<u>Drawing on subject-specific reading, identify and critically evaluate what you</u>
<u>consider to be the rationale that justifies and underpins the teaching of your subject</u>

Although it is now an established and high-profile part of education in Britain, Muriel Robinson (2000, p.91) writes that the teaching of literacy was once controversial because of its "potentially empowering effect". According to the CIA World Factbook (CIA, 2013) the United Kingdom now has a literacy rate of 99%, where 'literacy' is defined as the state of being aged fifteen or over and having completed at least five years of school. Leaving aside the potential flaws in this definition, it is clear that 'functional' literacy skills are now the norm within society, given a recent study which suggests literacy standards have fallen recently (Coughlan, 2013). I believe we must adopt a broader view of literacy which equips students with the cultural analysis skills that will empower them to look critically at the world around them and make informed decisions in their adult lives.

Bryan and Westbrook (2000 p.45) suggest that "the concept of literacy is sometimes narrowed down to a utilitarian definition" where students are expected to reach "a level necessary to function… at work" for the "economic well-being of the country." This passage was written in response to the National Literacy Strategy (NLS), which they saw as being "in tension with the richer model of English in the National Curriculum" (as above). Indeed, while there is evidence that the NLS has helped to develop a consistent "progression of skills" (DfE, 2011), Bryan and Westbrook draw attention to the fact that schools placing an emphasis on aspects of the strategy where progress is more easily measurable, particularly with pupils in lower sets, may have "diverted schools from developing richer, more coherent literacy cultures" (2000, p.46). This emphasis on functional skills is something I have seen within my own career.

I feel it is important that students understand that engaging with a text (whether that means *Great Expectations*, *The Beano* or the latest *Grand Theft Auto* video game) is necessarily a cultural activity; any text is a product, and sometimes an implied critique, of the culture which produced it. While this is addressed in the National

Strategies Framework for Secondary English (DfEE, 2008, p.16), in my experience, the teaching of this often takes the form of a brief look at the historical context for a text before or during the scheme of work. This approach may be useful to help students understand the social situation of the women in *Romeo and Juliet*, for example, but if it were taken further, so that students were taught to analyse (in this instance) the way in which Shakespeare himself represents women, they would learn the sorts of analytical skills which they can apply to making critical judgements of our own culture. By equipping students in this way, we are going beyond narrow definitions of literacy and adult needs and empowering them to participate in a democratic society from an informed point of view.

There is, of course, a moral element to this, which satisfies to some extent the personal development model – one of the five models for English teaching identified by Cox (Goodwyn 1992) - which has been identified as being the favoured viewpoint of a majority of English teachers (Goodwyn and Findlay, 1997). However, the personal development point of view can be dependent on Leavisite notions that the study of good literature will somehow automatically awaken a "young person's sensitivity to human emotions" (Davies, 1996, p.17). This point of view is understandably attractive for those who have spent a good portion of their lives studying literature. Davies suggests, though, that the logical connection between studying literature and increased empathy is essentially unprovable. While a recent study reported by The Guardian (Bury, 2013) has suggested that there is a measurable link between reading 'literary' fiction and performance in certain psychological tests of empathy, at least in the short term, I would argue that encouraging students to analyse texts from a cultural standpoint is equally important, as the ability to understand the socio-political viewpoints in a text should teach students to do the same within the wider culture. This is important because as teachers we have a responsibility to endow our students with the skills to develop their own values in relation to a critical understanding of the society they are living in.

It could be argued that Media Studies, Art or Music have equal responsibility for equipping students with these cultural analysis skills, as they also deal with cultural activities. However, because it already emphasises analysis from an early stage, and

because it deals primarily with language, I believe English is in a strong position to encourage students to look critically at cultural texts. The focus on language is an important element in this, as it is often through language that underlying ideologies are most readily identified. Take, for example, the lyrics from a recent chart-topping song, which would be familiar to many school pupils. The lines: "tried to domesticate you/but you're an animal" in the Robin Thicke song 'Blurred Lines' (2013) liken women to wild animals waiting to be tamed by heterosexual male sexuality, and this is just one example from a song which has been accused of trivialising 'rape culture' (Michaels, 2013). If students are taught to analyse the way language is used to refer to women (for example) or other groups in songs or other texts, I feel it will equip them to reflect on the way in which those groups are treated by society as a whole, and the attitudes which are embedded in our culture. This also demonstrates the value of teaching students to read critically a variety of texts from different media. While literary texts such as novels and poems still hold a prestigious position in our culture, they make up only a small minority of the texts a student is likely to encounter in his or her everyday life. This is why the integration of media texts into English study is "logical and necessary, preparing children for participation in a media rich world" (Durran and Morrison, 2011, p.26). Given the necessity that Durran and Morrison describe here, it seems anachronistic to me that the incoming national curriculum contains no mention of media text. However, while media texts will not be included in statutory assessments, the curriculum's stipulation that students should read 'a wide variety of texts' (DfE, 2013) could be interpreted to include the analysis of written language for webpages, posters and texts in other media, even if it is now beyond the national curriculum to examine how meaning is created through other presentational features.

Given the centrality of texts in other media, we might question why we should study literature in schools at all. While it is beyond the scope of this essay to give a full answer to that question, I will attempt to justify the place of literature on the school curriculum in relation to a cultural analysis model of English. Firstly, while there are flaws in an over-simplified cultural heritage model of English, it is important to remember that a properly balanced understanding of contemporary culture must

include some awareness of how it has developed. A student's History lessons may be part of this, but the study of literature allows a dialogue with cultural ideas from other times and places (Bryan and Westbrook, 2000, p.44). Also, the incumbent National Curriculum for key stage three places a strong emphasis on literary study which includes "prose, poetry and drama" from both "pre-1914 and contemporary" literature (DfE, 2013). This may open up arguments about the document's prescriptive nature, and its apparent privileging of the traditional literary cannon, but it also means that the study of literature can provide a politically respectable and language-rich practice ground for students to develop the cultural analysis skills which Moss suggests could sometimes lead to challenges to the established socio-political order (Moss, 2000, p.205).

It is not necessarily easy to integrate cultural analysis into an already crowded programme of study, particularly given the current emphasis on functional-skills and the push for C-grade GCSEs, but Moss (2000) asserts that there is "good evidence of [critical theory's] effectiveness in pedagogy" (p.207), while Peim (2000) offers some practical suggestions for how this can be applied to supporting cultural analysis in the classroom. One suggestion is that teachers could ask questions based on Barthes narrative codes (pp.176-177). This sounds abstract, but the questions asked need not be difficult in themselves, and they provide a way to prompt students to look at texts in ways which shift the focus from how the writer creates meaning, to how meaning is controlled by a number of pre-existing cultural conditions. This use of relatively simple questions based on cultural and critical theory is something I would like to attempt in my own pedagogy. Another of Peim's suggestions is that we could compare literary texts with recent films in order analyse both texts and explore the cultural attitudes contained within them (pp.175-177). However, it is worth remembering that Peim was writing before controlled assessments, and when the future of Media within English teaching appeared promising; in the current educational climate there would not be opportunity at key stage four to study material which cannot be assessed.

Despite the difficulties in integrating cultural analysis into the English curriculum, I believe that it is a worthwhile challenge, and one that I hope to attempt as I develop

my own classroom practice, as I feel that it is important that all students develop a measure of cultural literacy which allows them to understand and critique the culture we are living in. I see this as being a crucial part of English study because both language and literature reflect the culture that produced them, and the analysis of these can also be useful in exploring our own culture. It is through this process of examining values that cultures can change and progress.

Word Count: 1640

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