history with empathetic, oral and community histories; and, despite a range of finally travestied policy initiatives, reduced value placed on linguistic concepts and terminology (3). The point is not that such changes straightforwardly signal a decline in secondary education (though educational progressivism merits closer and less politically dogmatic attention than it usually receives). Rather, the point is that the sorts of university response now needed to support student learning effectively are impeded by positions which remain locked in oppositions between basic language abilities and 'higher' literary studies.

The limits of binaries

Before broadening my argument from these two cases into the more general claim that English studies should combine language and literary work in a structured syllabus, two cautionary points regarding the usefulness of even a heuristic contrast between literacy and literature are necessary.

Firstly, it is worth repeating that the contrast is a simplified one. In any case, the last thirty years of critical theory have shown the importance of not trusting binary oppositions as organising principles. As deconstruction emphasises, one term in a polarity or contrast is often more valued than another, but may still be undermined by careful examination of its relations with the other. In this case, we might note that 'literature' - the revered pole or value which casts its shadow on its other - *depends* on reading skills which are a pre-condition of its appreciation, and that in any case the two words 'literacy' and 'literature' are connected together by a range of factors: by common etymology ('litterae'); by phonological resemblance; by semantic entanglement of the kind we encounter when the word 'literate', in early senses, means 'well read'; and by the sort of ambiguity in figurative usage which arises when we characterise literary sensibility as a kind of 'cultural literacy' or even 'literary literacy' (4).

The second qualification is this. Perhaps the most interesting work in English studies over the last fifty years has not gravitated simply towards one or other pole of the opposition. I do not mean this merely in the relatively trivial sense that literary studies bridges its 'what to read' and 'how to read' questions through a succession of exemplary readings which simultaneously report prior readings and implicitly invite further readings in their footsteps. In that respect, I believe it remains at least arguable that most critical work does appeal to a dualism between linguistic abilities and critical argument only to go on to examine one or other, rarely both, and almost never the relation between the two. Against that trend, however, it is worth noting the genuine concern to integrate the study of language use with specialised literary production and reception, at a key stage in the twentieth-century evolution of English studies, in I.A.Richards's life-long efforts to connect empirical study of practical criticism with the development of Basic English, with semantic and psychological experiments, with discussion of changing communications technologies, and with an emphasis on rhetoric and practical writing (5). A similar point might be made about the work of Raymond Williams, with which this paper begins. Williams places keywords and symbolic conventions in a wider social history, continually highlighting connections between the social distribution of language skills, changes in communications technologies, and prevailing literary, social and political interests. It might be argued, in fact, that there is a significant line of affiliation from Richards, through Empson, into the work of Williams, as well as into some more recent varieties of structuralism and stylistics. It can certainly appear, when considering the range of material now published in English studies, that there are two major, identifiable paradigms: a 'formalist' tradition, in which generalisations and deduction of principles are made from individual cases; and an 'interpretative' tradition, in which close and specific work takes place on individual texts and the historical contexts in which they were produced and have later circulated. The historical formation of the discipline, however, suggests that the separation of these two elements - as with other separations, such as the disentanglement of English from Anglo-Saxon, from philology, and from the study of other European languages - is the result of specific historical forces and choices, rather than an inevitability about 'English' (6).

What is English studies?

Since the field of university English in large-scale institutional forms in higher education is comparatively recent, and faces major upheavals as we approach the millennium, it is appropriate to approach speculation about future priorities by means of reflection on the current shape of 'English' as a field. It has by now become a commonplace that English studies in Britain, as well as internationally (if in many differently modulated forms), has undergone a twenty-five year period of crisis. It would be more accurate, nevertheless, to say that English has been beset by a number of overlapping crises, or - better - that the field as historically constituted has been continuously engaged with a range of critical forces.

Most obviously, English studies has needed to respond to an interdisciplinary critique - formulated in literary and cultural theory - of its arguably uncritical humanistic study of national literary traditions as a project of cultural distinction and reproduction. Over the same period, the relationship of literary study with linguistics, as well as with English Language Teaching (ELT) and language study more broadly, has been renegotiated in complex ways, even as the global balance between monolingual native speakers and regular, English-using bilinguals has been simultaneously shifting. Further, major polemics have come from stake-holders outside education itself, challenging the field's mix of literary knowledge with communication skills, within larger debates about vocational training and the social value of humanities teaching. All this has taken place alongside arguments that nowadays people, especially young people, watch film, TV and videos rather than reading books, and so to engage intellectually with the contemporary cultural world means primarily teaching media (including multi-media), rather than re-examining the history of print culture.

There are clearly a number of other critiques besides these. The point in distinguishing such critical forces here is that any homogenized notion of 'crisis' within the discipline is likely to be unhelpfully reductive. Debate about changing definitions of or alternative futures for

English needs to engage with a broader range of social and educational determinants than any simple notion of intellectual 'crisis' allows.

The discrepancy between a broad emphasis on communicative abilities and more specialised reading of a literary corpus which I have tried to characterise by means of the terms 'literacy' and 'literature' points to fundamental uncertainties in the aims and scope of English as a field. Such uncertainties surround both the object of study (Which books? Why? How many? In what order?) and the nature of the educational practice at stake (What precisely are students supposed to do? In what sense does what they do amount to learning? On the basis of what criteria can that learning be monitored?). At school level, the definitional problems are less conspicuous. There is a clear, formative value in combining contextualised explorations of language with extensive reading. Also, the imaginative rather than more culturally authoritative, aesthetic or historical claims made about books tend to conceal the educational issue which becomes increasingly exposed in university English: how is an appropriate balance achieved between developing interpretative frameworks for use by students in later, extra-curricular readings of their own, and specialised interpretative work carried out on texts within a designated syllabus or even under direct guidance from tutors?

The effect of disciplinary instability created by this question is mitigated, in practice, by the fact that English studies is guaranteed survival - even pre-eminence in some educational systems - simply as the result of a contingent mix of social circumstances. Several in particular are notable: the centrality, in Britain, of supporting as a mainstream subject a field which brings together the literary heritage of the national culture with what are seen as national values and imaginative cultural possibilities; the requirement, in English-using societies, to provide basic instruction in the language, and to support this at higher educational levels with research and a trajectory of educational and professional development; the sense, in many Anglophone, post-colonial societies, that English is connected with both real and symbolic upward social mobility; the popularity of the subject with potential students which is linked to the contrasting world-view it appears to offer to the perceived crude instrumentalism of business and technology (though interestingly this trend is reversed in countries, especially developing countries, where educational instrumentalism is valued more highly; in such circumstances, the trend is for English to be popular among women, and among men with low grades in other subjects).

Perhaps because the effect of disciplinary instability is reduced by student demand for the subject (as well as by its sometimes sensitive political role), English has for a long time been suspended between a number of conflicting forces and interests. If we are to think forward into new futures for the field, therefore, it is important to establish a clearer sense of the sorts of principle on which boundaries for English as a subject are established at the moment.

Four conventional bases for defining 'English

Abstracting from the detail of individual curricula, there appear to be four main models underpinning prevailing views of English. Each is an organisational rationale or principle, rather than a set of specific goals or aims; each, at the same level of principle, appears problematic.

1. *Historical definitions*. In such definitions, English should be as English was: the historical form of the discipline points to its proper identity. But questions immediately arise regarding which earlier period of English studies should be viewed as definitive. Pre-nineteenth-century understandings in which literary extracts illustrate grammar and rhetoric classes, developing into eighteenth-century Scottish belles lettres? The combination of a coloniser's intermediary translation requirements with the securing and reproduction of cultural hegemony characteristic of Macauley's 1835 Minute introducing English into formal education in India? The Arnoldian 'culture and anarchy' view, roughly contemporaneous with the introduction in Britain of compulsory school education and with significant extension of access to higher education to women? One or other New Critical framework? Besides problems surrounding the notion of continuing appropriacy of models to fundamentally changed social circumstances, there is also the issue in such definitions of the geographical coordinates of the history: what of the historical forms of English studies in the United States, Australia, or elsewhere - in many cases, countries in which insecurity about English language proficiency has played at least as important a part as the wish to read literary works? Appeals to history for definition of the discipline refract back into interpretative problems surrounding the historical record, rather than simply identifying in the past something to be conveniently reproduced in the future (7).

2. *Definitions based on criteria of inclusion and exclusion, or necessary and sufficient conditions*. Such definitions typically focus on literary language or genres, and seek to define English on the basis of the specificity of literary and non-literary uses of language. Such attempts are afflicted, however, by well-rehearsed contradictions and special cases. Not all poetry, for instance, is characterised by poetic language, but poetic language may be found in a wide range of non-poetic, traditionally 'non-literary' kinds of discourse (proverbs, advertisements, graffiti, etc.). The criterion of fictionality founders when brought to bear on essays, autobiography, diaries, travel writing, or therapeutic discourse; and the boundary set by the 'three major literary types' (poetry, novel and drama) is breached by the commonplace that lyricism, for example, is for many people more often encountered in pop records than in poems, and narrative and drama enjoyed as much in film and television as in novels or plays on the stage. Even the general definition, on the basis of etymology and common perception, that literature involves 'the written' runs into difficulties throughout its accepted history: the Homeric epics which are widely believed to anchor European literature mark a transition from oral-formulaic to written composition (so introducing into discussion the oxymoronic term 'oral literature'); published versions of plays are arguably less written texts than notation for theatrical performance; poetry exists for many people more in the recitation than on the page; and script-writing, poetry cassettes and CDs, and media narrative and drama all connect literature indissolubly with larger, mixed-media concern with representation beyond the specific domain of 'the written'. (8).

3. *Functional definitions*. Such definitions appeal to notions of the usefulness of English, especially as perceived by non-educational stake-holders such as Government, employers' bodies, and parents. A fundamental clash then ensues between the instrumental concern of employers and others with grammatical and communication skills - especially writing in a range of professional genres and oral proficiency - and justifications for studying literature.

That clash occurs almost irrespective of whether studying literature is taken to mean familiarisation with the works of Shakespeare or introducing unfamiliar writers in order later to loosen their ideological grip by deconstructing them.

4. *Definition on the basis of a system of differences without positive terms*. In such definitions, English is in effect whatever remains intellectually squeezed between - or can be contrasted with - the more clearly delineated disciplines of anthropology, sociology, linguistics, psychology, philosophy and history. But such definitions are then obliged to confront the question why English should feature as a discipline in its own right at all, rather than remaining simply a hybrid supplement to another field: why is the term 'English' lexicalised at all within the system?

An alternative basis

These four bases for defining English contrast with a fifth, which might be loosely associated with the thinking, in a wider theoretical context, of psychologists such as Eleanor Rosch (9). This alternative way of defining English may turn out to be preferable as regards the next phase of the subject's development, to the extent that such a definition may facilitate consideration simultaneously both of institutional as well as intellectual concerns.

5. *Definition on the basis of prototype and fuzzy areas*. In such a definition, what is at stake is less a fixed identity than the notion of perceived core features (which might be defined in a number of different ways), surrounded by more or less central cases, with, beyond these, more marginal and arguable cases. In such an arrangement, it is possible to identify, intellectually and organisationally, a range of topics or approaches as generically all 'English' but at different degrees of proximity to prototypical cases.

Irrespective of how the core features of such a definition are established (eg. around a literary corpus, theory, political stance, or whatever), this mode of definition of 'English' offers a number of advantages. Firstly, definitions along such lines are likely to be more flexible, and more hospitable to multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary initiatives - and so changing demands in rapidly changing societies - than other forms of definition. Secondly, such definitions offer a version of coherence, in virtue of describable structural relations between elements, which is nevertheless not dogmatic or exclusive. Thirdly, such definitions fit comfortably with newly-dominant modular course schemes. Pathways, sets of modules, staff-groupings, and other institutional structures can be aligned with respective subject 'cores', and ownership flexibly negotiated in the fuzzy areas in between. A subject, that is to say, is in such a framework an area of intellectual enquiry around a focus, rather than a settled or definitive category; its content and procedures are structured in such a way as to recognise diversity of approaches and to accommodate combinations with other goals and methods, while retaining a coherence which must be established in terms of cognate relations to the prototypical characteristics.

Developing literacy

My own preferred definition for English would be one formulated around the core concept of *developing literacy*. Whereas routine speech skills are acquired by native speakers without institutionalised instruction, even the basics of writing need to be taught and are taught from an early age, including formally in schools. English in higher education is at its simplest in native-speaker contexts a more advanced stage of this same process: a stage at which what is learnt are more specialised practices of rhetorical production and understanding. Those practices involve increasingly complex and reflective judgements about forms of representation, linking an understanding of psychological processes of interpretation with investigation of social contexts of reception. In second- and foreign-language situations, a similar focus on rhetorical production and understanding is likely to be appropriate; a different balance may need to be struck between instruction in communicative skills and the enhancement of more specialised rhetorical and interpretive abilities.

A focus on what amounts to 'comparative discourse skills' may make it possible to overcome the incapacitating dichotomy outlined above. Such a claim appears supported by the extent to which competence in the areas of 'literacy' and 'literature' can be shown to be always provisional or intermediate, and capable of further development. 'Literacy' is not an easily definable 'basket of basic skills' (such as spelling, word recognition, grammar, etc.) which are soon completely acquired and thereafter your property. Rather, it develops cumulatively beyond such basic skills into a more fine-grained understanding of and ability to manipulate register, genre, information structure and a wide range of other aspects of discourse structure which are routinely deployed in letters, memos and reports, newspapers and magazines, and books (including literary works), as well as in media productions such as radio, television or film. 'Literature', equally, is not essentially a finite corpus of great books to be read, imitated, drawn on as a defining source of cultural identity, or alternatively dismantled or discredited. The range of texts worth reading is for practical purposes inexhaustible, and in any case expands faster than any single reader can keep up with as new works continue to be published.

These observations have ramifications in terms of curriculum priorities. Imposed on the vast range of published works are a number of classificatory patterns which it is instructive to explore, as the setting within which any specific reading will take place: grouping by period, by author, by region or country of first publication, by genre, by linguistic style or dialect, by theme, by reputation, etc. Often, though not always, literary works in particular offer reflexive comment on the possibilities and limits of different modes of discourse; and for this reason among others they can repay special attention. Studying a wide range of examples of discourse allows immense scope not only for making personal value judgements, but more importantly for debating the relations between aesthetic and cultural preferences and the criteria on which they are based. Each of these considerations seems to suggest that curriculum emphasis needs to be on developing frameworks for reading rather than on accomplishing specific readings -while recognizing of course that developing reading abilities clearly requires as one of its main supports the intensive investigation of appropriately chosen case studies.

In more specific curriculum terms, the sorts of priority I have outlined here might be achieved in a structure involving the following (or similar) interrelated curriculum strands:

(i) *broad experience of texts*, grouped on the basis of a range of classificatory principles (by author, by genre, etc). Such reading should provide a historical and geographical map of textual production and styles; should create awareness of the multiple grids within which texts are classified; and should support conceptually or theoretically organised work as case studies or illustrative material.

(ii) *discourse analysis and rhetorical study*: development of skills of linguistic description and analysis, including sentence parsing; investigation of discourse cohesion and coherence; point of view; figurative language; the role of intonation; information structure.

(iii) *intertextual study*: questions of allusion, genre, discourse conventions (including literary, cinematic and televisual conventions); themes and conventional literary topoi.

(iv) *interpretative study*: how to describe and construe linguistic codes; drawing and reconstructing interpretative inferences; practical semantic experimentation, including simple commutation tests; consideration of psychical forces on linguistic production and interpretation; critical evaluation of concepts of intention.

(v) *contextual and historical study*: looking at texts in their changing social contexts, including historical reception of literary texts; the formation of audiences and readerships in terms of literacy levels, relevant institutions (e.g. publishing, libraries) and technology; historically specific constructions of pleasure and value.

(vi) *understanding the present as the past's unfinished business*. Analysis of issues which connect historical dimensions of study to issues of contemporary discourse and identity, including intellectual property, obscenity, censorship and free speech, libel, etc.

(vii) *writing/speaking practice*: practical work in a wide range of genres, including conventionally literary and non-literary discourse types and conventional oral forms, especially linked with parallel activities in interpretative studies; investigation of editing (in broad sense including selection of material; manipulation of text and image in word-processing and DTP; juxtaposition and montage of images; genre and niche marketing decisions in production, etc).

The strands identified here are simply reference-points for more detailed curriculum thinking; they are certainly not the only way in which 'developing literacy' objectives could be achieved. More specific decisions would depend on a range of local factors, including expertise and facilities available as well as the institutional circumstances within which change is to take place. What is more important about the above list than its detail is that all aspects of the history of books currently taught in most English courses could be straightforwardly arranged around a core of contrastive discourse work along such lines. Such study could also readily accommodate analysis of and practice in kinds of discourse not currently much studied (such as conventional oral forms, poster captions, e-mail notes, or birthday greetings), as well as sociological and institutional questions of the reception and circulation of texts. Without incongruity, such an approach could at the same time easily accommodate the equally important study of media texts, including practical work in the development of so-called secondary oral, 'speech literacies' (telephone conventions, the techniques and politics of sound-bites, etc.). By contrast, it can seem merely parochial to devise English courses - dealing with a language regularly used globally by close to a billion people in a wide range of different cultural and cross-cultural circumstances - which define aims or prescribe content boundaries in terms primarily of simply a list of particular books to be read (10).

Content and process

Defining 'core features' for English, however, is not quite so much a matter of simple choice as I may appear to be suggesting. Underlying individual preference is a fundamental distinction between - to use here again a necessary binary shorthand - whether the subject's core consists of knowledge ('content'), or whether it consists of skills. This is a separate distinction from the one between a linguistic or literary core. A literary 'content' core, for example, might consist of a prescribed series of authors, a range of genres, or set of themes (e.g. country and city, representations of sexuality); a linguistic 'content' core, on the other hand, might be a particular theory (such as systemic grammar or Relevance Theory), a series of theoreticians (Saussure, Chomsky, Tannen), or series of concepts (isogloss, transitivity, implicature). A linguistic 'skills' core might include ability to parse sentences, reconstruct inferential processes, or classify dialectal features; and a literary 'skills' core might include techniques for describing and interpreting tropes, ability to distinguish different periods of literary writing on the basis of theme and style, or recognition of historically changing techniques of realist discourse.

It is at least worth considering whether defining English (or simply presuming an identity for it) in terms of content - often formulated as 'coverage' - may be a misguided way of conceiving the subject. There are certainly cases of curriculum initiatives which seek to achieve 'skills' aims by means of a content-driven curriculum, usually unsuccessfully; and many predominantly literary curriculum documents state a series of 'competency' aims which appear at best token add-ons, since they are not connected in any discernible way with what is then taught or assessed. It may be preferable, therefore, to advocate instead setting a higher organisational priority on matters of pedagogy, in recognition of 'English' as an educational *practice* rather than an *object of knowledge*.

In my view, the key question for the next phase of English studies to determine is whether the field should set its criteria for learning progression and outcomes in terms of an object of study (its specific representation of a culture) or around a set of practices (11). What is in question is not just so-called transferable skills, detached from specific contexts of practice (decontextualised reading, writing, talking, etc.). Rather, the question is one of the specific function and value of the educational transformation of raw materials which takes place in English (eg. the interpretation of books; the formulation and debate of views in a seminar discussion; the reconfiguration of secondary sources in writing an essay, etc.). What precisely, we need to ask more carefully, constitutes the *study* of literature of which selected books or traditions are the objects of knowledge?

The sheer obviousness of this question has been obscured, I have suggested above, by purely circumstantial features of English as a subject. Even so, a relevant generalisation can be made about responses to our twenty-five years of crisis which has, perhaps symptomatically, *not* become a commonplace: that most responses in the discipline have been changes in curriculum content rather than at the level of curriculum process. In Britain, arguably the most significant force for specifically methodological reform has been pragmatic (in many cases reluctant) reaction to the combined effect of significantly larger classes - in turn a result of Government funding and access policies - and the different educational experience and profile of literacy of the larger numbers of students coming into university English. In some countries other than Britain, initiatives have been made similarly as the result of the necessity of teaching very large classes; in others again, innovation is more commonly linked to the adoption of interactive methods developed within ELT and the increased use of educational technology, including hypertext and other multi-media systems.

In each of these different educational circumstances, one appropriate starting-point for thinking about alternative futures for English is that the subject is essentially a *practice of discourse*, as much involved with talking and writing (including assessed writing) as with reading. A syllabus is in any case never simply a list of books or topics, introduced by lectures and followed up in seminars, workshops and tutorials; besides indicating a content, it lays out an agenda for a series of learning events, shaped towards anticipated learning outcomes and monitored on the basis of explicit or impressionistic assessment criteria. In the case of English in particular, acquired modes for talking about texts, individually and in groups, and for constructing essays, form a central part of what is learnt. So it is important, in reflecting on English as a field, to investigate more formally the relations of talk which govern teaching and learning and the production by students of writing in academic genres. Arguably, nevertheless, most important initiatives as regards teaching method in English (at least in Britain) have for more than two decades come from outside university English itself: from English as a Foreign Langauge (EFL); from secondary and primary education, especially progressivist experimentation with groupwork methods and project work in science teaching; and from cognate fields such as linguistics and women's studies (12). Within English in universities, meanwhile, local initiatives have rarely been well supported; and pedagogic research is often viewed as second-order, even automatically second-rate. Proper consideration of classroom process within the mainstream of university English is long overdue, and is an obviously essential complement to any genuinely radical theoretical or critical practice. It is perhaps a sad irony, therefore, that the closest much mainstream English studies in Britain currently gets to such reflection is when it finds itself at the receiving end of (or at least under indirect pressure from) subject assessment visits organised by the respective Funding Councils.

Futures for English

It is impossible, of course, to know what directions 'English' will follow in future. Even alongside the recent experience, in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, of the teaching quality assessment exercise conducted by the Funding Councils, debate continues over whether it is necessary at university level to structure an English curriculum much at all.

Some colleagues contend that it is enough to indicate a plausible menu of books for informal discussion, with considerable latitude of approach between parallel classes following a common course.

The more worked-out formulation of the 'latitude of approach' position is that English thrives precisely because it is 'the subject which is not a subject': the subject which has not been channelled into a specifiable set of learning objectives, outcomes and criteria. Such a view often links organisational fluidity and pluralism to a proclaimed commitment within English to imagination and emotion rather than reason, and to a version of experiential learning in which it can become difficult to engage with, let alone assess, work produced on an unanalyzed basis of taste, individual sensibility and enjoyment. This view conflicts, quite evidently, with more recent critical arguments that lack of specification in a syllabus can guarantee under-achievement by students who for whatever reason are uncomfortable with established academic conventions for expressing sensibility; or that such arrangements lack any mechanism for considering genuine conflicts between value systems. At worst, such critiques suggest, vague and informal curricula may simply preserve the power of a professional elite, by disguising procedures or criteria according to which what F.R.Leavis in the 1940s called 'competence in literature' will be judged (Leavis, 1943:66).

In this second, ascendent educational view of the subject, it is recognised that English courses need to identify not only the range of concepts, techniques and topics which constitute the curriculum, but also sequential (or cumulatively cyclical) relations between them, in order to provide a schedule of anticipated learning progression. Goals and outcomes are likely to be made explicit; and material presented by lecturers is likely to be supported by additional independent-learning resources (including photocopies, CD-roms, video tapes, worksheets). Despite the 'production line' stereotype sometimes presented of it by its critics, such a framework need not restrict flexibility or variation: in being able to prepare for specific discussion opportunities and topics, students are also helped in broaching meta-issues about the organisation and social context of the field, and in negotiating their way more confidently through what can otherwise seem an opaque disciplinary practice.

Three alternatives

Undoubtedly, university English is at the beginning of a further transitional phase, pedagogically as much as theoretically; as I indicated above, there is an accumulating body of pressures for change from different stake-holders in the process. In the responses and morale of many university teachers of English, it is possible to detect a sense of impending further crisis, as traditional literature courses are seen as, on the one hand, in present forms unteachable, and, on the other, a diminishing element in what students themselves are looking for.

While there continue to be fundamental arguments about the formation of English as a subject, it is nevertheless possible to anticipate kinds of innovation which are likely to result from decisions in principle at a more abstract, theoretical level. There is a divergence worth noting, for instance, between thinking of 'English' as an object of study and as a practice when you consider curriculum development. If you conceive English as a knowledge-based field, it seems perfectly reasonable to add on units or modules incrementally, responding to available staff specialisms or student aspiration without revising existing syllabus provision. If, on the other hand, you think of English as a structured educational event or practice, then curriculum revisions are quite likely to be procedural or systemic, with implications fully across the range of different topics or subject areas: an alteration in aim or pedagogic method will affect how you approach a canonical literary work as much as how you approach a work from the New Literatures, a newspaper text, a film or a soap opera.

Three modalities among the complex range of current responses within the 'no structure' to 'transparent structure' curriculum continuum are in my view worth noting; together, they mark out importantly divergent futures. Yet all three begin from a common diagnosis: that present curriculum and teaching methods are unsustainable, given the sorts of changed social circumstances described above. Each recommends or implies a different course of action.

The first encourages in effect the acceleration of a longer term process of gradual, historical truncation of the traditional university English curriculum. The much earlier discontinuation of compulsory Anglo-Saxon in most universities is extended to Medieval studies and most Renaissance literature; and an increased emphasis is placed instead on post-Romantic, especially Modern literature - an emphasis easily reinforced by systems of electives and student choice of modules. In terms of language, difficulties presented by pre-eighteenth-century texts as the result of the extent of language change in English are considerably reduced; and the scale of historical, ideological and cultural upheavals by which modern discourse has been shaped is left unexplored. Such focus on the contemporary can nevertheless fit with the composition and second-language-acquisition needs of many students, as well as with broader, vocational or instrumental justifications for the subject. At the same time, a particular version of 'relevance to the student's own experience' is achieved. A further attraction of this line of thinking is that emphasis on contemporary texts intersects more readily with parallel studies of (and increased student demand for) media studies, especially of film, television and pop music, as well as with the established topics of contemporary cultural studies. At its best, such a shift of curriculum emphasis can allow students to study popular and previously marginalised 'minority' cultural forms in unprecedented ways, and is accordingly welcomed by them (especially by students who experience a strong sense of cultural estrangement within a university environment). There is nevertheless the risk, especially where circumstances allow an increasingly facile consumerist orientation in higher education, that the boundaries of whatever is initially perceived by a student as her or his own experience and social identity will set the horizons of that's individual's learning and ambition: study is likely to reinforce the lessons of prior experience, rather than challenge, extend or transform them.

The second direction is almost the reverse of the first. Alongside, pre-twentieth-century texts, poetry of all kinds is recognised as being increasingly inaccessible to students; and it is believed that more specialised and historically contextualised scholarly reading is required which is no longer compatible with intakes, class sizes or teaching procedures. The inference drawn is that what is needed is a fresh distinction, within English, between a more populist, 'liberal arts/general studies' approach - dealing with modern plays and novels, and concerned to broaden the imaginative experience of students working in large groups - and a more specialised and scholarly, historical or philological mode of study which would take detailed account of traditions, social history, and philosophical or theoretical concerns. In effect, the proposal for such a separation repeats the 'vernacularisation' impulse of the Arnoldian cultural moment. In that earlier case, the shift was away from Latin and Greek in favour of study of the national literature, with Classics subsequently isolated as more specialised, elite study. Currently, what is encouraged is a sort of 'Classicization' of English poetry (13). Interestingly, an analogous curriculum vision can be found within media and communication studies, where post-Screen film theory has begun to distinguish itself from (and in doing so becomes slightly aloof towards) less theoretical TV and popular cultural studies. The result is likely to be that the conventional hierarchy between literacy and literature reappears in a new form: the historically elevated place of 'literature' will be occupied by poetry and by film theory (the latter linked to an emergent 'film studies canon'); that of popular literacy will be occupied by generalist, less ambitious courses dealing informally - perhaps predominantly experientially, and almost certainly presented by higher proportions of casualised staff - with narrative and drama.

The third direction is premised on a belief that English is currently involved in a step-change within its longer-term historical movement from the relatively leisured and leisurely reading of literature towards more evident organisation as a field of enquiry. It commends that move towards more organised disciplinary structure as the means, organisationally, of reflecting the potentially empowering notion that the concepts and procedures of English studies, rather than being innate or the result of class socialization, can be both described and learnt. At the same time, the delineation of clear disciplinary structures is thought to function valuably as a way of reconciling three otherwise conflicting contemporary forces: first, an ethos (in Britain, but no longer unusual) of quality audit among funding agencies within which the coherence and internal progression of programmes in all areas will in future come under greater scrutiny during validation and review; second, a climate of reform triggered (but inexplicably deferred or defused) by the field's own theoretical self-critiques, such as its investigations of ideas of value or the distinction between high and popular culture; and third, the implication of recent demographic shifts in admissions that, as extended access reshapes the class constituency (and so initial cultural capital) of successive cohorts following English, student values, expectations, and needs will continue to change.

Conclusions

The period of confusion and transition I have attempted to describe in this paper might be interpreted as, at best, a moment of fragile opportunity. It is in any case difficult to anticipate how our currently rather haphazard debates about curriculum revision in university English will progress, especially given different corporate, national and international pressures. For what it is worth, my own predisposition towards 'developing literacy' inclines me towards the third direction outlined above. Given, however, the complex ways in which humanities education functions as a class marker as well as in terms of the learning it offers, it is necessary to acknowledge right away that this direction has an inevitable risk attached: that the sometimes hard-won achievements of students on English courses of the kind proposed may well be undermined in the social domain by the very mode of acquisition of the cultural capital such courses confer (Bourdieu, 1984:1-2).

Whichever direction eventually shapes English studies, however, it seems clear that research and innovation in teaching and learning are at least as essential as concern to develop new subject areas, if any emergence we achieve from our notional twenty-five year disciplinary crisis is to avoid unthinking replication of much that was seriously flawed in what was there before. Only through more concerted pedagogic discussion than we have at present do we have any real likelihood of moving the complex hybrid of 'literacy' and 'literature' which constitutes English studies forward towards 2000.

Middlesex University, London, May 1995

1. This paper brings together three strands in my thinking about English studies: some remarks towards the beginning are taken almost direct from more detailed analysis of the concepts 'literacy' and 'literature' in my (unpublished) Inaugural Lecture at Goldsmiths College, University of London, 1992; the discussion of curriculum design follows largely from recent experiences of curriculum development in my present post at Middlesex University, as well as benefiting from the insights of participants in numerous British Council workshops I have been involved in over the last decade in a number of countries; my speculations about future directions for English are personal reflections on the experience of acting as a HEFCE English subject assessor within the recent exercise, as well as, presently, of being one of the co-authors drafting the HEFCE English overview report for England and Northern Ireland.

2. For a detailed history of English language teaching, with extensive references, see for example A.P.R.Howatt (1984). More theoretical discussion of the contrasting approaches can be found in Stern (1983:75-187).

3. Changes in secondary education affecting knowledge about the English language in particular can be charted in successive reports: the Kingman report (HMSO, 1988); the Cox report (HMSO, 1989a); the orders for English in the National Curriculum (HMSO, 1989b); and the unpublished Language in the National Curriculum in-service development materials coordinated by Ron Carter (LINC, 1992). In Cox on Cox: An English curriculum for the 1990s (Cox, 1991), Brian Cox provides an interesting personal account of the gradual reversal by Government of many of the most important recommendations made in successive reports.

4. For an account of the changing meanings of the word 'literacy', see David Barton's Literacy: An introduction to the ecology of the written language (Barton, 1994:12-22); for useful more general accounts of literacy, and suggestions for further reading, see Levine (1986) and Goody (1987). For an introduction to the relationship between writing and speech, especially in a period of what Walter Ong has called 'secondary orality', see Goody (1987) and Ong (1982).

5. The detailed development of Richards's thought and changing intellectual and practical involvements is traced in Russo's thorough biography (Russo, 1989).

6. How English studies was formed historically has become a major field of enquiry over the last two decades. For an especially detailed analysis of changes in university English in Britain in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, see Francis Mulhern's The Moment of 'Scrutiny' (Mulhern, 1979), as well as the accounts in Baldick (1983) and Mathieson (1975).

7. The history of English studies since the Reformation in Britain is valuably recorded and illustrated in Ian Michael's massive study, The Teaching of English: From the sixteenth century to 1870 (Michael 1987), as well as considered more critically in the first chapter, 'The Scottish Invention of English Literature', of Robert Crawford's Devolving English Literature (Crawford 1992: 16-44). Critical characterisation of the rather different history in the United States can be found in Ohmann (1976). The introduction of English Literature into Indian education is traced in Viswanathan (1989), as well as in recent works by scholars in India informally associated with Miranda House college, New Delhi: Tharu (1991), Joshi (1991), and Sunder Rajan (1992). An ELT-based appraisal of the Indian situation is Marate et al (1993); and historical and critical arguments are combined with a compelling analysis of post-colonial intellectual work within global political relations in Ahmad (1992).

8. Terry Eagleton's introductory chapter 'What is literature?' in Literary Theory: An introduction (Eagleton, 1983: 1-16) offers an entertaining account of the difficulties faced by such attempts at definition. Discussion of relations between speech and writing can be found, with extensive reference to debates about orality, literacy and secondary orality, in Ong (1982) and Goody (1987).

9. For the psychological context to categorization on the basis of prototypical features, see especially the general comments on concept formation in the closing pages of Eleanor Rosch's paper 'Linguistic relativity' (Rosch, 1977: 516-9).

10. The perspective outlined in this section substantially reflects collaborative work at the Programme in Literary Linguistics, University of Strathclyde, during the 1980s. Detailed materials generated by that work, including syllabus outlines, methodological guidelines, independent study activities, and suggested approaches to assessed tasks, are exemplified in Durant and Fabb (1990), Montgomery et al (1992), and Fabb and Durant (1993), all of which contain extensive references to similar work. Fabb et al (1987) brings together a montage of relevant theoretical arguments concerned with relations between language and literature.

11. Description of syllabus principles in terms of a distinction between 'representation' and 'practice' can be found in a 'Used Books' review in Critical Quarterly of Eagleton (1983) attributed to 'Boffin' (Boffin, 1995). The same distinction, formulated in very similar terms, is repeated in recent articles in the education press by Colin MacCabe, reflecting his own pedagogic evolution from his 1983 establishment of the Programme in Literary Linguistics into more sustained critique of contemporary cultural studies. The commentary on Eagleton is especially interesting on account of the exceptional influence of the 1983 Introduction. Eagleton's own commitment in the final chapter to an urgent 'reinvention of rhetoric', defining

English studies not in terms of object or method but 'strategically' (Eagleton, 1983: 210-17) might be judged, twelve years later, on the basis of subsequent efforts by the author to develop the notion more programmatically or in terms of the scale of institutional initiatives which derive directly from it.

12. An impressive amount of pedagogic work in 'language through literature' approaches, for instance, has been accomplished by Ron Carter and a range of co-authors and collaborators: see, Brumfit and Carter (1986); Carter and Long (1991); McRae (1991), Brumfit and Benton (1993) as well as LINC (1992). The journal Language and Literature brings together more precisely stylistic approaches, also collected in Short (1989) and pioneered by Widdowson (1975, 1992). Feminist pedagogic techniques are described in Thompson and Wilcox (1989). Open University publications in Britain often demonstrate effectively the possibilities of independent learning materials; and a range of text analysis and hypertext software materials is available in Britain commercially and from the Computers in Teaching Initiative, Oxford. To gain a fuller sense of directions in pedagogic innovation surrounding English, it is also necessary to take into account a range of other approaches: arguments linking English studies closely with notions of general artistic creativity are developed in Abbs (1982); practical approaches to teaching communication and media studies are outlined in Burton and Dimbleby (1990) and Masterson (1985) respectively. A study of teaching black literature is Scafe (1989). Distinctive among textbooks produced for foreign-language learners of literature in English are Gomez Lara and Prieto Pablos (1994) and de Luca et al (1982). For a rather over-celebratory account of the DUET project on dynamics and methods in English teaching ('Developing University English Teaching'), see Evans (1995). For a general overview of staff and student attitudes towards studying English at British universities, based on informal ethnographic fieldwork, see Evans (1993).

13. A sustained argument to this effect is Bergonzi (1990).

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