“The Freedom to Frame Questions”
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The title of this paper echoes that of my recent article in English in Education (2007) in which I discussed control exerted over the curriculum by examinations’ assessment objectives. How far are my views shared by teachers of English Literature? To what extent do practising teachers wrest back control, finding light-touch ways to teach the subject they love and at the same time ‘deliver’ curriculum and examination imperatives? What follows here may be regarded as a small initial study leading to further research in this area.

the background

Teachers’ freedom to frame questions is much constrained in England. Their subject of English Literature is centrally defined by official programmes of study and assessment objectives (AOs). The assessment regime gives AOs undue prominence under the pressure of ‘hyperaccountability’ (Mansell, 2007). At A Level ‘assessment criteria…dictate much of what students actually do’ (Nightingale, 2007, p139). At GCSE you routinely hear assessors of coursework talking about where the AOs have been ‘hit’. At KS3 the assessment focuses (AFs) which govern the tests are now given renewed prominence through the Assessment of Pupil Performance (APP), the programme of teacher-assessment of pupils which QCA suggest is appropriate on a ‘day to day’ basis. (1) This centralism can be described as fordist, in that it is hierarchically managed, with clear divisions of labour and systems of quality-control. Despite post-fordist developments over decades in the industries of this country and of our competitors (see e.g. Edwards et al, 1992) ‘schools remain resolutely fordist in their architectures and procedures’ (Hartley, 2007, p629). To Graham (1998) ‘the horizons of school teachers in the UK have been narrowed by the curricular prescriptions of the nation state’ (p11). To Jones (2003) central curriculum control is ‘culture reinvented as management’. Teachers are locked into being mere deliverers (Rosowsky, 2006).
My intention is consider two matters arising from this situation of constraint and to begin to investigate how far and in what ways they both feature in the work of practising teachers: teaching to the test and ways of reading.

There is probably nothing new in the charge nor the phenomenon of teaching to the test; Brian Jackson was concerned about ‘the increasing influence of examinations in school’ in 1965 (p9). But the current news agenda suggests a more acute problem, the unhealthy dominance of test criteria in the classroom. There are two particular symptoms. The first is what I call phantom emphasis. For example, AO5 for English Literature under the current specifications prescribes that students will be able to show understanding of the context of a work of literature. In the early days of Curriculum 2000 this requirement caused much anxiety among English teachers, and publishers cashed in. Yet experience has shown that little new or extra teaching of context is required, that the anxiety was largely unfounded, and that, as the examination itself was first to acknowledge, ‘Experience of examining in this subject along with research conducted into how candidates approach answering questions show that there is never an occasion where one can assess a single assessment objective discretely.’ (2) For some (e.g. Atherton, 2004) Curriculum 2000 has been a missed opportunity to redefine the subject in respect of this apparent softening of demand. The KS3 tests and APP teacher assessment explicitly claim to be able to test objectives discretely, yet the AFs notoriously overlap. For instance, consider this question from the 2007 Reading Paper:

How does the writer build up a sense of Gregor’s increasing desperation in paragraphs 5 to 9?

This question according to the mark scheme addresses AF 4, structure and organisation (because of ‘build up’, presumably), but it could just as well be asking about AF5 writer’s use of language (‘How does the writer…’) or AF6 writer’s purpose (‘Gregor’s increasing desperation’) (3). The KS3 Shakespeare test contains phantom emphasis in a different form. Its mark scheme claims that there are four possible ‘areas for assessment’, any one of which may be the focus for the examination question (4), yet the mark schemes are substantially generic and marks are given for close reading of the set scenes (Coles, 2003). Neither these ‘areas’ nor the Reading Paper’s AFs are revealed to the pupils sitting the examination. It is not
surprising that it is suggested that test performances might be better if pupils were told (Pepper et al, 2007).

The second symptom is regurgitation to the point of plagiarism in students’ writing. Teachers do trust AOs despite their often phantom nature, and teach their students to include in their work tracts of information in the name of context. The evidence of this is in examiners’ reports, for example (OCR, 2006):

(a) ‘reliance on…the unloading of extraneous social/historical/cultural/literary material (on Miller’s politics, the Wall Street Crash and consumerism in the USA, on Aristotle and Greek tragedy, on the background to World War One and Sherriff’s involvement in it, on Pinter’s Jewish origins…)’, (p8)

(b) ‘The fact that Tennyson’s brother took opium never did quite inform a study of “The Charge of the Light Brigade”’ (p29)

Note that (a) is a comment on an examination and (b) on coursework; both modes of assessment attract this symptom. School students would not do this kind of thing unless they had been told to, and they are told to by teacher teaching to the test, anxious about their results and ‘hitting’ the AOs.

In terms of ways of reading, teachers are pulled in two different directions: at KS3 and to some extent at KS4 close reading holds sway; at KS5 context and breadth, especially under the new specifications, becomes important.

‘Last year, in discussion with children’s authors in Manchester, Tony Ross was astonished to learn how his books were being used in the classroom to demonstrate sentence-level work’. (Wyse and Jones, 2002, p80)

Under the impact of the ‘Strategy’ and the ‘Framework’ this is what reading became, a matter of reading short passages for analysis, rather than for breadth and pleasure. The practice of close reading, enshrined and enforced in ‘literacy’ practice with younger school students, has been felt under a kind of threat post-16. The traditional A Level English Literature course has been accused of clinging to an old-fashioned
view of reading as close analysis of individual texts largely devoid of contextual/historical/theoretical enquiry. Curriculum 2000, with its emphasis on explicit attention to different readings and contexts, was intended to redress a balance, though for some (e.g. Atherton, 2004) this has been only partially successful. It is therefore instructive to consider lessons pre-A Level in this regard. QCA’s assessment focuses for reading number seven in all, the last of which is *relate texts to their social, cultural and historical contexts and literary tradition*. We are told that AF7 is ‘not covered’ in the KS3 English Reading Test, though no rationale is given for this (QCA, 2007, p3). Markers in their training are apparently told ‘it could be, but it isn’t’. So, when a teacher is teaching a text to Year 9 or Year 11, where on the intrinsic-extrinsic continuum (see Eaglestone, 2000, Chapter 4) is the work located?

**the research**

Two opportunity samples of responses from PGCE trainees have informed this investigation. The first was the written responses to a question about attitudes to teaching to the test, conducted mid-way through the course and reported on more fully in my previous paper (op. cit.). The responses were roughly equally divided between positive and negative views of the notion of teaching to the test as a practice. Some spoke up for tests, arguing that they ‘consolidate’ learning and therefore pupils ‘need to be familiar’ with their requirements. But one trainee summed up teaching to the test like this: ‘AOs the master, literature the slave’. The second sample was a discussion conducted later in the course, in which the same group of trainees were asked to reflect on the state of literature teaching, based on their main practice. The picture was inevitably mixed to a degree, but a theme which emerged strongly was the sense of prescriptivism particularly at KS4: ‘strait-jacketed by exams’, ‘poetry overkill’, ‘teachers asking questions they know the answers to’. If this is what beginning teachers perceive, what do their more experienced colleagues think, and do? The experience of English Literature at school is one of the most powerful factors behind English teachers wanting to teach their subject (Daly, 2004), and teaching literature is one of their great professional pleasures. But in what ways currently are this power and this pleasure qualified?
Over the course of approximately a school term six (6) English teachers in local state secondary schools were able to assist in this enquiry. They were observed teaching: the brief here was simply that it should be a ‘literature lesson’, however defined. Then they were interviewed. Both the lesson (film) and the interview (audio) were recorded. The aim was to ask ethnographically and consider phenomenologically what the intentions and concerns of practising English teachers actually are. The results of five interviews and recorded lessons are considered here.

(a) the interviews

For a summary of questions and responses see Appendix 1. The questions centred on impressions of literature teaching, when they were students, and now in their schools, and in the wider (national?) context.

All five reflected on the subject in their own sixth form experience as a pleasurable and stimulating source of discussion. All five saw literature teaching as central to their current work as English teachers, although they may have expressed the point variously. Teacher 1 used the word ‘dominated’ in an entirely positive sense in declaring that the English schemes of work in that school are ‘dominated’ by literature. This is very like the assertion by Teacher 2 that in this school literature ‘suffuses everything’, and also like Teacher 4’s expression ‘central focus’. Teacher 3 indicates perhaps a different situation; trying to ‘make space’ implies curriculum pressures rather than freedom.

The question about impressions of the current state of English Literature as a subject elicited a mixture of responses. The assertion that literature is why people want to become English teachers (Teacher 1) is a statement of a persistent and presumably welcome verity. Teacher 4, whose own university experience was not wholly happy, made a positive claim about Curriculum 2000 and the bridge to higher education. The three other comments expressed frustration with central policy: ‘Literacy’, ‘heritage’, ‘SATs’. Teacher 5 wished to be at a distance from the view of Teacher 2 about GCSE poetry. When asked about the current impact of syllabuses/specifications the teachers’ responses were almost entirely critical and negative. Teacher 1’s ‘separate from history’ remark was a complaint about the insistence on context (AO5) at A level,
perhaps the very factor that Teacher 4 was applauding in the previous response. Teacher 3’s ‘two minds’ concerned support for independent learning, but also a complaint about the onerous requirements of coursework at GCSE, echoed by Teacher 5.

The relevance of these responses to teaching to the test is both clear and uncertain. Clearly the teachers find examination requirements problematic and pressurising. What is uncertain is whether they respond by in effect passing on the pressure, teaching their students to unload extraneous material, for example, or whether they find ways of preserving what they feel to be the enjoyable soul of the subject. Recording literature lessons was intended, amongst other things, to begin to clarify the uncertainty here.

On the subject of close and wider reading there are interesting glimpses. The expressions ‘pushed aside’ and ‘narrowed’ are part of a discourse which criticises the close reading strategies of the Strategy. Teacher 1 and Teacher 4 both note the move away from the dominance of close reading post-16, but do not agree in their evaluation of this. All five claimed that their departments are involved in promoting wider reading outside the English classroom, and were entirely in support of this aim.

(b) the lessons

In all five cases I observed good teaching: carefully planned and structured lessons; students on task, engaged, and evidently learning. It was also noticeable in all these lessons that the teacher was having a good time: smiles, body language, assertiveness and also patient listening to what the students had to say; the teacher was engaged too.

Clearly the fact that this small number of local teachers, known to me, had agreed to participate in this research skews the sample in the sense of confident classroom practice. But by the same token the focus of the research is on what effective teachers want to do and feel they can do.

Appendix 2 summarises the contexts and nature of the lessons, and also some salient points about teaching to the test and ways of reading.
Teacher 1’s lesson was a discussion of a passage, with the teacher informally but in a leading position sitting on the edge of the desk, and everyone in a relatively small A Level class contributing, and closely reading: the kind of lesson we would all occasionally like to teach and probably were lucky enough to have had taught to us. It was quite early in the academic year, which may have some bearing on the fact that there was no mention made by the teacher of exam requirements. This was an experienced teacher, whose implicit objective in the lesson was teaching skills which enable students to cope with the exam later. Teacher 3 was operating in the same territory, and again exam imperatives remained implicit, but the lesson was very different in terms of teaching and learning, and also as a reflection of ways of reading. Here groups of students were considering the whole text, each group from a different theoretical perspective (for example, Marxist, feminist, and psychoanalytical).

The comparison of Teachers’ 4 and 5 lessons is also inviting. Although there were regular moments of paired discussion, Teacher 5 was the more centrally directing, seen in the teacher’s patrolling of the classroom, and the arrangement of its desks, as well as the explicit use of terminology from the examination in the lesson objectives displayed on the board. In Teacher 4’s lesson the majority of the time was spent in groups with low-key interventions by the teacher, preceded by the briefest mention of comparison of poems, ‘that’s what they’re looking for in the higher bands’. Both lessons included elements of close reading, but the former’s was more wide-ranging in terms of ways of reading since it also included intertextual references (not surprising since the lesson was on Carol Ann Duffy’s poem ‘Havisham’) and image analysis, where the students were asked to consider denotation and connotation of still images projected. The lesson of Teacher 6 focused on aspects of Shakespeare in performance (how to direct a speech of Benedick’s) but this emphasis was coterminous with a desire to address assessment objectives for the upcoming SATs: ‘That sentence is loaded with meaning…I would certainly look at directing that.’

As well as being led by an engaged teacher each of these lessons implicitly or explicitly addresses the examination agenda. Whatever their reservations about the ‘exam-driven’ nature of what they do, there is in the classroom a light-touch approach,
a skilful integration of objectives, an example of ‘mediating practices’ (Bousted, 2000). Perhaps this is part of what we mean by good teaching.

**a remarkable coincidence**

Things have been different. It is a tribute to the power of collective nostalgia that I, and colleagues with whom I discussed the matter, got the date wrong in *English in Education* of the appearance of Hardy’s poem *Drummer Hodge* in an O Level Literature exam. The exam was in 1983 not 1982 as I said in the article, the year after the Falklands War, but still a remarkable coincidence and still a strong if refracted memory. The poem, which is about an English soldier dying in the southern hemisphere, was set before the war broke out, and provoked strong responses from examiners as well as examinees. I conducted telephone interviews earlier this year with four examiners from the time, simply asking them what they remembered; a summary of what they said is in Appendix 3. I wish to highlight two threads in their comments. The first is the feeling of participation implied in Luke’s responses: ‘like going to church’ and ‘examiners don’t have rows now’, which seems to resonate with the interview responses on the current state of literature teaching. The other is a glimpse of the possibility of student responses to literature being most vividly informed by wider, even intertextual factors (‘news items’) than the mere requirements of the exam. The remark about ‘going off the subject of the poem’ returns us to the present control by AO of what is rewardable and what is not. *Drummer Hodge* was a coincidence; but if teachers had more choice, of texts and of questions to ask and reward, perhaps more work on poetry in particular would be ‘spectacularly well done’ than at present. The glimpse is of an earlier era and indicates the extent of change.

Some degree of teaching to the test is both proper and inevitable. The problem arises when different stakeholders feel distortions are thereby produced. To Dylan Wiliam (2001) a test is ‘authentic’, that is to say has high validity, if everyone is happy for teachers to teach to it. To put this another way, it should be, according to Raymond O’Malley, ‘the minimum disturbance of good teaching’ (quoted in Cooper, 1988, p31). For an exploration of ways in which examination questions in English Literature can be expressed so as to facilitate the authentic test see Sharp (1988). In the same book
Owen (1988) argues that marking literature responses necessarily involves recognition of different psycholinguistic dimensions. I wonder whether anything like that currently happens when an examiner talks about which AO has been ‘hit’. Coles (2004) argues that testing in the English curriculum and testing regime often entails failure to ‘acknowledge young people’s involvement in complex cultural activity’ (p56). One can imagine a more enlightened mode of testing which is liberal enough to permit complexity, authentic enough to have the support of stakeholders, and which promotes a positive backwash (Cooper, op cit).

The Cambridge Plain Texts O Level Literature examination was set for sixteen years, from 1971 until 1986, and featured an unseen poetry task. Although at first the task comprised structured questions there was always an emphasis on personal response:

‘…try to show what images and feelings these lines call up for you’ (1979, the first year)
‘After reading the poem a number of times, say what it means to you’ (1983, the Drummer Hodge year)
‘Write about whatever you find interesting in this poem’ (1986, the final year).

Here we have a model of question-setting which is ‘authentic’, and which restores to teachers a freedom which they do not currently feel they possess.

The Advanced Extension Award (AEA) in English, intended for the ablest students, is applauded because it is liberated from AO concern. Adrian Barlow, from whom I have taken the title phrase of this paper, puts it like this:

‘the AEA has only one, very general Assessment Objective. This restores to examiners the freedom to frame questions they deem worth asking, without having to ensure that each one can be precisely and equally mapped onto a pre-determined assessment grid. In each AEA session to date students, and examiners too, have welcomed not having constantly to check that their answer address prescribed assessment objectives’ (2004, p210).

2009 will see the last ever AEA paper. It is to be hoped that freedom to frame questions will be possible somewhere in the teaching and testing of English Literature
in the future. Further research may help us consolidate a sense of whether teachers are rising above their constraints or remain bound by them.

**Appendix 1**

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<th>Teacher 1</th>
<th>Teacher 2</th>
<th>Teacher 3</th>
<th>Teacher 4</th>
<th>Teacher 5</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Degree</strong></td>
<td>Eng. Lit.</td>
<td>Eng. &amp; American Lit.</td>
<td>OU Lit.</td>
<td>Eng. &amp; French Studies</td>
<td>English &amp; Media</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Teaching experience</strong></td>
<td>16 years</td>
<td>30 years</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>12 years</td>
<td>3 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Memories of A/L</strong></td>
<td><em>Summarising Paradise Lost</em></td>
<td><em>Lots of discussion</em></td>
<td><em>Favourite subject</em></td>
<td><em>Debate &amp; discussion</em></td>
<td>discussion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Lots of discussion</em></td>
<td></td>
<td><em>Model teacher</em></td>
<td><em>Stimulating texts</em></td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td><em>‘fantastic book’</em></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Memories of uni.</strong></td>
<td>‘not really taught’</td>
<td>‘revelation’ of ‘discovering’…</td>
<td>OU so ‘not taught as such’</td>
<td>‘too much to cope with’</td>
<td>Enjoyed tackling a wide variety of texts</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Lit. teaching in your school</strong></td>
<td><em>Teach though literature</em></td>
<td><em>lit. ‘suffuses everything’</em></td>
<td>Try to make space for reading for pleasure</td>
<td>Central focus on lit.</td>
<td>Literature very important</td>
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<td></td>
<td><em>SoW ‘dominated’ by lit.</em></td>
<td><em>2-way process: pupils help you to see things</em></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Current state</strong></td>
<td><em>Lit. is why many teachers go into Eng. Teaching</em></td>
<td><em>Tension between heritage &amp; engagement</em></td>
<td>Students are ‘spoonfed’</td>
<td>A/L now prepares better for uni.</td>
<td>Why complain about poetry when the set poems are good?</td>
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<td></td>
<td><em>Literacy has pushed aside lit.</em></td>
<td><em>SATs have narrowed pupil exp.</em></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Impact of syll./spec.</strong></td>
<td><em>A/L run by ‘men in grey suits’</em></td>
<td><em>KS4 ‘entirely exam-driven’</em></td>
<td><em>In two minds about coursework</em></td>
<td><em>GCSE ‘killing off’ A/L take-up?</em></td>
<td>GCSE Coursework requirements complex</td>
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<td></td>
<td><em>‘Eng. Lit. is something separate from history’</em></td>
<td><em>Don’t agree with testing Sh. at KS3</em></td>
<td><em>Too much box-ticking</em></td>
<td><em>Some schools opt for Media instead of Lit.</em></td>
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<td><em>too much GCSE poetry</em></td>
<td><em>KS3</em></td>
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Appendix 2: the lessons

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<th>Teacher 1</th>
<th>Teacher 3</th>
<th>Teacher 4</th>
<th>Teacher 5</th>
<th>Teacher 6</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teaching to the test</td>
<td>No mention of the exam</td>
<td>No mention of the exam</td>
<td>Brief mention of comparison</td>
<td>Explicit objectives</td>
<td>Explicit objectives</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ways of reading</td>
<td>Close reading</td>
<td>Theoretical perspectives</td>
<td>Close reading</td>
<td>Close reading Image analysis Intertextuality</td>
<td>Play in performance</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Appendix 3: the examiners of 1983

Matthew

- naïve assumption that ‘Drummer Hodge’ had been specially chosen to chime in with the Falklands
- vivid scripts

Mark

- inviting questions in those days
- furious row about whether to allow reference to the Falklands war
- news items about the expense of ferrying war dead home

Luke

- the setter of the poetry question did not want refs to Falklands war: argument about universality of literature: most disagreed with him
- ‘Drummer Hodge’ esp. apt since it is about war in the southern hemisphere
- meeting on Sunday morning like going to church
- we don’t have rows now
- not the Alan Bennett ‘History Boys’ interpretation!
- ‘Moving On’ a later unseen with apparently topical reference to police moving on travellers

John

- principle that there should be no poetry set text therefore unseens
- strong reactions rewarded: then much more ready to accept students going off the subject of the poem
- RSThomas ‘Ninetieth Birthday’ spectacularly well done

Notes

1. QCA and the Secondary National Strategy have produced new materials, called Assessing pupil's progress (APP), to support day-to-day and periodic assessment in
English for reading and writing. These materials support teacher assessment throughout key stage 3 and at the end of key stage 3. 
http://www.qca.org.uk/qca_5631.aspx (accessed 11/04/08)

2. see for example www.aqa.org.uk/qual/gceasa/qp-ms/AQA-LTA3-W-MS-JAN06.PDF (accessed 08/04/08) p2

3. AF4 identify and comment on the structure and organisation of texts, including grammatical and presentational features at text level
   AF5 explain and comment on writers’ uses of language, including grammatical and literary features at word and sentence level
   AF6 identify and comment on writers’ purposes and viewpoints and the overall effect of the text on the reader
   (see KS3 English Test Mark Scheme, p3.)

4. see for example any English test mark scheme: key stage 3, London: NAA/QCA

5. I am grateful to UCLES Archives for access to this material.

6. The results of five interviews and five lesson observations are considered in what follows.

References


Warner, L. (2007) ‘The “freedom to …frame questions worth asking” or three stories and three (other) fragments of research’, *English in Education* 42:1, pp88-100


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