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Imagining a national English curriculum: Connecting with and speaking back to standards-based reforms

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‘And we learnt the world in scraps
from some ancient dingy maps
Long discarded by the public schools in town…’

Henry Lawson, ‘The Old Bark School’

Australia has recently witnessed a raft of standards-based reforms (Darling-Hammond, 2004) in education, stretching back to initiatives taken in the Hawke-Keating era such as A statement on English for Australian schools and the accompanying subject profile (AEC, 1994a, 1994b). The profiles were organised in the form of a set of outcomes which mapped ‘the progression of learning typically achieved by students during the compulsory years of schooling’ (AEC, 1994a, p. 1). While the idea of describing learning in the form of developmental continua was hardly new, the way the national profiles formalised learning outcomes was controversial (for a taste of debates at the time with respect to the English profile see English in Australia 117, December, 1996). Touted as ‘the most significant collaborative curriculum development in the history of Australian education’, this project did not achieve its aim of providing a common curriculum framework for schools across Australia. Each state chose, instead, to go its own way. Yet it is still interesting to observe the way the language of ‘outcomes’ and ‘standards’ has since become part of everyone’s vocabulary. Around Australia it is now impossible to talk about education without using the language which came into currency at that time. Even those of us who might want to exercise a critical distance from this discourse now hear ourselves talking about ‘outcomes’ and of working within a ‘standards’ framework, although many of us still balk at managerial jargon like ‘value adding’.

The current attempt to introduce a national curriculum is the latest example of such standards-based reforms. This initiative is to be understood, not simply alongside the attempt in the early 1990s to introduce the national statements and profiles, but as part of a range of reforms, including the introduction of standardised testing across the country at Years 3, 5, 7 and 9, and various initiatives by individual states to regulate teaching and learning. Indeed, it might be argued that a distinctive feature of the past decade or so has been the implementation of standards-based reforms, including the introduction of standards for entry into the profession and continuing registration by statutory authorities in most states, as well as a proliferation of regulatory mechanisms relating to curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. These initiatives are invariably said to be ‘evidence-based’ (another term which has come into frequent use over recent years), although they typically reflect a number of assumptions which might be subjected to critical scrutiny.

The official documentation about the national curriculum which has been put into circulation over the past few months evinces the rhetorical features that characterise standards-based reforms. Certain things can be said, while other things must apparently remain unsaid – they exist in a realm beyond the discursive space in which these texts operate. A good example is the recently released The shape of the national curriculum: A proposal for discussion (NCB, 2008c). Although this text purports to be a consultation document that seeks to elicit feedback from the teaching profession and other stakeholders, a glance shows that the terms for discussing a national curriculum have already been set. The document begins by making claims about the
The question of how education might actually be framed in the so-called Anglophone world? Are we supposed to imagine that such tensions have ceased to exist, and that the tension that has historically existed between a notion of 'standard' English and the diversity of languages and dialects that actually constitute nations has been simply a neutral medium of communication? What of the tension that has historically existed between a notion of 'standard' English and the diversity of languages and dialects that actually constitute nations in the so-called Anglophone world? Are we supposed to imagine that such tensions have ceased to exist, and that teachers of English should no longer feel obliged to ensure that all students have a fair chance to achieve the views that are being ascribed here to Indigenous leaders? Could their views conceivably be a reaction to years of neglect, neglect which has involved brutal insensitivity to the languages and cultures of Indigenous communities?

It is disturbing (though unsurprising) to find that papers which the National Curriculum Board is circulating about the nature and scope of a national English curriculum have also allowed such questions to go begging. The statement of aims in the National English Curriculum: Framing paper (NCB, 2008b) begins by asserting that 'historically, English has taken responsibility for developing students’ knowledge of language and literature and for consolidating and expanding their literacy' (p. 1). But this gesture towards history is immediately displaced by a list of aims that is bereft of any historical context. And how accurate, after all, is this opening claim about the role that subject English has played 'historically'? Are we to suppose that English is simply a neutral medium of communication? What of the tension that has historically existed between a notion of 'standard' English and the diversity of languages and dialects that actually constitute nations in the so-called Anglophone world? Are we supposed to imagine that such tensions have ceased to exist, and that teachers of English should no longer feel obliged to ensure that all students have a fair chance to achieve the views that are being ascribed here to Indigenous leaders? Could their views conceivably be a reaction to years of neglect, neglect which has involved brutal insensitivity to the languages and cultures of Indigenous communities?

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lum should 'harness' this 'resource', it fails to grapple with the question of how the imposition of a 'standard' version of English has been implicated in positioning students who are learning English as an additional language or dialect at 'lower achievement levels in literacy assessments' (NCB, 2008b, p. 3). Despite gesturing towards the variety of languages that exist within the Australian community, students who speak other languages and dialects are described negatively, in the same breath as students with learning disabilities and those with special needs.

These statements from The shape of the national curriculum and the National English Curriculum: Framing paper need to be relocated in a discursive space where due acknowledgement might be given to other views. They reflect one response to the question of equity and diversity that has sometimes been advocated in educational debates over the past century, reflecting a tension that has always existed within English curriculum and pedagogy. Twenty years ago figures like James Britton, Douglas Barnes, and Harold Rosen were speaking a different language, provocatively challenging English teachers to develop curriculum and pedagogy that affirmed the richness of cultural and linguistic diversity. They were urging teachers to confront the history of subject English and to acknowledge the role that so-called 'standard' English has played in 'the explicit suppression of mother tongues … patois and vernaculars of all kinds' (Rosen, 1982, p. 19). This was in response to the view – most powerfully advocated by George Sampson in his aptly titled book, English for the English – that the dialects and languages of working class communities in England were rubbish which should be cleared away, in order to transform all children into proficient users of Standard English (Sampson, 1950/1970). By contrast, Britton urged that there was 'no alternative' but 'total acceptance' of the languages which children bring with them into class as a foundation for learning and engaging in the curriculum (Britton, 1970/1975). Douglas Barnes made a similar claim when he described pupils as 'interpreting what the teacher says through what they already know: they have no other means of interpretation' (Barnes, 1975/1992, p. 21). But whatever viewpoint one might take with respect to how schools should address the issue of the linguistic and socio-cultural diversity of their students, this remains a topic for debate, and it can only be a matter of concern that such statements should be presented without any proper acknowledgement of their partial nature.

Any curriculum exercise which does not reflexively seek to locate itself within the history of which it is a part must be impoverished. But rather than simply lamenting the absence of history from the materials which have so far been published by the National Curriculum Board, we are invoking history in order to imagine a different future to the one mapped out by these documents.

Is there any reason to be hopeful? Vis-à-vis the work being done by the National Curriculum Board, teachers might be excused for simply taking a pragmatic stance – they will get on with their work, whatever happens. And this need not be seen negatively, as some kind of ingrained resistance to educational reform. For all the attempts to regulate schooling in order to produce a set of pre-defined 'outcomes', there is always a difference between the 'intended' curriculum and the 'enacted' one (Barnes, 1975/1992; Applebee, 1992). And this difference between teaching and learning does not always signal a breakdown in communication. To the contrary, for many leading educators in Australia during the post war period, this difference has opened up opportunities for engaging students in far richer experiences than those mapped out by any formal curriculum. As Douglas Barnes puts it, a curriculum made up only of a teacher's intentions 'would be an insubstantial thing from which nobody would learn much' (Barnes, 1995/1992, p. 14). Educators in Australia have seen the disjunction between the intended curriculum and the enacted one, not as a sign of their failure to communicate with students, but as opening up potential for richer communication and imaginative play. They have argued the need to negotiate the curriculum, making classrooms into sites where students are able to bring their experiences and values and use them as a resource for creating new understandings, new knowledge (Boomer, 1982; Boomer et al., 1992; cf. Wells, 1999).

This is not, however, a matter of closing the classroom door. Such a romantic notion is hardly possible in these times of increasing regulation and accountability (and despite the problematical nature of standards-based reforms, there are good reasons for putting such romantic views behind us). We are affirming the rich tradition of English curriculum and pedagogy that has emerged in Australia during the post war period. The best way for the English teaching profession to respond to the sweeping generalisations made by the texts which are being circulated by the National Curriculum Board is to simultaneously affirm the rich specificity of English curriculum and pedagogy enacted within local
communities and to locate their work within a larger tradition of English curriculum and pedagogy.

The post war years have witnessed remarkable examples of such creative work. We might instance the establishment of the Australian Association for the Teaching of English (AATE) and the role which the Association’s journal has played in stimulating reflective discussion about the nature and scope of subject English. Indeed, the lack of a sense of history in the most recent statement about subject English being circulated by the NCB is shown by the way it fails to list any publications produced by the AATE. Where is there any reference to the Standards for Teachers of English Language and Literacy in Australia (STELLA) (AATE/ALEA, 2002), and specifically the way these standards attempt to capture best practice with respect to the teaching of reading, writing, speaking and listening? How, for example, do the materials which have been circulated respond to the challenge posed by STELLA, when it argues (on the basis of ‘evidence-based’ research) that ‘talk is at the centre of English curriculum and pedagogy’?

But our point is not to argue the validity of such claims. It is, rather, to say that the English teaching community around Australia has demonstrated a sense of professional connectedness, a commonality of knowledge, experience and values that should constitute the core of any attempt to establish a framework for a ‘national’ curriculum. This is not least because STELLA connects with, and yet speaks back to, the standards-based reforms that have transformed our professional landscape, simultaneously using the language of standards while recognising the primacy of local experiences and knowledge.

As we are writing this, we note that in The Age Magazine Professor Barry McGaw, Chair of the National Curriculum Board, is described as ‘the curriculum guy’:

‘What will our kids be learning in 2011? Ask Barry McGaw – it’s been his job to figure it all out.... “We aspire to be number one in sport,” he says. “There’s no reason why we shouldn’t do the same in education.”’

(Evans et al., 2009, p. 30)

Such triteness is what you would expect from a glossy weekend magazine – it’s language that you can easily digest, along with your muesli and toast on a Saturday morning. No doubt Professor McGaw is capable of arguing a more sophisticated rationale for treating Australian education as though it is primarily a matter of international competitiveness, with Australian learners seeking to muscle their way to the top of some international education tree. Clearly, the curriculum that McGaw is reported as ‘figuring out’ will crucially impact on the lives of young people in our schools. This curriculum will become part of the dialogue that students will have with their teachers, and yet it will invariably be understood differently by them. What Professor McGaw ‘figures out’ will not necessarily match what young people make of it. Rather than supposing that curriculum is something to be delivered, it would be more productive – and much more respectful of the experiences and values of young people in our schools – to think of curriculum as providing structures for conversation and negotiation with them. Curriculum should enable teachers to be receptive to the imagination and creativity of young people, not a blueprint for ‘forming’ them in our own image (as The shape of the National Curriculum: A proposal for discussion, expresses it (NCB, 2008c, p. 1)). Australia’s future does, indeed, lie in the potential of its young people, but only if we recognise that their potential will exceed our own expectations, our own imaginings.

What to Henry Lawson were isolated ‘scraps’ on some ‘ancient dingy maps’, no doubt cohered perfectly in the mind of his teacher, even if it was only in the form of a set of objectives for each lesson, dutifully set down in his or her teaching program for the visiting superintendent to inspect. As a young person ‘learning the world’, Lawson had to journey beyond his Old Bark School in order to make meaning from the maps and scraps he encountered there.

Australian young people, in all their diversity, deserve a curriculum that enables them to imagine, to communicate and participate in a future that connects with their experience of the here and now. The futurist scenarios which have thus far been a feature of the national curriculum exercise will only amount to anything if young people in our schools are able to meaningfully engage in them.

What you will find in this issue
Our aim in this special issue of English in Australia is to take what has been said so far about the national curriculum and specifically the role that subject English might play in the education of Australia’s youth, and make it the focus for discussion from a range of standpoints. The task of assembling these viewpoints has been a challenging one in the time frame available to us, and you will find that some important standpoints missing; most notably that of Indigenous educators, as
well as other educators who are working in ethnically diverse communities in our large cities or in regional centres. We hope, nonetheless, that the contributions you find here will unsettle many of the assumptions underpinning the national curriculum exercise, and that – whatever your opinion – you will appreciate the democratic spirit and commitment towards intellectual inquiry with which we have attempted to open up many of the assumptions underpinning this national curriculum exercise to critical reflection.

When we approached educators from a wide range of contexts with an interest in Australian English curricula, we invited them to imagine a national English curriculum for Australia. We hoped that they, like the contributors to STELLA, would connect with, and yet speak back to, standards-based reforms of English education. This, at any rate, was one possibility we asked them to consider. We encouraged them to articulate their imaginings in language accessible by a wide audience. It was always our intention that the voices of this issue would open up a conversation about the National English Curriculum beyond a dialogue of like-minded people talking to themselves.

We had felt, and we still feel, considerable unease about a curriculum written in so-called plain English, ‘so that everyone, from academics to beginning teachers to community members, will understand what our nation’s schools are teaching’ (NCB, Media Release, May 2008), as though the English teaching profession should feel guilty about using a specialist language. Yet it is salient to recognise the ways in which a wide range of contributors to this special issue are, in fact, able to reach out to a wider audience in articulating their visions of a national English curriculum. They are able to ground their vision within compelling authentic stories of English curriculum and curriculum development enacted in Australia in diverse ways.

The following outlines the scope of their curriculum imaginings:

- **Rob Pope** ("Curriculum", "National", "English" ...? A critical exploration of key terms with some seriously playful alternatives) teases out some nuances and implications of key words and language in national curriculum debates in recent times, and in many respects this piece frames the field of curriculum conversations throughout the issue.

- **Pat Thomson** (Lessons for Australia? Learning from England’s curriculum "black box") uses her perspective as an Australian educator now working in the UK to critically explore the possible purposes of a national curriculum, and she unpacks the notion of a national curriculum as a ‘black box’ with problematic uses.

- **Rosie Kerin and Barbara Comber** (‘A national English curriculum for all Australian youth: Making it work for teachers and students everywhere’) draw on some powerful practitioner research they have been associated with recently to envision ways in which a national curriculum might redress the inequities experienced by Australia’s most disadvantaged young people.

- **Bill Green** (‘English, rhetoric, democracy; or, Renewing English in Australia’) discusses what he sees as opportunities and challenges for English teaching at this time of national curriculum construction, in an attempt to explore some of the issues that are involved in renewing the project of English in Australia.

- **Larissa McLean Davies** (‘Telling stories, Australian literature in a national English curriculum’) focuses on the place of Australian literature in a national curriculum, and advocates for what she sees as a ‘nexus approach’. This approach seeks to explore the relationships between individuals, texts and society rather than fetishising a certain set of texts and practices.

- **Prue Gill** (‘Learning’s Bower’) calls for a national English curriculum that appreciates the complex relationship between curriculum and assessment, one that is supported by strong government investment in professional learning, and one that will enable young people to imagine a different future from that which has been imagined for them by their elders.

- **Wayne Sawyer** (‘The National Curriculum and enabling creativity’) sketches out a brief English curriculum history with a particular focus on creativity, and urges curriculum writers and educators to use this moment of national curriculum development to re-visit the possibilities of creativity in English, and to re-vision what it means to have students do things with language.

- **Mark Howie** (‘Critical literacy, the future of English and the work of mourning’) uses the occasion of farewelling his Year 12 students at the end of their schooling, some intertextual references to *Hamlet*, and some conceptual frames of Derrida, to reflect dialogically on the role of critical literacy in Australian English curricula in the past, the present and into the future.
Jack Thomson (’Constructing a model for a national English curriculum’) counsels against crudely instrumental models of English curriculum. His imagining of a national curriculum draws on the strong traditions of English curriculum in this country, and it is built on what he calls ‘Foundational Principles of Good Educative Practice.’

Note
The views expressed in this editorial are those of the authors. The editorial does not reflect the views of the Australian Association for the Teaching of English. An editorial team was convened to produce this special issue of English in Australia, namely (in alphabetical order): Brenton Doecke, Mark Howie, Karen Moni and Graham Parr.

Thanks to Ernie Tucker and Wayne Martino
This edition marks Ernie Tucker’s last column ‘on Books’ for us. After 10 years of valuable and consistently excellent service, Ernie has decided that it is time to retire. I am sure my sentiments are shared by AATE Council and with previous Editors of the journal who have had the privilege of working with Ernie, when I say that I have very much appreciated the support and hard work that he has undertaken for the journal over many years, but especially in my tenure as Editor. I have always looked forward to reading his reviews and have searched out many of the novels he has written about. Ernie’s final column where he chooses his top ten reads for teachers epitomises his depth of knowledge, reflection and enthusiasm for readers, reading and books – he will be very much missed.

I would also like to acknowledge the contribution of Wayne Martino who retired as an Editorial Board member at the end of 2008. On behalf of AATE I would like to thank Wayne for his many contributions and continuing support for the journal during his tenure on the Board. Membership of the Board is voluntary and we all appreciate the demands of managing a successful academic career and community service such as this. We wish Wayne well as he continues to develop his research in Policy Studies and Gender Equity and Social Justice in Canada.

References


