

# Questions of English

Ethics, aesthetics, rhetoric, and the  
formation of the subject in England,  
Australia and the United States

Robin Peel  
Annette Patterson  
and Jeanne Gerlach

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# Questions of English

The impact and content of English as a subject on the curriculum is once more the subject of lively debate. *Questions of English* sets out to map the development of English as a subject and how it has come to encompass the diversity of ideas that currently characterise it.

Drawing on a combination of historical analysis and recent research findings **Robin Peel, Annette Patterson** and **Jeanne Gerlach** bring together and compare important new insights on curriculum development and teaching practice from England, Australia and the United States. They discuss the place of English in elementary schools and universities; the development of teacher training and the variety of ways in which teachers build their own beliefs and knowledge about English; the relationship between the teaching of English and the formation of the citizen and the international move towards outcomes based assessment.

*Questions of English* offers a lively and accessible guide through past and present debates about the English curriculum which will appeal to students and practising teachers.

**Robin Peel** is Principal Lecturer in English at the University of Plymouth, **Annette Patterson** is Senior Lecturer at James Cook University, Australia and **Jeanne Gerlach** is Dean of the Faculty of Teacher Education at the University of Texas at Arlington, United States.



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# Preface

In my first lecture before you, in January 1913, I quoted to you the artist in Don Quixote who, being asked what animal he was painting, answered diffidently 'That is as it may turn out'.

'On a School of English' in *On the Art of Reading*  
by Sir Arthur Quiller Couch (1920)

This elusive figure, haunting the outskirts of Oxford for centuries, captures well the ambiguous stance which won Arnold himself a long-term influence: half Oxford academic, half romantic exile, he is not compromised by the fleshly institution (nor it by him) yet orbits around it as a necessary centre of gravity.

Baldick (1983:48) describing *The Scholar Gypsy*

## The questions

This is a book about English specialists, many of whom are troubled by notions of working within fixed frames or boundaries, and almost all of whom are operating within 'fleshly institutions'. In the following chapters we explore the relationship between the questions and beliefs that are currently being voiced in Australia, England and the United States and the material and historical factors which have helped shape them. We hope to demonstrate the historical antecedents of the views expressed not in order to 'explain' them but rather to consider the ways in which beliefs are formed and the questions which seem to dominate contemporary discussion. Through this process we are able to identify the kinds of questions which are exercising English specialists.

In so doing we are also and inevitably asking questions of English. It is important that such questions are asked by those who are 'inside' as we are living through a period when such questions have become very narrowly focussed by those who are outside. We are not, however, intending to devote any significant space to the familiar question 'What is English?'. This is the one question that those inside English, particularly in higher education, frequently *do* ask, and it is beginning to look increasingly narcissistic. Moreover, there is a response to the question itself which we find attractive. It was given recently by Colin Bulman (1997) who was lamenting the attention given in *Cultural*

*Studies* to the question ‘What is Cultural Studies?’. For cultural studies we can read English:

In fact, those who do need to ask ‘what is cultural studies?’ can get a succinct answer from Raymond Williams who argued that one cannot understand an artistic project or product without also understanding its formation and genesis within a society. The relation between a project and a formation is ‘always decisive’.

Bulman 1997, p. 13

Our own project is based on our own experience as specialists in English and as teacher educators, and on research carried out into the beliefs and perceptions of English specialists in schools, colleges and universities. The voices of students and teachers form a prominent part of our account of English in England, the United States and Australia, but we are keen to get behind those voices and to ask where they are coming from. So we have attempted to historicise them and to consider how they (and we) have been constructed by our histories. Furthermore, the gap between what we as teachers say we do and what actually happens in our classrooms has been noted by many researchers (Barnes and Barnes 1984). It is likely that what people profess to believe is less important for the way that they run their world than the pressures and influences that are exerted on them, and the social practices in which they have been inducted. But if, as we do, we believe in a dialectical world then ideas and beliefs can shape as well as be shaped, even though some ideas have to wait until the time when material and ideological circumstance allow their hour to come round.

In this book we propose a reading of some of the ideas and strategies which in our judgement should be available to a generation of students who will reach adulthood in the techno-cultural world of the twenty-first century. We explore the possibility that the practices of English and the specific strategies which English specialists employ are as much to do with the process of contributing to the formation of a particular kind of person as they are with the more obvious and more frequently articulated concerns with literacy, freedom, literature and the imagination. That person, our findings would suggest, is self-reflecting, self-regulating and more comfortable when enabling and supervising than when instructing and being didactic. Such strategies have been developed not because they produce more literate and knowledgeable students, but because they encourage aspects of the subject which prove valuable to society. The emphasis on the person, on affective response, on the experience and insights of the individual, help to validate and monitor qualities which are not given free play elsewhere. This may be a very desirable process: that it is normative is rarely acknowledged.

Inevitably, such a model of English has come into collision with the culture of the marketplace, which was the predominant ideology of the late twentieth century. It has not been well equipped theoretically to cope with this challenge. It seems in need of a new rhetoric, if it is to continue to enjoy the position to which it had become accustomed throughout much of the twentieth century. Several such rhetorics exist, as we show in the following chapters. In the United States the recommendation of the Gulbenkian

Commission chaired by Imanuel Wallerstein has offered an interdisciplinary model and points out that the combination of cultural studies and post modern theory has occasioned the first revival of the humanities since they were eclipsed by the sciences in the nineteenth century. In England, where such an eclipse seemed to have been prevented, that rhetoric alone is not viewed so optimistically. In terms of curricular, pedagogical and theoretical developments in schools and universities, it is perhaps to Australia that we must look for signs of what the future can hold for English.

We feel that an international perspective is both timely and pertinent. Among other things, it can show that despite the globalisation of culture, specific cultural differences survive. If English can articulate those practices which form its 'cultural capital' in a technocratic society, it may be able to avoid the prospect which it is being offered in England, that of being an agency for literacy and nothing more.

If there is one irony above all others in recent developments, it is that the privatisation of culture masks the continuing centralisation of power. It is an irony identified by Regenia Gagnier (1996):

The point is that despite pervasive market rhetoric, it appears that the government runs the universities in this country like planned economies under the old-fashioned bureaucracies, not really addressing how or whether we might produce better experts or intellectuals or technicians, or in what proportions we should produce them. Yet these are exactly the questions we should be asking. I think that this irony of market rhetoric over massive central planning should be pointed out, especially by those of us expert in the forms of irony. For English in the millennium, like so many things, will be determined by planning or markets.

What the set of practices that we associate with English are, why they have survived for so long, and whether they will adapt to ensure their survival in the future: these are three of the principal questions that have informed our analysis.

### **The arguments**

The novelist Vikram Seth once described how during one of his daily walks along the edge of the Serpentine in Hyde Park he struck up a conversation with a man who was taking an early morning swim.<sup>1</sup> The man was so enthusiastic about the delights of bathing that he persuaded Seth to join the Serpentine Swimming Club, and although by nature the novelist was not a person who particularly enjoyed cold water or the vigorous exercise required by swimming, he was soon a complete convert. The Swimming Club turned out to be a remarkable community comprising people of all ages, ethnic groups and classes.

Sadly, Vikram Seth reported the club was now under threat: it has been forced to move out of its headquarters in The Pavilion, which for commercial reasons had been converted

into a tea-room. This change could have been endured, but there was now a crushing weight of bureaucracy—all for apparently worthy reasons, because people could pick up infections from the lake, or suffer ill effects from diving into very cold water. Safe-guards have to be introduced—but these might have the effect of causing the club to close. This would be ironical, Seth pointed out: no member of the Serpentine Swimming Club has ever died as a result of swimming, and a good number have been much healthier citizens as a result of taking this regular exercise.

*Questions of English* is about the set of practices known as subject English, or to be more precise, a review of the beliefs and perceptions that inform those practices, in England, Australia and the United States. Although many of the long-time members of ‘club’ English take a view of recent changes in educational practice which chime with the wistful sentiments of Seth’s story, there are many who do not. It would be easy to construct a picture of subject English as a romantic club whose extinction is threatened by the bureaucracy of accountability. As researchers, we were keen to avoid constructing this kind of binary, and we agreed that our work should not be predicated on a particular argument about English that our findings then became material to endorse.

Inevitably, however, the book contains its own argument. The evidence we present confirms that English is an important subject. It is a site for fierce debate and contestation, both at school and university level. That English has remained central to the secondary/high school curriculum is clear from documents which begin—or in the case of England complete—the move towards a national curriculum for English. That English’s prime task is tied up with achievement of literacy is evident in the description ‘language arts’ in the United States and the ‘literacy hour’ in England. In Australia the term ‘critical literacy’ has emerged, and in all three countries there is a recognition by teachers that the kind of literacy appropriate in an age of Information and Communications Technology is different from that considered appropriate in the nineteenth century.

The focus of the book is on the way that the diversity of practice in

1 Vikram Seth, ‘Today’ Essay, BBC Radio 4, 3 April 1999.

English may conceal a commonality of pedagogy. That diversity is implicit in the range of rhetorical positions from which we report. Each of us has our ‘roots’ in subject English. The way that each of us has responded to our subject is a snapshot of the contrasting interests, experience and emphases that can be found among any group of English teachers. The early chapters that concentrate on England reflect my interest in the historicising process, in situating beliefs among the discourses and practices of the period from which they emerge. There is a danger in England—and Jeanne Gerlach reports that this is also true of the United States—that current concerns are discussed in a way that leads to the erasure of history, as if we are no longer living in a historical moment. I wish to challenge that notion, so there is a great deal of history in the early chapters of the book which map the subject’s development in England. These chapters also reflect another of my interests in that they attempt to provide a cross phase commentary. I wish to discuss what has been and is happening in universities and primary schools in England as this complements English in secondary/high schools, the phase which is generally our

focus.

Annette Patterson applies a reading of Michel Foucault and Ian Hunter to the development of English in England and Australia, picking up on some of the points I have made but questioning the category 'English' in a more systematic way, and challenging the usefulness of the Cox 'models' as a way of identifying pedagogical practice. In her analysis she argues that the pedagogical relationship is the crucial and central constant connecting early church and pastoral teaching traditions with contemporary critical reading practices in the English classroom. In providing space for the paradox of supervised freedom, English has served an important role in the managing of behaviour in a democratic society.

Jeanne Gerlach's account is a celebration of this relationship and the rich potential of subject English as a subject within the humanities, which still provides space for the personal, for discovery and for wonder in a world in which the call for evidence and accountability may seem to be marginalising these things.

The differences between us are apparent not only in the way we write, but what we write about and the way that we respond to current developments. Although the three of us are deeply interested in the questions that we pose, there is no consensus among us about how they should be answered. This is revealed in the way that we sometimes contradict and question one another.

This book is likely to be read by subject specialists, many of whom will be planning to teach in schools, and having discussed the issues and debates in university English departments in the opening chapters on England these are not repeated in the chapters on Australia and the United States, where differences in school practice become the focus. The opening section, therefore, is by far the longest.

For those subject specialists undertaking programmes leading to qualified teacher status, or for those already teaching in secondary/high school classrooms, some of the issues we address may seem rather remote from the twenty-first century world of increased state or government direction, where what an English teacher does is increasingly prescribed, inspected and assessed. The widespread emphasis on accountability and 'evidence' in England, Australia and the United States—an understandable response to concerns about literacy—poses a challenge to history, theory and experiment because it effectively offers closure on these issues. The busy practitioner is so preoccupied with preparing students for the requirements of assessment, providing the appropriate documentation, or getting ready for inspection that s/he is denied the 'luxury' of looking at English as a set of practices with a particular history. There is less time to think and reflect—and one strand of rhetoric coming out of government departments in England implies that there has been too much reflection, too much discussion, and not enough action. This is a seductive argument, especially when we see the literacy problems experienced by so many students, but the danger is that the 'action' required has not been thought through, and that it reduces teachers to the role of agents.

In fact, one of the arguments that emerges in this book is that English teachers *have* always been agents, though the model of agency which characterised the set of practices known as Subject English allowed for an autonomy and democratisation that has proved extremely useful. This is not to suggest a cynicism about change, but to emphasise how

important it is that the new 'action' writes these qualities into its assessment and outcomes frameworks.

Whilst rejecting the old Romantic binary of 'free English teacher versus institutional bureaucracy', we would wish to challenge those over simplistic models of teaching which regard students as vessels waiting to be filled. The monitorial system, *Hard Times* and Payment by Results showed us the limitations of that pedagogical model, which is why it is important that we do not lose sight of our history. Over the past 400 years, some experiments have already been tried and found wanting.

Originally this book was going to be called 'Beliefs about English' and inevitably these chapters are informed by our own beliefs, and our own experience. What we all have in common is that we have all taught English at levels ranging from primary to postgraduate, and all three of us taught a number of years in secondary schools. We enjoy teaching, and we maintain strong links with our respective country's professional English associations. It is perhaps significant that we have all found ourselves at some distance from our starting points, however: Robin Peel is a Programme Director for the Masters' Programme in the University of Plymouth, Faculty of Arts and Education, Graduate School, Annette Patterson is a Senior Lecturer at James Cook University School of Education teaching sociology and literacy, while Jeanne Gerlach is Dean of the Faculty of Education at the University of Texas at Arlington. It is apparent from our research that it is extremely common for English specialists to start out their adult lives doing one thing, to then specialise in English and finally to end up moving into something a little different as their careers unfolded.

This is not a book about how to teach English, nor is it a book about the old battles between canon and culture, tradition and theory, literature and literacy, though we touch on all of these subjects. It *is* a book which discusses a range of beliefs that have been expressed by subject specialists and outside commentators during the past 150 or so years, and the beliefs and perceptions that have been expressed by those we have interviewed as part of our research. The project began with an examination of questionnaire responses in England and Australia, and Sandra Hargreaves and Robin Peel reported on this in *English in Education* (Peel and Hargreaves 1995). This book builds on those responses, but seeks to locate them in the context of what has gone before, and what may be coming after.

We hope that what follows will encourage all of those interested in subject English to question and evaluate the assumptions and beliefs that underscore what still remains one of the central subjects of compulsory secondary education, and an extremely popular subject in colleges and universities.

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### **Jeanne Gerlach**

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The four lines from ‘Snow’ by Louis MacNeice are quoted on p. 7 with the permission of David Higham Associates and are taken from *Selected Poems* published by Faber and Faber (1964).

Parts of Chapter 3 were originally published as separate articles in English in *Education and in Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*.



# 1

# Introduction

*Robin Peel*

## Rationale

From its earliest days as a school and university subject English has been concerned with attempts to define itself. To the sceptical, whether inside or outside the field, this preoccupation is seen as no more than mildly interesting navel gazing, revealing the field's deep anxieties and unresolved insecurities. It is true that English, despite being one of the younger school curriculum subjects, has within 100 years undergone a number of name changes, as if it cannot make up its mind what its function is. First criticism, then literary criticism, then English, English Literature and Language and finally literary studies, textual studies, culture and criticism and English studies. Each term suggest a differing emphasis, as do the debates about whether we should use the word language or languages, literature or literatures, and the questions that have formed the titles of conferences such as *What is English?* and *English, whose English?*

Ultimately it is the failure to reach agreed definitions of what we mean when we use the word 'English' that bedevils discussion and creates unnecessary misunderstandings. In *What is English Teaching?* (Davies 1996) Chris Davies, writing from a United Kingdom perspective, argues that the inability to make a clear distinction between literacy and the subject English, between the subject name and the language name resulted in a National Curriculum that 'fudges the distinction between specialist English and general literacy...[and that] renders hopeless all attempts at coherence in the subject's structure' (Davies 1996, p. 35).

In this book we aim to demonstrate that the ability to live with uncertainty, a plurality of voices and a tradition of questioning is one of English's great strengths. But we are talking about plurality within specialist English: we are not seeking to take on the great issues of initial literacy, of how we *initially* learn to speak, read and write, or how these cross-curricular abilities are developed in secondary school and college. In the sections which discuss the United States experience we shall be discussing the effects of separating a literacy from English, of having separate 'writing' classes in a way that is not the case in England and Australia. If we argue for a separation, it does not necessarily have to be according to the American model.