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The Writer as Composer: The Place of Composing in New South Wales English Syllabuses

Abstract

Since 1996 all three New South Wales English Syllabuses (1996, 1999, 2002) position creative writing as an essential component of the curriculum content. While this is not a particularly radical situation for the lower years of schooling, it is a significant shift in the post-compulsory secondary school curriculum (Years 11-12). The previous English syllabuses for these years (1982, 1988) embraced a conception of the subject English based firmly in the study of literary texts while this new syllabus constructs the subject English in terms of 'responding to' and 'composing' texts. This paper examines the ways in which 'composing' is constituted in the new syllabuses with particular emphasis on the Years 7-10 English Syllabus (2002) and the Stage 6 English Syllabus (1999) - Standard, Advanced and Extension 2 courses. It demonstrates how composing is positioned within a production paradigm that valorizes compositions that display knowledge of textual forms and features for specific contexts, values compositions that are responses to existing texts and marginalizes the role of the author as explorer and creator in the composing process. Finally, it poses the question: Why should this matter to those of us who teach in tertiary writing programs? And offers some tentative answers.

Preamble

Two recent authors have highlighted the parlous state of public language in the age of post-modernism: Watson (2003) argues that everyday we 'vandalise the language, which is the foundation, the frame and joinery of the culture' (p.8), and Abbs (2003) asserts that 'our imperial global Anglo-American language is dull with the glitter of its own decay' (p.121). Both authors also turn their attention to the language of educational discourse: Abbs identifies the 'anodyne and functional language of current educational discourse' (p.4) in the English National Curriculum and Watson (2003) argues that '[t]here is nothing in this gush [of language in the New South Wales Higher School Certificate English syllabus] to suggest that in words and their arrangement an idea is sometimes born' (p.160). Both Watson and Abbs are concerned with the *decay* of the spiritual, metaphysical and musical in language: for Abbs the 'art-maker has become more showman than shaman' with writing reduced to 'the

verbal display of what is intellectually known in advance' (p.108), and for Watson the decay is evident in the emphasis on the relationship between text and context and the lack of emphasis on the author playing with the 'beautiful arrangement of words' (p.165) that can 'liberate, possess, bewilder and intoxicate' (p.164).

In the present study we examine the two current New South Wales (NSW) secondary English syllabuses: the *English Years 7-10 Syllabus* (2002) and the *English Stage 6 Syllabus* (1999). In NSW, syllabuses are developed by the Board of Studies through a consultative process that culminates in ministerial approval for syllabus implementation in schools. Both syllabuses examined in this study have been produced in the aftermath of the Eltis Review (1995) and McGaw Review (1996) that led to governmental directives for changes to the Higher School Certificate (HSC), School Certificate and to the imposition of outcomes-based education. Of particular significance for this study is the imposition of a particular model of outcomes-based education, differentiated curriculum structures and a changed conception of the subject English. The *English Years 7-10 Syllabus* (2002) is vertically differentiated in terms of Stages 4 and 5. Stage 4 includes years 7 and 8 and Stage 5 includes years 9 and 10 of secondary schooling. The *English Stage 6 Syllabus* (1999) is differentiated both vertically (year 11/preliminary and year 12/HSC) and is also differentiated horizontally with six hierarchically-arranged courses, each designed to meet the (putative) needs of particular classifications of students - Fundamentals of English, English as a Second Language, Standard English, Advanced English, Extension 1 English and Extension 2 English.

Both syllabuses are constructed within an outcomes based model with lists of learning outcomes being provided for each course and stage of learning. In addition to the lists of learning outcomes, the Stage 6 document contains module descriptions and examination specifications. In this research our focus is on the listed outcomes for Stages 4 and 5 of the *English Years 7-10 Syllabus* (2002) and the listed outcomes, module descriptions and examination specifications for the Standard, Advanced and Extension 2 courses of the *English Stage 6 Syllabus* (1999). The Standard and Advanced courses have been selected since they form a continuum with the Stages 4 and 5 of the *English Years 7-10 Syllabus* (2002) - except for those students who undertake the English as a Second Language course. The Extension 2 course has been selected since it represents the highest-level course in the six tiers of courses and comprises an independent Major Work undertaken by students to produce an extended original piece of writing. The Fundamentals of English course was omitted since it operates as a supplementary English course that is non-examinable and the Extension 1 course was not included since it is closely linked with Extension 1 in its approaches and because the researchers had limited time to manage the extensive amount of data from the existing courses.

The subject English is represented in these syllabuses in terms of an expressive/receptive dichotomy of *responding to and composing texts*. Texts are conceived of as comprising any communication of meaning using language including *written, spoken, nonverbal or visual communication of meaning* (Board of Studies 1999, p.143). The conception of English places emphasis on the context in which a text is composed or responded to and context is encapsulated in a broad sweeping definition: *the range of personal, social, historical, cultural and workplace conditions in which a text is responded to and composed* (Board of Studies

1999, p.140). The emphasis in this study is on the conceptualization of *composing* in the documents within the framework of this broad constitution of the subject English.

Although the quotidian associations of composing relate to the writing of music, the Macquarie Dictionary defines the word 'compose' as 'make or form by uniting parts or elements'. The syllabus definition echoes this denotation:

- *[Composing is] the activity that occurs when students **produce** [our emphasis] written, spoken, or visual texts. Composing typically involves:*
- *The shaping and arrangement of textual elements to explore and express ideas, emotions and values;*
- *The processes of imagining, drafting, appraising, reflecting and refining;*
- *Knowledge, understanding and use of the language forms, features and structures of texts. (Board of Studies 1999, p.7)*

This definition, couched in 'product-oriented instructional discourse' (Ross 2003: p.320), would appear to construct composing as activity and process that involves cognition, but that is shaped by a materialistic framework that seems to place emphasis on product. Part of our concern in this project has been to test out the extent to which this definition is reflected in the syllabus outcomes and content descriptions.

Method used in the analysis of the syllabus documents

This study adapts the content analysis methodology developed by Michaels (2001a) in analysing the NSW English syllabuses from 1953 to 1994 (that has been usefully replicated in subsequent studies such as Michaels 2003a, 2003b, 2003c, 2003d, 2001b, 2001c, and Michaels and Gibbs 2001). The benefit of this method is its capacity to reveal the patterns of meaning that are hidden in documents. The three research assistants and the chief investigator made initial individual readings and codings of the documents' references to composing. The researchers collectively refined the codes using concept clusters and matrices as data reduction tools. The revised codes were reapplied to the documents to check for validity and reliability and the re-coding was subjected to further data reduction processes to establish the *composing themes* in the two documents. The findings for the two documents were then compared to determine patterns and trends across the two syllabuses and this was re-examined in the light of the syllabus definition of composing.

The findings

The findings revealed some significant patterns of ideas and values across both syllabus documents in the constitution of composing within the subject English. While commonalities in the conception of composing in the *English Years 7-10 Syllabus* and the *Stage 6 English Syllabus* were evident there were also some differences in emphases. These will be mentioned within the framework of the main themes identified except in the case of the differences in emphases found in the Extension 2 course that are presented separately.

Four key themes were identified in relation to the constitution of composing in the *English Years 7-10 Syllabus* and the *English Stage 6*

Syllabus (Standard and Advanced courses):

1. Producing compositions that *display* knowledge of textual forms and features.
2. Shaping compositions in relation to cultural context.
3. Valuing compositions that comprise responses to existing texts.
4. Marginalising personal engagement and exploration in the composing process.

Composing in the *English Years 7-10 Syllabus* and *English Stage 6 Syllabus*

The emphasis on producing compositions that *display* knowledge of the forms and features of texts is strongest in Stage 4 and Stage 5 and less prevalent in the Standard and Advanced course of Stage 6 but emphasized in the Extension 2 course. The word, *display*, has been deliberately selected by the researchers because it best captures the documents' sense of composing as the production of a linguistic product and echoes Abbs's notion of 'verbal display'. The documents establish composers as those who *use the features and structures of imaginative texts to compose their own texts* or *control a range of language features to meet the requirements of composing*. The textual forms and features are described in various ways as, for instance, *symbols, images, icons, clichés, stereotypes, connotations, inference* or *textual and visual conventions for composing dialogue*. There is a particular emphasis on composing using ICT in Stages 4 and 5 - e.g. *technical features of audio and visual recording, word processing, graphics and formatting used for composing texts*. The implication is that the textual elements pre-exist the composition and the composing process simply requires the appropriate arrangement of these pre-existing components in order to *create cohesive texts*. The focus of the learning here is not so much on composing as on textual forms and features.

Both syllabuses place considerable emphasis on the concept of context, defined as the 'range of personal, social, historical, cultural and workplace conditions in which a text is responded to and composed' (Board of Studies 1999, p.8). However, there is little evidence of each of these elements being given equal emphasis in relation to composing. Cultural factors - *cultural expression* and *cultural assumptions in texts* - are highlighted and linked with personal experiences in Stage 4 and 5 - *ways culture and personal experience position composers and responders and influence response to and composition of texts* - and workplace elements feature in the Standard course, but there is little other than lip-service paid to the other identified elements of context. (It might be expected that workplace aspects would also feature in the Fundamentals course - since workplace is conceived of not so much as the workplace of the writer's vocation, but as the literacy needs of students in vocational education situations.) There is considerable focus on students' adapting existing texts to *new and unfamiliar contexts* or *adapting texts to address different purposes and audiences within workplace and other contexts*. This places the emphasis on learning about cultural context and omits those other aspects that McDonald (2002) points to in her statement: 'writers...exist in time and space, in a social context, as part of a collective history and future' (p.180).

The processes of responding to and composing texts are positioned as complementary components of the subject English, yet they are not given equal value: in both documents responding is valorized over composing, particularly in the Stage 6 syllabus. Composing in response to other texts is constituted both as:

*using a range of literary and non-literary texts as models,
composing personal responses to texts,
composing sustained arguments supported by textual
evidence,
recreating texts into new texts by changing perspective and
contexts for specified audiences, and
adapting texts to address different purposes and audiences.*

Even though the verb *compose* is used here, it is effectively a responding activity that is being described. The verb *compose* is commonly associated with actions such as *complying with, adapting or subverting the conventions of form, genre and ideology*, although some provision is made for *experiment[ing] with representing the real world imaginatively*. However, producing compositions in relation to existing texts is the dominant meaning associated with composing.

While both documents repeat the mantra *range of textual forms* they do not equally valorize all forms. In particular there tends to be less emphasis on forms that might ensure the personal engagement and exploration of the writer/composer in the process of composition. Both spoken and visual composition (the latter described in the documents by the gerund *representing*) tend to be marginalized. Not all written compositions are equally valued. Written personal compositions are given some emphasis in Stage 4 and 5 - e.g. *compose personal texts in literary forms such as narrative, poetry, speeches and scripts* or *compose texts that reflect their broadening world and their relationships within it* - but feature less prominently in Stage 6. Moreover, despite the use of the word *explore* in the syllabus definition of composing, there is little to stimulate students' use of writing to *explore*, rather than simply *reflect*, their understandings of themselves and their world, and little to encourage originality of composition other than, perhaps, the lip-service paid to *the cleverness and joy of invention* and the occasional reference to composing *texts that demonstrate originality, imagination and ingenuity in content and language* - something akin to Brophy's notion of pleasure with its 'potential for enhancing individual experience and individual difference' (Brophy 1998, p.218).

Not only do the documents disengage students from the form, they also tend to disconnect them from the process of composition. The production process is represented as involving stages - e.g. *planning, drafting, rehearsing, editing and publishing* - although the nature of each stage and the interrelationships between them are not explicated. There is little to suggest an active cognitive engagement on the part of the student/writer or the use of the writing process, in Watson's terms, to give birth to ideas or in Abbs's terms to unleash the power of the 'epiphanic', 'Socratic' or 'prophetic' (p.66-68). This analysis would seem to affirm Heuston's (2001) criticism of the syllabus that 'the meaning in texts comes from every other source except the person who wrote them' (p.1). The Major Work Examiners' Report (Board of Studies 2002b) provides further confirmation of this with its statement that 'many students developed a new text which emerged from the concepts or elements of a prescribed, well-known or canonical text' (p.10) suggesting a mechanical production devoid of

personal engagement on the part of the students. This situation mirrors that described by Ross in relation to the *Student Guides* of the Composition Program at the University of California at Irvine. She points out that the guides, in which prose is 'replaced by bullets and organized by lists of dos and don'ts', have the effect of 'atomiz[ing] and proceduralis[ing]' reading and writing to the extent that they 'disappear in a thicket of procedures' (Ross 2003, p.320). This production model eschews the author-stance advocated by Meehan where the writer is 'moving within the transforming progress of the whirlwind rather than observing it from afar, zigzagging wildly across the terrain of his or her subject in ways that defy all predictability, logic and probability' (p.28).

Composing in the Extension 2 course

While these themes are also evident in the Extension 2 course, a further pattern of ideas dominates that course description:

1. Products defined primarily in terms of form and medium of presentation.
2. A three-fold process of investigation, composition and reflection.

The Extension 2 course comprises the composition of an *extended, sustained or substantial Major Work* that is characterized as having *depth, insight and originality*. The term *Major Work* itself is generally, although not exclusively, used with capital letters that serve to commodify both the composition process and product.

Concrete specifications of the products are provided in the document with the nature of the Major Work being captured in the descriptors *imaginative, investigative, interpretive, analytical or any combination of these*. This statement would appear to acknowledge the blurring of genres, as writers such as Disher (2001) does when he describes books that 'blend fact and fiction or treat actual events and characters with the techniques of fiction' (p.25). However, it also positions imaginative works as only one of four or five different types of work - giving less value to fictional work than writers such as Vogler (1992/1996) who sees fiction as a 'thought machine, by which we test our ideas and feelings about some human quality and try to learn more about it' (p.1), or McKee (1999) who sees story as 'the profound human need to grasp the patterns of living, not merely as an intellectual exercise, but within a very personal, emotional experience' (p.12). Such an approach positions itself outside the expressivist position held by Elbow (2000) when he writes of 'cultivat[ing] the private dimension: the value of writing in order to make meaning to oneself' (p.204).

The Major Work product range is identified in terms of form and medium. While the syllabus glossary does not provide a definition of the term *form* it identifies the term *medium* as the *physical form in which the text exists*. Four physical forms are listed: Print Medium, Sound Medium, the Visual Medium and Multimedia. For each nominated Medium a further selection of forms is identified - e.g. Print Medium - Short Story(ies), Poem(s), Critical Responses and Scripts - Radio, Film, Television and Drama. There are some anomalies in the listings - e.g. performance poetry in the Sound Medium and only moving image forms - video and film - in the Visual Medium. The identified forms are explicated only in terms of practical specifications of length or manner of presentation - e.g. *Students must*

complete a short story or a selection of stories within the 6,000-8,000 word limit and Font size should be size 12, Arial or Times New Roman.

Moreover, the word *form* is also used somewhat ambiguously to mean content or approach as, for instance, in the list of forms that Critical Responses may take:

- A critique of an author's work, or
- An independent investigation into an aspect of language, or
- An independent investigation into the works of a particular historical period, or
- An independent investigation into a particular paradigm related to the study of English, or
- Any other critical response approved by the teacher, which is an extension of the knowledge and understanding gained by the student in the Advanced or Extension course.

(Board of Studies 1999, p.132-3)

Indeed, it is in this section - the explicitly non-fictional, analytical form - that there is the most explicit explication of the *nature* of the work that can be undertaken by the students. This raises questions about the value attributed to imaginative as opposed to analytical work in the context of an emphasis on composing as responding to existing texts.

Whatever the anomalies in descriptions, definitions or explications, the outcome is that students are required to select a medium of production and a form for their work prior to making other decisions about the subject of the work or the process of development. This process is the obverse of McKee's (1999) approach, where '[o]riginality is the confluence of content and form - distinctive choices of subject plus a unique shaping of the telling' (p.8). It implies, rather, that the manner of telling be selected and the content shaped to the form and echoes Crick's criticisms of Bartholomae's position in his essay 'Inventing the University': the writer here is simply a mouthpiece for the larger discourse that exists outside of them, the kind of discourse that is 'a context beyond the reader that is not the world but a way of talking about the world' (Crick 2003, p.263).

The Major Work process is constituted as threefold: investigation, composition and reflection, although there is virtually nothing in the document that establishes the precise nature of the relationship between the three threads. The investigation or inquiry process is variously described as *on-going, systematic and rigorous, extended and independent* and as involving *skills* - although no specific skills are listed in the document. Interestingly, it is not constructed as a research process (the word research itself appears once in the document) perhaps reflecting the wider contests over the nature of research in the humanities and creative arts discussed by Brophy (1998, pp. 212-217). The reflection process is highlighted in the description of requirements for the Major Work Journal (inconsistently capitalized throughout the document). The Journal serves a dual purpose: on the one hand it *has a role in establishing the authenticity of the Major Work* and on the other it *will assist students in achieving course objectives and outcomes and in preparing for internal and external assessment tasks*. These functions are achieved through the process of *recording of research, analysis, critical, imaginative and speculative reflections*. Significantly, the emphasis in the outcomes is on reflection skills rather than on aesthetic or metaphysical understandings. Indeed, the single reference to reflecting on *the knowledge and understanding gained* refers back to the *processes of inquiry* - i.e. a responding activity, rather

than reflecting in and on the processes of composition. Even in the description of the requirements for the Reflection Statement (a kind of exegesis statement) that forms part of the requirements for submission of the Major Work for examination, there is an emphasis on *explaining the relationships of concept, structure, technical and language features and conventions in the final product*. It should be noted that a Marking Centre myth currently circulating suggests that the quality of the Reflection Statement is more important than the Major Work itself! This myth perhaps has its shadow in the emphasis on the exegesis in Masters and PhD programs 'in order to satisfy universities' requirements that there be a traditionally recognizable research component in the final thesis' (Brophy 1998, p.218).

Surprisingly, there is little explication in the document of the composition process *per se*. One reference suggests that it is a *process of inquiry* although this term is also used somewhat ambiguously to mean investigation or research, suggesting that any new knowledge comes from the reading/investigation activities rather than the writing/composition activities. References to the process of composition cite practical aspects such as the *plan, the stages of the composition* and the presentation of *aspects of composition to specific audiences, in a range of modes*. In addition, there are sketchy references to the process being initiated by some *stimulus material*, involving the *development of concepts* and including *redrafts* or *changes in direction*. The stimulus material is constituted as the source of the work, strikingly captured in the verbal phrase *drawn from*, and although the notion of student selection of *an area of personal interest* is established by reference to *personal, affective, cognitive and other experiences, understanding and ideas*, the source of such selection is constrained by the prepositional phrase *from their specialized study of English*. Allied to this is the notion of intentions that relate both to the *intent of the work* which is to be *conceived* by the student, *negotiated* with the teacher and tightly linked with the independent investigation and the *intended audience* for the work, which is also connected to *the purpose for which it is composed* and implicated in the students' evaluation of the degree to which the work's intentions are realized in the final product.

This construction of the composition process and product is far removed from Romantic notions of the self and located in constructivist notions of discourse. As Crick says in his criticism of Bartholomae, 'the actual experiences of the individual students, or those with whom the students are communicating, are never actually addressed. There are only the desires and needs of the discourse' (Crick 2003, p. 264).

Conclusions

Composing in these documents, despite differences in emphasis, is primarily an act of production: compositions are constituted as products. What is valorized is the production of texts that conform to, adapt or subvert existing textual structures, forms and features in relation to specified contexts. While composing and responding to texts are established, through mantras, as complementary modes of using language, responding is not only given more emphasis than composing, but much of the composing itself is constituted as a responding activity. Even where personal exploration or experimentation is provided for, there is the overarching paradigm of a production activity involving a lego-like assembly of textual elements that has little connection with the subjective

experience of the writer/composer and the process of composing. As Watson writes (2003), 'people who write know that very often the creative context is the writing itself. You must know what is in your mind when you start, but once started you cannot know in every case what you will come upon' (p.160). Even in the reflection processes of the Major Work students are asked to evaluate *the relationships of concept, structure, technical and language features and conventions* in the chosen form and medium of their Major Work.

This constitution of composing seems to me to come perilously close to Abbs's (2003) description of deficit poets that 'contract the range, clog the channels of vital cognition, and spawn a self-regarding provincialism of mind' (p.122); or to Watson's description of consultants who 'clog the language and cut us off from thought, feeling and possibility' (p.183).

In these syllabus documents, composing - both in its definition and in the way in which it is explained throughout the documents - is uncomfortably placed within a cultural studies paradigm that refuses to 'privilege literary texts above other aspects of social life and the semiotic system used to represent them' (Stephens 1996, p.164). It is constituted as an almost mechanical act of production rather than an act of creation - a position that renders it 'devoid of creative energy and animating spirit' (Abbs, 2003 p.1) and cut off from McPhee's (2001) sense of 'stories like webs across the world' (p.1). This construction of composing has lost sight of Schwarz's dictum (1990) that 'texts are by human authors for human readers about human subjects' (p.21).

Why should this matter to those of us who teach in tertiary writing programs? On the pragmatic level, students who complete the Extension 2 English course in NSW are the very students who may well find their way into our programs (indeed, in my institution this is already occurring) and since they are students who have, in the syllabus's terms, been high achievers, they are likely to bring with them expectations about the features of their writing that will be rewarded high marks or grades. These students are likely to bring with them certain values and assumptions about writing that may well be at odds with the particular ideologies and approaches underpinning writing in the academy. It is in our interests to know and understand the contexts in which such values have been shaped.

It is also of concern to note how prescriptive syllabus/curriculum documents codify and commodify fields of knowledge capturing and holding them in a state of fixity when these very discourses are volatile and shifting in the academy. The collocation of this process with the formative and summative assessment technology of the HSC examination further complicates the situation. As Brophy points out: 'Along with a lack of experience in writing creatively, many teachers are, it seems, not confident that they can assess students' creative writing' (1998, p.227). In the NSW HSC, the use of a standards referenced assessment framework with its 'operationally defined criteria so that students can understand how grades are determined' (Brophy 1998, p 227) and the publication of a Standards Package of student responses 'runs the risk of reducing creative elements to a formula' (Brophy 1998, p.227).

More importantly, perhaps, it hides the 'mystery and mysteriousness of...the way writing gets done...the obsessiveness and vocational call of it, the way that if you must write nothing can stop you' (Baranay 1998 p.1) and reflects very closely the criticisms that Abbs (2003) makes about the values that are currently being suppressed in education and society through

the replication of functional discourse: 'a suppression of the spiritual and transcendent' (p.2), 'a suppression of values connected to the common realm', and 'the loss of any binding notion of ethical or aesthetic value' (p.3). Abbs argues for a re-engagement with 'the making of meaning, with the search for understanding, with the desire for an encompassing sense of life' and the search for a 'creative response' to the 'open predicament of being human' (p.4).

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