

## OPINION

### The fight for English

Malcolm King 7 March 2008

*"The only way to escape misrepresentation is to never commit oneself to any critical judgment that makes an impact - that is, never say anything."* The Great Tradition, F.R. Leavis.

The three-way "prang" of half-baked leftist ideology, the mumbo-jumbo of post modernist thinking and the introduction of new media in school curriculums, has been an unmitigated disaster for the teaching of English in Australia.

The disappearance of grammar from the classroom in the 1970s and 1980s meant that both students and their teachers cannot tell a gerund from a split infinitive, an adverb from an adjective. The rules for the use of apostrophes and capitalisation have been sucked from the classroom like a road map out of the window of a speeding car.

This is not language evolving. It is English corrupted. Where William Epsom's *Seven Types of Ambiguity* showed that English is malleable and plastic only a fool believes that "multiple interpretations" allows multiple errors of grammar, syntax and spelling.

As a former university selection officer and lecturer in professional writing I was astounded by the poor spelling and grammar of 17 and 18-year-olds - and of their parents.

We need a national school curriculum and we need it by the end of 2009.

TAFE and university entrance applications would be littered with passive sentence constructions, redundancies, clichés and American spellings. It became clear in the selection interviews that many of the applicants were not fiction or non-fiction readers.

If you don't read books, it's almost impossible to grasp how to interpret, let alone write, complex narratives. Those of a feminist persuasion hadn't read Greer, Faludi, Rolphe or Jay Griffiths. It was as if an intellectual Year Zero had taken place in the mid 1980s.

I'm not an intellectual snob. I simply read. Good writing both transports and transforms you. You're not the same after reading Dicken's *Hard Times* or Heller's *Catch 22*. There's no place for snobbery in this debate. To take the journey to Dickensian London is to eschew the toff professor.

The "Literacy Wars" are a ridiculous sideshow and a distraction born from dogmatism. The real task is teaching students to read, write and understand the historical relevance and context that these novels (or films) were written or produced. I can see nothing inherently "conservative" or "progressive" about either argument.

At best, it seems like those arranged behind Kevin Donnelly are more akin to Edmund Burke's arguments for ensuring continuity with tradition rather than the post modernist radical "Jacobin" departure from tradition in the form of liberty, equality and fraternity - or else! This is a simplistic and possibly silly juxtaposition.

In my classes, the first three weeks of the academic year were spent teaching the subject/object verb relationship. We went right back to the basics of writing simple sentences and using simple words.

Standing in front of a new class I could not assume that any of the students had read George Eliot, Henry James, Joyce, Hemingway, Woolfe, White, Winton, Stephen King, Zadie Smith or Ian McEwin, to name just a few. When I asked them why they were here they said they wanted to be writers. It was like wanting to be a brain surgeon but not being interested in brains.

My job was not to teach English. My job was to teach professional writing. There are school teachers far more capable people than me, armed with zest and imagination, that could impart the mystery and joy of reading and performing Shakespeare, Beckett or Berkoff.

Jonathan Swift is up-roaringly funny. He's a poke in the eye for the establishment. Chaucer is preoccupied with drinking and sex. Why not? And after reading the poetry of Andrew Marvell, well, he wouldn't be the first choice of a date for your daughter. And they're not even the good bits.

All of that stuff should have already been taught. We need a national teaching curriculum. It should provide students with the ability to write and argue in a logical and coherent manner.

Any future school curriculum needs to arm students not with relativistic twaddle but to draw their own conclusions about some of the best writing in the history of literature. Then let the students make up their own minds if it's any good. At the moment, to quote F.R. Leavis, many kids aren't saying anything intelligible.

It's not that they haven't got anything to say. Far from it. They simply lack the tools to express themselves.

If they can explain in a logical and concise way why the screenwriting behind the "tooth and fang" e-games trumps the dramatic writing of C.S. Forester, then more power to them.

A recent survey by Canberra based academic Andrew Leigh concludes, "troubling new evidence suggests that literacy and numeracy scores have stagnated or fallen since the 1970s despite the doubling of resources".

Commonwealth and state governments can throw all the money they like at a system that is churning out semi-literates and semi-numerates but in my experience, much of the money is spent on IT development rather than helping students write comprehensible content.

Allow me to digress. There are serious issues with the push in some schools to replace texts with online books. Quoted recently in the Adelaide *Sunday Mail*, Ms Trudy Sweeney, president of Computers in Education Group SA said, "The curriculum recognises that it's important to have authentic tasks, which means their learning shouldn't just be out of a text book in isolation of the world".

In the same news story, Dr Robert Fitzgerald, a research fellow in ICT at Canberra University said, "Publishers are realising that, whether it's in schools or universities, it's hard to convince students to buy those big heavy books".

In isolation of the world? Where does she think these kids live?

Big, heavy books? Ridiculous.

This is frivolous opportunistic tripe. So students who are now struggling to write will have the opportunity to be semi-illiterate in both traditional and new media? Whacko. They'll just digitally regurgitate their ignorance and even worse, post it on the Internet for the world (and prospective employers) to see.

I now run a small CV writing and career guidance business. Nowhere is the evidence of standards slippage more pronounced than the inability of job applicants to write a simple CV and explain in short, sharp sentences why they want a job.

Some may suggest that I have thrown my hand in with the social or economic conservatives or that I'm against online learning. That I'm marching along side Reagan, Thatcher, Hayek and Friedman. Most certainly not. I don't march to the beat of any political drum.

While there are problems teaching exposition online, I certainly advocate for public schools, I want teachers (and nurses) to get paid more, I want to see a transparent application of funding for public schools so they get new buildings and resources. I want to see more public school teachers, especially in maths and physics.

This debate needs to be settled in the Rudd Government's first term. It has been raging for almost 20 years.

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