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ENGLISH TEACHING IN AUSTRALIA AND THE UNITED STATES: SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES

By Ken Watson

American teachers of English who have had the opportunity to work in Australia generally seem to find little difficulty in adjusting to the new situation; likewise, the somewhat smaller numbers of Australians who come to teach in American schools soon discover that the similarities far outweigh the differences. Our common methods and purposes derive in part from a joint allegiance to the personal growth model put forward at the Dartmouth Seminar in 1966, and in part from the impact that certain American educators have had on Australian education, particularly in the areas of writing and reading.

In the teaching of writing, Donald Graves of the University of New Hampshire has been particularly influential; indeed, one can say that over the last half dozen years the process-conference approach to writing has become dominant in all States. Publications like R.D. Walshe's *Donald Graves in Australia* and Jan Turbill's *No Better Way to Teach Writing* and *Now, We Really Want to Write* (available in this country through Heinemann) testify to the enormous impact that his work has had in Australia. With similar approaches to the teaching of writing being adopted in both countries, it was a little surprising, at the recent M.C.T.E. Conference in Lansing, to hear Sister Rosemary Winkeljohann of N.C.T.E. expressing the view, based on a recent visit to New South Wales, that Australian teachers are far ahead of their American counterparts in the teaching of writing. If she is right, it must be that there are some differences in approach, even if the general thrust of writing instruction is the same. My admittedly limited experience with American schools leads me to the conclusion that there are two major differences.

In the first place, Australian teachers have, by and large, taken to heart the massive amount of evidence pointing to the lack of any relationship between knowledge of a grammatical system and ability to write. While there are a few who still insist on teaching the whole apparatus of traditional grammar from descriptive adjectives to adverbial clauses of concession, the majority confine themselves to teaching, through the students' own writing, those few grammatical concepts that writers make conscious use of in their work. (My research into this question has convinced me that there are in fact only two or three such concepts: agreement of verb and subject in number, sequence of tense and, possibly, pronoun agreement, and that these are universally applied in the revision stage of writing.) Thus, by devoting so little time to grammar teaching (and none at all to sentence combining), Australian teachers are able to give their students much more time to write.

A second factor, it seems to me, is that at the high school level writing instruction is less formulaic. I had never heard, until I came to the USA, of the five-paragraph theme or, outside a university context, of the research paper. Very few Australian teachers these days trouble their students with the concept of the topic sentence. (Richard Braddock's American research on the relative infrequency of topic sentences in expository prose has been taken to heart.) Young writers in Australia, then, may well feel freer to experiment than do their American counterparts. I should add, however, that that incubus on the pillows of teachers and students in most Australian States, the Higher School Certificate Examination, which is taken at the end of Grade 12, provides a powerful incentive to students to improve essay-writing techniques, since essay answers are required in all humanities subjects. This is perhaps the one benefit coming from that examination, which in all other respects exerts a malign influence on the curriculum in the senior high school years.

In the area of reading, the American influence on Australian education has been less dramatic but nonetheless pervasive. At the primary level, the whole-language approach to reading advocated by Ken and Yetta Goodman is taking hold as teachers become more and more

disillusioned with phonics. (Those who cling to a phonics approach are known as phonicators.) As far as literature teaching is concerned, the work of reader-response theorists like Louise Rosenblatt has led to a recognition of the importance of building upon the individual student's response to a literary work. It is now generally recognised that no two readers will respond to a poem or novel or short story in exactly the same way; hence teachers are much more careful than they once were not to impose their interpretations upon their pupils. There is a good deal of stress on encouraging a deeper appreciation through techniques of imaginative re-creation (such as re-writing an incident in a novel from another point of view, turning a section of a novel into a radio play, exploring characterisation by writing imaginative diaries or letters from one character to another, writing an alternative ending to a novel or play). A book from England, *Patterns of Language* by L. Stratta, J. Dixon and A. Wilkinson, has been particularly influential here.

There seems, however, to be a marked divergence of approach when it comes to the teaching of literature in Grades 10, 11 and 12. Most Australian teachers working at these levels retain a commitment to reader-response theory and to the personal growth model of English. This means that they try to select works of literature that can be linked in some way to the students' own experience. The relevance that is sought is not a superficial one: it is relevance to the students' deepest concerns as human beings. To quote John Dixon,

If an interest in literature is to inform and modify our encounter with life itself, the teacher must bring into a vivid relationship life as it enacted and life as it is represented.
(54)

In contrast, if one may judge from the various curriculum guides that I have looked at, it seems that at these levels American teachers are being advised to abandon the personal growth model in favour of what Dixon has called the cultural heritage model. The Lansing District Curriculum Guide, for example, states that the first semester in Grade 10 will "survey early American literature through the turn of the century," and lists such writers as Edward Taylor, Jonathan Edwards, Ben Franklin

and Thomas Paine as required reading. My fear would be that such courses are likely to prove counter-productive, making the pupils view reading as drudgery.

I imagine that the rationale for such survey courses has sprung from the "melting pot" philosophy of the nineteenth century, that such courses are seen as providing a necessary common core of cultural experience for everyone. Australia, which is, after Israel, the most multicultural nation on earth today, faces in the 20th century similar problems to those faced by America when migrants flocked here in the late 19th century. Our solution is, however, quite different. We have, with some regret, concluded that the notion of a common culture is an illusion symptomatic of a yearning to return to some earlier, simpler life. Thus, while we see English as the national language and while we make some gestures towards the cultural heritage model by trying to ensure that all students encounter some Australian literature and that most encounter Shakespeare, we are seeking to celebrate rather than to suppress the diverse cultures that make up present-day Australia. Survey courses of the American kind do not exist below university level; instead, we draw on as wide a range of literature as possible. Thus a Grade 10 or Grade 11 class may be studying Achebe's novel, *Things Fall Apart*, (from Africa), Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (a very popular book among Australian teenagers), Joan Lindsay's *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (Australian), *Macbeth*, and plays by David Williamson (Australian), Bertolt Brecht (German) and Peter Shaffer (English). They may study the works of particular poets, like W.H. Auden, e.e. cummings and Judith Wright (Australian), or, particularly at Grade 10, draw on a poetry anthology which includes poems by Edward Brathwaite (West Indian), Seamus Heaney (Irish), Pablo Neruda (Chilean), George Seferis (Greek) and Robert Frost, the poems chosen being ones that link with the concerns of adolescents growing up in a multicultural society. A more sensitive attitude to the culture of Aboriginal Australians is gradually leading to the inclusion of more of the writings of modern Aboriginal authors.

Despite these differences in emphasis, we have so much in common that it is not surprising that we share common problems. Certain

American fundamentalist religious groups have seen Australia as an appropriate area of missionary endeavour, and in their wake have come demands to censor what is studied in English classrooms. Even such a delightful fantasy as Madeleine L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time*, which has been used in Australian schools for a generation without a single complaint, is now a target of the self-appointed censors. We in Australia are, therefore, anxious to learn from you about the most effective strategies for combatting this most alarming trend. An allied area of common concern is the need in both countries to combat the assaults of the New Right upon public education in general.

Australian teachers have been more successful than their American counterparts in combatting demands for standardised testing in the schools. For this we have to thank our strong teachers' unions, which have not only refused to countenance proposals for standardised testing of pupils in the upper primary and middle secondary grades, but have also helped to rid schools in most States of I.Q. tests. And no politician in Australia has yet dared to propose that we follow Texas and test the teachers.

Last May, in Ottawa, the Fourth International Conference on the Teaching of English was held, its theme being 'Issues which divide us'. We found then, as I have found here since, that the issues on which we are united are of far greater significance than those which divide us. Long may this continue!

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