

DIFFERENT IMPLEMENTATION APPROACHES TO THE NEW ENGLISH SYLLABUS

EMMA CAMPBELL, STEVE HENRY, ROSEMARY HENZELL

English Head Teachers, Emma Campbell, Steve Henry and Rosemary Henzell, share the motivators and contextual variables that were the driving force behind their approach to planning and programming for the new 7-10 English Syllabus...

Much like new homeowners facing a house quaintly described as “well-loved and full of character”, faculties facing a new English syllabus must ask themselves a single question: “Repaint, renovate, or rebuild?” For some, the thought of doing any more than a quick update will be overwhelming, while others may see it as a chance to fix issues that have been bothering them for years. A total overhaul offers us an opportunity to completely reconfigure our programs to fit our current world: a huge amount of work initially, but with the possibility of a wonderful final product. Regardless of where we sit along this spectrum, however, we must not allow fittings, fixtures, and furniture to distract us from the core purpose of such an endeavour: to build a home for ideas, student thinking and deep engagement with texts and language. This is, and always has been, our priority.

In her keynote address at last year’s CPL Secondary English Conference (2023), Jackie Manuel traced the through lines of the NSW English syllabus, from its origins in 1911 to its most recent iterations. Using Jeanette Winterson’s observation that ‘everything is forever imprinted with what it once was’ (The Stone Gods, 2008), Jackie reminded us of the echoic nature of our syllabus, from the original statement that it is in the ‘study of . . . literature that the High School will exercise its highest influence upon the general training of pupils’ (NSW Department of Public Instruction, 1911, p. 5, p. 18) to the most recent aim of the syllabus where students learn to ‘appreciate, reflect on and enjoy language, and make meaning in ways that are imaginative . . . and powerful.’

The notion that we, as teachers, may be able to embody these ideals and affect the lives of the next generation in ways that are lasting, profound and

enriching, still motivates young people to enter the classroom and our profession. Jackie’s reminder of our educational inheritance then becomes an important touchstone for the tackling of the new syllabus over the last twelve months and it is these broader aims of the new syllabus, rather than the more performative measures of ATAR or HSC band analysis that are our starting point.

EMMA CAMPBELL AND STEVE HENRY (HEAD TEACHERS OF ENGLISH: CHERRYBROOK TECHNOLOGY HIGH)

Where are we now?

Working in an English faculty, with some genuine stability and experience at the heart of the staffing roster, and with a large student cohort that is generally motivated and socially privileged, our approach to the new syllabus was equivalent to a home renovation. Yes, there were going to be drop sheets and dust and some demolition, scraping, smells of paint and turpentine but the structure of our programs would remain largely intact.

New syllabus as opportunity

Looking back over the years, the regular changes to the syllabus stand out, but there are other changes that have affected us as well and it’s worthwhile pondering these shifts in order to put the new syllabus in context. At the national level we’ve had the push for a national curriculum, but NSW has held fast to its commitment to the HSC, so it has felt less like a tidal shift and more like an insistent current. More profound has been the siloing of our schools and faculties, firstly with the loss of a structured approach to local networks of English teachers, then with Covid and now with the teacher shortage and the sheer exhaustion of administrative overload. We

have all, it seems, been attempting the impossible: to develop our own networks, to connect where we can, to learn, discuss, tinker, sweep away the old, renovate, rebuild or re-shape our programs within the time and personnel limitations of our schools and system. Has it been possible to see this as more opportunity than burden? Talking with others and moving through this process, we think so. Perhaps we are limited in our own siloed experience or, perhaps, the simple fact is that the English teachers of NSW regularly do the impossible. For us, the opportunity to refresh and re-shape has been welcome, particularly given the obvious shifts within the lives of our teens, artificial intelligence, the distractions and distorting effects of social media, the rise of anxiety and the deficits left by covid. But to tell this story, it might be better to move away from a building metaphor to an image that is less static.

The car, and the kid in the passenger seat

At the centre of our review, then, we placed the students. Our classrooms demanded a new curriculum because the students sitting in them have been buffeted by these enormous forces, reforming their ways of engaging in the world. Our goals: encourage closer reading, deeper engagement, and authentic composition, so students could harness that power we have for so long been encouraging.

The new syllabus, freed from some of the clutter, offered a chance to slow down our program. Metaphorically, we wanted to upgrade the car. We wanted to take the students from passive passengers (glued to their phones in the front seat, eventually squinting into sunlight, wondering where they were and how they ended up there) to being the ones who ask for the keys.

The syllabus, with its focus areas of reading, understanding, and responding, has allowed multiple points of entry, because English, as a discipline, does not have a clear start and end point. Our students are cast as readers, who grow to critique others' work, and develop the confidence to compose their own, before going back to read some more to help refine their writing. We want them to stop thinking about learning as a passive journey that their teachers are navigating for them from A to

B to C. Instead, opening a book is being dropped at any point of the map and navigating their way back to clarity.

A clean car with seat warmers and safety cameras is offering us the best opportunity to reacquaint our teens with the power and magic of language. Upon returning to the classroom after online learning, our students were hesitant to take charge of their learning – reluctant to answer questions, mulishly splitting up a group task into four individual responses, politely asking how many quotes they need in each paragraph to get an A, before they'd actually read the end of the novel. Paring back our units, focusing on structured discussion, allowing space for confusion to grow into understanding, is, we hope, teaching them how to drive.

ROSEMARY HENZELL (HEAD TEACHER ENGLISH: CANTERBURY GIRLS HIGH SCHOOL)

Where should we start?

Coming into a new faculty on the brink of a new syllabus was both a blessing and a curse. Having just arrived, I hadn't had a chance to see most of the programs in action before I needed to begin discussions about what our approach should be. On the other hand, early conversations with teachers revealed the need for significant changes as well as a readiness to revamp and renew. Our school was in a Local Government Area (LGA) of concern during COVID, and the aftereffects of strict lockdowns were evident in disconnection between students and in the decline of some faculty processes, compounded by changes in staff. We settled on an ambitious but necessary project: a complete knock-down and rebuild of our 7-10 programs, recycling some quality materials where possible, but integrating them into a brand new build.

Planning our 'dream home'

Like for Steve and Emma, the new syllabus, therefore, became a marvellous opportunity. It invited us to have reflective and evaluative conversations about our values, our expectations for our students and what we cherished about our role as English teachers. These conversations, at the beginning of 2023, centred around four key questions:

- Where are we at right now?
- Where do we want to go?
- What does 'excellence' look like for us?
- Why do we want to go there?

These discussions were instrumental in allowing us to drill down into what mattered most to us, and what we felt our students needed in today's world. Similar to Cherrybrook, deeper engagement with reading, developing students' critical thinking, and supporting them to find their personal voice through authentic writing opportunities were at the forefront of our plans. We also considered social-emotional development in our choice of concepts, ensuring positive and affirming ideas were present to balance out the dark, and providing opportunities to tackle big issues in authentic and productive ways. Armed with Jane Sherlock and Deb Macpherson's incredible list of suggested texts from the 2022 CPL Secondary English Conference, we embarked on a revamp of our book room.

A brand new 7-10 scope and sequence, backward-mapped from Year 11 and 12, became our schematics. Introducing a conceptual framework approach, I led small faculty teams through the creation and structuring of units during once-a-term planning days. Release time was hard to come by, but we were supported, wherever possible, by the Executive to achieve this. This rebuild was only made possible by the incredible dedication of our faculty, and it is a testament to those collective efforts that by the time we wrapped up in 2023, we had completed programs for all units, including assessment tasks drafts and conceptual introduction resources. The house was built...but there wasn't a lot of furnishing in place yet!

Resisting the one-size-fits-all McMansion

I am a firm believer that programming lies at the heart of our work as English teachers. The process of interpreting a syllabus through the creation of structured, meaningful and experiential learning activities relevant to my particular content and cohort of students has always been one of my greatest joys, and methods of development, as a

teacher. Collaboration with our colleagues through co-creation turns a scope and sequence into a living, breathing entity that is capable of growth, evolution and innovation. As we teach, we become what Steve calls the embodied syllabus - we are the vehicle and vessel for student learning, deep thinking, questioning, creation and reflection. Let me be clear - I'm not suggesting that every program in every school must be built from scratch, and the sharing of units and resources is central to our practice (and survival!). However, if we are not cultivating our programming skills, or supporting others to cultivate theirs, we risk losing our ability to synthesise future shifts in syllabus focus with the enduring truths and values of our subject. We must remain connected to our history, our core purpose and beliefs as English teachers, perhaps drawing inspiration from Charles Olson (1997) when he says:

whatever you have to say, leave

the roots on, let them

dangle.

And the dirt

Just to make clear

where they come from

Let us always remember where we have come from, and cherish the dirt beneath our fingernails that is a sign of our dedication and efforts.

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