

TALKING ACROSS THE DIVIDE: ENGLISH TEACHERS RESPOND TO THE NCEA¹

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ABSTRACT: *The implementation of the National Certificate of Educational Achievement as a single, senior secondary school qualification in New Zealand has been a fraught process marked by a good deal of acrimonious debate. This article reports on a research project that brought together two groups of secondary English teachers, one self-described as in favour of the NCEA and one as opposed to it. Both groups were invited to describe aspects of their practice, share their views on aspects of the NCEA and engage in a focus group where they explored these views with other teachers. Certain predictable trends were found in the responses of both groups but there was also an interesting degree of convergence. On the basis of this convergence, a possible way forward for reform of the NCEA is suggested.*

KEYWORDS

English, Assessment reform, Qualifications, NCEA

INTRODUCTION

Since 2002, New Zealand secondary school teachers have been implementing a radically innovative senior school qualifications regime, the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA). In terms of this regime:

- Canonical subjects from Year 11 to Year 13 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 was rendered redundant since the new system allowed students to select some but not necessarily all achievement standards (or unit standards)² from a particular subject level in planning their programmes of study (NZQA, 2001).
- Achievement standards were developed at three levels, corresponding roughly with Year 11 (Level 1), Year 12 (Level 2) and Year 13 (Level 3). A scholarship level (Level 4) was also developed to extend Year 13 students.
- 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.
- Each achievement standard 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.

- Grade point averages are calculated for each subject.³
- Achievement standards are assessed according to a particular type of standards-based assessment, with each standard being divided into 'elements', and 'descriptors' for Credit, Merit and Excellence grades written for each element.

As a qualifications system, the NCEA had virtually no trialling and has no parallel elsewhere in the world (Black, 2000; Irwin, 1999). Up until recently, the academic literature in respect of the NCEA has been predictive; that is, it has attempted to predict the impact of the regime on aspects of practice. In respect of assessment, for example, serious questions have been raised in relation to validity, reliability, moderation, the lack of uniformity in respect of re-testing policy and manageability (Black, 2000; Elley, 2000; Hall, 2000; Irwin, 2000; Locke, 1999, 2000). Others have attempted to predict ways in which the regime might potentially impact on the specifics of classroom practice (Locke, 2001).

Recently, predictions about inherent reliability problems with the NCEA appear to have been borne out. Discrepancies in numbers of Scholarship awards among subjects after the 2004 examinations precipitated the appointment of a special committee to review procedures and suggest recommendations (since implemented) together with a State Services Commission (SSC) inquiry to investigate reasons for the 'botch-up'. The Scholarship debacle threw a more general spotlight on the NCEA, including issues of reliability, and led to a second SSC inquiry into the conduct of the NZQA in implementing qualifications reform to date. In their submission to both inquiries, Elley, Hall and Marsh (2005) drew attention to evidence for NCEA variability (unreliability) in respect of the 2004 Scholarship examination, Level 1 results for 2003 and 2004, the percentage of students gaining excellence and the contrast between internally- and externally-assessed standards.⁴

More recently, also, a literature has begun to emerge which addresses teachers' responses to the actual process of implementation. An Education Review Office (ERO) report (Education Review Office, 2004), based on an evaluation of 25 schools, suggested that teaching practice was *not* being radically transformed, that continuous assessment was finding favour with students, that students liked having all of their learning recognized (via credits) but that there were potential issues of curriculum coverage.

At the time of writing, the New Zealand Council for Educational Research (NZCER) has published two of three reports based on a three-year, longitudinal study into the impact of the NCEA, drawing findings from a case study into a range of six schools (Hipkins & Vaughan, 2002; Hipkins, Vaughan, Beals & Ferral, 2004). The first report (Hipkins & Vaughan, 2002) raised issues of moderation, reliability, reporting and workload. However, it tended to endorse the NCEA's ability to provide flexibility in course design and an increased range of courses, and suggested that this increased flexibility was serving the learning needs of students, a

finding supported by the second report (Hipkins et al., 2004), especially in respect of low- or under-achieving students. The later report expressed concerns about motivation in respect of high-achieving students, inconsistencies between standards in terms of student workload, and ways in which the freedom to pick and mix and the degree of focus on summative assessment were affecting student choice and motivation.

Most recently, the Post-Primary Teachers Association (PPTA) has released its report *Teachers talk about NCEA* (Alison, 2005), based on focus groups involving 105 teachers from nine secondary schools. The report raised a number of issues arising from teachers' sense of their teaching having become "assessment driven" (Alison, 2005, p. 9). These include coverage and coherence (derived from NCEA's 'pick and mix' facility), motivation (with the NCEA seen as having features which can both motivate and de-motivate), comparability between unit and achievement standards, manageability, reliability, moderation, inconsistencies in resubmission practices and resourcing. Having said this, teachers also offered a view that the NCEA was offering better information on student performance, was a more valid assessment system and was offering a better range of qualifications pathways for students.

My focus in this article is the response of secondary teachers of English to the NCEA. While English teachers have undoubtedly contributed their views to some of the studies reported above, I am unaware of research that has made their responses central to the project. A partial exception to this is Helen O'Neill's doctoral research (O'Neill, 2005) on the current status of poetry in the secondary English curriculum, which appears to suggest that assessment-driven changes in English-teaching practice are contributing to a demise in poetry since there are easier routes (than poetry) available for students to gain credits for Understanding Unfamiliar Texts achievement standards (p. 20).

THE RESEARCH DESIGN

The research on which I am reporting was undertaken at a time when the NCEA had yet again become media fodder in the aftermath of failings in the 2004 Scholarship examination. However, the Scholarship controversy was just one in a long line of periodic media eruptions, where NCEA advocates and opponents squared off against one another in ways which often served to entrench people in opposing camps. Demonisation (e.g., of norm-referenced or standards-based assessment) and personal vilification frequently replaced listening and dialogue.

As a teacher educator, I was caught up in all of this. Indeed, I had made my own concerns about the NCEA public in a range of articles (Locke, 1999, 2001, 2004) and had coordinated a project which developed a senior, secondary school English qualification which, while operating under the NCEA umbrella, differed markedly from what I termed "achievement-standard English" (Locke, 2002, p. 72). I would like to be able to confirm that my stance on the NCEA did not affect my relationship with colleagues who supported the system. Unfortunately, it did. I found myself positioned as an outsider in relation to a subject to which I had

devoted most of my working life, with my capability to prepare English teachers for the new environment called into question by some.

All of this had a bearing on the research design which I now describe. In broad terms, the project was concerned to investigate the responses of two groups of secondary English teachers to the NCEA-oriented English programmes they had been implementing at three levels since the beginning of 2002. I planned to use two groups of teachers, one broadly supportive of the NCEA and the other broadly unhappy with the NCEA. The aim of the project was to find out, in terms of a number of aspects (see below), what these teachers considered to be working well under the NCEA and what they considered to be not working well.

The approach to obtaining these two groups of teachers was a form of *purposive* sampling, which is a type of non-probability sampling; that is, the participants were chosen because of specific qualities they brought to the study (Lankshear & Knobel, 2004). Within this approach, the particular procedure adopted might be described as *snowball sampling* (Trochim, 2004). Specifically, I approached English subject advisors in Auckland and Hamilton asking them to recommend the names of teachers who fitted the categories mentioned. Teachers thus recommended were asked to furnish further names, and so on. The aim was to generate two groups of approximately 10-12 teachers representing, for each group, about six schools.

Obtaining a group of English teachers describing themselves as broadly supportive of the NCEA was not plain sailing, not because such teachers are few in number (they are not) but because the polarization of teachers into opposing camps had produced an atmosphere of distrust. Eventually, one Head of Department (HOD) English fronted up to me bluntly with the challenge: "Why should I trust you?" Another HOD remarked: "I feel that involving myself in this project means that I am on a hiding to nothing." I was grateful for their frankness and, after explaining the ethical constraints I had undertaken to work within and emphasizing my genuine desire to learn from what they had to say, they agreed to participate in the group of NCEA 'proponents'. In fact, I ended up with more offers to participate than I was able to use. The proponents group numbered 10 and was drawn from five schools, including integrated and state, single-sex and co-educational. Seventy percent taught NCEA English at Level 1, 100 percent at Level 2 and 60 percent at Level 3.

Obtaining a group of 'opponents' was easier. This group numbered 11 and was drawn from eight schools, including private and state, single-sex and co-educational. Seventy-three percent taught NCEA English at Level 1, 73 percent at Level 2 and 45 percent at Level 3.

Participants were involved in two procedures:

1. *The completion of two questionnaires.* The first of these sought *descriptive* information pertinent to a range of classroom practices and procedures and was completed by participants prior to the focus group (see 2 below). The second was completed after the focus group discussion and invited teachers to express their agreement or disagreement on a 10-point scale with a number of

statements related to teaching and assessment, and also structural features of the NCEA, on a 10-point scale.

2. *Participation in a focus group.* The focus groups sought teacher opinion on a range of aspects of the NCEA-oriented classroom programmes they were implementing. These aspects included moderation procedures, resubmission practices, planning and programming, pedagogical practices, workload, authenticity provisions, student response to NCEA's 'pick and mix' potential, and procedures for allocating students to courses.

The focus groups took place at two out-of-school venues in Hamilton and Auckland in April and May, 2005. Teachers were assured that their views would be confidential and their anonymity respected. In addition, they were asked to represent their *own* views and not those of their respective schools.

The research design was set up to enable me to canvass the views of teachers who might superficially be reckoned as occupying opposed positions. By so doing, areas of accord might be identified in respect of an issue around which the expression of opinion had been characterized by discord. Even better, a degree of accord might offer the basis for the emergence of a qualifications design template, in accordance with which the NCEA in its current form might be reformed or supplanted. That was the hope!

A RANGE OF PRACTICES

Subject English has always been characterized by a range of practices amongst its practitioners. There has never been a single "literacy" or essence of English and that, I have argued, is one of its strengths (Locke, 2003). As the initial questionnaire⁵ revealed, there was a high degree of diversity among the 21 teachers across a range of practices related to aspects of NCEA implementation. I describe this diversity here and reserve comment until later in this article.

Programme Integration

At the beginning of 2005, English departments had available to them nine achievement standards (AS) and 18 unit standards (US) at Level 1; eight AS and 16 US at Level 2; and seven AS and seven US at Level 3 from which they could fashion courses of work. In addition, they had the freedom to incorporate standards from related subjects, (e.g., Drama and Media Studies) into courses at particular levels. With the development of unit standards, units of work with exemplars were also developed, many of which integrated more than one standard. National tasks have also been developed for achievement standards, but are *not* integrative; that is, they are focused on a single achievement standard.

Participants in both groups (termed 'proponents' and 'opponents') were asked about the degree of integration among standards in their classroom programmes. The vast majority of English teachers plan their year programmes in terms of units of work (or modules). I was interested to find out the extent to which teachers in both groups integrated the achievement or unit standards that their students were assessed against in the various modules that made up their courses (see Table 1).

It needs to be emphasized that this is a small, non-random but arguably representative group of teachers. For these two groups, proponents tended to integrate assessment standards more than opponents (38% compared with 19% at Level 1; 50.7% compared with 41% at Level 2). Both groups indicated a large range of practices in respect of integration, with some teachers in both groups who did not integrate at all, and some who integrated standards in most of their units of work. Teachers in both groups tended to integrate more at Level 2 than Level 1.

Table 1. Patterns of Programme Integration (P = proponents; O = opponents).

	Level 1		Level 2	
	P	O	P	O
Mean number of standards used to assess students	10.43	8.60	7.20	8.60
Mean number of modules per course	8.71	8.60	7.30	7.00
Range of integrated modules as a percentage of modules in course	0 – 100%	0 – 60%	0 – 100%	0 – 80%
Mean percentage of integrated modules	38%	19%	50.7%	41%

Creative Writing: Resubmissions, Range and Class Time for Creative Writing

Under the NCEA, ‘creative writing’ achievement standards at Levels 1 and 2 are assessed internally. (‘Formal writing’ achievement standards are assessed externally under examination conditions at Level 1 and internally at Level 2.) I was interested in ascertaining the range of practices in respect of creative writing, for what these might indicate about pedagogy and their bearing on issues of reliability (see Table 2). (Are we *reliably* distinguishing between the levels of performance of different students in relationship to a standard when the conditions under which they *try for* these standards differ markedly between different schools?)

Table 2. Creative Writing: Resubmissions, Range and Class Time for Processing Writing (P = proponents; O = opponents)

	Levels 1 and 2			
	P		O	
	Range	Mean	Range	Mean
Number of modules incorporating creative writing	1 – 4	1.7	1 – 6	2.4
Number of opportunities for resubmission per module	0 – 3	1.4	0 – 3	0.75
Time allowance per module for processing writing in class time (minutes)	40 – 1020 mins	246 mins	160 – 360 mins	264 mins
Number of creative writing text-types addressed in the year’s programme	1 – 3	1.65	1 – 6	2.6

In respect of Table 2, it should be noted that the largest number (1020 minutes) came from a Level 2 course in one school; one might speculate that it related to the need to push struggling students to achieve literacy credits for university entrance purposes. Half of the proponents viewed their students as tending to focus on one text-type and work on it until they had achieved, while half indicated that their students worked on a range of text-types in the course of the year (portfolio-like), submitting their best piece for summative assessment. In comparison, the vast majority of opponents (90%) suggested that their students tended to focus on one text-type and work on it until they had achieved, whereas only 10 percent indicated that their students worked on a range of text-types over the course of the year and submitted their best piece for summative assessment.

Both groups, again, indicated a wide range of practices in terms of opportunities for creative writing, resubmission, amount of class time and genre range. On average, students of opponents had half the number of opportunities for resubmission. (One opponent commented that there was a school policy in place, which did not allow resubmissions.) Curiously, opponents' students tended to engage with a greater range of text-types. However, 90 percent of these teachers viewed their students as focusing on only one text-type until they mastered it, whereas 50 percent of proponents appeared to see themselves as adopting a portfolio approach to the teaching of creative writing.

National Tasks and Exemplars

Before the advent of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) and the development of unit standards, teachers tended to produce their own units of work with more or less assistance from departmental resource banks and textbooks. In order to gauge the level of leniency or severity in their marking, they could refer to School Certificate or Bursary examiners' reports or purchase text books which contained model examination answers.

The development of national tasks coupled with exemplars was arguably the central feature and focus of the NCEA implementation process. In the succession of 'Jumbo Days', which provided the platform for what was misnamed 'professional development', study of task-related exemplars dominated the agenda. The tasks themselves were units of work designed to guide students towards the successful completion of a single achievement standard. Accompanying them were exemplars of students work graded as Not Achieved, Achieved, Merit and Excellence.

Teachers in both groups were asked about the extent to which they planned units of work themselves as compared with depending on national tasks and basing their English programmes around these. The figures listed in Table 3 have to be seen against a picture that is complicated by the fact that many teachers use units of work that are collectively developed at departmental or syndicate level and, furthermore, that many teachers see themselves as taking individual "ownership" of national tasks by modifying them to their own purposes. (One needs to note that the exemplars themselves can be used in the context of a self-developed task or unit of work.)

Table 3. Use of National Tasks and Exemplars (P = proponents; O = opponents).

	Level 1				Level 2			
	P		O		P		O	
	Range %	Mean %	Range %	Mean %	Range %	Mean %	Range %	Mean %
Number of modules as percentage of total number in programme described as “self-developed”	0–100	14	0 – 60	23	0–100	29	0 – 60	29
Number of modules as percentage of total number in programme based on national exemplars	14–100	62	10–100	41	0–100	62	8–100	50

In respect of the data shown in Table 3, it might be noted that four out of the six proponents who answered this question for Level 1 taught no units entirely self-developed. Of NCEA opponents for Level 1, three out of seven teachers taught no self-developed units. At Level 2, six proponents out of 10 taught no units entirely self-developed, whereas among opponents, two out of eight teachers who responded to this question did not teach any self-developed units.

Again, these figures suggest a huge range of planning practices. For both groups at both Levels 1 and 2 there appear to be more national task-based than self-developed units being taught. The figures raise the possibility that more self-developed units are being used at Level 2 than Level 1 but that there is little difference in national task dependency between the two levels.

Moderation

Issues of moderation are not new to English teachers, especially those who would have engaged in inter-class moderation in relation to the old Sixth-Form Certificate and internally assessed School Certificate qualifications. The initial questionnaire had two questions aimed at getting a picture of the range of moderation practices characterizing the work of teachers delivering English under the NCEA regime.

With a focus on the internally assessed “creative writing” achievement standards (1.1 and 2.1), teachers were asked to provide detail about the numbers of pieces of work internally moderated or checked (i.e., at school level via assurance audit) per class, the number externally moderated and to estimate the percentage of samples of creative writing at either level sent from the school for external moderation purposes in 2004 (see Table 4).

Table 4. Moderation Practices (P = proponents; O = opponents).

	Levels 1 and 2			
	P		O	
	Range %	Mean %	Range %	Mean %
Percentage of pieces of work internally moderated (i.e., at school level)	11–100	35	9–100	39
Percentage of school writing samples externally moderated	0–100	3	0–62	12

It should be noted that figures for the proponents group are based on the responses of eight teachers, one of whom did not know what percentage of school writing samples were externally moderated. Five out of these eight proponents reported zero external moderation for creative writing. The opponents group responses numbered 10. It might be noted that the large figure of 62 percent pertained to a small, sole-charge English department. Twenty percent of opponents reported zero external moderation.

The figures indicate very little difference between the two groups in terms of patterns of moderation, internal and external. In both groups there were huge differences between numbers of pieces of work moderated, both internally and externally. A large minority of teachers reported that, for creative writing, external moderation was not happening.

HOW ENGLISH TEACHERS VIEW THE NCEA – ON THE FACE OF IT

So far in this article, I have reported on findings that suggest that in respect of a variety of aspects of English teaching there is a huge range in practice which does not particularly correspond with teachers' positions on the NCEA. After the focus group discussion (see next section), teachers were asked to complete a questionnaire which asked them to indicate, on a 10-point scale, their degree of agreement or disagreement with nine statements:

1. My classroom practice has improved under the NCEA.
2. My planning has improved under the NCEA.
3. My assessment practice has improved under the NCEA.
4. Moderation practices are fair and consistent under the NCEA.
5. Resubmissions are a helpful feature of the NCEA.
6. The NCEA authenticity requirements have improved classroom practice in respect of writing.
7. Enabling students to “pick and mix” discrete standards (to make up a required 80 for an NCEA) is a good thing.
8. A school's ability under the NCEA to offer flexibly packaged courses advantages students.

9. The NCEA imposes an “acceptable” professional workload.

As one might expect, this rather crude measure suggests a much greater level of support for the NCEA from the proponents group. The data also suggests that the opponents are *more* opposed than the proponents are *for* the NCEA.

Table 5 summarises salient data from the post-focus group questionnaire. The 10-point scale has been conflated, with responses of 0-1 becoming strong disagreement; 2-3, agreement; 4-6, fairly neutral; 7-8, agreement; and 9-10 strong agreement. Response numbers are expressed as percentages, remembering that there were slightly more teachers in the opponents group than the proponents group.⁶

Table 5. Responses to Key Statements Expressed as Percentages (P = proponents; O = opponents; T = Total teachers across both groups).

State- ment	Strong disagreement (%)			Disagreement (%)			Fairly neutral (%)			Agreement (%)			Strong agreement (%)		
	P	O	T	P	O	T	P	O	T	P	O	T	P	O	T
1	-	27.5	14	-	54.5	29	50	54.5	33	50	-	24	-	-	-
2	-	9	5	-	45.5	24	30	45.5	38	50	-	24	20	-	10
3	-	36	19	-	27.5	14	20	27.5	24	50	9	29	30	-	14
4	10	54.5	33	40	45.5	43	50	45.5	24	-	-	-	-	-	-
5	-	27.5	14	10	45.5	29	20	45.5	19	30	-	14	40	9	24
6	-	54.5	29	10	9	10	50	9	43	40	-	19	-	-	-
7	-	45.5	25	12.5	36.5	25	62.5	18	35	-	-	-	25	-	10
8	-	9	5	-	27.5	15	25	36.5	30	37.5	18	25	37.5	9	20
9	12.5	45.5	30	25	36.5	30	25	9	15	25	9	15	12.5	-	5

These data would appear to suggest the following:

1. *Classroom practice*: Half the teachers describing themselves as proponents agreed (but none strongly) that their classroom practice had improved under the NCEA. Half were neutral on the matter. No opponents agreed that their classroom practice had improved. Eighty-two percent believed that their teaching had not improved, with around 27 percent believing this strongly.
2. *Planning*: Seventy percent of proponents agreed that their planning had improved under the NCEA (20% strongly) with none feeling that it had not improved. Just over half of opponents disagreed, suggesting that their planning had not improved. However, only 9 percent felt this strongly. No opponents agreed that their planning had improved.
3. *Assessment practice*: A massive 80 percent of NCEA proponents felt that their assessment practice had improved (30% strongly) with none suggesting it had not. Just over 63 percent of NCEA opponents would have disagreed with them, 36 percent strongly. One opponent (9%), however, thought that his/her assessment practice *had* improved.

4. *Moderation:* Half of the teachers supportive of the NCEA believed (10% strongly) that moderation practices under the NCEA were not fair and consistent, with the remainder being neutral on this issue. In respect of NCEA opponents, *all* teachers disagreed that moderation practices were fair and consistent, with around 55 percent holding this view strongly.
5. *Resubmissions:* Seventy percent of proponents agreed (40% strongly) that resubmissions were a helpful feature of the NCEA. One proponent (10%) disagreed, but not strongly. Virtually the same proportion of opponents (73%) thought that resubmissions were an *unhelpful* feature (around 27% strongly). However, one opponent (9%) believed strongly that resubmissions were a helpful feature.
6. *Authenticity requirements:* The authenticity provisions that pertain to the production of writing in English classrooms under the NCEA received a mixed response from NCEA proponents. Of the 40 percent who agreed that these provisions had improved classroom practice, none were strongly attached to their position. Fifty percent were fairly neutral on the issue and one (10%) disagreed that these requirements had improved classroom practice. Around 64 percent of opponents (around 54% strongly) disagreed that these requirements were an improvement and none at all thought that they were.
7. *The 'pick and mix' feature of the NCEA:* Twenty-five percent of NCEA proponents endorsed the way NCEA allowed students to 'pick and mix' discrete standards, all strongly. Around 62 percent were neutral on this issue, with one choosing not to think that this feature is a good thing. In contrast, no opponents supported the 'pick and mix' aspect of the NCEA, with 82 percent (around 46% strongly) suggesting that it was not a good thing.
8. *Flexibly packaged courses:* Seventy-five percent of proponents thought that a school's ability to offer flexibly packaged courses to students advantaged them. None saw it as a distinct disadvantage. Of NCEA opponents, there was something of a balance in terms of teacher response to this statement. A little over 36 percent did not think the ability to package courses flexibly advantaged students with 9 percent holding this view strongly. Twenty-seven percent thought that this arrangement *did* advantage students, 9 percent feeling this strongly.
9. *Professional workload:* At minority of NCEA proponents (around 37%) saw the NCEA as imposing an 'acceptable' professional workload on teachers, with an equal number viewing the workload as unacceptable. Similar proportions (12.5%) held their views strongly. Of NCEA opponents, a mere 9 percent felt (but not strongly) that NCEA imposed an acceptable workload. Eighty-two percent of opponents felt the workload was unacceptable, around 46 percent strongly.

Despite the relatively small number of teachers in each group, there are some noteworthy trends here. On the face of it, the two groups are in stark contrast in respect of planning and classroom practice, with proponents endorsing the impact

of the NCEA (especially in respect of planning) and opponents being dismissive (especially in respect of classroom practice). In respect of assessment, proponents were more strongly supportive of NCEA practice than opponents were condemnatory. However, in respect of moderation, no teachers in either ‘camp’ viewed NCEA practices as fair and consistent.

In respect of the resubmission provision for ‘creative writing’ (as an example), teachers with opposing stances fell fairly neatly into opposing views, with one teacher in each group ‘crossing the floor’ and voting against their party. However, also in relation to creative writing, the authenticity provisions had only moderate support from a largish minority of proponents but were roundly condemned by opponents.

Statements 7 and 8 related to structural features of the NCEA. The ‘pick and mix’ feature had only minority (but strong) support from opponents with most being neutral or opposed, whereas opponents were almost universally condemnatory. NCEA opponents, however, were fairly divided in respect of the ability of schools to offer flexibly packaged courses, a feature overwhelmingly supported by proponents. Finally, in respect of workload, as many proponents felt workload to be acceptable as unacceptable, whereas a huge majority of opponents viewed it as unacceptable.

CONSTRUCTING DIALOGUE

As mentioned previously, the last section reports on an analysis of a questionnaire completed by participating teachers *after* a focus group discussion where groups of proponents and opponents, meeting separately, discussed and recorded in small clusters of two to four, their views on eight themes: pedagogy, planning, assessment, resubmission, authenticity, stand-alone standards, course flexibility and workload. For each theme, participants were asked to identify negatives and positives.

As one might expect of English teachers, cluster group discussions were animated and vigorous with the researcher playing no part (other than providing refreshments). Afterwards, however, he produced a report collating the comments of each group theme by theme. The reports were subsequently distributed to participants for confirmation that they were indeed a fair and accurate reflection of their views and have since been posted on the WWW.⁷

Readers of this article are referred to these reports as data. What I want to do here is interpret them as an imagined dialogue between two English teachers, Pauline (who is pro-NCEA) and Oscar (who is opposed). The dialogue takes place on a Friday night at a bar with the unlikely name of Hades. Words in italics were actually used by one of the cluster groups in their minutes. Pauline’s italics are drawn from the proponents’ report. A similar convention operates for Oscar. Figures in the right-hand column indicate the numbers agreeing to a particular statement in either group. My aim in this fictional enterprise is to test the possibility of a common ground emerging that teachers from both sides of the NCEA divide might just feel comfortable standing on. Here goes.

The Hades bar is dimly lit but there is a convivial atmosphere.		
O.	Hey, Pauline, I thought you had moderation meetings on Friday night.	
P.	Give me a break, I do still have a life, Oscar. If you want to do me a favour, get me one of those NZQA cocktails, please.	
O.	[Returns with a cocktail for her and a Tui for himself.] Yeah, right!	
P.	Well, I know you're pretty anti, but I think I'm teaching better these days. I used to get away with murder. Now, there's much more <i>focus and structure in my assignments</i> and, with <i>specific criteria</i> , my <i>formative feedback</i> and <i>feed forward</i> to students is <i>more focused</i> . I can <i>target areas where students need help</i> , especially with the <i>internal writing standards</i> .	P10 P3 P4
O.	I think you've got a point with <i>creative writing</i> . I'd have to concede that <i>discussion of criteria and focus on meaning and expectations</i> have <i>increased</i> . You'd have to say that students are <i>more focused on following instructions and addressing the demands of the task</i> .	O3 O4 O3
P.	And exemplars...	P3
O.	Agree, we're using them in a <i>more focused way</i> and getting students to <i>dissect</i> them as <i>models of good writing</i> so that they can <i>apply the skills in their own writing</i> . But, you know, there's a down side to this.	O2
P.	Do tell.	
O.	Well, I'm not really a great fan of slavish <i>imitation</i> , especially with <i>creative writing</i> . I see quite a lot of mechanistic teaching, drilling to the exemplar.	O3
P.	Mmmm...yes, I think there is sometimes <i>too much focus on technical aspects at the expense of ideas</i> . Is that the fault of NCEA?	P4
O.	Bloody oath it is! All these wonderful <i>improvements</i> you talk about <i>could be implemented under any system, not just NCEA</i> . You'd have to say that those <i>NZQA units of teaching and learning have dominated</i> , haven't they, <i>not local preparation</i> .	O2 O4
P.	Well, they don't have to! It's <i>useful</i> having national common tasks and planning is certainly helped by having those <i>TKI teaching units for internal standards</i> .	P4 P3
O.	Well, yes, <i>ready-made resources</i> are handy. But <i>notional national units?</i> <i>Ugh!</i>	O4
P.	I reckon things are changing. Look, do you want to go back to the bad old days of School Cert and Bursary?	
O.	No I don't. I think the NCEA's got its heart in the right place. Kids can get <i>credit for achievement, even if little and low</i> . Certainly <i>eight credits</i> is better than 20 percent. We've moved away from <i>ranking</i> and at least we're trying to <i>identify</i> kids' skills.	O4 P4
P.	Also, Oscar. How much <i>poetic writing</i> did you used to do in Year 13?	
O.	That's true in one sense. School Cert was a real phoney in the way in assessed <i>practical tasks</i> like <i>oral presentations</i> . And the chance to do <i>theme studies of language at Level 3</i> is good. But in a way, I feel that everything has actually become quite <i>restricted</i> . I know I'm supposed to feel that I have more <i>freedom</i> and <i>flexibility</i> but I don't. I feel my <i>creativity</i> is <i>limited</i> . It seems to me that the NCEA has been designed for <i>unimaginative people</i> to engage in <i>unimaginative teaching</i> .	O6 O2 O2 O4 O2
P.	Careful, that's me you're talking about! Any new system's going to have teething problems. <i>Because we're still implementing the NCEA we feel less comfortable designing our own units outside the national tasks</i> . We're still	P4

<p>coming to grips <i>with the language</i>. Hopefully, as we <i>become more comfortable with the NCEA</i> we'll become more <i>creative</i>. Having said that, I know that nowadays I find it harder to <i>integrate new material from an article in the weekend</i> in my teaching. I think the NCEA has <i>removed some of the breadth of literature and learning</i>. Perhaps our teaching has become <i>narrowed</i>.... not so many <i>texts being studied</i>.</p>	P3 P3
<p>O. This coverage thing really bothers me. I think there's been a <i>marked reduction in the range and quality of texts and tasks</i>. I see <i>units being dropped</i>. Okay, most of us teach the <i>novel</i> but all this <i>increased assessment time</i> means we skip teaching a <i>play or other extended text</i>. Sure there's a greater range of <i>practical work</i>, but I think literature has become the <i>victim</i>....as for poetry....I think we deserve another drink.</p>	P3 O4 O2
<p>P. I'll switch to Tuis light, if you don't mind.</p>	O3
<p>[A few minutes later, Oscar returns with a beer each.]</p>	
<p>P. I've been thinking about what you said about coverage. I think we DO aim for reasonable coverage. I'd say our English department works much better as a <i>team</i> these days, we're <i>more synchronized</i> in our planning and have a <i>common focus</i>. Certainly, we attempt to have an <i>all-covering approach to topics</i> and, despite what you say about <i>exemplars</i>, their <i>integration</i> into our programme has been beneficial.</p>	P4 P3 P3
<p>O. Well, yes, our department is better <i>organized</i> also. There's certainly a <i>tighter balance</i>. And you could say that the NCEA has made the <i>division of the year into discrete units easier</i>. We can give our <i>overseas teachers</i> a fairly clear steer. Though I have mixed feelings....</p>	O4 O3 O2
<p>P. Well, you'd have to say we're more accountable, Oscar. How much planning did we used to do together? We were little islands with very little accountability. <i>We all now know what we're assessing</i>. Things are <i>tighter</i> now, <i>demytified</i> and there IS <i>flexibility</i> when we do our <i>year planning overview</i>. We can <i>pace</i> things now and aim for an <i>even time-spread of topics</i>. There's <i>more transparency and accountability</i>, and that goes for the <i>kids</i> also.</p>	P3 P3 P3 P4 O3
<p>O. Well, yes, at least the <i>assessment criteria</i> are made available to the kids and the <i>oral language exemplars</i> help them know what's expected....But jeepers, Pauline. I think this word 'transparent' is flattering the <i>unhelpful and opaque wording</i> of the assessment criteria. The fact is, we often <i>lack specific criteria</i> and are often <i>left to our own interpretation based on vague terminology</i>.</p>	O2 O3 O2 P4
<p>P. Well, that might be true sometimes. Anyway, individual teachers now know <i>when deadlines have not been met and aspects not covered</i>. With internal assessment we're forced to <i>take a stand, to be professional</i>.</p>	P3 O4 O2
<p>O. Well, yes, there's more <i>coordination of units</i> these days. But coordination is not the same is coherence. Sure we try to <i>integrate aspects</i>, but the <i>programme is still fragmented</i>, there is <i>no course cohesion</i>. We've <i>compartmentalized English</i>. I just don't see us as offering a <i>full academic programme of English</i>. We only <i>select certain standards</i>. <i>Some teachers can avoid teaching literature standards almost entirely</i>.</p>	O4 O2 P3 O4
<p>P. Well, the <i>structure CAN be limiting</i> and a bit <i>too tight</i>.</p>	O2
<p>O. Tight? It's <i>constricting</i>. I just don't see much <i>innovation</i>. I like to use a <i>range of teaching strategies, bringing in fresh ideas and resources</i> –</p>	O2

	<i>thematic or genre-based approaches</i> using texts from the <i>real world</i> rather than this <i>specific, picky</i> stuff that seems to have forgotten the English curriculum.	
P.	Sorry, Oscar, that's a cop-out! You can't blame the NCEA if you've suddenly become a boring teacher.	O3
O.	What planet are you on, Pauline! Our planning may be tighter, but like everything else, it's <i>assessment</i> that <i>drives</i> it. The <i>overlay of school-wide planning complicates planning</i> at the classroom level. Our school goes crazy at assessment time. <i>Assessment-driven scheduling is tending to preclude interesting digressions and more in-depth study. Assessment forces deadlines</i> and we end up having our <i>teaching compressed</i> . Finally, we get our assessment plan in place, and along comes NZQA with yet another <i>change</i> to take on board.	O4 O4 P3 P4 P6
P.	OK, planning CAN sometimes be <i>too tight</i> and make it hard to <i>seize the teaching moment</i> as they say. And I'd agree that <i>assessment-based teaching is not positive</i> . But you'd have to say that <i>standards-based</i> assessment is better than <i>norm-referencing</i> , isn't it. Students really do like the sense of knowing exactly what is <i>expected of them</i> . None of this 9 out of 20 business and no reasons given. No more subjective, <i>personal preference</i> marking. We've all had to pull our socks up in respect of writing <i>conventions</i> . I'm sure you've seen a <i>positive flow down</i> into more <i>structured junior programmes</i> .	P3 P3 P4 P4 P3 O3
O.	Yeah, right! Failing talented students because of faulty spelling....	O2
P.	Well, yes, it <i>does disallow recognition of good work against particular criteria</i>	O2
O.	C'mon, Pauline, a lot of what we're doing is training monkeys to <i>jump through hoops</i> while <i>destroying our passion</i> for our subject. We were actually starting to <i>assess for better learning using models, exemplars and sharing marking criteria with students</i> long before the NCEA regime was dropped on us.	P4 P3 P3 P3
P.	And hasn't the NCEA built on that, Oscar? Look, cast your mind back, old fulla. Think of what used to happen with speeches and static images in the days of School Cert. <i>Students are assessed on what they present now</i> , not for <i>writing about a task they may not have even done!</i> Curriculum can be <i>assessed as it should</i> , not by <i>writing an essay about a speech you've heard</i> . Those <i>unseen texts</i> standards are excellent ways of evaluating <i>the general aptitude of students</i> .	O3 P4
O.	Hang on! As I said before, I'm happy to see School Cert go. My department always assessed internally anyway, so that argument didn't apply to us. You're right, <i>assessment of some tasks, the oral and visual work, IS more direct and relevant</i>	O2
P.	... which makes NCEA assessment more <i>holistic</i> . A greater range of English skills are assessed <i>rather than focusing on reading and writing</i> .	O2
O.	Maybe more, but better? There's another side to your validity argument. I think the NCEA is producing a <i>tick-box mentality</i> . It's doing odd things to what we think we're assessing. <i>Students can fail on a small aspect</i> of something. It's <i>all or nothing, nitpicky</i> and <i>very demoralizing</i> . <i>Penalising them for what they haven't done, not rewarding them for what is well done</i> . It's <i>not sound educational practice</i> . Having <i>lowest criterion achieved rather than "best fit"</i> is producing a <i>skewed outcome</i> .	O3 P3 P4 P3 P3

P.	Well, I agree that <i>Not Achieved</i> is too vague; I mean, <i>exactly what areas are lacking?</i> But like I said, Oscar, I think we're still honing our assessment skills. You'd have to agree that <i>assessment practice has tightened and become more consistent</i> under the NCEA. We've got <i>more consistency with moderation; the exemplars provide useful guidelines...</i>	O4
O.	Well, I do think that <i>uniformity of policy and practice, including moderation</i> is a good thing. Certainly, in my school there has been <i>improved supervision</i> with the help of exemplars, criteria and the amount of <i>cross-moderation between markers and between schools</i> . But don't try to tell me that things are consistent. The <i>goalposts constantly move</i> ; there's actually <i>a lack of consistency and confidence in and a vast range of interpretations of vague standards. Unpacking of criteria is too local-dependent. Moderation is inconsistent. The marking of externals is inconsistent – our practice exams seldom match what students achieve in the externals.</i>	O3 O2 O4 O2 P3 P3 P3 O3
P.	Well, yes, I also have issues with consistency, especially in assessment conditions, how we interpret <i>writing conventions</i> when students use computers as compared with handwriting. But at least the criteria <i>remove personalities from the marking process so that students cannot believe that "Teacher doesn't like me"</i> .	P4 P3
O.	I wish. I think having teachers assess their <i>own students is open to abuse and unfair pressure.</i>	P3 O3
P.	Well, I'd concede that internal assessment does create <i>opportunities for teacher bias and puts a heavy reliance on teacher integrity</i> . I think there is a <i>conflict between "teacher as assessor" and teacher as teacher"</i> . I was kinda thinking about this before when I was suggesting that we're having to be <i>more professional</i> .	O2 O3 O2 O2 O4
O.	Well, I wish they'd treat us as professionals. Ministry advice is so <i>unhelpful and unprofessional. Markers' reports are often poor and come out so late that recommendations can't be applied</i> . Y'know, it's the <i>time spent assessing that's grinding me down</i> . A lot of the time I'm <i>tired and unstimulated</i> . Everything seems to be assessment-driven, there's <i>less genuine teaching/learning time</i> . The <i>genuine discussion</i> I used to have with my class has been replaced by the <i>mechanics of assessment</i> .	P3 P4 P3 P4 P4
P.	Well, yes, the <i>time factor can limit teaching</i> . I sometimes do think that <i>English has become too dominated by assessment rather than the teacher</i> . Our students are affected, too, of course, with <i>time pressure to complete assignments</i> . Some are <i>over-assessed and under a lot of pressure and stress</i> . And it's pretty <i>demotivating</i> for those who get <i>boxed as Not Achieved early in the year</i> .	O2 O3 O2 O2
O.	Well, it's the motivation thing that really disturbs me. I mean, it's now the <i>standards</i> that are driving <i>motivation</i> , not something intrinsic to the subject. It's all about <i>"Does it count?"</i> I don't think there's much <i>challenge for top students. Students don't see the value of improving – once they're an Achieved for a standard, that's it</i> . Some students simply <i>disregard external assessments if they have already achieved internals</i> so they're <i>less interested in assessment by the end of the year</i> . The grading scale's not much help. <i>Three bands is very limiting and de-motivating for students</i> . They find it <i>difficult to see how to improve or WHY</i> . <i>Gifted kids like to know where they are on a scale...to have sense of where they stand</i>	O2

	in relation to other kids.	P3
P.	I think in terms of my relation to you, I owe you a drink. What'll it be?	P3
O.	I think I need a scotch.	O6
		P4
	[Pauline returns with a scotch for Oscar and a Tui for herself.]	P4
		O3
P.	I was thinking about non-gifted kids while getting served. Y'know, resubmissions are a bit of a chore and <i>it's really easy for a teacher to get buried under resubs</i> . But they do <i>help borderline students get up to standard</i> .	O2
		O2
O.	Well, <i>theoretically, they're good and useful in limited cases....</i>	P4
P.	Additional <i>assessment opportunities allow students to develop their skills and mature</i> , they can <i>develop their skills and learn over time</i> .	P3
		P4
O.	Well, I suppose it's <i>helpful for less well-organized students</i> , but only if <i>they want to be helped</i> . I mean, it <i>allows for minor adjustments and improvement of skills</i> , but I think this <i>would be better managed as part of on-going coursework, not part of the assessment regime</i> . I know some schools that don't allow it.	O3
		O3
		O4
		P3
P.	I think it helps formative assessment. It's a special way of <i>focusing specifically on individual weakness</i> through <i>conferencing</i> and <i>mentoring</i> so that students <i>become aware of what they need to do to improve</i> . That's how the <i>real world</i> operates also.	O2
		O2
O.	I suppose if you do it wisely, it spreads the students' <i>assessment load over the whole year</i> . But frankly, I think that <i>resubmissions and re-assessments make planning a nightmare</i> and they actually interfere with subsequent <i>units</i> .	O3
		O3
		O3
		O2
P.	Well, certainly, <i>schools need to be pragmatic in setting up manageable systems to fit kids</i> .	P4
O.	Overall, I think it's <i>unmanageable</i> , it imposes a <i>huge workload</i> , it's <i>time consuming, administration is problematic</i> and it generates stress. I'm also not that convinced it's helpful to students overall. <i>Students don't see the need to make a serious attempt for the first submission</i> . You talked about the <i>real world</i> . Well, the real world is a world of <i>deadlines</i> . I'm not sure it <i>IS a motivating feature for students</i> . It's not always valid either, not if <i>re-teaching or further work</i> hasn't actually occurred. And then there's the question of consistency. Some teachers <i>err on the side of caution and tend to be inflexible</i> .	P4
		P3
		O4
		P4
		O4
P.	Yes, well, I'm aware that resubmissions <i>differ widely between schools</i> and the term is <i>open to different interpretations</i> .	P4
		P3
O.	Exactly. Some define it as a <i>second opportunity, reworking</i> work already done. For some it's simply <i>editing</i> . For others, it's an entirely <i>new task</i> .	O2
		O2
P.	And then there's the question of work processors. Should we <i>allow students to use word processors if it means we don't know if students can use conventions accurately?</i>	P4
		P3
O.	I guess that's an authenticity issue. Once more we're cast in the role of <i>managers</i> rather than <i>educators</i> . But I guess we need to know <i>WHO does the task</i> .	O2
		O2
P.	Well it <i>cuts down on cheating, plagiarism, parents doing the work</i> . We <i>KNOW it's the student's own work</i> . They know exactly <i>what is required of them</i> .	O3
		P4

O.	Yes, we're all <i>more conscious of the need for authenticity</i> ...And certainly, <i>students are much more aware of the implications of plagiarizing or downloading "chunks" off the internet to pass off as their own. It's not as easy for our second-language students to take work home for tutors to do.</i>	O2
P.	...and it <i>makes students realise how important it is to rework their writing. I think making the drafting process visible allows more individual, student-centred learning.</i>	O2 O4 O2 O3
O.	Yes, students are <i>re-writing to improve in class rather than at home where there are no checks. Mind you, having to allow for the process to take place in class with minimal time spent at home takes up excessive teaching time.</i>	P3
P.	True, it <i>DOES take time away from teaching.</i>	
O.	Yep, you have to be super <i>efficient and organized to manage work storage. Sometimes I wonder if we're using a sledgehammer to break a nut here and if we're not taking something away from our students. Some of my students waste the time given and don't focus; others, usually better writers, find the time in class restrictive and prefer to ponder, review, rehearse aspects at home in their own time. Are we destroying creative writing, do you think, closing writing down? Indeed, what ultimate guarantee of authenticity is working in class anyway?</i>	P7 P3 O2 P4 O3
P.	Mmmm...I know I'd be happier if there was more <i>national consistency in the application of the requirements. Sometimes I'm not sure whether I'm more for national consistency or more for flexibility.</i>	P4 P3 P3 O2
O.	What do you mean?	O2
P.	Well, take the fact that we have stand-alone standards which means that students can pick and mix...well, theoretically. I mean, such <i>flexibility caters for the needs of the student better than a rigid exam system.</i>	P3 P4
O.	It does <i>give choice</i> ...	
P.	I mean, <i>students can achieve SOME standards, they can be assessed in a style that suits them</i> ...	O4 P3
O.	It <i>gives opportunities to students with specific weaknesses not to count those standards</i> ...	O2 O3
P.	...and <i>allows students to focus on areas they know they will or can pass</i> ...[Pause]...but then, <i>students tend to pick and choose where they make the effort. There's less drive among students to strive for higher levels of achievement.</i>	P4
O.	Well, yes, it's a two-edged sword. <i>Students can achieve in areas of strength, but then never tackle or improve in areas of weaknesses.</i>	O3 O3
P.	In my school, we call it <i>credit-banking. It's not a good idea. It's demotivating. Once students have their 80 credits or literacy requirements they stop working on English.</i>	O2
O.	True. They forget <i>all aspects are needed</i> ...	P3
P.	... <i>reasonable coverage</i> ...	
O.	...and <i>balance. They select a minimum number of credits just to pass and are not receiving a balanced course. So much for the knowledge and experience of teachers as course designers. It legitimizes a bad practice; they decide to miss opportunities.</i>	P4 O2 O2 O2
P.	Yes, it's short-term thinking, I know lots of students who don't <i>choose standards wisely in order to allow further tertiary study</i> ...	O2
O.	That's right, they're simply <i>unprepared to exercise this level of choice.</i>	

	What's more, students are getting really savvy. They're asking <i>real and pointed questions about variations in expectations between achievement standards and unit standards</i> and the huge discrepancy between requirements in different standards.	P3 O2 O3
P.	And then there's reporting. I have some sympathy with <i>employers</i> who are confused about exactly what a potential employee CAN do. Employers find it difficult to read a record of learning.	O2
O.	There are plenty of students who struggle to comprehend their own qualifications. And of course there are the ethical implications of not reporting failure. Those who fail know it, but not reporting it is fraudulent. It gives a false picture. It certainly doesn't offer a holistic reflection of students' abilities, strengths and weaknesses in any given subject since it glosses over failures and not attempted.	P3 P3 O4 O4
P.	Still, schools are working hard to design courses to differences in student ability, mixing and matching different standards, and so on.	O2
O.	It's true we've become more focused on individual needs, though it has become easier for students to omit harder achievement standards such as Shakespeare. Overall, it maybe advantages students who are limited, low ability since we can package a range of vocational standards to benefit them.	O4 P3 P3
P.	Yes, we've set up a special course at Level 2 for students who are capable of Level 2 but at a less intense level. I agree with your point about non-academic students.	O2
O.	Having said that, we have a "Certificate of Employment" with elements such as group activities, interview, writing a letter, and so on. I sometimes wonder What happens once the student gets a job? Does making it EASIER advantage kids in the long term? There's all sorts of ad hocery around course arrangements designed to help students with catch-ups and completion of "packages". These arrangements are often tenuous. I know of instances where the Literacy requirements drive foolish actions, you know, crash courses at Year 13 – assessment without prior specific learning – dishonest, really.	O44 O2 O3 O3 O3
P.	Schools need a structured pathway for a three-year programme. I'm afraid that some schools choose areas for best achievement in the public eye, at the cost of a well balanced course ... no names mentioned, of course.	P4 O2 O2
O.	You've got networks of teachers working out ways of ensuring the success of students rather than ensuring curriculum needs are met. So much for course flexibility addressing individual needs. It's a bit of a myth really. I mean, I think it actually disadvantages students who are more academic and who need to experience a subject holistically. Often large chunks of knowledge are missed out and students miss out on challenges. Some schools are using Cambridge for strong students and a botched version of NCEA for the less able. It's a kind of streaming in drag. Also, here's a thing. I know teachers who don't think they need to extend their knowledge and skills since they teach low-ability classes.	O2 O2 O8 O2 O2 P3
P.	I sometimes think too MANY courses disadvantages students, stopping them specializing as much as they should.	O2
O.	Well, there's sure been a proliferation. Sometimes I have to remind myself what I'm doing. I mean NCEA at three levels has led to multiple courses and dangerously overloaded teachers. I spend Term 1 sorting classes,	P3 P4 P3

	<i>senior teachers are always out of classes, not to mention the paperwork involved in tracking progress, students transferring from other schools, time-tabling complications. It's an administrative nightmare.</i>	O2 O8 O3
P.	The workload's too heavy. It's turning off young teachers. I mean, the system relies on teachers teaching for the love of it. It's unfair. Teachers shouldn't have to look after their own PD, or choose between staying on top of it and having a life.	O3 O2 O2 P4
O.	There's huge pressure on new teachers to keep track of students, different types of courses, reassessments, you name it...and who'd want to be a HOD! I'm snowed under keeping track of a multitude of courses, individual tracking, literacy requirements, multi-level courses...sorry to moan...	P4 P4 P3
P.	HODs do have an unmanageable load. I mean the system DOES expose the shirkers. You know which teachers are pulling their weight...though, mind you, I hear stories about workplace bullying. I think the system enhances opportunities for that sort of thing.	P3 P3 O2 O2
O.	Let's face it, Pauline. The workload is unacceptable. The administrative load is huge, what with the paperwork, copying and form-filling, referring to exemplars, recording, handling resubmissions, filing and storing records, constantly trying to keep track of changes on the website and adapting to meet the requirements...the time pressure's immense.	P3 P4
P.	I guess the changes in assessment are the main thing, aren't they. Because we're marking internal assessment, there has been a huge workload increase, which has been unacceptable. Because the marks count, the pressure to mark is more, especially as there is a need for more precise feedback, so marking takes more time. I know some people think that this is acceptable because we ARE professionals and that marking is becoming easier. But over-assessment is a real issue. I mean, I think that the NCEA DOES attempt to promote certain ideals of best practice. But you can't do that with current class sizes. It's oppressive.	O5 O3 P4 O2 O4
O.	...not when you're moderating discrete elements, reporting on every standard separately...	
P.	Yes, and peripheral external moderation requirements can be stressful. And the meetings! There's so much more need for department meetings, to ensure all marking is to the standard, so that we're all interpreting the standards the same....	
O.	...cluster meetings after school...discussion time with management, students and parents....	
P.	...setting policies, procedures, organizing courses, constructing tasks...I suppose it's good to have a bit of a moan.	
O.	I think I could cope with the tedium if morale wasn't so low. Are we more professional, Pauline? I think I've become a facilitator and administrator. There's no trust any more in my professional competence or judgement.	
P.	You reckon we could have come up with a better system?	
O.	You've gotta believe it.	

NOTES TOWARDS A SUPREME QUALIFICATION

The various practices investigated in the preliminary questionnaire suggest a large amount of non-integrated teaching under the NCEA (though this may have been the

case previous to its introduction), enormous variation in resubmission practices (with implications for reliability) with proponents favouring portfolio assessment, a heavy reliance on national tasks and exemplars compared with self-developed units of work, and enormous inconsistencies in respect of moderation practice.

Though both groups disagreed on whether they were teaching better, there was some agreement that NCEA assessment practice had focused teachers and that this focus was a good thing. Planning had become tighter and more collegial but I suggest that necessity has produced this invention. However, there was a general recognition that there were constraints on creativity. Even opponents of the NCEA saw it as having addressed validity issues never dealt with in the old examination system. Reliability and consistency, however, were a real issue for opponents and proponents, with both roundly viewing moderation practices as inconsistent. All teachers, despite misgivings about consistency around resubmissions, valued multiple assessment opportunities in some form. Authenticity provisions were seen as problematic, however, and creating as many problems as they solved. Both groups saw a number of aspects of the NCEA as demotivating, with a number from both groups associating this with the “pick and mix” affordance of discrete standards. Equally, both groups valued the additional room for course flexibility that the NCEA provided. As for workload, most teachers across both groups felt it to be unacceptable.

If we were to ask Pauline and Oscar to describe the features of a system which retained what they liked about the NCEA and which addressed their misgivings, what might they come up with? As I interpret the focus-group reports in the light of the two questionnaires, such a system would be characterized by:

1. Room for teacher creativity and innovation, and the valuing of professional knowledge and judgement.
2. An emphasis on coherent, comprehensive and integrated courses of study that would drive assessment practice (not vice versa).
3. Flexibility in course design.
4. Course designs that are intrinsically motivating of students.
5. A form of standards-based assessment that would be transparent, clear, logical and enhance formative as well as summative assessment.
6. An emphasis on assessment validity, including an emphasis on authenticity.
7. Consistency and reliability in assessment.
8. The cautious use of exemplars for formative assessment purposes.
9. The sensible inclusion of multiple assessment opportunities.
10. Rigorous and consistent moderation procedures that respect teacher professionalism.
11. Clear, holistic reporting that acknowledges partial achievement.
12. Reasonable workload.

In my own view, for the NCEA to fulfil this brief, some major changes need to be made. For a start, I believe we need to abandon the “separate standards-based” model used currently and replace it with an “integrated standards-based” model (Hall, 2004, p. 1). This would mean a return to course-based thinking, addressing issues of coherence, integration, coverage and flexibility, with the latter addressed either in terms of flexibility within the overall course structure or by having a limited number of course-based pathways for students of different abilities. An example of the latter are the five sets of English courses available in the new New South Wales Higher School Certificate qualification (Board of Studies, n.d.). Such a suggestion needs to be seen as a kind of trade-off, since it effectively reduces the current “pick and mix” aspect of the NCEA.

Standards-based assessment would be retained but be flexible in terms of its form for different subjects. Different subjects would decide on the degree of internal/external assessment suited to them. For English, I would favour a sophisticated version of achievement-based assessment, incorporating marking guides and rubrics, the abandonment of the pass-fail line, and the use of a 10-point scale for grading. Courses would still have “discrete” components, and these would be graded separately (on an E to A+ scale) and *all* components would be reported on in a profile report which would also provide an overall subject grade.

Issues of authenticity would be dealt with in a light-handed (as opposed to heavy-handed) manner, with less emphasis on all writing for summative purposes being completed in class but with a requirement that students hand in a ‘Declaration of Authenticity’ with their writing.⁸ The notion of resubmission would be replaced by larger composition and ‘reading’ components (or standards) allowing a ‘best fit’ grade to be awarded on the basis of a portfolio of best work. Where a portfolio is not feasible (say, with speaking tasks), formative assessment practice would replace resubmissions.

Finally, moderation would be based first and foremost in an emphasis on professional collegiality (at school level) and networking (between schools). Norm referencing would be restored as a moderating device, and the current emphasis on stand-alone, separate standards would be further broken down by a degree of moderation between standards and the use of external examinations to moderate internally assessed grades. Moderation via sampling would continue but moderators would not be anonymous. Sample assessment items, tasks and exemplars would continue to be made available but not in a way which encourages slavish imitation or questionable pedagogy.

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NOTES

- ¹ An earlier version of this article was published in English in Aotearoa, No. 56, July 2005. Republished with permission.
- ² Non-New Zealand readers unfamiliar with the term need to realise that unit standards, as developed for NZQA, are used for assessment for national qualifications. They 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” (NZQA, 1998, p. 1.3)) and the *standard* (in the performance criteria) of performance required to meet the outcome (NZQA, 1998, p. 1.5). (The English unit standard 8812 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.) Achievement standards stipulate a cluster of descriptors or performance criteria for *three* levels of performance (Achieved, Merit and Excellence), all of which have to be satisfied if a grade is to awarded for that level.
- ³ The grade point average is not a percentage in the traditional sense since it does not take into account standards students have not achieved in or have decided (for whatever reason) not to study. Unlike a traditional percentage, also, there is no consistent answer to the question, ‘percentage in what?’, since there is no longer a syllabus. Briefly, the grade point average is worked out by multiplying the results a student gets in a particular ‘subject’s’ standards by certain ‘grade values’, adding these up as a raw score, and expressing this raw score as a ratio of a possible score had that student received Excellence in all standards sat as a percentage. For NZQA’s account of this procedure, visit <http://www.nzqa.govt.nz/ncea/results/gradeaverages.html>.
- ⁴ Elley et al. (2005) write: “It has now been acknowledged officially that the variation in pass rates between subjects for the Scholarship examinations is unacceptable and that some form of NR [norm referencing] assessment will be needed” (¶7). Further, they explain that: ...the same kind of variations were found, and exposed by some of us, in the NCEA Level 1 results of the previous two years, but were ignored, or dismissed, by both NZQA and the Minister of Education. For instance, in the six academic subjects taken by large numbers of students in the first two years, there were 44 standards assessed. In 32 of these 44 standards, the discrepancy in pass rates between 2002 and 2003 was more than 5%. Any discrepancy over 5% needs explaining because there is substantial evidence that adjacent (nation-wide) cohorts rarely differ by more than 2% or 3% in achievement levels. Fourteen of the 44 standards showed discrepancies of more than 10%; it is incredible that NZQA ignored these variations and even claimed that all was well. (Elley et al., 2005, ¶8)
- ⁵ A much more detailed analysis of this initial questionnaire can be found at: http://edlinked.soc.waikato.ac.nz/users/locketj/English_Teachers_and_the_NCEA/Initquestanal.doc
- ⁶ A detailed analysis of the post-focus group analysis can be accessed at: http://edlinked.soc.waikato.ac.nz/users/locketj/English_Teachers_and_the_NCEA/Postquestanal.doc
- ⁷ Go to http://edlinked.soc.waikato.ac.nz/staff/index.php?user=locketj&page_id=4480
- ⁸ Many schools currently require their students to sign departmental or blanket authenticity statements.

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