

AATE POSITION PAPER

ENGLISH IN A NATIONAL CURRICULUM

The school subject English draws on a number of tertiary level disciplines, including literary studies, linguistics, media and cultural studies, and writing. To provide for the needs of students in contemporary society, the range of texts legitimately studied in the English classroom has undergone significant expansion since the middle of the 20th century. As communication practices continue to change in line with advances in technology, this expansion can be anticipated to continue.

The varied nature of the subject and its diverse demands on teachers and their professional capacities are captured in the following statement from Standards for Teachers of English Language and Literacy in Australia (STELLA), developed jointly by AATE and ALEA.

Accomplished English/Literacy teachers have a broad, deep and critical knowledge and understanding of the academic discipline (or fields of knowledge) from which their subject and curriculum area are derived, including specialist knowledge relevant to the age ranges they teach...They are informed about contemporary issues and debates regarding language, literacy and literature and possess a critical understanding of recent theory and practice relevant to their field, including language acquisition, literacy learning and development, reader response and literary theory. They demonstrate high standards of performance in their own literacy practices and have a firm grasp of the application of new technologies in their field. They have a wide knowledge of different texts and types of texts, classic and contemporary literature (including poetry, fiction and drama), everyday texts, visual, media and electronic texts.

English demands a good deal of teachers. The history of the subject has been marked by significant changes over time in content, pedagogy and assessment. The movement towards a national curriculum cannot easily leave behind this rather dramatic history. Still, the times demand that we continue to ask what it is that English does that affords it a place in the school curriculum- a place that has and continues (as it should) to be a privileged one.

A significant statement as to the role of English has been made by Kress (2006, p.32), who repositions the historic concern of English with aesthetics, rhetoric and ethics (cf. Hunter, 1997) for the future.

English is the subject which is concerned with the means for representing ourselves, our meanings, values and ideals to ourselves and to others. It is concerned with making available the means for understanding the representations of others – whether in the past or present – and rendering them significant for ourselves. Above all, English deals with the means for designing our visions.

This last sentence emphasises that English is the subject in which students attain the linguistic wherewithal and textual knowledge to give expressive form to texts of their own creation, in situations arising from their needs, interests, hopes and dreams. These texts will be intended to create “effects in and on the world” (Green, 2006, p.16), effects which will vary from immediate pragmatic and instrumental concerns to those involving pleasure. In turn, this also highlights that the discipline of English has always been first and foremost centred in the lives of its students. The STELLA elaborations describe this inheritance in the following terms.

Accomplished English/Literacy teachers recognise each student's uniqueness. They are aware of their students' diverse sociocultural, language and ethnic heritage and have specific knowledge of the community to which each student belongs, including the literacy practices of that community. They know each student's preferred learning style and linguistic and cognitive capabilities. They recognise and affirm each student's potential and achievements; they know their histories as learners and members of the school community. Accomplished English/Literacy teachers are sensitive to the individual dispositions of their

students, the ways they interact with their peers, their engagement with schooling, their values and interests and their aspirations and ideals.

In its concern with aesthetics, rhetoric, ethics and design, English develops the social and personal efficacy of individuals, and works to strengthen connections between people across social, cultural, temporal and geographic divides. . It is only through valuing and supporting diversity that the needs of all students can be met. A national curriculum for English can contribute to nation-building and Australia's long term social and economic prosperity by enhancing the linguistic, intellectual, ethical and creative capacities of individuals, in the process harnessing and extending the possibilities for creativity that follows from an openness to difference To these ends, English has a unique and significant role to play in a national curriculum by helping to shape and further the key elements outlined below.

Accordingly, we endorse a national K-12 curriculum to the extent that it supports teachers in meeting the needs of students into the future and on the terms outlined here.

1. Australia's cultural heritage

We believe that in English students learn to appreciate the values and traditions which are part of this nation's cultural heritage. This is achieved through the study of a range of textual forms that promote understandings of literary heritage, cultural engagement and how ideas and language shape identity.

Students explore and evaluate these values and traditions as central elements of the contexts in which texts are created, read and viewed. Such critical thinking is at the centre of Western European intellectual tradition, which has developed through generative engagement with difference.. Disseminating the ideal of liberal democracy and acknowledging Australia's historical position as a postcolonial and multicultural society, English promotes values such as a 'fair go', acceptance and understanding. The study of English in a national curriculum needs to include Aboriginal and multicultural perspectives and texts.

We are committed to a culturally dynamic and balanced curriculum. Such a curriculum must engage students in the study and use of language in written, spoken and visual modes and through different types of texts, including: classic and popular texts, multimodal texts, fiction and non-fiction texts.

2. The education of powerfully literate citizens who are able to effectively participate in society and realise their goals and aspirations

We believe that effective language use lies at the heart of active participation in individual and community life. A defining element of English is its concern with social, imaginative and personal uses of language, as well as the manner in which it gives equal value to the aesthetic, creative and critical domains of language. Increased appreciation of artistry in the use of language in a variety of situations is central to the study of language. English teachers draw from a rich repertoire of teaching strategies, which acknowledge and extend the experiences of the young people they teach.

A key goal of English teachers is to enable students to understand and experience how language is used differently in different contexts, thereby enabling them to succeed in the full

range of communication situations in which they might participate. A fundamental expectation of English teachers is that students will understand and use the codes and conventions of Standard Australian English in an appropriate way, based on their understanding of contextual demands. Oral communication receives significant emphasis in English, being essential to success in life, but takes on special significance as a basis for deep engagement in writing and reading and critical thinking. Through listening and speaking, English students engage in significant imaginative and intellectual activity, negotiating issues of value and identity in a way that is unique to the English classroom.

The commitment to the study of language in use in a variety of contexts requires that English take account of different textual forms and necessitates the study and use of print, visual, electronic and spoken texts. The study of English should include classic, contemporary and popular texts, multimodal texts, imaginative, information and argument texts. Such a range encompasses everyday texts, culturally salient texts and texts that are aesthetically valued.

3. A rich, examined life and a moral education

We believe students come to understand themselves and their world through engagement with a range of cultures and the ways these cultures represent human experience. Textual study provides opportunities for vicarious experience of other lives, places and times, and greater understanding of the human condition. The development of self-understanding and a better understanding of others are key aims of the English curriculum. On these grounds, a national curriculum for Australia must also be international in its scope and intent. It must be open to the ideas, values, beliefs and texts of other peoples, other times and other places..

Through their study of language, literature and other types of texts, students explore ethical and moral issues to develop and understand their own values and perspectives, as well as the values and perspectives of others. At the same time, English teachers recognise that texts have a range of purposes, not the least of which is to provide pleasure. In devising teaching and learning activities, English teachers work at once to develop the functional, socio-cultural, imaginative, emotional and ethical understandings and capacities of their students. A national curriculum that addresses such different concerns will deepen students' understandings of language and of how language and text shape cultural and personal identity. It will also provide opportunities for students to use language for imaginative and critical purposes, acknowledging the deep connection between symbolization, reflection and conception.

4. Teacher autonomy and professionalism

To be successful, the national curriculum requires a real sense of ownership on the part of the professional educators who will be charged with its implementation. This can only develop as a consequence of the direct engagement of teachers and other educators at all stages of the development and implementation of the national curriculum.

The national curriculum should allow and support professional decision-making at the classroom level, giving teachers the flexibility they need to address the needs of their students. The touchstone here will be the capacity of the national curriculum to harness and extend the ability of English teachers to mobilise authentic learning; including the acquisition of knowledge, skills development and application, innovation and creativity; and to connect their students to the national curriculum and its aspirations. Assessment has an integral role to play in this process. Accomplished English teachers understand the central role of assessment in advancing student learning, improving the effectiveness of teaching practice and contributing to planning for future learning. A national curriculum must allow teachers to make judicious use of a wide range of formal and informal assessments that relate as closely as possible to real and diverse conditions of use and practice.

It is vitally important that teachers are able to use appropriate processes, procedures and strategies to improve student learning. Supporting teachers' professional work by providing extensive and high quality professional learning, and by developing and providing access to high quality teaching resources and technologies, will be crucial to the success of the national curriculum. Effective pre-service training is also of the highest importance. It is necessary to have teachers trained in the discipline of English and its pedagogies in order to teach the subject effectively. Subject knowledge is vital, but equally so is the capacity of teachers to effectively communicate their own passion for language and literature in developing the interests and capacities of their students.