

## English teaching in New Zealand: The current play of the state

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*ABSTRACT: Curriculum, assessment and qualifications reforms in New Zealand have wrought significant changes in the construction of English as a subject and in the practices of English teachers. While the content of the new English curriculum suggests continuities with past syllabuses, its structural parameters indicate a different discursive agenda. Reforms in senior secondary school qualifications have also acted to construct English in ways that need to be contested and which may be making the subject less responsive to changes in textual practice resulting from the rise in digital technologisation. In a variety of ways, the reforms are also serving to reshape the everyday classroom practices of English teachers, both overtly and covertly through a process of discursive colonisation. Because the reforms have been highly centralised, state initiated and state managed, they have posed a huge challenge to teacher professionalism and identity. Through all of this, the hegemonic status of English as the vehicle through which literature is studied remains unchallenged. The article concludes by listing five challenges to English teachers.*

*KEYWORDS: Curriculum, assessment, qualifications, educational reform, professionalism, ICTs, English hegemony, English.*

[This article is a wordprocessed version of an already existent hypertext. I accorded hypertext primacy in writing it because I don't think the topic can be reduced to a simple linear argumentative sequence. While there is a personal voice underpinning this text, I would want to acknowledge that the situation here in New Zealand is a complex interweaving of stories, themes and perspectives. While this version has a series of headings suggesting a linear argument, I suggest readers treat the sections as relatively self-contained menu items which discuss five issues: English language as hegemony; theorising subject English; framing curriculum; classroom practice and the maintenance of professionalism. There is no suggestion of an order of importance. Rather, the text suggests an interconnectedness among those topics we might categorise as "issues". The title itself is a play and in keeping with the modus operandi of hypertext. But the game itself is being played for high stakes, as I shall be discussing, and the State in NZ is a serious player in it.]

### CURRICULUM BACKGROUND

It is now almost ten years since the draft curriculum document ENGLISH in the New Zealand Curriculum was released for comment after a gestation period of around 18 months. (The previous curriculum for English for Forms 3-5 had taken an elephantine 14 years to develop.) Driving the development was what a newly elected National Government announced as its Achievement Initiative. The new policy called for:

1. the establishing of clear achievement standards for all levels of compulsory schooling, first in the basic subjects of English, mathematics, science and technology, and later in other subjects;
2. the developing of national assessment procedures at key stages of schooling, by which the learning progress of all students can be monitored in those basic subjects. (Ministry of Education, 1991, p. 1.)

What this policy announcement was signalling was:

a clear intention by the National government to play a directing and centralising role in curriculum reform;

a massive shift from a curriculum oriented to the needs of individual learners to a system describing student learning as measurable against pre-established “clear objective standards” and state-dictated educational priorities;

a reiteration of the notion that assessment is about measuring students against a set of external and predetermined measures of performance, with a concomitant shift away from programme assessment to the assessment of individual learners;

a belief that “continuity and progression” of learning can be neatly encapsulated in a series of “key stages” or levels of achievement, describable as a set of “clear learning outcomes”, which would allow for “sound assessment and monitoring to occur”. Such a belief was the basis for reforms which would redeem the educational system from its past failures by incorporating a transparent method of accountability. Measurement against clear learning outcomes would be the pathway towards establishing accountability in respect of individual students and ultimately individual schools and teachers.

Despite their own misgivings, the original English curriculum development team and the subsequent team that revised the 1993 draft in the light of submissions received, gave to English/literacy teachers in New Zealand a curriculum document – *English in the New Zealand Curriculum* – that complied with the parameters imposed by the Achievement Initiative.

The New Zealand English curriculum (henceforth abbreviated to *ENZC*) divided English into the three major strands of Oral, Written and Visual Language, with these being further divided into what the developers rather awkwardly denoted “function” sub-strands and “process” sub-strands. For example, in the “Written Language” strand, the “Reading Functions” were “Personal Reading” and “Close Reading” and the “Writing Functions” were “Expressive Writing”, “Poetic Writing” and “Transactional Writing” whereas the “Reading and Writing Processes” were listed as “Exploring Language”, “Critical Thinking” and “Processing Information”. (This three-way description of “Processes” was repeated for “Listening and Speaking” and “Viewing and Presenting”.)

The original developers struggled with the requirement that they produce learning outcomes for all strands and sub-strands at eight levels, but by the time the final document was released, learning outcomes at eight levels had been developed for all

"function" sub-strands and "achievement standards" at four levels for all "process" sub-strands. Outcomes-based assessment had arrived!

The document has been variously read. Brown (1998) read it as largely reflecting a "personal growth" model for English and literacy. Others (Peters and Marshall, 1996) argued that New Zealand's National Curriculum was a socio-cultural construction reflective of New Right presuppositions underlying what they term "enterprise culture and competition". Others, in particular Elley (1996), saw the model of progression implicit in the curriculum document as logically indefensible and theoretically flawed. For my own part, I read the document as a discursive mix, with strong suggestions of a personal growth model of English, yet underpinned, through its structure and through its intended use as an accountability device, by a discourse of economic rationalism (Locke, 2000).

Responses to the 1993 draft were generally positive, but included a consensus of disapproval in respect of the levels and some criticism of terminology – especially the use of the terms "expressive", "poetic" and "transactional" as written text categories (Duthie, 1994). My own study of secondary English teachers' response to the implementation of ENZC suggests that taken as a whole they can be seen as manifesting an intellectual resistance to major aspects of the curriculum and assessment reforms that have taken place in New Zealand since the early 1990s and which continue to frame classroom practice (Locke, 2001a).

In 2000, the Ministry of Education began its Curriculum Stocktake project, aimed not at rushing into "...revision of the curriculum, but to take stock of the last decade's developments and their implications for teaching and learning, and to consider what they indicate for future curriculum directions." The first meeting of educators with an interest in the Language and Languages essential learning area took place in September, 2001. It is still rather unclear what aspects of the curriculum are actually up for renegotiation (the levels? the number and nature of the strands? terminology?). What does seem clear is that a number of assessment initiatives currently being undertaken look likely to further reify the curriculum levels and that in the short to mid-term, ENZC is here to stay. (For a more detailed discussion, visit <http://www.soe.waikato.ac.nz/english/EnglishNZ/curric.html>.)

Like Allan Luke (2000-2001), I see the structure of the current national curriculum and its tendency to generate teacher compliance, and work standardisation and intensification as unlikely to equip the education system to deal with new, digitally based technologies of textuality and what he calls "the emergent demands of information/digital economies and cultures" (p. 134). In the New Zealand situation, a ministerial edict in the early 1990s resulted in the creation of a core, national curriculum subject called Technology. As I see it, such a move "constructed" technology out of the English curriculum, when it would have been better to have integrated it, perhaps in a strand called, say, "Understanding the technologies of text". Current surveys of English classrooms suggest that despite a reported increase in ICT access and use in New Zealand schools, there are relatively low levels of integration of ICTs in the classroom practices of English teachers, especially at secondary level (Halliday, 2001; Ham, 2001).

## **QUALIFICATIONS REFORM**

Prior to 1990, New Zealand fifth-formers (now year 11) sat a national examination known as School Certificate (a rough equivalent of the GCSE in England). For each subject they sat, they would gain a percentage mark. In some subjects there was an internally assessed component with some form of national moderation to ensure inter-school comparability. Sixth-formers (year 12) were assessed internally in a qualification known as Sixth-Form Certificate and were given a grade between 1 and 9 in each subject they sat with 1 being the highest. For moderation purposes, grade distributions were moderated by the sixth-form cohort's performance the previous year in School Certificate. Seventh-formers (year 13) sat a national examination called Bursary (rather like the NSW Higher School Certificate) for which they would obtain percentage marks in their subjects, with some subjects (not English) having an internal component.

Assessment debates in the 1980s tended to revolve around the respective virtues of norm versus criterion referencing and internal versus external assessment. In the late 1980s some subjects (including English) were involved in a trial of achievement-based assessment, a version of standards-based assessment.

In 1990, a sea-change occurred when the Education Amendment Act of 1990 provided the legislative basis for the creation of a new agency, the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA). This body was charged with developing a framework (to be called the National Qualifications Framework) for national qualifications in secondary schools and in post-school education and training.

As first set up, the Framework made standards-based assessment a fundamental feature, but it was standards-based assessment in a particular form, that is, "unit standards" (documents setting out the learning outcomes to be attained in a particular segment of a domain of knowledge) at eight levels. Unit standards in the New Zealand setting describe both outcomes which students need to perform in order to achieve credit on the National Qualifications Framework (e.g. English 8812 reads "produce transactional written text in simple forms") and the standard (in the performance criteria) of performance required to meet the outcome (NZQA, 1998, p. 1.5). The English unit standard 8812, for example, has four separate criteria expressed as competences: writing develops idea(s); ideas are logically sequenced and supported by relevant details and/or examples; conventions of chosen form are observed and appropriate to purpose; final product is crafted to publication standard.

English unit standards were based on the national curriculum document and reified its flaws as well as its virtues. But they did more than that. They repackaged the curriculum into little parcels (unit standards) and this package became a de facto curriculum. This new package, tied as it was to high stakes, national qualifications (and entry to tertiary institutions), became the point of curriculum reference. And it was a package with the potential to impact far more on the minutiae of classroom practice than the more generalised national English curriculum.

The intended curriculum is always about outcomes, of course. But as Eisner (2002) has pointed out, educational outcomes can be expressed as either behavioural, problem-solving or as expressive (p. 117). The outcomes associated with unit

standards were distinctly behavioural, predetermined, nationally prescribed, discrete and decontextualised.

In the mid to late-1990s, there was considerable debate about unit standards and a growing groundswell of opposition. Hall (1998) summarised what he saw as a widespread belief among educationists that the unit standard model was unsuited to school curriculum subjects. He identified these concerns as:

- The negative impact on course coherence of separating the specification of standards from curriculum development and course design;
- The failure to acknowledge openly the complex nature of most educational and vocational standards and the difficulty in specifying such standards in an easily interpreted form;
- The failure to recognise the impact of process on outcome and the implications of this for interpreting educational standards;
- The “neo-behaviourist” and reductionist nature of the unit standard model and its unsuitability to most general and professional educational contexts;
- The increasing emphasis on assessment rather than teaching and learning;
- The failure to include a focus on excellence;
- The failure to recognise the significance of content and context in assessment of student work and decisions on credit transfer and the recognition of prior learning (p. 34).

Hall also identified a number of administrative concerns, including teacher workload.

In response to widespread concerns with the shape of the National Qualifications Framework, opposition from schools and universities, and perceived shortcomings with unit standards, the Government released a Green Paper on national qualifications in June, 1997. On 5 November, 1998, the Minister of Education released a White Paper, *Achievement 2001*, which set forth a new template for secondary school qualifications, the National Certificate of Educational Achievement. The NCEA (as it is now called) was to be implemented for year 11 students in 2001, a date later changed to 2002.

In terms of the NCEA:

- "Canonical" subjects have had their content delineated by a range of "achievement standards" (between five and nine per subject). The traditional equation of a subject with a course has been rendered redundant in that the regime allows students to select some but not necessarily all achievement standards (or unit standards, which have been retained as optional assessment components) from a particular subject level in planning their programmes of study (NZQA, 2001);
- Achievement standards have been developed at three levels, corresponding roughly with year 11 (level 1), year 12 (level 2) and year 13 (level 3). Scholarship level 4 is currently a problematic area;
- Some achievement standards are assessed internally and some (at least 50%) externally;
- Students sitting achievement standards receive either credit at three different grades (achieved, merit or excellence) or no credit at all;

- Each achievement and unit standards has a credit weighting, with a notional year's work in a subject allowing for the possible achievement of 24 credits. Credits are accumulated over a range of subjects with a total of 80 credits (including 60 at the award level) required for a National Certificate to be awarded at a particular level;
- Mark percentages, where feasible, are to be calculated for individual subjects;
- Achievement standards are assessed according to a system of standards-based assessment, with each standard being divided into "elements" and "descriptors" for achieved, merit and excellence grades written for each element.

The NCEA as a qualifications framework has had virtually no trialling and has no parallel elsewhere in the world (Black, 2000). Serious questions in respect of the NCEA have been raised in relation to validity, reliability, moderation, the lack of uniformity in respect of retesting policy and workload. (See Qualifications reform: Unit standards, the English Study Design Project and the NCEA [<http://www.soe.waikato.ac.nz/english/EnglishNZ/quals.html>] for more detail on this critique and additional links.). In respect of English, I see the NCEA as raising a number of issues, some of which I discuss elsewhere in this article.

However, despite lukewarm support from the secondary teachers' union (Spence, 2001), unprecedented industrial agitation from teachers during 2001 and 2002 and deep disquiet in a number of quarters, the first phase of implementation at level 1 (year 11) is currently proceeding. Level 2 (Year 12) implementation is now optional for 2003.

## **ENGLISH LANGUAGE AS HEGEMONY**

In his article in this issue of *English Teaching: Practice and Critique*, Richard Andrews notes of the situation in England that even the latest version of the National Curriculum for English is not offering a curriculum in literature, but in English literature – or literature written in English.

This comment certainly resonates with the situation here in New Zealand. Although this country is sometimes characterised as a national of immigrants, its emergence as a linguistically diverse country is a relatively recent occurrence. In the past minority ethnic groups: Dalmatians, Chinese, Indians, Dutch, Bohemians, Poles and others were expected to assimilate. The sheer size of Pacific Island migrations (dating back to the 1950s) and more recent migrations from a number of Asian and other non-English speaking) countries has produced a kind of non-English speaking "critical mass" which means that English teachers can no longer ignore (should they want to) the diversity of cultural and linguistic backgrounds that characterises many New Zealand classrooms.

What English and other teachers are up against is a pervasive discourse of monolingualism which naturalises and abets the hegemony of English as a language. And, as in other countries, an aspect of this discourse is a belief in English as the language of material advancement and the language of high-level instruction.

Returning to Andrews' comment, an issue of particular concern to English teachers is (or should be) the coupling of literature with the national curriculum in English. While the coupling is anchored by subject English's history, it is hardly a logically necessary arrangement. Ironically enough, in the New Zealand setting, when the National Curriculum Framework (the blueprint for curriculum reform) was published in 1991, literature was linked with the Arts "area of learning" rather than with Language and Languages (where English was located). Subsequently, however, it became absorbed into the English curriculum. (Drama, Visual Arts, Dance and Music became disciplines within the Arts curriculum and Media Studies was orphaned.)

Before taking up my present position, I was HOD English at a large co-educational school in Auckland, 40% of whose students had English as an additional language. Many were Asian. I frequently taught NESB students at year 12 (where English was compulsory and internally assessed) who enjoyed the study of literature but were reluctant to continue literary study at year 13 when they knew they would be assessed in English language in an external examination.

As I see it, the simplest way of dealing with this inequitable situation is to align Literature with the Arts curriculum, thereby freeing it from the requirement that English language be either the language of instruction or the language of assessment. I don't for a minute think that such a solution would have the broad backing of English teachers. But given the emergence of Maori medium secondary schools and schooling (*kura kaupapa*) over the last decade, I believe the time is ripe for the development and trialling of a Comparative Literature study in secondary schools which would have literature as a cultural phenomenon as its object of study but would be non-specific in respect of the language of instruction, the language of the texts studied and the language of assessment.

The place and status of literature in the national curriculum is not the only manifestation of a naturalised English language hegemony, of course. There are other manifestations which should concern English/literacy teachers, not the least of which is the pervasive naturalisation of English as the language of the World Wide Web. It is not my intention to explore that issue in the context of this article. But I would relate it to the general point made earlier, that it can only be addressed in terms of a more general strategy of resisting on many fronts the discourse that naturalises English language dominance and devalues the maintenance and advancement of mother tongue usage.

## **THEORISING SUBJECT ENGLISH**

From my perspective, the theorisation of English is like a long conversation that I have found myself tuning in and out of, which has been enacted in a range of settings by a range of players. In attempting to read the New Zealand national English curriculum in terms of its discursive underpinnings, for example, I couched my discussion in terms of four contrasting emphases: cultural heritage, personal growth, textual and sub-textual skills and critical practice (Locke, 2000) while acknowledging other versions of "model" categorisation (e.g. Andrews, 1995; Morgan, 1997).

It is not my intention here to rehearse the various ways in which English as a subject has been theorised nor to appraise the strengths and weaknesses of various "models" of English. My concern is far more with the settings in which these acts of theorisation occur, the participants in the conversations (including the construction of "insiders" and "outsiders") and the development of what I will call "critical savvy". I define the latter as the capacity to identify the ways English as a subject is being constructed in "official" documentation and sanctioned practices, the ability to envision other constructions and the pragmatic skills required to act politically to create, even in a small-scale way, opportunities to teach English in ways that enhance professional identity. (I discuss the latter in the section, "Maintaining professionalism".)

Since 1990, the State has concentrated the power to theorise English in the various expert panels assigned the task of developing the national English curriculum, the unit standards matrix and the various English matrices associated with the National Certificate of Educational Achievement. Both the curriculum developers and the unit/achievement standard writers were circumscribed in their task by structural parameters that were predetermined by the State agenda. In respect of the national curriculum, these structural parameters included the eight levels, and the partitioning into strands and sub-strands. In respect of the National Qualifications Framework, they included the abandonment of the idea of a syllabus or standardised course, the "unitisation" of curriculum into discrete packages and a particular approach to assessment and moderation. To a large extent then, while various panel members, most of them practising English teachers, were participants in a process of theorising subject English, they were hardly equal partners (Bendall, 1994).

English teachers attending "professional development" days dedicated to reform implementation found themselves circumscribed in the questions they could ask. Fundamental why questions in respect of the reforms were out of court, whereas instrumentalist queries in respect of the how of implementation were permitted. It is no reflection on the consultative intentions of those teachers centrally involved in the various reform developments to suggest that the process relegated many of their colleagues to an "out" group status. I would argue that one of the casualties of the reform process in New Zealand has been the production of an "expert" group (often reform facilitators) in what Larsen (1990) calls a "core region", while other teachers experience themselves as marginalised.

Sentiments to this effect are reflected in the following statement from a secondary English teacher involved in a recent study:

I feel I am playing someone else's silly game in following the detail of the English Curriculum in this way. It doesn't allow me to use my own experience and judgement in the way I'd like to, keeping in my sights the value of the subject and the needs of the students before me. It undermines and frustrates me. If you are permitted to think for yourself you put more into the job because you take responsibility for what you do and work out a sense of conviction or rightness. If you are not allowed to use your own judgement you might as well be a computer. If I'm reduced to a cog in a machine, I don't feel like a human being who is growing, responding, serving needs as I see them, etc...I'm not interested in teaching English as this sort of person. It takes away your soul. I also don't believe that those in



positions of power in shaping the curriculum have necessarily any better judgement that I have, although I respect the work they do. Because teachers don't seek promotion/status/high profile...or whatever else attracts people to curriculum committees, it can't be assumed that they haven't ability and judgement (Locke, 2001a, p. 17).

With the state-funded "professional development" agenda yoked to reform implementation and teacher education institutions under pressure to adopt an instrumentalist approach in line with the reforms (Alcorn, 2001), the settings for professional conversations concerned with theorising subject English are diminished. And there are other factors that come in to play. These include the stance of the professional association NZATE in respect of the reforms; the role of publishers; the role of Ministry-funded websites charged with the provision of online teacher resources – and, of course, there is the wear and tear on the energy and morale of teachers through the work intensification associated with recent reforms.

'Tis a pity! English as a subject in New Zealand (and elsewhere) is under pressure to find spaces for conversations to occur that contest the current construction(s). My list of pressures would include English language hegemony, the transformation of textuality (texts and textual practice) under the pressure of ICTs, the commodification of knowledge, the threat to local communities by the forces of globalisation, the importance of developing critical approaches to textual practice and the insights about meaning-making being provided by cognitive neuroscience.

## FRAMING CURRICULUM

Any account of the development of the national English curriculum in New Zealand will indicate that a theory of subject English played a part in it. It is *what* theory and *how big a part* that are debatable. But a theory of subject English, as the developers discovered, maketh not a curriculum. What the curriculum developers ran smack up against was a State-ordained curriculum structure (levels and strands) and a curriculum purpose (teacher accountability and assessment at key stages) that, in the final analysis, had a bigger say in the construction of English via the intended curriculum than any theory of the subject. A few examples will suffice.

Prior to 1994, English teachers at junior secondary level worked with what was generally known as the *Statement of Aims* (Department of Education, 1983). Although the Statement was a syllabus, teachers were not told what texts to use with their students; nor were they given detailed programmes of work or assessment criteria. Rather they were given a set of broad objectives that an English programme should embody. There were no achievement objectives expressed as outcomes, there were no strands to partition objectives off from one another, and there were no levels offering models of student progression up strand-based ladders. The dismemberment (yes, it's an emotive term) of English into strands was accompanied by various terminological labellings: English objectives were described as either "functions" or "processes" while writing was categorised as "expressive", "poetic" or "transactional".

To the extent that the new English curriculum reflected a theorisation of subject English, it was more or less endorsed. It was the way its structural parameters affected the construction of English that met teacher resistance, as submissions on the 1993 draft clearly showed (Duthie, 1994). In the aftermath of its implementation, there is clear evidence that many teachers found the ways its structural parameters forced them to think about English unpalatable. By the same token, there is also evidence that new teachers are less critical of the curriculum and more managerial in their approach to its adoption (Locke, 2001a).

Perhaps inevitably, as the language related to these structural changes beds down and is reified, and as the "guild knowledge" associated with older teachers disappears (the profession is haemorrhaging at the moment), it is becoming natural (in the discursive sense) to think in ways encouraged by these structures. For instance, the partition of English into Oral, Written and Visual language has become a given and the artificiality of such an arrangement becomes invisible as do the possibilities for other structural arrangements (for example, Oral, Print and Digital language). When an eight-level "Close Reading" strand constructs literacy development as involving analysis and interpretation no earlier than level 6, it becomes natural to think of critical reading as beyond primary-age children. And so on.

The issue, then, is the way English becomes constructed *via* the structures built into a State-mandated and legally binding national curriculum and how these constructions become naturalised through a process of discursive colonisation.

The qualifications reforms have added another layer to this process. While debates concerning the theorisation of subject English are becoming increasingly attenuated, the development of unit standard and achievement standard matrices, the implementation of high stakes summative assessment regimes, and the fragmentation of English (and other "subfields") into discrete outcomes-based assessment units are all constituting a powerful centrifugal influence on the construction of the English curriculum (Locke, 2001b).

Of particularly powerful significance is the way in which the Ministry's NCEA discourse has actually abandoned the notion of "subject" altogether. The New Zealand Qualifications Authority's website lists the fields, sub-fields and domains of knowledge that any post-compulsory programme of study is to be described in terms of. There is no mention of subjects. This elaborate system of categorisation is itself a construction, of course. But crucial to debates about curriculum is the disappearance of the term "subject". Out in schools, students, teachers and parents still talk about subjects. But in doing so they are unaware that NCEA discourse has consigned the term to another age.

What is ultimately at stake here, I think, are what Lemke calls "learning paradigms". In a recent article (Lemke, 1998), he makes a distinction between what he calls the *curricular learning paradigm* which "...assumes that someone else will decide what you need to know and will arrange for you to learn it all in a fixed order and on a fixed schedule", and the *interactive learning paradigm* which "...assumes that people determine what they need to know based on their participation in activities in which such needs arise, and in consultation with knowledgeable specialists; that they

learn in the order that suits them, at a comfortable pace, and just in time to make use of what they learn" (pp. 293-4).

Lemke is arguing in the context of a discussion of the impact of ICTs on literacy learning and teaching, and he clearly leans towards the latter paradigm. It is easy to see how the "curricular learning paradigm" relates to traditional discourses of subjects and syllabuses – discourses which get a bad press from Lemke and which are certainly marginalised by the Ministry's rhetorical advocacy for the NCEA.

For myself, I can't be sanguine about the abandonment of "subject" (as constituted by a discipline and a body of integrated knowledge) and regular, coherent, nationally prescribed courses (syllabuses). While acknowledging that Lemke's distinction is useful one, I'm uncomfortable with the prospect of its becoming yet another polarising binary. That is, I don't believe that the two paradigms are mutually irreconcilable. Lemke's repeated use of the word "fixed" makes his definition of the curricular learning paradigm something of a straw man. I would argue that the curricular learning paradigm does not have to be rigid in the way he suggests. Nor does it necessarily leave no room for negotiation among its stakeholders, especially students.

Meanwhile, here in New Zealand, the documentation associated with the new qualifications structures not only permits the establishment of customised courses; it actively encourages it. The NCEA English panel itself makes the point that the achievement standard matrix doesn't lay down a compulsory course. Rather, it points out, "Some English teachers may like to develop a composite course from which students can be assessed for a range of achievement standards drawn from English, Media Studies and Drama" (Ministry of Education, 2000). A bullet-point in a Ministry overhead states that "In most conventional school subjects, a package of achievement standards describes criteria for assessing all of the commonly expected outcomes of the subject" (Ministry of Education, 2001).

On the face of it, such an arrangement appears to reflect the requirements of Lemke's interactive learning paradigm. Looked at positively, it appears to empower students and teachers to negotiate programmes of study commensurate with the needs and aspirations of students. The downside, however, is its potential to allow students to avoid more demanding achievement standards, or achievement standards that are assessed by external examination. Because the discrete achievement standards are linked to high-stakes summative assessment, a consumer-driven discourse of credentialism might tempt schools to encourage students to enter only for unit or achievement standards where they are more likely to succeed, not for the good of the student but for the reputation of the school as a quality provider.

Finally, as suggested above, the arrangement has the potential to undermine the concept of a subject as constituted by a discipline and a body of integrated knowledge underpinning a coherent and reasonably uniform programme of study. The Ministry's use of the term "package" is a discursive give-away portending the fragmentation of traditional subjects and their replacement by packages of market-oriented assessment units. Lemke himself associates the interactive learning paradigm with fast capitalism, though he doesn't see this as problematic. I'm arguing that an approach to curriculum based on unit and achievement standards is indeed an

example of the interactive learning paradigm, but that the example shows that such a paradigm is not necessarily as liberating (from external control) as Lemke suggests.

## **CLASSROOM PRACTICE**

There are many ways in which constructions of curriculum contingent upon State-mandated documents and "professional" development programmes impact on the minutiae of classroom practice. The same goes for centrally imposed assessment regimes, whether they are tied to national qualifications or not (Locke, 2001b). The issue here is not the usual "how to" of classroom practice which one meets at countless English teachers' conferences in countless locations where a presenter offers, say, a new way of making Shakespeare palatable. The issue I'm raising is rather the critical one of being aware of what it is that is impacting, in subtle ways, on the way we do things in classrooms. I'll give two examples.

The first is really an anecdote. Recently, I was doing an observation (famously called a "crit" in New Zealand) of a pre-service teacher doing a lesson with a junior English class. My eye was drawn to a recent "English" textbook, which promised students mastery of all nine level 1 achievement standards in 24 hour-long, easy-to-follow lessons. The book had lots of write-on space in it – an indication of the publisher's hope that a new copy would be bought once a user had written on it. As is typical of such a textbook, it was providing students with a way of "doing" English. This particular version of the doing suggested a view of English as a succession of discrete competencies that could be knocked off (to steal an expression from the New Zealand icon, Sir Edmund Hillary) one by one. And over a period totalling just 24 hours!

My second example relates to the centrality of nationally prescribed, pre-determined achievement objectives as a feature of 90s curriculum reform. Open *English in the New Zealand Curriculum* on page 23, and you'll find "An Approach to Planning" presented as a continuous, circular diagram with stages such as "Identify students' needs", (followed by) "Identify achievement objectives from the most relevant strand or strands" and (later) "Monitor students' achievements against the objectives". What's becoming discursively naturalised here is a particular version of preparation. How one identifies students' needs is not really spelled out, but because the diagram is circular, the suggestion is that "needs" are to be identified in terms of a previous act of assessment against the curriculum. Certainly, once these needs have been identified, the teacher is referred immediately to the curriculum document as the desirable locus for discovering appropriate learning outcomes. In such a circular arrangement, learning has become totally curriculum referenced. With dependency on its authority encouraged, why should teachers look beyond the curriculum for answers to questions related to their students' learning needs?

Furthermore, the planning wheel offers a particular model for unit and lesson preparation which has also become naturalised. It is a model which privileges what Eisner (2002) terms behavioural objectives. My own teacher education institution will not be unique in offering to its students lesson plan templates that require them, lesson after lesson, to identify "specific learning outcomes" (these must be measurable!) and to relate these to the curriculum's achievement objectives. Such SLOs, Eisner suggests, "are offered as though one were not really professionally

competent without a list of objectives that one could pull out for each set of curriculum activities formulated" (p. 113). What becomes marginalised are alternative ways of thinking about educational outcomes, as per Eisner's "problem-solving" objectives. Or his notion of "expressive" outcomes which he describes as what one ends up with, intended or not, after some form of engagement (p. 119). What also becomes marginalised are other ways of planning – for example, planning that revolves around the provision of rich, open-ended experiences. (Such planning connects with what New Zealand educators have traditionally called "language experience" [Smith & Elley, 1994].)

## **MAINTAINING PROFESSIONALISM**

The need to reflect on what it means to be a professional is an issue facing all teachers in New Zealand. The climate is all the more challenging, I would argue, because ironically a rhetoric of professionalism has become extremely widespread in association with the Government's reform agenda. I am inclined to agree with commentators such as Susan Robertson (1996) who are apt to view the "new professionalism" associated with highly centralised reforms as in fact a myth of professionalism which hides the extent to which teachers have become controlled through the technical and physical structure of the labour process of their work.

The rhetoric of the "new professionalism" is a powerful and pervasive one. Like the revisionism associated with the "socialist realism" of the Soviet era, it works to rewrite the past, in this instance by negatively constructing past practices as too loose, too individualistic, insufficiently learner-centred, insufficiently accountable and so on, and so on. It is all too easy for teachers to be seduced by the rhetoric even to the point of dissociating themselves (through confession) from their past "selves".

In conclusion, I believe are a number of challenges facing "The Little Company", if I might borrow Brenton Doecke's metaphor from his article in this inaugural issue of *English Teaching: Practice and Critique*. One, I think, is to feel that it is actually OK to subscribe to an idealist notion of professionalism as involving expert knowledge, autonomy and altruism while at the same time acknowledging the ways in which all of these terms can be contested (as can the concept of professionalism itself). The second, dare I say it, is the challenge of developing an attitude of humility in respect of the beliefs, passions and practices of our English teaching forerunners. Everything is new under the sun and nothing is new under the sun, but you wouldn't pick that from databases which consign anything written prior to 1990 to the valley of shadow.

The third challenge, discussed elsewhere in this article, is to develop a critical savvy to guide one's pursuit of professionally expert knowledge and autonomy. The fourth is to develop networks of association that provide opportunities for rich professional conversations to take place about our roles as English/literacy teachers right now in a continuing tradition that happens to be passing through 2002 on its way to a place we can affect. This particular challenge extends to scrutinising the roles being played by subject English associations and the conferences they stage.

Finally, there is a challenge to foster text-based forums where these conversations can be enacted, however temporarily. To this particular challenge, Critical English Online and English Teaching: Practice and Critique are but one response.

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- the students' language and personal experiences are the starting point for teaching
  - language develops naturally and progressively
  - literature and language are inseparable
  - modes of language use are integrated and
  - language is treated as a whole (p. 65)
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