

Part I

Principles and practice

1

The art of teaching English

Teaching English: painting the picture or copying the diagram?

I think aesthetic teaching is the highest of all teaching because it deals with life in its highest complexity. But if it ceases to be purely aesthetic – if it lapses anywhere from the picture to the diagram – it becomes the most offensive of all teaching. (George Eliot, 1866/1967: 9–10).

In arguing that ‘the highest of all teaching’ is essentially aesthetic (creative, imaginative, visionary and inspirational), George Eliot strikes a chord with English teachers who currently find their work being increasingly characterized as straightforwardly instructional and more akin to the ‘diagram’ than the ‘picture’. Eliot does not hesitate to designate such educational practice ‘the most offensive of all teaching’ and nor should we. Consequently, this chapter emphasizes the importance of the ‘picture’ and of creativity in English teaching. While there are similarities between pictures and diagrams, essential features present in one are conspicuously absent from the other. Diagrams are explicit; pictures, on the other hand, are often most successful if meaning is implicit so that the individual can form a personal interpretation and the work can become personally significant.

Far from being seen as an art, however, English teaching is being increasingly construed as a diagram to follow, a technology to employ or a method to adopt in order to achieve specific ends. It has even been asserted that construing teaching as an art rather than a technology may be responsible for a lack of excellent teachers in our schools because such a view results in attention being devoted to ‘personal factors and qualities’ (Muijs and Reynold, 2001: vii) which are difficult to manage. Attempts to reduce what should be aesthetic and inspired to the explicitly diagrammatic and instrumental make George Eliot’s views especially relevant to English teachers at the start of the

twenty-first century who believe in the importance of the 'picture' rather than the 'diagram' in English teaching (Pike, 2003f).

The aims of English teaching

Most handbooks on the teaching of English (Brindley, 1994; Davison and Dowson, 1998; Fleming and Stevens, 1998) prompt the reader to think about the aims of English teaching. The Cox models (DES, 1989) provide a helpful starting point as they describe different emphases within English. Yet these models and the aims they describe cannot be adequately evaluated without reference to the teaching methods generally employed to implement them. An important question to ask is which model or models enable the 'aesthetic teaching' so highly praised by George Eliot to take place. It is important to consider which models allow children to paint pictures and which have a heavy emphasis on getting them to copy diagrams. The models are as follows:

A 'personal growth' view focuses on the child: it emphasizes the relationship between language and learning in the individual and the role of literature in developing children's imaginative and aesthetic lives.

A 'cross-curricular' view focuses on the school: it emphasises that teachers (of English and of other subjects) have a responsibility to help children with the language demands of different subjects in the school curriculum, otherwise areas of the curriculum may be closed to them. In England, English is different from other school subjects, in that it is both a subject and a medium of instruction in other subjects.

An 'adult needs' view focuses on communication outside the school, it emphasizes the responsibility of English teachers to prepare children for the language demands of adult life, including the workplace, in a fast-changing world. Children need to learn to cope with the day-to-day demands of spoken language and of print, they also need to be able to write clearly, appropriately and effectively.

A 'cultural heritage' view emphasizes the responsibility of schools to lead children to an appreciation of those works of literature that have been widely regarded as amongst the finest in the language.

A 'cultural analysis' view emphasizes the role of English in helping children towards a critical understanding of the world and cultural environment in which they live. Children should know about processes by which meanings are conveyed, and about the ways in which print and other media carry values. (DES, 1989: paras, 2.21–2.25)

When recently surveyed, three quarters of students following the post-graduate certificate in education (PGCE) English course at the University of Leeds stated that they believed the ‘personal growth’ model deserved most emphasis in the English classroom (Pike, 2002b) and such a finding is representative of the wider population of English teachers (Goodwyn and Findlay, 1999). Some of my PGCE students’ comments illustrate why they thought ‘personal growth’ should be privileged:

Personal growth is the most important aspect of English as I feel imagination is vital to all aspects of life and that English can enrich your life. (Kristina)

I believe that the study of literature and language is enriching in terms of personal growth. Books give people access to many different experiences and viewpoints. In terms of education, the needs of the whole child should be considered.

I chose personal growth as the most important because through English children can broaden their range of experiences and learn to empathize with other people. Without personal growth, and a deepening of understanding of both literature and language, the other models become very difficult to achieve. (Alex)

The individual and aesthetic response

Those teachers of English who valorize the ‘personal growth’ model generally acknowledge that it has implications for their practice in two important areas. First, the individual and relationships are especially valued and, secondly, an important element of their role is to foster aesthetic response. These twin elements are also emphasized in a recent survey of subject teaching in secondary schools, which concluded that in the best English lessons teachers ‘showed thorough knowledge of pupils as *individual* learners and commitment to their intellectual, cultural and *aesthetic* development’ (HMI, 2001: 3, emphasis added).

Indeed, ‘a recurring tenet of the philosophy of personal growth through English’ is that English teaching must be based upon ‘a special knowledge of the pupils as individuals’ (Bosted, 2000: 24). There is an important place for the individual in English teaching and the comments below typify the views of many English teachers:

Personal growth is the most important due to the emphasis on the *individual*.
(Helena)

The individual must be the central focus of the teaching of English. It is important to enable them to develop personal appreciation of literature. (Catherine)

English needs to be taught with *the individual* in mind. (Pete)

As an English teacher, I think *the pupil has to be at the centre* of everything I do. (Cathy)

In the best English lessons special attention is given to ‘aesthetic uses of language and form’ (HMI, 2001: 3) and it is not, perhaps, surprising that individuality and aesthetic response go together as the following comments from student-teachers at the end of their PGCE course suggests:

I chose personal growth because I think the ability to develop a child’s *imaginative and aesthetic life* is crucial in discovering a full sense of self and nowhere else is there suitable room in the curriculum to do this. (Ruth)

English should be about developing the *imagination*. If it is not, then why not just teach English within history or RE or across the curriculum? To have any value and importance as a subject, English needs to offer something that other subjects cannot. This is why English is important to develop the imagination. (Michael)

‘Allowing’ children to be *creative and imaginative* – through language and literature – is to liberate them. (Dawn)

Personal growth is the main aim of life and *creativity* allows one to become the person one really is. (Helen)

The Art of Teaching English

The justification for considering English teaching to be an art (rather than a technology or simply a method) derives from the aims of English teaching, as exemplified by the comments of these student-teachers, which can only be achieved through the *art* of English. When asked to rank the models in order of importance one student explained that ‘understanding both yourself and the world seems to me to be the aim of art – hence personal growth comes first’. The art of being an English teacher is to empower children to see through literature what they have missed in life as it is often ‘art’s ability to shock and inspire, to change vision, ideas and feelings’ (Stibbs, 1998: 210) that is so potently educative for its purpose is ‘to raise consciousness, not to evade or anaesthetise it’ (Stibbs, 1996: 31).

Far from seeing teaching as an art, however, many consider only knowledge to be of central importance. Even some writers, such as Tolstoy, consider teaching to be a transmission of knowledge and distinguish between ‘the handing on of what was known to former generations’, which is seen as the business of ‘teaching and learning’, and ‘the production of something new’ which is creation or ‘the real artistic activity’ (Tolstoy, 1997: 169). Yet, many English teachers create something new every day they are in the classroom. Views of teaching like Tolstoy’s are invidious because knowledge is seen as something to be ‘delivered’ and a harmful emphasis can then be given to explicitness, transmission teaching and inappropriate didactic methods. In contrast to Tolstoy, Dickens (like George Eliot) recognized that there is more to teaching than knowledge. We can learn a great deal from the second chapter of Dickens’ *Hard Times*; what we need now in English teaching is not more ‘fact’ but more ‘fancy’, more imagination and less prescription:

Fact versus Fancy

So, Mr Choakumchild began in his best manner. He and some one hundred and forty schoolmasters, had been lately turned at the same time, in the same factory, on the same principles, like so many pianoforte legs. He had been put through an immense variety of paces, and had answered volumes of head-breaking questions. Orthography, etymology, syntax, and prosody, biography, astronomy, geography, and general cosmography, the sciences of compound proportion, algebra, land-surveying and levelling, vocal music and drawing from models, were all at the ends of his ten chilled fingers. He had worked his stony way into Her Majesty’s most Honourable Privy Council’s Schedule B, and had taken the bloom off the higher branches of mathematics and physical science, French, German, Latin and Greek. He knew all about all the Water Sheds of all the word (whatever they are), and all the histories of all the peoples, and all the names of all the rivers and mountains, and all the productions, manners, and customs of all the countries, and all their boundaries and bearings on the two-and-thirty points of the compass. Ah, rather overdone, Mr Choakumchild. If he had only learnt a little less, how infinitely better he might have taught much more!

Standardization, where either teachers or pupils are ‘turned at the same time, in the same factory, on the same principles, like so many pianoforte legs’ is no substitute for individuality.

English teaching at its finest, as an art, can flourish when ‘responsive teaching’ is practised for such teaching ‘is founded upon a pupil’s response’ so that ‘the starting point is where the pupil is and not where the teacher is’ (Pike, 2000b: 20). If cues are taken from pupils, rather than exclusively from

a prescribed curriculum or strategy, teachers are liberated to paint individual pictures for children instead of imposing a single diagram upon heterogeneous groups. Most importantly, children in our English lessons may become capable of painting pictures for themselves.

Responsive teaching recognizes that both the emotional and intellectual play a part in learning for ‘the way it feels to the reader, what it does for him/her may yield a more lasting influence than any critical analysis aimed at advocating what is often regarded as an expert interpretation’ (Britton, 1993: 88). The recognition that ‘intelligence’ and ‘feeling’ are ‘mutually dependent aspects of human consciousness’ is especially relevant in ‘responsive teaching’ (Wade and Reed, 1987: 56) as the ‘broad range of affective components of appreciation, not just emotions properly so called, but also moods, desires, feelings, drives and attitudes or frames of mind’ (Feagin, 1996: 9) are drawn upon. Such aesthetic response is likely to be enhanced and augmented through social interaction in the English classroom (Pike, 2003d) for while ‘knowing how we see and read helps us to see and read things differently’ (Stibbs, 2000: 43), we help others see as they help us and the sort of perception called for is often not only cognitive or even entirely rational.

Being and knowing: Heidegger and English teaching

Martin Heidegger, one of the twentieth century’s greatest philosophers, provides us with a ‘powerful philosophical basis for construing English teaching as a form of engagement and “being-with” students which acknowledges the aesthetic nature of literary study’ (Pike, 2003a). Heidegger argues that there are important limitations on what we might call ‘diagrammatic’ ways of knowing and insists that we do not think in exclusively scientific, rational or objective ways because we are always *in* a situation in the sense that we are involved and engaged and are not passive or detached. Heidegger neatly reverses Descartes ‘Cogito Ergo Sum’ (I think therefore I am) and asserts that our primary way of being is not cognitive: we can only think because we exist. As a result of having experiences, we can think about them which is why the growth of experience (valorized in the ‘personal growth’ model) is central to English.

Heidegger’s theory of knowledge is more significant than we might at first realize and has significant implications for English teaching for he refutes the humanist view, underlying most educational thinking and especially the new managerialism, by claiming we can only ever know through involvement,

engagement, interconnectedness, relationships and experience. For Heidegger, the aesthetic encounter (which English teaching should foster) is 'lived experience' (1993/1934: 204) as it opens up a fuller and truer knowledge than is possible in any other way. As such it brings about what the Greeks termed 'aleithia', the 'unconcealment and disclosure' of things or 'seeing in the widest sense of seeing' (ibid.: 184) and allows 'life in its highest complexity' (Eliot, 1866/1967) to be apprehended. The knowledge experienced in the English classroom is founded upon engagement and relationships for English teachers are not divorced from, but intimately involved with, human concerns. Heidegger's achievement is an important counter to 'the dominant rationalist view' which has 'screened out this engagement' and given us 'a model of ourselves as disengaged thinkers' (Taylor, 1993: 319).

Consequently, this book seeks to show how the formal curriculum can be implemented in a way that preserves what Heidegger would, no doubt, have termed the 'primordial' nature of English teaching. The English teacher's task is to bring about *significance* which is the sort of knowing that emerges from a way of *being*. Arguably, such an existence has a spiritual dimension and the quest for significance (Pike, 2002b) requires a spirituality of learning.

■ The spirituality of English teaching

According to Hegel, one of Heidegger's predecessors, 'art presents itself to sense, feeling, intuition, imagination' and therefore 'demands an organ other than scientific thinking' (1997: 142) and teaching that is genuinely aesthetic has a spiritual dimension. Indeed, according to Dewey, in *Art as Experience* (1934/1980), one of the last century's most influential works on education, we should not confine the 'spiritual' to places of worship any more than we restrict 'art' to what we see in 'theatres, galleries or museums' for both the aesthetic and the spiritual are 'present in the "significant life" of a community and within the story of our own human development' (ibid.: 7). The English classroom is a spiritual place and English lessons can foster spiritual development. The overwhelming importance of such learning in the lives of children is essential if one accepts that the 'spiritual' denotes 'something fundamental in the human condition which is not necessarily expressed through the physical sense and/or expressed through everyday language' (SCAA, 1995: 3). Indeed, the place of English as an arts subject can be justified by arguing that aesthetic education nurtures spiritual development (Pike, 2000e; 2002b; 2003f) for if pupils were 'not able to be moved by feelings of awe and wonder at the beauty of the world we live in, or the power of artists, musicians and writers to manipulate space, sound and language, they would live in an inner spiritual and cultural desert' (SCAA, 1995: 4).

The relation between aesthetic education and spirituality is well established and Hegel even considered that ‘art and works of art, by springing from and being created by the spirit, are themselves of a spiritual kind’ because art ‘points through and beyond itself and itself hints at something spiritual’ (1997: 145). When the dominant paradigm in teaching today is technical, rational and scientific an emphasis upon the spiritual and aesthetic is much needed and the theme running throughout this book is of English teaching as an artistic and spiritual endeavour. The challenge taken up here is to show how the *Framework for Teaching English: years 7, 8 and 9* (DfEE, 2001) and the *National Curriculum for England: English* (DfEE/QCA, 1999) can be implemented in a way that is true to the ideals and values of most English teachers. We must counter attempts to reduce the aesthetic and inspired to the rational, methodological and explicitly diagrammatic and the following chapters demonstrate the importance of the ‘picture’ over the ‘diagram’ while recognizing that English is an applied art which has social obligations to fulfil.

Further reading

- Dewey, J. (1980/1934) *Art as Experience*. New York, NY: Perigee.
- Pike, M.A. (2003) ‘On being in English teaching: a time for Heidegger?’, *Changing English – Studies in Reading and Culture*, 10(1): 91–9.
- Pike, M.A. (2003) ‘From personal to social transaction: a model of aesthetic reading in the classroom’, *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 87(2).
- Pike, M.A. (2003) ‘From the picture to the diagram? Literacy and the art of English teaching’, *The Use of English*, 54(3): 211–16.
- Pike, M.A. (forthcoming) ‘Aesthetic teaching’, *Journal of Aesthetic Education*.
- Webb, E (1992) *Literature in Education: Encounter and Experience*. London: The Falmer Press.