

Charged with Meaning

Re-Viewing English

3rd edition

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SAMPLE

Charged with Meaning

Susanne Gannon, Mark Howie and Wayne Sawyer

Charged with meaning... The phrase originally comes from Ezra Pound, who argued that ‘Great literature is simply language charged with meaning to the utmost possible degree’. We think the phrase resonates for teachers of English in many ways quite apart from highlighting the central place which literature has traditionally held in the profession. It is of interest that Pound’s aphorism is contained in his *How to Read*, a work whose title drips with educative intent. Meaning in language of course has always been at the centre of English. Take almost any Syllabus from any jurisdiction and the production and reception of meaning will be at the core of curriculum aims. *Charged with meaning* captures our fundamental justification for why ‘doing things with texts’ (Green 2006:16) is important work.

When Margaret Mathieson (1975) called her history of ‘English and its teachers’ *The Preachers of Culture*, she captured another sense of being **charged with ...** in the history of the subject. By deploying Farrar’s 1868 description of English teachers as her title (Mathieson 1975: 29), Mathieson’s history demonstrates the extent to which English teachers have often been positioned as a quasi-priestly caste with an almost mystical responsibility for character development and the preservation of the heritage. When the subject’s name captures the confluence of language and nation – as most (though not all) mother-tongue curricula do – it is almost inevitable that its history will embrace a cultural project well beyond the development of literacy skills. This is reflected in the fact that so much of the subject’s historiography is centred on questions of larger social moment than simply questions of pedagogy: the nature of ‘culture’ to be studied in English; the roles of equity, democracy and egalitarianism in education; whose knowledge-base and whose culture is to be represented; the role of the curriculum in creating a national culture; the role of the school generally and of literacy in particular in social reproduction; the role of the school in providing future citizens and the nature of those citizens. Green et al’s study of literacy crises in Australia presents a range of sources since WWII to demonstrate that ‘literacy’ evolved as a code word in the media at different times for different things, including: allegiance to the Crown and Commonwealth; Protestant religious values; discipline and obedience to authority; mastery of British ‘proper speech’; innate intellectual gifts; monocultural Anglo/Australian nationalism; scientific and technological competitiveness; mental and physical health and employability and job competence (Green et al 1994: np). Similarly, in England, Ball’s histories show the *Black Papers* after 1969 linking an alleged decline in literacy standards with Britain’s economic decline and also with student radicalism, sexual permissiveness, the decline of the family and general moral decay (Ball et al 1990: 61; Ball 1987: 22-23). English, then, has always ‘been more than part of larger changes in education and society; it has been the focus of those changes, a battleground on which fundamental educational issues have been fought’ (Goodwyn 2001: 149).

And when the subject and its teachers are perceived as ‘not delivering’ on these multiple demands, they are **charged with** this failure through the application of crisis rhetoric and the narrative of declining standards

so beloved of politicians and the media (cf Green et al 1994; Sawyer 2006). The professional responsibilities with which English teachers are realistically charged do not at the present moment carry with them a concomitant recognition of their professionalism. Following the trend in most of the English-speaking world, political emphasis in Australia is on measures of accountability – national testing, increasingly centralised curriculum, league tables – that speak of a profound distrust of the profession (cf Gale 2006). To quote Goodwyn again: ‘subject English has been the central plank in any attempt to control education and schooling’ (Goodwyn 2001: 149). In Australia, this is despite consistently high scores in international testing such as PISA and despite the reality that Australia’s weak spot in such testing – its equity gap – reflects far more a failure of public policy than of teaching. This distrust also stands in contradistinction to the attitude of Finnish policy makers for whom trust in their teachers is a basic assumption (Hargreaves et al 2007). Finland, we need not remind readers, stands at the top of PISA with no national testing and no league tables.

One important distinction to be made in discussions of the nature of English is between the subject and the discipline (cf Green 2008). Traditionally, ‘English’ has been a different subject at primary school, secondary school and university; it has often been a different subject from university to university and, at the secondary school level, it is certainly a subject with different histories and curriculum configurations from country to country. Australia, for example, at the secondary level, has largely followed a British ‘version’ of English which is quite different from American versions of the subject. Most university constructions of English in Australia are also quite different from American versions. McComiskey (2006) is an excellent introduction to a study of the North American disciplines that make up English. The term ‘discipline’ is the point here. For McComiskey, ‘English Studies’ as a term ‘contains’ linguistics and discourse analysis, rhetoric and composition, creative writing, literature and literary criticism, critical theory and cultural studies and English education (the latter, of course, is itself made up of a number of disciplines). What the projected national curriculum in Australia is partly attempting to do is to ‘discipline’ the subject towards more uniformity at primary and secondary levels. *Charged with Meaning* demonstrates the range of disciplines that currently constitute the subject in secondary schools. These include (but are not limited to): linguistics, cultural studies, rhetoric, literature, literary and critical theory, semiotics, psycholinguistics, composition, film and media study, discourse analysis, drama and literacy. It is a timely reminder of the range of expertise held by teachers of the subject.

Therefore we believe that the contributions to this book deliver a counter narrative to that which pervades the distrust we discussed earlier – a narrative about the health of the subject and of the abiding professionalism of its teachers to whom distrust is the least appropriate reaction. We feel that a realistic reminder of the responsibilities with which the teachers and the subject itself are charged and the fundamental nature of these – learning to read the meanings of the texts of the world and to be designers of meaning in their own texts – is needed at this historical moment. At the time of writing, the national curriculum is still being written and could deliver a subject appropriate to 21st textual engagement or could deliver a hymn to nostalgia and become an opportunity lost. Above all else, the decisions about how that curriculum will be assessed will determine how it will be enacted in classrooms and the level of intellectual engagement it will promote.

Charged with Meaning is a continuation of the series that began with *Reviewing English* (Sawyer, Watson & Gold 1998) and later became *Reviewing English in the 21st Century* (Sawyer & Gold 2004). But it also stands within a longer tradition of books that are a testament to the influence that Ken Watson has had on the teaching of English in this country as well as internationally. *Reviewing English* was itself something of a successor to *English Teaching in Perspective in the Context of the 1990s* (Watson et al 1994), which followed (in turn) *English Teaching in Perspective* (Watson 1981, 1987), *English in Secondary Schools: Today and Tomorrow* (Watson & Eagleson 1977) and *Towards a New English* (Ashworth and Watson 1972). That Ken Watson founded St Clair Press in order to make important Australian publications available to English teachers is also part of this history. The quality of this publication project is attested to by those books

which became part of the Open University Press *English, Language and Education* series (edited by Anthony Adams), as well as by the continuation of the project through Phoenix Education.

Inevitably, however, *Charged with Meaning* is different from those books it succeeds. Every chapter which appeared in *Reviewing English in the 21st Century* has been revised and updated and a considerable number of chapters are totally new. Many – though not all - of the contributors were given the brief to approach their topic by both writing about the ‘big picture’ issues in their field and then considering how these issues might be applied in a classroom. There was to be a flexible structure of ‘if...then...’ that is reflected in the *Applications* section of many chapters. Some chapters are also accompanied by *Further Applications* in a *Chapter X / Chapter XA* pairing. These *Further Applications* sometimes directly reflect the ideas of the accompanying chapter or sometimes take the general topic in a different direction. The contributors reflect a range of Australian educational jurisdictions and a range of countries. They also consciously and deliberately reflect a mix of current secondary teachers and current academics. As far as possible, we want to disrupt any binary division between these groups. Each of the academics has been an experienced classroom teacher of English, and the teachers themselves bring a range of experiences that include working in teacher education, holding consultancy positions, holding executive office in professional associations and having, or working towards, research doctorates in an area of English studies. As editors, we ourselves reflect the complexity of this mix in our personal histories.

Charged with meaning... Finally, we see in Pound’s phrase the possibilities for the classroom itself as a site of interaction and relationship between students and students, teachers and students, and teachers and teachers. Without romanticising unduly, we see in the teacher’s oft-used metaphor about a lesson giving them ‘a charge’ the idea of an educational moment setting off a series of chain reactions that can often lead to unanticipated sets of meanings. We hope this book itself also fulfils the promise of its title.

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Post-Dartmouth Developments in English Teaching in Australia

Jack Thomson

Preliminary Notes

- I. In my title I include 'in Australia' very deliberately. The reason for this is that I believe that Australian English teachers have been far from slow in dealing with the practical implications of contemporary cultural and curriculum theory and the latest research findings on language and learning processes. There is plenty of evidence from publications on English teaching in England, the United States and Australia to suggest that Australia is still at the leading edge of significant research, curriculum theorising, and practical classroom application of recent sociolinguistic, cultural, literary and learning theory. Further, Australians appear to read the professional publications of other countries, whereas the parochialism of (particularly) American luminaries is all too evident in the way the texts they write exclude, silence, or at best marginalise Australian voices.

As I write in 2009, I think that the previous paragraph puts in a very ironic light the present Australian Government's stated aim to follow New York City's corporate business model of education, with its publication of school league tables, and shaming of schools which perform badly on the proliferating number of standardised literacy tests of questionable validity. As research has demonstrated, the major problems with standardised literacy tests are that: (a) teachers are forced into shifting their primary focus of attention from teaching literacy to teaching students how to handle the tests; and (b) such tests tend to be dominated by those discrete, isolated skill items that can most easily be tested and marked.

- II. In the discussion below, all the points are inter-related. A diagram that showed the nature of these inter-connections would be more circular - or even spiral - in shape than linear, so the numerical ordering of the issues below is probably an inappropriate form in which to present them, implying as it does a sequential and incremental logic of development of ideas rather than a complex dialectic.

I realise, however, that if I were asked to draw such a diagram I would find it very difficult to produce anything clear, coherent or illuminating and the value of the exercise would be in what the process of doing it achieved for my own understanding rather than in what the product could possibly communicate to anyone else. (This problem is caused partly by my own personal limitations of understanding and communication, and partly by the limitations of the [English] language of my culture and the way my thinking is linguistically constructed and circumscribed.)

- III. All of the classroom activities mentioned below can be either agents of literacy growth and empowerment for students or meaningless routines of industrious futility merely filling the daily time available for work in English. They are inevitably the latter when they are introduced rigidly and formulaically into the classroom rather than in contexts in which students understand the point of doing them. When any otherwise enlightened activity hardens into a routine system it becomes meaningless. Two examples of this in the past, I believe, have been:

- ~ process-conference writing when every piece of writing students did was required to go through a series of drafts to finished product regardless of the purposes of that writing; and
- ~ the writing of reading journals (or learning logs) when students responded to all books they read in exactly the same way: for example, by answering the same kinds of questions on each text.

Perhaps this could all be summarised by saying that all student activities in English are less than useful when they are not continually reflected on, and evaluated, by both students and teachers.

Developments in English teaching 1966-2009

1. Learning processes

We now have a deeper understanding of many of the processes of human learning, so that we know that all human beings who are not severely brain-damaged can become literate. These processes include cognitive development, emotional-intellectual growth (intelligence of feeling), the role of language in learning, language development, and the development of writing and reading abilities and skills. These processes are all inter-connected, so that the work of Piaget, Vygotsky and Bruner on cognitive development and the relationship between language and thought links with: Britton's work on language as a tool of learning (Britton 1970); with Barnes' work on talking in small groups and the relationship between language form and function (Barnes 1976); with different models of language functions (including Halliday's - 1973); with the work of Britton et al. on the development of writing abilities across a range of writing functions at developing incremental levels of conceptualisation (1975); and with work by people like the Goodmans (cf Gollasch 1982), Frank Smith (1978), Brian Cambourne (1988), Robert Scholes (1985) and others on the development of reading abilities.

One of the more important recent findings linking all of the above developments in our understanding of learning, thinking and languaging processes is **the importance of metacognition - of students reflecting on their learning** to make explicit to themselves both what they have learned from particular activities and how they have learned it; and going on to reflect further on their reflections to achieve higher level self-reflexive understanding of their own - and their culture's - preferred ways of learning. The incremental order of metacognitive conceptualisation is, therefore, from 'what I have learned', through 'how I learned that', to 'how I best learn different kinds of knowledge/understanding/skills in different contexts', with increasing understanding of the particular contributions of languaging processes (talking and writing of various kinds, performing and presenting in various ways) to different kinds of learning in different learning situations.

2. Relationship between theory and practice

We now have a much clearer and deeper understanding of the intricate dialectic relationship between theory and practice, for too long (and still often by many teachers) conceived of as binary opposites. We now know that there is no such thing as practice without theory. We know that every teacher in a classroom, in every teaching activity, is implementing a theory of learning whether that teacher is conscious of this simple fact or not. Therefore, we recognise **the importance of teachers theorising their own practice**. The first step to pedagogic improvement for all of us is to come to understand, and be able to articulate clearly, exactly what is the present (often covertly held) theory of learning that underpins our present practice. After reaching this kind of understanding and articulation, teachers are in a position to be able to look for answers to identified pedagogic problems by reading more theory and research, and to go on to apply what they find as relevant aspects of it in their teaching. The model I have in mind here is of a spiral progression from present practice, through developing - and intentionally explored - theoretical understanding of how people best learn, to a higher level of consciously chosen/constructed practice underpinned by a fully developed theoretical rationale. On this point, I think it is interesting to