
Igniting a Passion in English

SUSAN NOBLE

ABSTRACT This article looks in detail at the constraints imposed on teachers of English by current examination syllabuses, and at how approaches developed through the Key Stage 3 (KS3) offer and the innovative Excellent Futures Curriculum at Stanley Park High School, Carshalton enable KS4 students to be more securely and fruitfully engaged as readers, writers, speakers and listeners.

I started at Stanley Park High School, Carshalton as an English Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) student on my second placement in January 2003, aged 21. Previously, for my first placement, I had been to a leafy, middle-class comprehensive in the heart of Surrey where I never met the head teacher and was thrown in to teach a top set Year 8 with no introduction. After six weeks of misery, I decided that in order to discern if teaching was for me, I needed my second placement school to be completely different from the first. I was given Stanley Park, and some 14 years later I am still here, now as Head of the English department. At times I have felt pangs of anxiety about my decision to stay in one place for so long, but when I reflect on the school today and the school I first entered in 2003, I realise that I have been privileged to witness and take part in the transformation that Stanley Park has undergone. The Stanley Park of 2017 is a far cry from what it was in 2003.

In the English department we have seen our results steadily rise and this year we were pleased with the marks gained by our first cohort in the new-style GCSEs. Like all other departments in the country, we felt the anxiety and pressure which comes with the new specifications and the corresponding challenge that all Year 11s now face. After our initial chagrin, we focused our efforts on preparing our students for the new GCSEs, and, more importantly, on maintaining our commitment to enkindle a passion for English and an awareness of how literature helps us understand our world and history. In order to do this, we have resisted becoming solely driven by targets, by the need to teach for exams, and by regarding students as data for analysis. Instead, we are

concerned to devise creative ways to engage our students and harness their interest.

Last month, my Year 10 students were engrossed in the BBC adaptation of *Great Expectations*. Throughout the film, they were gripped by the plot and more importantly questioned and learnt much about Victorian society. We enjoyed lively discussions about the class system, education, child labour and gender relationships. Through the brilliant acting they identified with the plight of the convict Magwitch and the misery of Miss Havisham, and were critical of Pip's treatment of Joe and overwhelmingly repulsed by Orlick. We only read three extracts from the text and we will not be using this text as our nineteenth-century novel for GCSE Literature. So why did we teach it? Simply because it is a great story and our students enjoyed it. We used the extracts to start teaching some of the Language Paper 1 skills, but mainly we wanted to increase our students' cultural capital and provide them with an experience of literature that they enjoyed. I can honestly say, my students loved it! One golden moment was when 15-year-old Jed, recently returned from a period of absence, called out 'What? Nooo ... Magwitch is Estella's dad! ... This film is sick!' For me, this engagement and strength of reaction is what teaching is all about and exactly the excitement we want students to feel at the beginning of the GCSE years.

The Reader's Right to Enjoyment

At Stanley Park, many of our students are not confident readers and find English lessons challenging. For this reason, we have tried to design a curriculum that provides them with enjoyable experiences while also developing the necessary skills for success in later life (where exams are just one feature). We believe our job is to engage students in a range of literature, develop our students' literacy and communication skills and find opportunities to develop our students' empathy with the world around them. Recently in English teaching, there has been a view that schools need to increase the level of challenge in Key Stage 3 (KS3) in order for students to be prepared for the new, more demanding GCSEs. This has resulted in some schools teaching GCSE texts in KS3 years, beginning GCSE courses in Year 9, assessing students using GCSE levels from Year 7, and including in KS3 texts from 'Wider Reading' lists found on the A-level specification. Is *Wide Sargasso Sea* a novel to recommend for students in Year 8? Is *The Handmaid's Tale* a Year 9 book? In a climate where young people are more likely to text on a mobile, play a computer game or consume box sets of TV dramas rather than read a book, I believe we need to tempt them with stimulating novels and stories that relate to their lives and the world around them.

This belief has seen us including novels such as *My Sister Lives on the Mantelpiece* and *The Prince of Mist*, which are stories that grip our readers and in our opinion are age appropriate. The journey of Jamie in the plot of *My Sister* is heart-warming yet thought provoking: we witness how the tragedy of a terrorist attack rips apart his family. The discussions we have about racism, grief

and family relationships provide our students with a chance to explore some of the most topical issues of our time. At times we will teach *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* to groups of Year 9 students who are very reluctant readers. We are well aware of the fact that many primary schools are now teaching this in Year 5, but we feel that vital lessons from the book can still be learned by 14-year-olds and that the more subtle uses of author's craft will go over 10-year-olds' heads. There seems little point in bombarding reluctant readers with texts that are too difficult for their reading age when we are trying to foster an understanding that reading can bring pleasure.

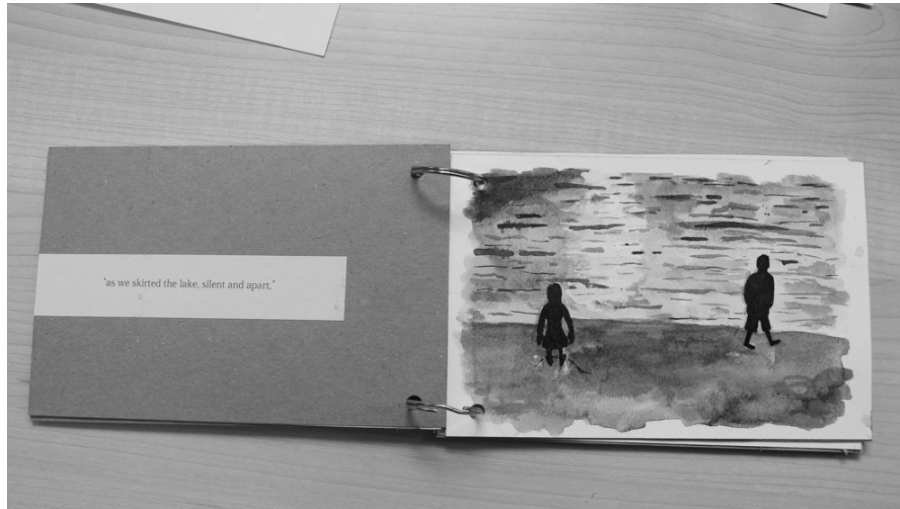


Figure 1. Year 9 Poetry Project: the opening lines of *Winter Swans* by Owen Sheers represented in watercolour.

This is not to say that we do not spend time in the year visiting more challenging texts such as *The Tell Tale Heart* in Year 7 or *The Signalman* in Year 9, but we ensure that in every year our students have opportunities to enjoy a shared class text. In the past we have been criticised for using some of these texts by those who would like to see more challenging texts on the specification. After teaching these stories to classes who genuinely want to read on and are excited by the narrative, I feel our decision to protect our students' right to enjoyment is justified. After all, don't most adults usually put down books they find inaccessible? Our aim for our students is to encourage them to want to pick up another book, not groan in frustration at the prospect of reading.

In our KS3 syllabus we have chosen current issues of interest to explore. Through these we aim to embed skills examined in GCSE Language Paper 2, and provide opportunities for discussion. In Year 8 we study the impact of sugar through a number of documentaries. In Year 9 we look at the morality of

animal captivity through *Blackfish*. In Year 10 we look at gender relationships through political speeches, and in Year 11 we look at poverty through the documentary *The Slum Children of Mumbai*. Our aim is to develop our students' understanding of the world around them and expose them to ideas they have not yet encountered. The look on the students' faces when they realise the bottle of drink they have in their bag contains the equivalent of ten teaspoons of sugar is a key moment in the Year 8 scheme of work. When they realise some branded baby food contains as much as two teaspoons of sugar, their outrage is not only moving to watch but an important step in their understanding of the world around them.

Description: the need for success

Just as we are careful to provide enjoyable reading material for our students, we also aim to prevent students from suffering frequent failure and the despondency this generates. This is a difficult line to tread as we must ensure that we still maintain an appropriate level of challenge and prepare our students for the taxing GCSEs. Recently, my Year 10 class looked at a section of the film *Jurassic World* and spent time developing engaging descriptions and varied sentences about the scene where the two boys first face Indomitus Rex. After a number of lessons modelling and working together in small groups to develop effective description, the students sat in silence for just under an hour and wrote their narrative of the film scene. Their responses were detailed, and illustrated that the students had invested in the activity. I was surprised when some students complained at the end of the timed activity that they hadn't finished.

As the GCSE exam does not include moving images as a stimulus for creative writing, my next challenge was to prepare the students for a still image. This writing they found much harder to succeed at. Despite a 10-minute planning session, their answers were bald in comparison with the descriptions inspired by watching the film, and students felt no pride in their work. Many claimed their descriptions were 'rubbish'. This worried me. A week before, they had been buoyed by their success with *Jurassic World*; now, they were deflated. Determined not to let this experience become a failure in their minds, I planned two more lessons where they would use a computer to type up their work. At the beginning of each lesson we shared effective sentences, explored how colour can improve description and revisited how to develop varied sentences. Again the final results were handed in, but this time with smiles and a sense of achievement. For this class, writing in exam conditions is a daunting process and over the next two years I will be aiming to develop their confidence by protecting them from a sense of failure.



Figure 2. Year 9 Poetry Project: *Sonnet 29* by Elizabeth Barrett Browning represented in oil on canvas.

Hidden Creativity

Recently, our school made the decision to reduce the number of English lessons from five to four in Year 11. We had previously increased the number of lessons from four to five when the new GCSE specifications came out. However, this had resulted in an extra lesson needing to be added to the timetable, and after a full cohort had been through the course, it was felt that it was important to return to the original timetable in order to once again enable an earlier finish to teaching on Thursdays for the benefit of staff and student well-being. The loss of a lesson posed challenges to our planned delivery of the new GCSE and resulted in us having to compromise on our decision not to teach GCSE texts in Year 9.

We decided that the most accessible part of the GCSE specification would be the taught poetry element in Literature Paper 2. In order to avoid overwhelming our Year 9 students, and after witnessing the success of various projects deriving from the Excellent Futures Curriculum (EFC), we decided to turn the unit into an extended project. Over 12 lessons we taught the students four poems from the set poetry cluster: two poems written before 1900 and two written after that date. These were Robert Browning's *Porphyria's Lover*; Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Sonnet 29*; *Winter Swans* by Owen Sheers; and Carol Ann Duffy's *Before You Were Mine*. After the students had been given grounding knowledge of each of the poems, we launched our project to explore

one of the poems in more depth. We gave the students suggestions about how they could do this. For example, they might explore a poet's life and times in more detail and present the information; or write a poem that mirrored one of the cluster poems and write a commentary on it; or create a piece of drama around a poem, or a visual representation of a poem, or any other idea they might come up with that seemed appropriate.

The students knew from the beginning that, as with EFC projects, there would be an exhibition of their work on show to other classes. Over the course of the half term I was surprised by my students' hidden creativity! For three years we had written essays, monologues, articles, poems and stories, and yet the majority of my strongest writers chose to represent the poems in art (see the illustrative photos). This resulted in us purchasing oil pastels, watercolour paints, charcoal and art paper and embarking on three weeks of project lessons. Our one condition was that somewhere in the display there needed to be key words from the poem. The results were truly stupendous. The students were so engaged in their work! Their pride at the exhibition was almost tangible. It was evident to all of us that this project had elicited much deeper connections with the poems than a series of essays and questions would have done. This year I tested their knowledge of the poems and was thrilled to see that they had retained detailed information about the context and meaning, and could even recall some quotations. The success of this project has meant that our current Year 9s will begin this project after Easter.



Figure 3. Year 9 Poetry Project: the closing lines of *Winter Swans* by Owen Sheers represented in watercolour.

And now...

As a department, we still have some way to go. We need to work out how to incorporate the school's declared commitment to 'optimism in a rapidly changing world' into our curriculum, how to develop more consistently effective peer assessment, and how to continue to engage our more passive learners. These are areas that we will find challenging, but the climate of our school encourages taking calculated risks. The fact that we are not constricted by demands to generate 'flight paths' to predict student attainment, or by other kinds of data crunching, means we have the freedom to explore. This year, our focus has also turned towards the ways we approach KS5 with our A-level English, and towards the GCSE re-sits. In our A-level teaching we are finding there is a real need to develop our students' independence and ability to lead and direct their own learning. For the GCSE re-sits we are working on developing a curriculum that is not 'just more of the same' from Year 11 and which instead tries to engage the students in texts and activities that they will find stimulating.

For the first time in a number of years I feel that as a department we now have time to take a breath and reflect on what we have achieved, and on what we need to improve. We finally have time to think about areas that are not immediately connected to the GCSEs and A levels. It has been busy, even hectic, these last few years, but as a department we are now looking towards developing our team, sharing good practice and spending time on the finer details of our curriculum.

SUSAN NOBLE has been Head of English at Stanley Park High School, Carshalton, since 2012. *Correspondence:* snoble@suttonmail.org

