Knowledge about Language, Literacy and Literature in the Teaching and Learning of English

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This chapter provides you with some key ideas about English so that you have a sense of its history and its role in education systems. To start you off on your journey of discovery, Peter Freebody alerts you to the differences that exist between the everyday world and the world of school. He wants you to appreciate the enormous responsibility you have as a teacher to make connections from your students' lives to the knowledge about language, literacy and literature they need to have in order to become thoughtful, creative, responsible citizens of the future.

In this chapter Peter revisits the Four Resources model to show how learners require far more than basic literacy and decoding skills if they are to cope with challenging lives. He takes a political stance to remind us that if we limit the learning of some students during school, we limit their potential for life. Therefore he adds two new resources to the familiar Four Resources model to broaden its scope and include ways of dealing with discipline knowledge and ways of taking transformational action. It repositions learning about English at the heart of learning about life.

Throughout the chapter you will have the opportunity to learn about English as a discipline area from a variety of theoretical perspectives. Each one has had an influence over the possible ways of knowing about English that were popular at one time or another. You will also read contrasting texts that require you to rethink your understanding of language, literacy and literature. All this information is positioned within the current context of a new national curriculum.

Introduction: English and schooling

■ **Thought experiment**
A mental exercise that uses the imagination to consider possibilities.

■ **Blogging**
An electronic form of communication that keeps a chronological archive of online discussions as a record of ideas developed over time.

A **thought–experiment**: Lunchtime on a weekday and you stroll through a busy shopping centre near where you were brought up. As usual the people you see do lots of reading and writing—street signs, advertisements, newspapers, menus, product labels, book blurbs, shopping lists, crossword puzzles, credit card slips, emailing, texting, **blogging**, gaming, and all the rest. A question arises: What have these people become good at such that they can function so smoothly in this complicated setting? How can we name resources—the knowledge about texts and about the world, the techniques, actions and attitudes—that enable them to pursue their interests with texts in purposeful, effective and civil ways in this small but literacy-saturated slice of the world?

A first answer might be that we see some activities that are surrounded by talk, some that need talk to come off, and others not so. Literacy capabilities

Figure 1.1   Literacy in the everyday world

are necessary for many of the events we see to succeed, but they are often not enough on their own (Barton 2007). Second, we might answer that in this setting 'functioning well' calls for more than a single ability; that we see people bringing together what they know about language and literacy, and about the world generally, to make their reading and writing activities fluent, accurate, meaningful, purposeful, appropriately adaptable to different demands (e.g. some literacy mistakes will be more costly than others), proactive—with initiative—and critical—with 'savvy', sensitivity and discernment. The fully fledged shopping-centre-literate are active participants; they make the shopping centre happen. In a real sense, their language and literacy resources are part of what these people have *become*, not just what they *have*. They are *of* the literacy-saturated world; they help make it 'go'.

THINKING BOX

My response on reading this the first time …

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My response on coming back to it later …

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So still in your thought-experiment, you continue your stroll past a secondary school. You see teachers and students reading and writing—on the board, posters, worksheets, computer screens, in workbooks and so on, working alone and in small groups and in whole-class sessions. You hear the bell and you know that this signals a change of teachers, topics and materials and that, every 50 minutes or so, these changes also bring with them shifts in the levels of language and literacy, the writing, the visual and layout expectations of students, the purpose and structure of the work activities, and the old and new technologies called into play.

So a second question occurs to you: If you had helped the students you now see to develop 'shopping-centre-language-and-literacy' resources, would they have all the resources they need to function well in this school environment? If not, what more is there to 'school-literacy'? How does the 'schooling of English'—both as a language and as a school subject—shape the teaching and learning of language and literacy? Why is such an important area as **cross-curricular** literacies most commonly seen as the responsibility of the English classroom where it is reduced to literacy? What kinds of work are done in classrooms and what are the sorts of worksites that students are being prepared to enter? What ethics and values are students being 'worked up', and how does the language, literacy and literature look in that light?

■ **Cross-curricular**
An approach to teaching that explores the potential of connecting ideas from one area of learning to those of another, for example literacy with science, instead of limiting learning to discipline-specific areas.

EXERCISE 1.1: COMPARE AND CONTRAST LITERACY CAPABILITIES

Literacy lets us actively participate in the everyday world, yet each of us has a different experience of how that day plays out. List the literacies that you would classify as everyday in your life and contrast that list with the literacies you needed for school and now need for university. Is there any crossover? Are there any major gaps?
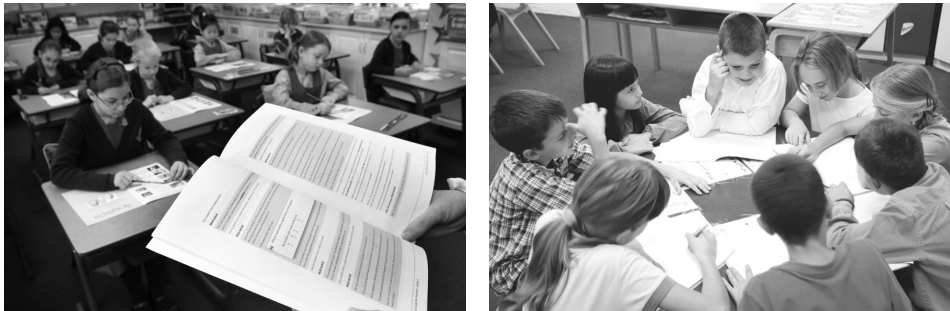
Everyday literacies	School literacies	Tertiary literacies

School and work

Anyon (1981, 2005) has studied classrooms in US cities as worksites. She examined the structure of the work activities in these classrooms, and how these build a particular ethos and project the students into particular forms of work and civil participation. She found four clusters of classrooms:

Figure 1.2   Different classrooms, different opportunities for learning

- Cluster 1: Some classrooms offered essentially a preparation for mechanical labour, with carefully sequenced movements from simple to difficult tasks and tests; **curriculum** activities were driven by a rationale of testing rather than learning, with few explicit connections made among the elements of the learning—a culture of learning for 'correctness and control'.
- Cluster 2: Some classrooms offered essentially a preparation for low/middle-level office/bureau work, with a focus on developing students' abilities to be selective and appropriate in their use of information, with no apparent interest in their creativity or critical judgment—a culture of 'learning for access to and appropriate use of information'.

■ **Curriculum**
The program of study set by an institution as the required content to meet set standards.

- Cluster 3: Some classrooms offered essentially a preparation for intellectual, scientific, artistic work, with a focus on discerning, critical thinking and the acquisition of powerful, prestigious cultural and symbolic learning—an ethos of expressiveness, self-evaluation and reflection.
- Cluster 4: Some classrooms offered essentially preparation for leadership, ownership and control, focusing on debate, the appreciation and mobilisation of differing perspectives—a culture that works with the socially valued understandings of how systems work and of how to influence people and manage the material and social world.

THINKING BOX

My response on reading this the first time …

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My response on coming back to it later …

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Anyon argued that she had found students who are learning very different skills and ways of knowing about and being in the world, preparing them for very different kinds of civil and work lives. We can speculate that even if students in these four groupings were found to be 'equally good' at their work in language, literacy and literature, say, according to a standardised assessment of some kind, they might not show the same kinds of qualities in their work in their English classrooms, or in their other subject areas. In classrooms we find a variety of materials that place a variety of language and literacy demands on students. Further, these materials and what is done with them become more and more differentiated as the school years progress, but the key activities for students remain reading and writing, including texts that comprise both language and images as heavy-duty sources of learning.

School and society

We quickly see that the resources we refer to when we consider English language, literacy and literature education not only make up a subject within school, but actually constitute the means by which an entire school system functions. 'English language, literacy and literature' are terms that have historically referred to large and complicated collections of materials, knowledge, skills, attitudes and dispositions. One feature of societies such as Australia is that, over the last century or so, virtually every aspect of personal, domestic, community, vocational and civic life is shot through with the need to understand, manage and produce a wide variety of texts, spoken, written and **multimodal**—working effectively, pursuing hobbies and leisure activities, keeping up contacts with friends and families, managing money, learning new things, communicating with the law, government, and the rest. It is not just schools but contemporary societies that are literacy-dependent and literacy-saturated.

■ **Multimodal**
The combination of more than one meaning making (semiotic) system to create a text, for example, image plus music, writing plus text layout.

This development points to the special role of schooling in those societies, such as Australia, that have developed adversarial judicial and political systems. For instance, how well equipped are we to make informed personal, community and political choices on matters such as climate change, the global financial system, immigration, human rights, bio-ethics, or public health? To take an active part in society people need to have more than just functional literacy.

Do we have the specific language and literacy capabilities to make judgments about the strongly opposing views put in front of us? Would we be able to read and understand accessible, non-technical but intellectually honest accounts of such issues? Even if we could, is there even a body of reading materials in this 'middle zone' between lay opinion and technical expertise? These questions draw our attention to a danger in highly specialised democratic societies: the more specialised the theory and research on a particular topic, the more non-specialists are inclined to leave the decision to the specialists. But what if the specialists disagree? Or what if some groups have an interest in creating doubt around what all of the specialists seem to agree on?

■ See Walsh (2011) for a helpful study of teachers researching multimodal texts across a mix of classrooms and curriculum areas.

So voters in the developed democracies—who will, it seems, influence what happens on big issues much more than the latest Nobel Laureates—need some working understanding of the technical issues involved in their decisions, and equally, some understanding and discernment around the politics, sociology and economics of these matters. While acknowledging that they are non-specialists, they will need to develop a breadth and depth of understanding of specialist domains that gives them confidence in their personal public and political choices. Their only alternatives to this are to find an infallible guru, or to hope that some combination of denial, cynicism and helplessness will somehow see them through.

The growth of a post–denial society—active, informed, determined to develop non-specialist but nonetheless broad and deep understandings of consequential issues (Hind 2010)—seems to be largely a job for schoolteachers. It could be that this is now, more dramatically than ever, the most far-reaching of schooling's roles, introducing students to the powerful and developing bodies of knowledge, skill, disposition and attitude that will inform their experience. Along with helping to secure meaningful and sustaining work, it is these bodies of knowledge that give substance to citizens' actions and decisions. Whether those bodies of knowledge end up being always or only sometimes right, and whether or not our decisions and choices always end up for the best, are important questions: at least equally important, however, is the sense of engagement, efficacy, and an appreciation of the deep connection between our individual and collective experience that together give meaning to our individual and collective actions and struggles.

School and knowledge

Different disciplines and curriculum domains call on differing language and literacy demands. The disciplines 'have been resources for cutting beneath the surfaces of experience, gearing young people into an "explicable" world beyond the touchstones of the tribe—commonsense and dogma' (Freebody & Muspratt 2007, p. 48). Further, each discipline can be shown to have developed its own logic in using language and visual images and its own distinctive forms of enquiry (Deng & Luke 2008).

The school subjects morph into distinct sets of communicational demands as they drive through the school years, and it is these communicational demands that embody the particular technical and specialised work of the disciplines. This usually begins in about upper primary and culminates in radically different forms of talking, listening, reading and writing by the end of secondary school. With the long view across Kindergarten to Year 12, what is striking is that students need to manage and create a very different kind of communication every 40–50 minutes, that is, every time the bell goes for a new subject area session.

So two sets of resources appear when we consider the question of school demands over and above the general demands of living in a literacy-saturated society: knowing how to use text to transform the material and social world (mobilising others, 'working the systems' of knowledge and influence), and meeting and managing the different literacy demands of texts in different disciplines.

EXERCISE 1.2: ANYON'S MODELS OF SCHOOLING

■ **Pre-service teacher**
A tertiary-level teacher education student who has not fully completed professional requirements.

School is about more than just learning the basics. Teachers have a significant role in ensuring that students grow into citizens capable of critical thinking and responsible planning. Think back to classes you have sat in as a student or a **pre-service teacher** and map them onto Anyon's model. Consider the impact of the models on the different groups of students. What systems of disadvantage/advantage do we set up by the ways we choose to teach?

The paradigms of English

How competently and effectively we participate in, make decisions about, and act on the various aspects of our lives, and how much engagement and pleasure we draw from our daily experiences, depend in large part on how fluent and adaptable we are in the deployment of language and literacy resources. These resources gear us into the visible and invisible workings of our society, and give us access to the kinds of texts that are valued for the pleasure, reflection, interest or utility they provide.

In light of these high stakes, one question we can ask is about how educators have conventionally thought about, organised, and practised the three responsibilities of school subject English—language, literacy and literature. We can identify three broad **paradigms** that have informed the evolution of school subject English (adapted from Crawford 1998; and see Christie 2006; Gilbert 1989; Green & Beavis 1996): the *responsive* paradigm, the *growth* paradigm and the *heritage* paradigm.

■ **Paradigm**
A theoretical or philosophical framework that clusters sets of concepts together because they share commonality.

Proponents of the *responsive* paradigm take success in English to be mainly about allowing learners to respond to demands and challenges that they face, or that they will face later. The purposes, contents and processes of teaching English are justified in terms of what and how well the subject prepares students to meet these demands and challenges.

We find three aspects of this responsiveness. The first focuses on the skills required to read and write accurately in English, for example managing the conventions of the alphabet and spelling, punctuation and layout conventions, understanding and use of conventional grammatical formations. We can call this aspect of responsiveness *correct* English. A second aspect of the responsive paradigm focuses on the different social and cultural functions of English usage in different contexts. Here, correctness is layered over with social and cultural appropriateness: breadth and flexibility of vocabulary, an adaptable and sensitive repertoire of use

and taste. The essential response to the language and literacy demands that face an individual is the response of appropriateness in the management, as a reader or writer, of the situation of which the text forms a significant part. We can call this aspect of responsiveness *appropriate* English. A third aspect of the responsive paradigm focuses on developing critical readers and writers, who understand how the technologies of writing can oppress and mislead as well as liberate and inform (Freebody & Freiberg 2011; Thomas 2009). The demands and challenges facing learners of English, in this school of thought, are not just technical or socio-cultural but rather, they are philosophical, moral, political and ideological. This aspect of responsive English we can call *critical* English.

Competing with responsiveness as the key organising idea in English education, we find a second paradigm central to which is the view that school subject English offers students an arena in which to explore the social and psychological world in which they live, and to grow and develop their personal understandings and sensitivities to that world, through guided encounters with texts. For some this is associated with a commitment to the personal emancipatory potential of studying English. The focus here is on the development of sensibility—deeper and nuanced psychological interiors that can guide activities and relationships, through a heightened sense of the developing self. This paradigm we can term *developmental* English.

A third paradigm that has informed English holds that the fundamental function of English is to provide a guided exposure to the valued literary works in English. The force of identifying this third position is that many take the recognition of these cherished literary works, *as* cherished literary works, to be the prime motivation for English. That is, the displayed refinement of a particular kind of responsiveness to certain texts is taken to be the basis of the other potential outcomes of English, whether those other outcomes are to do with correct, appropriate or critical communications, or with personal growth and development. We can call this paradigm *heritage* English.

THINKING BOX

My response on reading this the first time …

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My response on coming back to it later …

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Not many proponents of any of these paradigms think it is a good idea for teachers to ignore accuracy, appropriateness or critical/analytic aspects of reading and writing, or to dismiss the relevance of English studies to personal growth and access to and appreciation of the literary heritage of English. Rather, English educators have differed on three counts: 1) how high on the *hierarchy of importance* they would place these central ideas, and thus what they would take to be the core description, the central responsibility of subject English, 2) how relevant each of these ideas is across the *entire span of the school years*, and 3) how *explicitly* each needs to be dealt with in English classrooms. The Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) statements about the national English curriculum, for example, draw these informing philosophies together rather than presenting them as strict alternatives:

> The national English curriculum is built around three interrelated strands that support students' growing understanding and use of English.
> - Language—Knowing about the English language: a coherent, dynamic, and evolving body of knowledge about the English language and how it works.
> - Literature—Understanding, appreciating, responding to, analysing and creating literature: an enjoyment in, and informed appreciation of, how English language can convey information and emotion, create imaginative worlds and aesthetic and other significant experiences.
> - Literacy—Growing a repertoire of English usage: the ability to understand and produce the English language accurately, fluently, creatively, critically, confidently, and effectively in a range of modes, and digital and print settings, in texts designed for a range of purposes and audiences. (ACARA 2009, p. 6)

EXERCISE 1.3: PARADIGMS OF ENGLISH

What paradigms of English are you familiar with from your schooling? Consider how layering each of the paradigms would help teachers to fulfil the requirements of the Australian Curriculum. As the paradigms are more familiar to secondary teachers, what is the flow-on effect to teachers of other ages?

School subject English has generally taken a significant share of the responsibility for all of these 'takes' on the teaching and learning of language and literacy, the heritage of significant works that users of English have made and shared, and the ways in which that heritage has been shaped, maintained and changed. So it seems we need a multifaceted model if we are aiming to be comprehensive in our understanding of what it takes to become a member of a language- and literacy-saturated society.

One model that educators with a literacy focus have commonly used to address this multiplicity of demands is termed the 'Four Resources model' (4RM) (Freebody 1992, 2004; Freebody & Luke 1990; Luke & Freebody 1997; Underwood et al. 2007). This approach has been described as a 'full-bodied model … grounded in the best current scholarship' (Underwood et al. 2007, p. 90). The 4RM stipulates that, whatever forms of **pedagogy** and assessment might be preferred, every approach to teaching and learning needs to develop explicitly resources that allow learners to:

■ **Pedagogy**
The study of teaching including philosophy and strategies (i.e. knowledge and skills).

- break the codes of written English (so they can be accurate, fluent, efficient)
- participate in the meaning systems of texts (so they can use what they know to understand and build texts)
- use a variety of powerful texts in a variety of contexts (so they can understand and use the relationships between a text's form and its functions)
- analyse texts (so they can operate analytically, deliberately and critically).

This model was offered as a set of general 'job specs' for a literacy program. It outlines elements of literacy capability that deserve attention when any curriculum, pedagogy and assessments are in development or under review.

Various theoretical and research traditions have developed that argue for the primary or, in some cases, even the exclusive status of one or other of these resources. The argument here, however, is that each single resource is necessary but not sufficient, that each resource requires explicit teaching for the bulk of youngsters, and that, in fluent practice, these resources become effortlessly orchestrated (see e.g. Murphy 2004; Paulson et al. 2004; Rush 2004; Underwood et al. 2007).

The aim is for a comprehensive model, sufficient to the task of describing the resources relating to a cultural achievement as complex and pervasive as literacy, and generative enough to accommodate the changing demands that literacy-based societies and schools present (see e.g. Strop & Carlson 2010).

The strong version of the model is that all four resources require development at all points in learning literacy. The weaker version is that, while more effort may be put into one or the other of these resources at any given phase in the students' progress, all four should be reflected in some way in the teaching and learning activities.

Putting the Four Resources model to work

Opening gambits

For people who read and write books such as this it is difficult to create an experience that can show how it feels to be non- or semi-literate, and so it is not easy to clarify what it would take to develop adequate literacy resources. We can try to illustrate the need for a 4RM-style approach to learning about literacy by subjecting you to a simple reading test. The text is about a topic that is highly familiar to millions of readers around the world, and a mystery to millions of others. Your task is simply to read this text out loud, describe and explain it, speculate about what might happen next, and critically analyse and evaluate the actions that it depicts. You might also like to give some historical account of the setting and symbolism more broadly surrounding the traditions this text reflects. In other words, as the **discussion** unfolds, consider how 'reading' this text draws on the four resources mentioned above.

■ **Discussion**
The text type used to present a reader with opposing or complementary points of view through a process of argument.

Here is the text:

1 d4   d5
2 c4   e6

The first question is: Can you, like millions of people across practically every country in the world, crack the codes of chess? If not, then: There is a player with white pieces and a player with black pieces; the board is 8 by 8 alternating dark and light squares. Letter coordinates (a–h) are used to locate the vertical axis beginning on white's left, and numerical co-ordinates (1–8) horizontally across the board beginning at white's end, as in the figure below.

White always starts (so d4 is white's first move), and in the opening sequences the pawns remain unsignalled because their placement is obvious, … and so on.

So the message is the letters and numbers: Exchange 1: d4-d5; if you're a participant, you know this means 'white pawn on column d moves to row 4 and
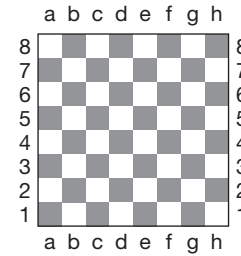
in reply black pawn on column d moves to row 5'. You know they are facing one another. Exchange 2 shows White moving the pawn on column c to row 4. If you can see through this to a coherent text, you know that this would enable Black at d5 to take the pawn on c4.

But Black goes to e6, rather than taking the piece. Lazy? Frightened? Not paying attention? No, absolutely routine. As a text participant, you would know that Black's move to e6 means deliberately *not* taking the white pawn.
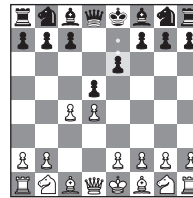
But if you are a text user, you would see through this text to recognise how it is based on a set of conventionalised practices, a common opening gambit called the 'Queen's Gambit Declined', known as QGD to its friends. This is what the text is to a chess-literate text user. QGD has been described as a 'quiet opening' (Cox 2011). If you're a text-analyst chess-literate (you know the history and the conventions, and you can evaluate them), then you also know that, in declining the sacrifice of the pawn, Black can build a more solid position; pawns d5 and e6 can give Black a hold on the centre of the board. In fact, QGD is one of Black's most reliable defences in the face of any later White aggression. The QGD, over thousands of games, has been calculated to have a 41% win-rate for White, 23% for Black, with 36% drawn (Crouch 1998).

Figure 1.3   Chessboard

Figure 1.4   Chessboard showing the moves as seen above

As we examine the myriad texts of chess, in particular those concerning opening gambits, a number of things become clear: there are hundreds of well-documented opening gambits. Each has its proponents and critics. Their disputes are not just about the raw success or failure rates of these gambits (the statistics are also widely known); they are mainly about evaluations and biases relating to 'future move options' and 'board behaviour'—etiquette (planful, but not inflexible), the morality of chess (aggressive, but not berserk), based in turn on different understandings and appreciations of the ideological symbolism arising from the game's history.

THINKING BOX

My response on reading this the first time …

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My response on coming back to it later …

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As the 4RM would predict, for the chess-literate, movements back and forth from the basic symbols and codes to their meaning in moves and sets of moves, to their value, and to their philosophical or moral propriety are seamless, fluent, and continuously informed by many levels of engagement with the history and structure of the game. These movements can be seen to make up what we mean when we say that we 'read the game'. The resources that allow these movements include knowledge of and fluency with the rendering of the symbols into sounds and words, and the words to actions, and the actions to conventions, and the conventions to their practical, historical, and moral significance and value. The chess-literate community has a shared vocabulary with which to initiate novices, build up and refine members' knowledge, engage in debates, and develop a sense of their individual and collective knowledge, skills, attitudes and sensibilities as they keep the game alive and well. It is the management, production and distribution of texts written in 'Chess' that create, sustain and expand that community and that create, disseminate and refine its expertise, its artfulness, and the pleasure it derives from participation.

■ See Healy & Honan (2004) for a useful discussion of how the four resources model can be applied in different contexts.

As with shopping, chess and schoolwork, the business of 'literacy' is to see through the objects meeting our eyes and ears towards seeing that they, together, constitute a message, to see through the message towards seeing that it is a coherent text, to see through the coherent text towards seeing how it forms part of a set of practical, social and/or cultural practices, and to see through these practices towards seeing how they make sense historically, morally, ideologically and philosophically.

EXERCISE 1.4: FOUR RESOURCES MODEL

Use the table below to note how Peter's discussion of chess aligns with the Four Resources model. After you have completed that step add another line and consider another familiar text that does not belong to school literacies, such as a bus timetable.

Text sample	Code breaker	Text participant	Text user	Text analyst
Chess game				

Practise looking at texts in this way to see the influence of all four resources on the learner.

Dancing back to paradise

But English education is not just literacy education: One of the defining features of subject English has been its interest in developing language and literacy knowledge and capabilities both in their own right and as they can be expanded when set in the context of the study of literature.

The study of literature, as with language and literacy education, has been a site of much debate (e.g. Crawford 1998; Green & Cormack 2008; Showalter 2003). Many English teachers have found the study of literature distinctively valuable for a number of reasons. Christie (2006) singles out three: a source of pleasure and entertainment; a means of examining substantial personal, social and cultural issues; and a setting for studying the aesthetic aspects of language ('the nature of language as art', p. 203). Others have pointed out that English, virtually since its development as a school subject, has always involved the interrelation of a mix of emphases, including the study of language use, aesthetics and ethics in and through literature (Patterson 2008). The 'balance' among these emphases has been shown to change as the cultural, social and economic conditions surrounding schools changes (e.g. Cormack 2008). Hunter (1997), for example, has suggested that English teaching in 20th-century English-speaking countries 'has increasingly focused throughout on the development of personal conduct that demonstrated creativity and self-reflection' (cited in Patterson 2008, p. 313).

A thread connecting these purposes for learning literature is its distinctive reliance on developing students' ability to read 'closely', and the special understandings about the multiple layers of interpretive resources that such close reading calls for. Engaging literature presents to students the material aspects of language—its sounds and appearance—and the potential value of multiple, and not necessarily definite, final determinable meanings. Appreciating these two aspects of interpretation means that we develop as readers and writers who

do not always simply reduce our interpretive experiences to the calculation of the bottom-line 'meaning' of a text, who keep activated all of our interpretive resources, from our ears to our historical knowledge, our philosophical beliefs and analytic inclinations.

Eagleton expresses the point with regard to poetry, but it applies to other forms, new and ancient, a point that keeps us focused on the special role of literature in English:

> [P]ay particular attention to the language itself—to experience the words as material events rather than to gaze right through them to the meaning. In most poetry, however, it is not a question of experiencing the word rather than the meaning, but of responding to both of them together, or by sensing some internal bond between the two. (Eagleton 2007, p. 47)

This bond may amount to a tension between the sounds or movement of the words, the grammatical patterns, and/or the meanings (Hasan 1985). We can briefly illustrate this point, considering particularly the usefulness of a 4RM-style approach to English education.

Some years ago lightning struck the house of Rita Dove, novelist, playwright, short story writer, essayist, commentator, musician, academic, and the United States Poet Laureate 1993–95. She and her partner lost many paintings, manuscripts and photographs. Friends decided to help them get over this by taking them out dancing, old-time ballroom dancing, a not very cool, not very modern, and certainly a not very common pastime among the African-American intelligentsia. They soon became 'hooked' (Spiegelman 2005). Five years after the lightning strike, Rita Dove published a collection of poems named after a particular style of dancing, *American Smooth* (2004). The following is the third poem in the collection, but it is the first one that is overtly about dancing, and introduces the idea of dance as a way through their distress.

Fox Trot Fridays

Thank the stars there's a day
each week to tuck in

the grief, lift your pearls, and
stride brush stride

quick-quick with a
heel-ball-toe. Smooth

as Nat King Cole's
slow satin smile,

easy as taking
one day at a time:

> *one man and*
> *one woman,*
>
> *rib to rib,*
> *with no heartbreak in sight—*
>
> *just the sweep of Paradise*
> *and the space of a song*
>
> *to count all the wonders in it.*

A sparse poem like this offers an unusually clear glimpse of parts of the poet's toolkit. Poetry draws our attention to the basic codes of the language—the sounds, letters, and layout. In 'Fox Trot Fridays' these codes are recruited in special, deliberate ways: through alliteration (*sweep of Paradise / and the space of a song*), assonance (*each week to tuck in / the grief*), rhythm (*heel-ball-toe. Smooth*), images (*lift your pearls*), and **metaphor** (*slow satin smile*). These are part of the material reality of the poem, how it sounds when it is read, and how it looks on the page. Our attention is also drawn to the changes in pace of the poem created by the changes in enjambment, the splitting of a grammatical unit such as a clause or phrase across two or more lines, keeping us moving across some lines (*to tuck in / the grief*), and stopping us dead at others (*one day at a time: / one man*).

So the poet moves us along deliberately, at a certain pace and rhythm, offering us the possibility that the movement of the poetry can draw us into the movement of the dance, and vice versa. She draws us into this moment with an intimate, chatty opening line (*Thank the stars …*)—thank God … (*stride-brush-stride*) it's Friday! (*heel-ball-toe*). She also weaves in allusions to aspects of cultural and religious symbolism (*Nat King Cole, rib to rib, Paradise…*). But, as resourceful readers of poetry, we know that this is not just a singular, stand-alone literary event. It partakes of a tradition, in this case the tradition of lyric poetry. A lyric poem expresses feelings, addressing the reader directly, intimately, revealing 'inner' thoughts, feelings and states of mind. There is little emphasis on the public proclamation of a story with characters and actions in lyric poems; what lyrics generally let us into is a more fleeting moment of emotional intensity, often expressed in briefer, more sparse poems, such as 'Fox Trot Fridays'.

But another benefit of lyrics is that they offer the poet, and us, a space to hint at emotional ambiguity. In this case Dove troubles the 'smooth' surface of the poem with some light touches that suggest the other, more troubling out-of-dance world: *tuck in / the grief*, and *no heartbreak in sight*—. For her this may have referred to the lightning strike, or not; she does not force her past onto the poem, instead inviting our own experiences into the interpretation.

Here, finally, we are also readers of a poem in a collection with other poems, and, of course, this invites some interpretation of the place of this particular poem

■ **Metaphor**
The literary feature that allows authors to imply that one item resembles another; for example, *the book opened the door to another world* suggests the book is a key.

in the sequence. The collection starts with the loss of paradise, a direct reference to Adam and Eve's expulsion from the Garden of Eden ('All souls'), a poem about confusion and grief. The collection ends on a note of positive resignation ('Looking up from the page, I am reminded of this mortal coil'), a glass-half-full assertion of the value and beauty of ordinary everyday life. This poem is the first in the sequence about dancing, and it begins with putting aside ('tucking in') grief, and, as they dance, they get to a point where there is not a *heartbreak in sight*. So paradise can be momentarily regained and explored, at least for the duration of the song.

This is all done in two sentences—seventeen lines comprising eight couplets plus a singleton—a common lyric format that encourages hints and ambiguities rather than explanatory, discursive expressions. As readers who can use and analyse such texts, as 'poetry-literate', we know then how to draw out these hints and ambiguities without labouring over the business of 'solving' them in a factual sense or even in the sense of wondering what the poet 'finally' meant.

Through the seamless coordination of these elements of the toolkit, and through assuming that her well-resourced readers can coordinate these elements, Rita Dove presents to us a tone of voice that is literally 'smooth' and 'easy', relaxed, relaxing and recuperative. Learning literature in English is not just the place where we encounter these kinds of texts and experience their effects; it is also where we begin to discover how poets bring it off; how they draw on traditions and signal the relevance of those traditions; and how they thereby allow us to develop an understanding of how the sounds, the images, the movement and texture of the language, through their alignments and their tensions, together provide us with pleasing and memorable levels of meaning.

THINKING BOX

My response on reading this the first time …

_____

_____

_____

My response on coming back to it later …

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_____

_____

The blind eye of chance

'Literature' is an open-textured category that refers to inventive texts that have an aesthetic impact among their central goals. Such a categorisation increasingly encompasses a variety of forms of e-literature (Unsworth 2006), and evolving, contentious forms of writing and visual crafting. Some e-literature is confronting rather than contentious, stretching the boundaries of what the digital environment can do with the notion of 'the literary'. As an example we can briefly consider the e-poet Robert Kendall, and his 'collection of poems' entitled *Feed* (Kendall 2008). In *Feed* words and small word groups are sorted by a grammar software program into, effectively, grammatical–but–random sentences. Then, collections of five of these sentences are produced as 'screens' on the basis of some association among their key nouns. Here is one screen from *Feed: Special Edition*, formatted as in the original:

Poetically enhanced poets cast doubt upon the unthinkable celebration.
Nobody wants to get on the bad side of meaning.
Unanswerable arguments tamper with the unparsable country.
Meaning plans a raid on antique assumptions.
The almanacs are about to give in.

Feed will not, indeed could not, ever produce this screen again. The poem presents as 'modern', with no discernible rhyme, tempo, alliteration or assonance, but with a recognisably modern juxtaposition of the colloquial, the grandiloquent and the abstract (e.g. … *the bad side of meaning. / Unanswerable arguments tamper…*). Another feature of experimental–modern poetry is the varying start points of the lines on the page, and we are invited to imbue this with some significance, perhaps as they are 'intended' to indicate differences in pausing or tone.

But it is the associations among the key nouns, in this instance around the notion of meaning, combined with the abstractions created by the rare combinations of words that together most powerfully lure us into the business of poetic interpretation. Readers' work of sensing and turning this into a specific category of writing—poetry—is part of what this poetry achieves. That is, showing readers that it is the activation of their resources as readers of poetry, even at the very moment they know this is a machine-generated, randomly constructed text, is an experience *about* poetry. That process of discovering our resources as readers of poetry is part of the pleasure the work offers. In this instance, this is poetry about meaning, about what meaning in poetry is about, and the question of whether or not it even *is* poetry is what makes it a challenging enquiry *into* poetry. Kendall provides a commentary on how he sees *Feed* operating 'spontaneously from largely random associations of charged words … it presents cultural observation through the blind eye of chance … flirting with the meaningless and parading arbitrary associations before the reader'.

One insight we can develop from experiences such as the poetry of *Feed* is some sense of how we need to be resourced to be an effective reader (and writer) of works constructed with aesthetic motivations significantly in mind. As Eagleton commented, we can see how engaging systematically with literature can provide us with the ability and disposition to experience the reading and making of texts in a special way, by staying alive to the different facets of our experience of the text—the sounds, images, grammar, themes, all informed but not restricted by the background cultural, social and personal knowledge we can bring to bear. This in turn can help us appreciate the 'bonds' between these resources, the ways they might parallel, reinforce or resist one another.

EXERCISE 1.5: CLOSE READING

List the key nouns in the poem *Feed* and then consider what personal meaning they have for you and how that affects the reading that you make of the poem. How does your cultural heritage position you to comprehend the poem? What familiar knowledge you have about poetry does the poem work against? What does this teach you about the complexity of interpreting any text?

The English language as object, meaning and culture

At different points in history, school subject English has been charged with ambitious responsibilities such as saving the English-speaking countries from communism (Sampson 1925, p. 00), retaining the moral orderliness of a society, building a nation, and the preservation of high-cultural heritage and its privileged and aspiring enthusiasts (Williams 1983).

However transcendent the aspirations of English educators, we can at least acknowledge that it is in studying literature that we can deepen our understanding of the connection between the levels of resources that readers and writers deploy, where we can learn how and when to resist the urge to reduce our experience of language (and perhaps, by analogy, other aspects of our experience) to its minimal functionalities by 'gazing' through the sounds and images to leave ourselves with just a baseline translation into 'commonsense' or 'a moral'. From that we can begin to understand why it is that people cherish works—of music, architecture, sculpture and literature—often for generations, and, even more, that they take to reflect, epitomise or even help define their culture. Thus we see the formation of a 'canon' in the traditional literary sense and in popular culture settings as

well. Twentieth-century lyric poetry and Gangster Rap both have canons of key iconic works and exponents, or they would not be recognisable genres.

To know about and be interested in English enough to teach it in the primary, middle or secondary school years calls for engagement with the historical interplay of the knowledge, goals, processes and aspirations that English educators across hundreds of countries have professed, in the past, today, and in rapidly changing local and global educational futures. It is to understand the issues that bear significantly on the teaching and learning of English language, literacy and literature, and finally to be able to frame them in terms of the overall functions that schooling performs in societies such as Australia. So what are schools for?

In different places and times the different functions of schooling can be in competition with one another. The economic, cultural and social conditions of the day are critical in shaping what societies regard as the dominant functions of education: societies may be under different amounts of economic, cultural or military competition from external sources at different times. Further, internal competition among groups of people in a society—perhaps relating to cultural, gender, generational, ethnic or class reconfigurations or struggles—will also vary across place and time. These factors affect what people expect from schools, and they ensure that heated debates about what schools are for will remain a key feature of the educational terrain, regardless of how much things inside and outside schools actually change.

Some of the major functions of schooling (following Hunter 1994; Spring 2009) are pastoral care, developing useful skills, learning to regulate your behaviour, developing human capital, fostering individual expression, preserving and growing the culture's heritage, developing political and civic awareness and determination to act, and so on.

Recalling writing at the centre

Widespread literacy makes schooling possible and vice versa. Literacy capabilities underpin what and how we understand, feel and know, how we work, and how we participate in society. We have encountered six kinds of resources that should attract our attention and effort as educators:

1   resources that allow us to interpret and produce, accurately and fluently, the script of our language
2   resources that allow us to interpret and produce patterns of meaning that reflect participation in our culture
3   resources that allow us to interpret and produce a variety of texts, in practical and influential ways and in a variety of contexts, through an understanding and use of the relationships between texts' various forms and functions

4   resources that allow us to analyse our own and others' texts in ways that enable us to operate analytically, deliberately and critically

5   resources that allow us to use texts of different kinds to transform the material and social world, mobilising others, learning about and productively capitalising on the systems of knowledge and influence

6   resources that allow us to manage productively the different literacy demands of texts in different disciplines.

Seen in this way, schooling and literacy development are deeply joined in their processes and in the immensity of the consequences of success and failure for individuals and societies. A full-bodied view of literacy reflects an appreciation of the social, cultural, linguistic, technological, aesthetic, intellectual, ideological and moral complexity of the human society our students face, and a refusal to walk away from that complexity by offering them a simple set of resources to deal with it.

EXERCISE 1.6: EXPANDING THE FOUR RESOURCES

Why has Peter expanded the Four Resources model? What real-life and school contexts have made him add two more? What would they require teachers to consider as they plan their programs?

The one thing we would notice if we had come from a society without schools and embarked on an educational tour is that, whatever the functions of schooling in play in any given school activity, however grand or mundane the work at hand, the business, especially the high-stakes business, is generally about or modelled on written texts. Even when a formal assessment of a student takes place in the form of oral language, it seems that it is really just written language that happens to be spoken out loud that the teacher (and the student) are hoping to 'hear'.

So our kind of schooling is literacy-dependent, and our schools literacy-saturated, even when there is 'talk' everywhere. It is sometimes hard for us to see the significance of this literacy saturation in our daily domestic and institutional life because most of us have been, for such a long time, literate, and institutionally literate. What we do not see is what the student struggling with literacy sees— that so much of everyday life in and out of school requires fluent, accurate, effortless reading and writing, and so much of it, so quickly, becomes so much more complex, abstract and dense as learning advances.

It is these two ideas taken together—the multiplicity of the functions of schooling and the literacy-dependence of our ways of acting on those functions— that set a scene in which we can examine the teaching and learning of English

language, literacy and literature, and the distinctive importance of these areas to the lives of individuals and societies. One thing that becomes clear is that being a teacher of English language, literacy and literature is a uniquely complex and demanding job. It calls for knowledge, intelligence, innovativeness, professional persistence and stamina, seriousness and playfulness, and an optimism that will sometimes seem pathological. All this will sometimes be called for in the face of resistant students who may not have been served well throughout their years of schooling. Also encountered sometimes will be parents, bosses, bureaucrats and governments who have moulded their resistance into a comfortable lifestyle of ignorance and irritability. But when we consider what is at stake for the future, our students' and our own, it is the size of the difference between getting it right and getting it wrong that makes teaching English the biggest job in town.

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