

English Reform Group 14-19

A discussion document on Communication at Intermediate Level

The English Reform Group

The English Reform Group (14-19) was set up in July 2003, in order to discuss current changes and developments in the English curriculum and to formulate responses which might be a catalyst for wider debate and reform of the subject. Members of the group share significant concerns about the way the English curriculum is formulated; the group has a particular interest in the A Level /16-19 curriculum and its continuity with both 11-16 and HE English.

All members of the group have been professionally concerned with curriculum and assessment at 14-19 and/or with the relationship between A Level English and university English. Members of the group are associated with the English teaching associations (NATE and the English Association), the English and Media Centre, the English Subject Centre, and the exam boards, but the group is independent of these and the members of the group do not officially represent these institutions.

Some of the group's discussions have addressed the work of Tomlinson's 14-19 working party. This document sets out the group's ideas about the proposed Communication element at 14-16.

If you have any comments or feedback on these first thoughts, please email your views to barbara@englishandmedia.co.uk

Communication at Intermediate Level

At meetings in May and September 2004 with members of NATE and ERG 14-19, Tomlinson confirmed that all Intermediate students would study both "English" as a subject in main learning as well as "Communication" as part of the Core, in order to fulfil NC requirements. Tomlinson also suggested that "Communication" should concern itself with functional literacy. However, he seemed responsive to broad definitions of functional literacy both in terms of pedagogy and curriculum content (e.g. media, drama, IT, texts in context). "English", he suggested, would be more concerned with literary aspects of the subject. In addition, he indicated that the number of teaching hours for Communications and English combined would be about the same as that currently allocated to English and English Literature. These meetings offered a glimpse of the current thinking of the Working Group but we will have to await the Final Report in a few weeks for a clearer picture.

The issue of what functional literacy is, and what it would look like in the curriculum, has become a focus for the English Reform Group's discussions. This issue of what functional literacy is and how it might be taught and learned became a focus for the Group's discussions. We believe that this issue is crucial, given the current state of GCSE English and English Literature, and, in particular, the problematic relationship between key skills/literacy, English and English Literature. We are keen to develop a more coherent pathway for students from 14-19.

The English Reform Group wants a wider audience for this and other debates. The following represents our initial thoughts on what Intermediate Communication might look like. These thoughts are a starting point and we would welcome your feedback and comments to take the debate further.

for debate.

Communication Core

The structure and content of a Communication core will need to be defined in relation to English as main learning. As both will be compulsory, what Tomlinson seems to propose is a Communication course which deals with 'functional literacy' and an English course which deals with other, particularly literary, aspects of the subject.

However, for a Communication course to be effective in delivering what is termed 'functional literacy' it must

- have significant content – i.e. a variety of texts for study (including media and electronic texts etc)
- develop students' *understanding* of the forms and functions of different genres as well as their ability to use them

Deciding which texts and genres would be studied under Communication and which under English (or Media) is difficult (as is evidenced by the current division at GCSE). One possible way of dividing English and Communication might be to reserve fictional texts for English and factual texts for Communication. But would you then lose the important understanding that comes from, for example, the use of narrative in news stories?

One way of thinking about what might go into Communication might be through the following strands.

- language and identity
e.g. idiolect, spoken language, language repertoire
- language and society
e.g. language and representation, language and power, the language of debate and opinion, citizenship
- language and the workplace
e.g. information texts, advertising, letters, interviews, spoken and written language in the workplace
- language and the media
e.g. visual language, news, new media technologies, language of the web
- language and learning
e.g. language development, genres associated with learning,, the language of school subjects

These strands could be taught discretely but could also be combined in ways that would be valuable to the needs of a particular group of students (or institution). Each strand lends itself to different modes of study and hence assessment. For example 'language and the workplace' could be an individual project linked to work experience.

English as main learning might then be imagined as a course which focuses not solely on literature, but on a variety of fictional representations in print fiction, poetry, film, theatre, and other media.

Tomlinson 14-19: Communication

See separate *English Reform Group 14-19* paper: proposals of a joint group for the Core Communication component projected in 14-19 reform.

NATE Conference 2005

UMIST, 4-6 February

Opening speaker: David Crystal

No doubt the text for his address will be the ten-point education manifesto, 'The way forward', in the conclusion to his newly published:

The Stories of English (London, 2004): Allen Lane, Penguin Books

which includes (p 530):

8. Everyone who receives a school education needs to learn to read and write Standard English, and to understand its spoken use, because this is the variety which carries most prestige in English-speaking national and international society and which gives greatest access to high-status positions at these levels. Some children also learn to use the associated grammar as a spoken dialect in addition to their mother dialect; and a small minority from higher-class backgrounds, use it as a mother dialect at home. A spoken form of Standard English is the traditional expectation of use in certain careers, such as the civil service, teaching and national broadcasting.
9. Everyone who receives a school education needs to learn about varieties which express a person's identity as part of a national or international community and which gives greatest insight into community values and attitudes. The first dialect learned by most English-speaking children is a nonstandard variety, and the importance of this should be recognised through opportunities to use their variety in writing as well as speech.

He notes (p 523):

Institutionalized prescriptivism began to come to an end in the later decades of the twentieth century. Primarily, this meant a change in educational practice, for it was only through the school system that prescriptivism had been able to propagate itself (p. 396). In the UK, from the 1970s, changes in school syllabuses and examination systems heralded a new dispensation, with an unthinking adherence to mechanical sentence analysis and old-style canons of correctness gradually being replaced by a broad-based investigation of the forms and functions of language in all their social manifestations. By the 1990s, in the new National Curriculum, as well as in the syllabuses which were being devised for higher examinations, there was a complete change in emphasis.

... The aim, in short, was to promote a more responsive and responsible approach to language, in which students would come to understand why people use language in the way they do, and would be able to put this knowledge to active use to become more able to control language for themselves.

However, in another part of the forest:-

'Belief in grammar is misplaced

'Studies reveal that syntax lessons have very little influence on how children write.'

Dr Sue Beverton (Durham), British Educational Research Association Conference, as reported in the *TES*, 24 September. Research review at www.eppi.ioe.ac.uk.

But see also: Sue Palmer's response, *TES*, 1 October:

'Breathe some life into the nouns and verbs
'Grammar can enhance children's use of English, but we must avoid the mistakes made by the National Literacy Strategy.'