

“Shuttling between the eagle and the wren...”
Learning and levels in the secondary English classroom

Paul Cullen English/HSIE teacher Carroll College, Broulee

Abstract:

This paper and workshop provide an examination of how English teachers can successfully engage students possessing a disparate range of abilities and cultural capital. While there has been a trend towards “specialist classrooms” (single sex, enrichment, targeted literacy) there has been no corresponding incline towards “specialist teachers”. In any one day a teacher is required to differentiate curriculum for several subjects, levels and learning styles. Literacy, rather than a problem to be solved, should be seen as a fire to be lit - empowerment, liberation and an antidote to “the inarticulate speech of the heart”. Like the beach, the English classroom should be the most democratic setting for each student to find a niche, to find his or her own voice; whether it be story writing, reading for pleasure and discovery, active listening, or critical evaluation of the media forms that help shape their lives. The presenter will use two model programmes to demonstrate how English units can be modified to cater for targeted literacy groups in a Year 9 class TIFF (**T**aking **I**nitiative for the **F**uture) and an integrated English/HSIE enrichment class (**D**eep **E**nrichment **E**nglish **P**rogramme). Practical strategies to engage students of all levels will be discussed and demonstrated.

Introduction

“...these are great teachers not because they necessarily teach the subject well but because they exemplify, and stimulate in students a profound and loving attitude towards learning.”
(Vladimir Nabokov)

The Australian poet Bruce Dawe’s elegant poem ‘Teaching’ asserts that we as teachers (and indeed parents) are dealing with futures that we never see, that we share the “wind’s invisibility” and that soaring talents and diminutive abilities are our daily fare. In any one day, teachers are required to deal with the whole range of learning styles and abilities. A teacher may walk from English (Extension 2) to a 10D English classroom and be expected to adapt pedagogy accordingly. It is at once daunting and remarkable. This paper will examine how two English secondary classes with discrete abilities are taught and the common pedagogy employed.

Class 1: The Year 9/10 Taking Initiative for the Future (TIFF) project

Identifying the Problem

What do we know about what it means to be a man in the early years of the 21st century other than what the media tells us? Advertisements are replete with males shouting, moving about recklessly, being ridiculed by others, not being able to undertake the simplest tasks. Are we men doomed to accept Lester Lamb’s view of himself in Tim Winton’s novel *Cloudstreet* when he says:

“and he knew that being a man was the most stupid, useless thing you could be...”

In 2005, as part of teacher supervision duties, I was given the management of the lunchtime Detention Room. I became concerned about the disproportionate number of boys represented in this aspect of the College’s discipline policy.

I was most interested in the “Uncooperative Behaviour” referrals. Was it behaviour that stemmed from an inability to cope with the demands of the subject specific curriculum, extra-mural factors or feelings of uselessness and stupidity? Many of these boys do not have a male in their lives. However, girls appeared to be receiving detentions for reasons that did not seem to involve class behaviour. There does seem to be a case that partial truancy may indicate lack of engagement with class work. It was the glaring disproportion that needed immediate attention.

“Boys are more likely to participate and achieve in school literacy work if they don’t see it as being in conflict with desirable constructions of masculinity” (Gilbert & Alloway, 1997). I spoke to the repeat referrals informally and attempted to ascertain why they were given referrals for detention. A consistent statement was “I can’t do the work” or ‘it’s boring” or “The teacher is always cranky.” Having always been interested in Attribution Theory, I would discuss with them how they explained success and lack of success in their academic progress. Invariably it was that they found it difficult to read, for an extended period, literature that alienated them. They also reported unfamiliarity with the conventions of prose. Some of the boys would sneak away from their friendship group at lunch to seek help before assessment deadlines. These students wanted to achieve!

Planning a Solution

In July of 2005 a Middle School Literacy project meeting examined the possibility of setting up a class that targeted literacy development. I met with the Special Needs Coordinator who provided data on the boys’ performance in the ELLA tests. The boys who had racked up the most number of detentions were in the lowest band of performance, considered “at risk”. Seventeen students (15 Year 9 boys and 2 girls) were in this category.

A meeting with the Curriculum Coordinator followed and support was extended at the executive level. The class would be, by necessity, small and it would have implications for the construction of the other English classes. As I was coordinating the English Department at that stage, I advocated a modified programme that emphasised engagement and functional literacy. The boys would have the same teacher for English/HSIE and Religious Education.

I wrote to parents seeking their support for this new programme. There were 14 replies giving wholehearted approval. A meeting with the boys followed in November setting out the purpose and a general scope and sequence of work for Year 9, 2006. It would be a two year project and School Certificate results, student, teacher and parent feedback and the Detention book would be used as measures of the project’s effectiveness.

At the time of writing this paper (May, 2007) this all-boys Year 10 class is progressing well, at least by the criterion of fewer detentions. In addition, parents have stated, on a number of

occasions, that their sons have gained a measure of self-confidence beyond the natural maturation process. Some days it is “one step forward, two steps back” but they do seem to be more engaged in their own literacy development.

The Program

Lillico (2003) suggests that effective lessons for boys have a clear format; that we structure the work so that there are clear sequences, clear steps and achievable goals. This aspect will be vital to the success of this class’ progress. What follows is a discussion of learning activities that engaged and stimulated the boys to develop their literacy skills.

Motivation: That’s the Name of the Game!

Student motivation is a key factor in this programme. Yes, intrinsic rewards have their place but there should also be an emphasis on seeing a task through to completion, to work towards deferred rewards. Once a month I will go through the *Seven Rules of Motivation* with the students (Pohl, 2000). The main elements are:

1. Set a major goal, but follow a path.

The path has mini goals and success with those mini goals will lead to motivation for bigger goals.

2. Finish what you start.

A half-finished task is not a success. Quitting is a habit. Develop the habit of finishing self-motivated tasks.

3. Socialise with others of similar interest.

Mutual support is motivating. Friendship based on affirmation of the importance of learning in their lives. Avoid the “put down”.

4. Learn how to learn.

Dependency on others is negative. Discover **how** you learn and try to put in place strategies for revision and forward thinking.

5. Blend natural talent with motivation.

Attempt to use you own natural skills (e.g. computer games, carpentry) to enhance research skills and working towards harder class work.

6. Increase knowledge of subjects that inspire.

The more we know about a subject the more we want to know about it

7. Take a risk

Failure and bouncing back (resilience) are elements of motivation. Use lack of success as a learning tool.

Our class will work towards the following goals to be achieved by the end of Year 9:

- write a sentence and only then to build a paragraph
- identify simple, complex sentence and parts of speech
- use punctuation correctly
- know the topic
- use a dictionary and Thesaurus

Group work

I have used group work sparingly over many years. There is always a danger of an imbalance of roles and workload. However, boys work well in pairs both in terms of peer regulation and sharing ideas that may be too fraught in the larger group. The concept of rights and responsibilities figures largely here. How can I, as a teacher, ensure each student has a stake in his own literacy development? We examine the importance of being articulate; not as pretentiousness but as a life skill. The job interview is used as a particularly important context for developing language skills.

Knowledge for its own sake

Boys love to 'know' things, yet English syllabuses have devalued knowledge in favour of skills. Knowledge of grammar, spelling and punctuation rules and formal writing and speaking structures gave some students confidence in a subject which may not have come naturally to them. My experience in speaking to many ex-students over the years, from the brickie's labourer who struggled at school to the Business Management graduate who loved English, has been that boys loved learning something by heart – 'Stay Gold', 'The Raven', 'Mulga Bill's Bicycle', 'Weapons Training', 'Dover Beach', Macbeth's "Out, out brief candle" speech. If you want to deal directly with the role of dads, examine the construction of masculinity or the role of guardians or mentors in boys' lives, 'My Father Began as a God' by Ian Mudie is a great discussion starter. The poignant final stanza will often challenge boys to reassess their relationships with their fathers:

Strangest of all how
The deeper he receded into the grave
The more I see myself
As one more of the little men
Who creep through life
Not even knee-high to this long dead god.

Poetry, with its regular rhythms, rhymes and cadences, is a music boys understand. We should not deny them the beautiful words eloquently expressed which return to us again and again throughout our lives at pertinent moments, articulating and clarifying our experience for us better than we could do so ourselves.

Emotional Intelligence

Literature is a powerful tool here. "Boys are more likely to participate and achieve in school literacy work if they don't see it as being in conflict with constructions of masculinity" (Gilbert & Alloway, 1997). The implication is that it is vital to choose texts that avoid stereotypical masculine images. This of course does not preclude literature that challenges assumptions. The recent film *The Pursuit of Happyness* provides a powerful exemplar of perseverance and self-belief.

Together with instilling a passion for literature that I love, we as a class deal with the notion of emotional intelligence. In dealing with a text such as Hinton's *The Outsiders* we would discuss whether males place too much emphasis on sport and physically solving problems. Challenging

the “running away from anything serious” mentality becomes the underpinning of this literacy programme. John Marsden’s *Secret Men’s Business* is a good resource in this regard. He examines maturation in these terms:blaming failure on anyone and everything else

- treating women in a condescending or exploitative manner
- risk taking and alcohol use
- hero worshipping others without having own opinions
- the use of language rather than aggression to solve conflict

Not the Classics!

Recently we undertook the study of a Shakespearean tragedy *Macbeth*. How could these “at risk” students possibly cope with the concepts and language? If the teacher loves the text enough, there will be learning by osmosis. Education is as much caught as taught. Any text in the pre-reading phase must be sold to them. It was important to tap into a natural curiosity. The poser “What if...? In this case what if you were told you could have anything you wanted. The one catch: *I have to break a law to achieve it!* We examined various scenarios and some students posed their own. After a mind map of the main characters and an abridged form of the text (including pictures) we snaked our way through a version that paralleled their own understanding of the world. “What happens next if...?” “Why do some readers lay the blame more on Lady Macbeth?” “Is that fair? “He’s a man; doesn’t he have responsibilities, a conscience?” Such discussions promote emotional intelligence through the study of literature. The focus was overtly on actions and consequences; thematic concerns meshed with problem solving. Students were interested in representing the ideas through colour. Invariably it involved the use of black, white and red and the intriguing use of font to represent motifs of daggers, crowns, ravens and candles.

The language can be a barrier if it is allowed to subsume the study of any text that is not contemporary. The boys liked the “music” of the Weird Sister’s incantations over the cauldron. The rhythms and cadences are not unlike rap music and it was an enjoyable experience to have them formulate a list of ingredients for a modern spell. In addition, they were fascinated with Macbeth’s soliloquy after the death of his wife. It was examined not only in terms of the comparison of life to an actor’s “hour upon a stage” but as a study of how men grieve and deal with loss. Writing short responses (diaries, journals, letters, column for *The Inverness Times*) from various points of view allowed the students to empathise with perspectives other than those of the protagonist. When the news is brought to Macduff of his wife and children having been savagely slaughtered, there is an exchange between Malcolm and Macduff that bears depth of treatment. When the future ruler of England discloses aspects of his own character that seem repugnant, there is a test of friendship. Is it a test or is the truth being revealed in this guise? How is Macduff supposed to react when the tragic dispatch is uttered? When Malcolm says, “Dispute it like a man” Macduff replies “...but I must also feel it as a man.” There is a wealth of material here for any boys’ class. *Othello* and *Macbeth* continue to be the most powerful of Shakespeare’s works for boys. Many boys in the teenage years have divided loyalties and teens understand the fragile bubble of reputation all too well.

‘Ars Poetica’

The class is soon to study a selection of poetry. The poems that will be chosen will be accessible yet arresting. They will challenge their views of the poetic form being unmanly and

genteel. Carl Sandberg's poem resembling a brick wall is a great way to start any unit. Works such as 'And a Good Friday Was Had by All', Komminos' 'Bombay Café', 'Ozymandias', 'Birches' by Robert Frost (a celebration of true freedom), 'Legend', 'The Listeners' and 'The Raven' engage, entertain and elicit powerful written responses. I have found it preferable to have the rhythms wash over them than to start with the ubiquitous exposition of poetic techniques; a sure way of destroying the osmosis of learning. I recommend a poem called 'Ars Poetica' that contains a sequence of images of what poetry is and ends with the line "A poem should not mean but be." It has proven to be a springboard for enthralling poetry writing.

Class 2: Year 8 Deep Educational Enrichment Program

As part of a Targeted Literacy Programme a Year 8 class was composed in 2006 for a two year trial to enrich skills in the English, HSIE and Religious Education KLA's. Based on the Middle School concept, this year an integrated unit of work was designed to meet outcomes for three subjects and to provide a milieu to extend, enrich and challenge. As there is no such thing as a homogenous class, this would prove as stimulating and challenging as any literacy challenged boys' class.

The main challenge for the teacher was how to integrate the content of English, HSIE and RE as well as liaising with the science teacher to incorporate that subject area as well. I had used a survival game called "The Island" in the study of *The Lord of the Flies* a few years ago. Here was an opportunity to adapt the concept for a range of purposes. I am fortunate to have my own room. That room has become a "drop in" centre (obviating the need for a stream of e-mails) and a major resource.

THE ISLAND

The students will spend an unspecified amount of time on the mythical island called Sarawana. It lies 500 nautical miles from the nearest shipping channels (see Appendix 2) and has the following features:

HSIE

- There are two distinctly different halves of the island. One has fertile, luxuriant vegetation, a freshwater spring and lagoon, abundant food supply, a small indigenous village while the other is mostly sand, rock and volcanic crater with less obvious water and food supplies.
- Each student will consider what supplies/material they will need for a minimum 30 day

stay. The items are limited in terms of being required to fit into a standard size backpack. Will they work in a group or go it alone?

- ▭ Compile a Glossary of terms on Global Inequality. Make them applicable to the experience.
- ▭ As part of the unit, chance cards will be given to students, some good, some not to assist decision making and problem solving skills.
- ▭ A close examination of the United Nations declaration on Human Rights. Which ones are relevant to the variations of:
 - movement of peoples across “artificial borders”
 - sharing of resources
 - freedom of association
 - equitable treatment of peoples
 - misdemeanours, crimes and punishment
 - mapping out a survival guide that does not impinge on others’ rights

English

- Students are required to keep a journal of their experiences on the island. There is an opportunity to write poetry (the other English classes are involved in a Poetry Unit at that time)
- Oracy: There will be occasional whole group or small group meetings when students will have the opportunity to proffer ideas, make suggestions, and formulate group rules. The teacher listens to the proceedings and evaluates active listening skills after setting some guidelines.
- Reading other students’ journals to seek information, to clarify instruction and to share ideas.
- Encouragement of literate, insightful, imaginative and empathetic written responses.
- The confidence to be able to read a poem/descriptive piece to the group.
- Reading extracts from texts dealing with the same experiences: *Castaway*, *Coral Island*, *The Cay*, *Heart of Darkness*, *The Day It Rained Forever*, *Hatchet*

Religious Education

- There has been a visit by Christian missionaries in the early years of the church and scrolls will be found near the remains of a church on the south end of the island.
- Contact with the indigenous culture will be examined in terms of maintaining its integrity and mutual education. Sarawana becomes a setting to explore some of the dilemmas that faced the early Christian missionaries.
- The formulation of a moral code of behaviour. How would it differ from the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights in the HSIE course?
- Rituals and ceremonies. How to remember, to celebrate?

Outline

Here is a brief summary of what will be undertaken in this pilot integrated unit:

1. Teacher explains what an integrated unit is and the purpose of the pilot program.
2. Students are issued a topographical map of the island.
3. Collaborative learning: Meeting organised on the beach on arrival.
4. Use of journal to record initial impressions. Foraging, exploration, setting up camp.
5. First contact with the indigenous peoples. How will it be successfully done?
6. Discussion of the geographical features of the island- food sources, fauna/flora etc.
7. “Scrolls” discovered that show possible European Christian settlement. Are they authentic? How do we know? (Use of Acts of the Apostles and St Paul’s letters)
8. Eco-footprints, globalisation (each students represents a different country)
9. Descriptive writing: short journal entries, poetry, a visual representation.
10. Problem solving exercises involving English/HSIE/RE. Has the student balanced self-interest with the collective interest?
11. Survival? Strengths and challenges of individual/group actions and decisions.
12. Evaluation of the unit in the last week of Term 2. What would they pack if they had their time again? Were weapons a good idea?

Engagement: Caught not taught!

The students are totally engaged in the experience so far. There are two students in the class of 26 who find the “game” perplexing as one said: “What are we supposed to be learning here?” Last week she stayed back and told me that she understood and that it was “better than copying things down from an overhead”. To enrich is to lift the bar beyond the literal. It is an attempt to encourage students to take control of their own learning and to review processes. The explicit goal in this unit is to survive and to minimise the group’s “eco footprint” on the island, to work cooperatively, to solve problems as they arise (through chance cards). Along the way, I subtly incorporated glossaries of key terms to meet outcomes. These outcomes were caught in the welter of discussions, exercises and deliberations. It is a noisy classroom at times but there is full engagement. Active listening to others’ points of view is invariably difficult at times but in this grittiness there were moments of great insight by many students. The work of Betts and Pears on the Millennial Learner in the *Boys: Getting it Right* Report (2002) helped identify a quality differentiated model for talented students. They advocated the use of seminars to develop creative problem solving, metacognition, moral, political and aesthetic judgements. The overarching concern lies in promoting critical reflection and analysis. I wish to extend the following characteristics:

- Motivation. Is the student an enthusiastic learner? Why/why not?
- Is the student able to work independently? This has considerable implications given the amount of research required of students across a number of KLAs.
- Has the student an ability to communicate ideas effectively? This will be dealt with in group meetings and small group discussions.
- Has the student an ability to “think outside the square”? Thinking divergently is a

crucial aspect of this integrated unit.

- ▭ Memory aids. There is much information to synthesise. What strategies could be implemented?
- ▭ Being an observational learner. Looking at patterns. This is closely allied with being a critical thinker.

The Integrated Approach

Last year I spoke about the “Glint in the Eye”, that engagement that extends beyond outcomes. It comes about when students see that the unit is fun, that they are being challenged and that there are clear instructions and review. The ACER Engagement and Productive Pedagogies Surveys are useful tool for my students and colleagues. I wish to ensure that the Intellectual Quality is such that it is extending them, that they see the relevance, that my classroom is a socially supportive environment and that I have recognised the differences in learning styles and personalities in an “homogenous” A- level class.

Although instructional strategies depend on the age of the students and the nature of the disciplines involved, the goal is always to encourage students to think about subjects in more abstract and complex ways. Activity selection should be based on student interests, and activities should be developed in ways that encourage self-directed learning. Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives (1956) offers the most common approach to process modification.

The Williams model was useful for identifying the elements of the creative process involved in this unit. This model stresses fluency flexibility originality and elaboration. Hopefully the teaching strategies enable the expression of curiosity, imagination, risk-taking and complexity. All these have been identified as important processes for the expression of creativity.

1. Paradox Something that is counter intuitive. It is used to evaluate ideas and challenge students to reason and to find evidence.	“Survival on this island depends on helping all others to survive.” Explain.
2. Attribute Listing. The skill of analysis.	“ The attribute that I need to survive in this experience are: ”
3. Analogy. Students find the similarities between concepts and compare abstract concepts to other things.	“resourcefulness to survival as ... “Morality is to decision making as... “Trying to find the basis for good group behaviour is like ...”

4. Discrepancy. Students are encouraged to discuss what is known or understood	How do individuals know what group decisions are? Do students know the key KLA concepts well enough to apply to simulated experience?
5. Provocative Questions. Questions that require analysis, synthesis and evaluation	Is our arrival on the island “invasion” or “settlement”? Should there be any attempt to covert the indigenous people?
6. Examples of Change. Demonstrate the dynamic nature of action	How might life be different if we landed on the eastern coast? What would be the consequences of not having a freshwater lagoon?
7. Examples of Habit. This emphasises the knowledge required to undertake conceptual class work	What is a contour map? An isobar? Physical map?
8. Organised random search. Ask students to undertake research on associated areas of study based on interest.	If the class was studying the Early Church, an associated area of study may tap into an interest on the role of women, of ritual.
9. Skills of Research Looking for cause and effect, analysing results and drawing conclusions.	Which of the “scrolls” is authentic? How do we know? (Religious Ed example)
10. Tolerance for Ambiguity. Posing open ended questions that lead to self-directed learning.	Helping the indigenous village is also destroying their culture? (HSIE)
11. Intuitive expression. Follow a hunch, explore a point of view.	Put yourself in the shoes of the student who has taken some supplies? Write about the incident from her viewpoint.
12. Adjustment to development Learning from mistakes and failures	What did we learn from bartering trinkets for food? (HSIE)
13. Study creative process. Analyse the traits and characteristics of concepts through biographies.	Find a story of someone who has survived an ordeal and discuss the factors involved
14. Evaluate situations Pose the question “What if...”	How could the group have been better prepared for the arrival of the tropical storm? (HSIE) What if you found the wooden boat and went for help? (English) What if the Christian missionaries did convert the indigenous population? (RE)
15. Creative reading skills. Students develop ideas after reading texts to stimulate new ideas	Use of the following texts as stimuli: <i>Bush Survival Guide</i> <i>The Bush Tucker Man</i> <i>Hatchet</i> <i>Tomorrow When the war Began</i>
16. Creative Listening Skills. Active listening to synthesise information and make judgements.	Audiotape of Bill Young’s experience in Changi Recording of various meetings. Play back to ascertain listening skills. Oral reading of a St. Paul letter to look for patterns.
17. Creative Writing Skills. Generating and communicating ideas through writing.	A variety of writing tasks Journal for HSIE Report for RE
18. Visualisation Skills. Visual representations of the experience.	The campsites The indigenous village Castle Rock The reef

Reflections

There are many flaws in this pilot and as I proceed I am constantly modifying and discarding ideas to cater for an immediate focus/interest. Literature will always be at the heart of English but in this integrated unit the students are in some ways writing the script themselves. It is not a clinical, esoteric study but a work in progress. I cannot subscribe to a pedagogy that condemns words to a page. Graham Swift, in his novel *Ever After*, puts it eloquently when he writes:

“I owe my teacher infinite thanks for introducing me to Literature, which despite its failure to save lives including, I suppose my own and despite its being chopped up and flung into preservatives as if it were a subject for an autopsy, I still believe in. I still believe it is the speech, the voice of the heart...”

Whether it is Period 1 with my Year 10 TIFF boys on some days “with satchel on back crawling like a snail/unwillingly to school” or the Year 8 DEEP class waiting expectantly outside the classroom, the question I never get tired of hearing is “What will we be doing today?”

Appendix 1: The Island: An integrated unit

HSIE

- * **Global inequalities**
- * **mapping**
- * **renewable resources**
- * **Globalisation**

ENGLISH

- * **poetry**
- * **the short story**
- * **oracy**
- * **listening skills**

RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

- * **The Early Church**
- * **Travels of St. Paul**
- * **ethics and morality**
- * **Women in the church**

***Sustainable use
of resources**

*** reading biographies
and fiction about survival**

*** rituals and ceremonies**

References

Alloway, N & Gilbert P.(1997) *Boys and Literacy -Professional Development Units*, Australia: Curriculum Corporation.

Gardner, H (2000). Howard Gardner on making the most of young minds. *The Educational Digest*. 65(6) Retrieved 15th April 2007, from <http://globalumi.com/pqdweb> accessed 15/4/07

House of Representatives, Standing Committee on Education and Training. (2002). *Boys: Getting it Right, Report on the inquiry into the Education of Boys, Commonwealth of Australia*. Retrieved 12 April 2007 from www.aph.gov.au/house/house_news/news_boys_ed_report_tabled.html

Marsden, John (2001). *Secret Men's Business*. Sydney: Pan MacMillan.

Pohl, M. (2000) *Learning to Think: Thinking to Learn*. Sydney: Hawker Brownlow Education.