‘English teachers are hardworking, committed professionals too often given too little time to grapple with the important questions of what it is to be an English teacher and teach the best of English literature. In *Making Meaning in English*, Didau explores the past of English teaching, the problematic present, whilst offering an exploration of a better future. He digs in the rich traditions of the discipline, whilst offering teachers practical insights so that they can notice the artful craft of English and turn it into compelling action.’

Alex Quigley, Author of *Closing the Reading Gap and Closing the Vocabulary Gap*

‘In this thoughtful and timely book, David Didau identifies all the challenges involved with English curriculum design, which many of us have wrestled with over the years. Through disciplinary practice and substantive knowledge, which he sees shaped by modes of thought such as metaphor, story and pattern, Didau offers a practical means for English teachers to structure their curricula and for students to learn and appreciate the joys of the subject. I only wish this book had been available when I was head of department!’

Phil Stock, Deputy Headteacher, Greenshaw High School, Sutton

‘This is a book that invites hyperbole and for good reason. Its scope is spectacular, its details delightful and its provocations powerful. The principles it proposes go beyond English and make it an important read for anyone with curriculum responsibilities who is concerned with creating a proper curriculum. Written with considerable erudition and lightness of touch *Making Meaning in English* is truly impressive.’

Mary Myatt, Education Adviser and Writer, Author of *The Curriculum: Gallimaufry to Coherence*

‘*Making Meaning in English* is a mature work, and this maturity can be detected in both its quietly meditative tone and the manner in which Didau, perhaps taking heed of Orwell’s ideas about writing,

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Foreword

Over the last fifteen years, little in education has brought me so near to despair as the strange corrosion of English in England's state secondary schools. The corrosion has been far-reaching and has felt, at times, inexorable.

It has been dispiriting to observe three invariably well-meaning but ultimately damaging processes. Like three grinding wheels, each seems to bear in and do fresh damage, grinding the subject into a strange set of proxies that now pass for 'English', removing its pleasure, obscuring its beauty and diminishing its educational role and value.

The first process has been underway for decades. Ian Warwick and Ray Speakman recently called it 'the tyranny of relevance'. This has both a curricular dimension – the supplanting of traditional, foundational or challenging texts with those deemed to provide most immediate appeal – and a pedagogic one – the fashion for seeking 'engagement' through ever more tantalising activities, rather than through the subject itself. The second process, arising in the last two decades, has been a trend towards drilling in the surface skills defined by assessment criteria, retrofitting everything to a GCSE markscheme. Far from achieving GCSE's avowed goals of wide reading, personal response and clear communication, this results in rehearsal of pointless formulae, the wearyingly familiar writing you'll find in Figure 2.1 of this book. At worst, with every lesson a mini-exam, Year 11 English becomes a joyless place. This second problem is all the more pernicious

for having been pursued in the name of 'raising achievement' and 'standards'. Sometimes, the entire secondary school English experience becomes a set of practice exercises for English GCSE. Denying pupils the really secure progress that would come from a fuller encounter, from authentic experience of reading, and from really systematic training in rich, broad literature and language, is an attack on standards, not an improvement in them.

The third and most recent process is perhaps the most revealing. New attention to the cognitive science of memory and new calls for knowledge-rich curricula ought to be antidotes to both the above. Sometimes they have been. But when the interpretation of knowledge-rich is little to do with knowledge, amounting to memorisation of isolated contextual facts, and when 'retrieval practice' means yet more skillification through the repeated rehearsal of structures for GCSE exam answers, one really does start to worry that the guardian angels of English have fled.

Other voices of concern have written recently and well about the above, but what strikes me about David Didau's new work is that he reserves equal fire for all of them. This includes his own book of nine years ago, and the former Ofsted regime that influenced it. It is not, however, a negative book. It is highly constructive and, despite his disavowal, highly practical. A detailed rationale for English teaching, it concludes with a sample curriculum exemplifying it.

This book stands out for me as significant among key works on English education for three main reasons.

First, Didau argues against short cuts. This is a book about going the long way round. A key reason each of the above three approaches is ineffective is that each is a cargo cult: each bypasses the whole point of the subject, both its pleasure and its effortful study. Didau goes the long way round on everything.

At the level of simply reading a book, he is clear that there is no replacement for actually reading the book. Discussing Orwell for his suggested Year 9 programme, Didau recommends teachers 'forego extensive analysis for the benefit (and pleasure) of reading more'. And on the grander scale of the whole curriculum, his case for taking time with seemingly demanding classics, whether Chaucer, Behn or Austen, or for teaching the metalanguage of grammar or argument, is the pleasure and delight they later afford in changing what pupils subsequently notice and enjoy in other works. Delight, joy and pleasure feature large in this book. This is curriculum as narrative, one that lays foundations. We recognise the poetic, not through memorising ten features, but because of the vast array of poems we have read. Pupils need both immediate delight and the delight that is hard won, that arises through the way other texts have changed their ears.

Second, Didau's solution to historical clashes over the purpose of English is a rationale that unashamedly puts literature first in teaching language. When Bryan Cox sought to move English on from all the divisions of Holbrook *versus* Bullock, of personal growth *versus* functional communication, he did so by embracing all purposes and avoiding specification. Didau, by contrast, dives into that space with specificity, but what marks out his curricular thinking is a coherence that gets beyond the 'both…and…' solution. Yes, we encounter both Angelou and Shakespeare, both Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Shelley, both prescriptive and descriptive grammar, both the canon and its challenge; but Didau transcends these dichotomies by theorising disciplinary knowledge itself. And he finds it temporal: the English language is ancient. It is also medieval, modern and right now still changing. This journey of language itself needs serious study. Planning for all pupils to reap the riches of intertextuality requires the system and

thoroughness of presenting intertextuality as story.

My final, abiding impression of this book is that it fosters a sense of higher purpose, the proper commitment of the English teacher to something even more important than the pupils in front of them: a sense of responsibility to the future as stewards of language and literature as a tradition, and precisely so that *anyone* can renew that tradition through challenge, creativity and debate. Canons are not there for ossification, but to furnish new and yet unknown ways of thinking, writing and being. By the concluding chapter, as Didau pours out how and why he would teach Toni Morrison and Achebe, he conveys breathless exhilaration that makes me wish I had been his Year 9 pupil. Here we feel the excitement from the kind of literary training that reveals the protean quality of language, its extraordinary capacity for reinvention, for mediating and for silencing, for empowerment and oppression.

This is a book for English teachers, but the group I most want to read it is headteachers, from all subjects. Subject community agency cannot thrive, nor be effective, without sponsors and guardians. We need those with power in the school situation to ensure that wider school policy is not the cause of cargo cults and we need them to empower English teachers with the professional incentives to debate the ambition of this book.

Christine Counsell

Christine Counsell serves on the boards of David Ross Education Trust, Now Teach and Ark Curriculum Partnerships. She taught in comprehensive schools for many years and has held positions as local authority adviser for primary and secondary schools, Senior Lecturer in the University of Cambridge Faculty of Education where she trained secondary

teachers for nineteen years, and Director of Education of a Multi-Academy Trust in East Anglia. She now works nationally and internationally as an independent education consultant, especially in curriculum development and teacher development.

Introduction

The anxiety that there's something rotten in the state of English seems as old as the subject itself. When I trained in the 1990s, the fashion was to teach children creativity and empathy. We'd read young adult novels and ask, 'How do you think the characters *feel?* How would *you* feel in that situation?' Then we'd ask students to write letters to the characters expressing these feelings, or compose a diary entry from different characters' perspectives where they reveal their reactions to events. Other stuff – like sentence structure – we assumed children would just pick up if they read enough young adult novels and wrote enough diary entries.

With the era of accountability, results became ever more important. English lessons were increasingly focussed on checking off attainment targets, and students spent ever more time drilling skills as the curriculum became an extended rehearsal for examinations. If it was considered at all, the idea that a student should find meaning in their study of English was dismissed as risibly elitist.

More recently, we've become fascinated with cognitive science and begun to focus on building up students' stores of knowledge about literature and grammar. So, students learn lists of contextual facts, engage in retrieval practice quizzes and answer multiple-choice questions. But in the rush to reinvent the subject as 'knowledge-rich' there's a risk that self-expression, empathy and meaning may be thrown out along with the admittedly filthy bathwater.

If English *should* be for passing on a body of knowledge – and I think it should – we need to think more deeply and critically about what this knowledge should be. Unlike most other school subjects English does not consist of an agreed, settled body of knowledge. We take our guidance from examination boards. We dwell on the detailed knowledge of a very few canonical texts and attempt to teach and assess a generic set of skills in the forlorn hope that this will equip young people for the vicissitudes they will face in life. But if this is not enough, if our students need more direction in navigating an uncertain world, we are often unprepared to guide them in making meaning.

I am no exception. My literature degree was gleefully focussed on literary theory, and tended to overlook the centrality of literature itself, except to diminish it. As a result, I embarked on my teaching career unaware of much of what the study of literature and language has to offer. In the fifteen years I spent as an English teacher, never once was it suggested I might want or need to expand my subject knowledge. All the training I received – pre- and in-service – was at the level of the pedagogic 'how,' and most of that was concerned with teaching as a generic act, with the same advice offered to teachers of all subjects. What specialist training there was focussed on teaching to examination specifications. How did it come to this?

At some point in the last half-century, English underwent seismic changes in higher education. It became common to hear that all language, no matter how transient or insubstantial, could be considered literature; that all texts are of equal worth; that the reason some texts are considered more important than others is the result of unfair power structures. We shouldn't seek to blame literary theorists; they were responding to the consensus that existed before them and sought to undermine overconfidence with some much-needed tentativity. Much of

what they had to say has enlivened and enriched the subject, but the pendulum swung too far. Old certainties were replaced with new, equally dogmatic certainties. This new fervour eroded English's understanding of what it was. Now, wherever we look there is self-conscious hand-wringing. Is the author dead? Is the act of reading opaque and contentious? How do the concerns of identity, gender, ethnicity and class affect the processes of reading and writing? Is there such a thing as universal human nature? Is the aesthetic appeal of literature always subordinate to notions of power and prejudice? And what even *is* literature?

As English teachers we were left not just lacking expertise, but lacking conviction. Until recently, discussions about *what* to teach were sidelined by injunctions on *how* to teach. The curriculum became the business of exam boards and quangos; English teachers were shut out of the debate. Now, with a renewed focus on the curriculum, we are often unsure where to start or how to proceed. If we have been trying to build on a foundation of uncertainty we shouldn't be surprised if the resulting structure is rickety.

We've awakened to the idea that knowing things about language and literature is an essential part of the discipline, and that if students are going to enjoy the subject and do well in it, they need to be more knowledgeable. But lacking expertise, passionate intensity has resulted in all too predictable mistakes being loosed upon the world. English is in danger of becoming a clockwork version of itself with children learning lists of quotations and tables of techniques but with little sense of how to use these facts to create meaning.

'Knowledge-rich' should – *can* – be much more than an antidote to 'knowledge-lite.' We need a third way, a path between the poorly conceived excesses of the 'skills-based' curriculum and the technocratic grip of the knowledge

organiser; a path which teaches, “knowledge of a tradition that involves both knowing and doing,”[1] and conceives of the English curriculum as a conversation.

A guide to *Making Meaning*

Chapter 1: My search for a third way begins with an investigation of what English teachers have done in the past. This history tends not to be discussed in schools (or in university education departments) and so most English teachers have no way to learn from either the mistakes or successes of previous generations. I explore how English has been taught over the decades and find that what’s studied today is surprisingly similar to what was studied in the 1890s. In considering ‘traditional’ and ‘progressive’ ideas about English the major shift has been from authority to impotence, leaving teachers and students cut off from the roots of what English was once believed to be about.

Chapter 2: Our collective lack of conviction has led to various endemic problems in the way reading, writing and literature are taught. Underlying all the problems considered is the issue that knowledge – specifically knowledge about literature and language – has been systematically undervalued, misunderstood or misapplied.

Chapter 3: Because there is little agreement about what knowledge in English actually is, it can be difficult for teachers to know how to take a genuinely knowledge-rich approach. I explore the tension between the need for English to be seen as an objective and rigorous academic subject and its concern with the unquantifiable: feelings, beauty, values and meaning. Our focus will extend beyond knowledge; knowing is worthwhile

when it helps us to shape our place in the world, to establish our relation to the knowledge we encounter and to be able to think about its significance.

Chapter 4: Our investigation into making meaning focusses on two processes: the ability to *notice* what is happening when readers read and writers write, and the ability to judiciously select from a store of knowledge to make *analogies*. These disciplinary actions of noticing what is happening on the page and making analogies to what has happened on other pages also benefit from learning the knowledge shaped by different modes of thought that I've called metaphor, story, argument, pattern, grammar and context. Each of these modes deals with the frames through which we 'see' meaning as well as what is 'seen' within the frame, the content itself.

Chapter 5: Metaphor plays a deep role in how we think: all subjects rely on metaphors to make meaning but in English, metaphors themselves are also the focus of meaning. I not only review how metaphor works and how our thinking changes as we become attuned to the connectedness between seemingly unconnected things, I also suggest what students might benefit from being taught to support their quest for meaning.

Chapter 6: Like metaphor, storytelling also seems to be a primary mode of thought. All subjects use stories to impose meaning on the substance of what they operate on, but in English we also study how different kinds of stories work and what makes them satisfying and successful. Here we focus on plot, character and thought as the most important aspects of story for students to understand.

Chapter 7: Our instinct for argument is rooted in our need to cooperate with others; where we can we seek to persuade

those around us using logic and reason instead of violence and intimidation. Here I discuss how students can analyse the arguments of others and improve their own in terms of rhetoric, dialectic, debate and conversation.

Chapter 8: We are instinctively drawn to patterns of similarity and difference. All subjects possess their own distinct patterns of meaning but, again, in English these patterns are also the object of study. Students need to become attuned to the patterns that proliferate in language and literature – sound, repetition, rhyme, metre, form – in order to understand and impose meaning on what they read and write.

Chapter 9: Grammar frames our thoughts as well as our speech and writing. Although we have an instinctive facility with morphology and syntax, learning metalanguage allows students to think more deeply about how they and others use language and, instead of being bound by half-understood 'rules,' are able to ask penetrating questions about the grammatical structures they encounter.

Chapter 10: There is an inherent tension between text and context; how much context is necessary or desirable in exploring a text? How much should students be taught about the circumstances in which texts were written and consumed? Two areas I explore in depth are the role and effects of literary theory, and the notion of 'the canon' and how canonical knowledge can be accommodated in schools. This role – as thoughtful curators of the canon – is something we owe to our students.

Chapter 11: The potential fruit of this 'knowledge-rich' approach to English is planted in curriculum plans but harvested in the classroom. In this chapter I discuss the tools and principles we

can use to make decisions about what to teach.

Chapter 12: If what you're most interested in are practical resources, you may want to skip ahead to this final chapter. Here I imagine a curriculum that draws all the strands discussed in the book together in a framework that allows students to make sense of the knowledge they encounter.

Whether you agree with any or all of the suggestions offered is beside the point. What matters is that we take some tentative steps to being bolder about how best to help students make meaning within our subject.

The British-Hungarian polymath, Michael Polanyi warned, "Man lives in the meanings he is able to discern. He extends himself into that which he finds coherent and is at home there."[2] If we do not enlarge and extend the meanings our students are able to discern there will be no obvious tragedy. Our students will, on the whole, be at home with the limited glimpses of literature and language permitted them, but they will be prevented from entering and feeling comfortable in a larger, richer tradition of ideas and meaning.

This book is not a guide on how to teach English – there are several excellent such books already available – instead it is a book *about* English as a school subject. It is a plea to care about something only those who already know how to make meaning in English are able to discern. The aim is to reimagine English as a subject concerned primarily with significance. You may find ideas that strike you as too ambitious, too challenging, too rarefied for the students you teach, but I hope to persuade you to reconceive the curriculum as a place where old and new ideas clash, where the canon is wrestled with, and where students are given the intellectual wherewithal to impose their own judgements and meanings on what we lay before them.

The philosopher Michael Oakeshott once said, "As civilized

human beings, we are the inheritors … of a conversation, begun in the primeval forests and extended and made more articulate in the course of centuries."[3] If our students are to claim this inheritance, they need us to have higher expectations of ourselves. They need our guidance, our encouragement and our determination to share that to which we have been fortunate enough to be granted access.

1 What is English *for*?

What does the study of English – both in universities and schools – seek to achieve? Why do people engage in linguistic research or literary criticism? Maybe we should start by asking why, in the 'real world,' people read and write? Here, reading is either for recreation or is a purely functional activity designed to extract information as efficiently as possible. Writing, though, is rarely a leisure pursuit. In the 'real world' – although there is a tiny class of professional writers almost no one earns a living through the proceeds of writing[1] – people only write for practical purposes: to inform, persuade, instruct or explain. Should teaching reflect these utilitarian ends?

Like many English teachers before and since, George Sampson, writing in 1922, thought not.

> A very admirable, hard-working lady came one day to a London elementary school on Care Committee business, and found that the 'leavers' she wanted to interview had gone with their class to a performance of Twelfth Night. "Of course," she said, quite pleasantly, "it is very nice for the boys to go to the theatre, but Shakespeare won't help them to earn their living." This is profoundly true. Shakespeare will not help anyone to earn a living, not even a modern actor-manager. Shakespeare is quite useless, as useless as Beauty and Love and Joy and Laughter, all of which many reputable persons would like to banish from the schools of the poor. Yet it is in beauty and love and joy and laughter that we must find the way of speaking to the soul — the soul, that does not appear in the statistics and

is therefore always left out of account.[2]

This tension – between pragmatism and 'the soul' – has always been at the heart of debates about what English should be for.

It's revealing to compare the activities of academics with those of teachers in schools. The study of language varies enormously between universities and schools. Essentially, the professional study of language relates to a quasi-scientific investigation whereas the study of literature is more akin to the study of art or music, where texts are explored for their cultural or aesthetic value. Academics studying language explore how English changes, create models for the patterns it follows, and investigate how people use it, whereas the school subject is more narrowly focussed on technical competence. The study of literature in schools is more of a 'junior version' of the 'game' academics play, although one shorn of much of the trappings of theory.[3] Is this as it should be? Should students emulate the academic 'games' of English, or should we be satisfied with teaching them to master the foundations and prepare them for the 'real world'?

As it has many times over the past century, English is once again trying to remake itself. Typically, the arguments about what English should be – and what it is for – are simplistically presented in terms of 'traditionalist' versus 'progressive' positions (see Figure 1.1).

'Traditional'	*'Progressive'*
English for employment	English for 'life'
Vocational training in specialism	Education of whole person
Promotion of single standard language	Recognition of varieties
Emphasis on writing	Attention to speech
Formal written examinations	Mixed-mode assessment
Dictionary definitions & grammatical rules	Flexibility of usage
Canon of 'great works'	Open or no canon
National curriculum	Local syllabuses
Single dominant cultural identity	Multicultural differences

Figure 1.1 'Traditional' and 'progressive' views of

English

Source: These lists are taken from Rob Pope, *The English Studies Book*, p. 31.

The idea that we can, or should, select from just one side of this dichotomous list is odd. Each of these opposed sets of views has something to offer but neither, taken alone, is satisfactory. This tension between the pragmatic and the idealistic is at the heart of debates about what English should be for. On one hand, there is the notion of functional English – that children must be able to read and write to an acceptable standard and capable of taking a useful part in society – and on the other, the belief that English ought to develop the 'whole child,' so that they become more empathetic, more cultured, more capable of participation in the 'conversation of humankind.'

In an attempt to bring together some of these polarised positions, here are *my* thoughts on what English should be for:

- English should exist to enlarge and extend children's capacity to think about the world. Naturally, this should equip them for employment as well as the rest of life.
- English teaching should both recognise and value the many varieties of English but also induct students into the opportunities afforded by the mastery of standard English.
- Whilst attention should be given to spoken English, the emphasis should be on written forms.
- Despite their many limitations, formal written examina-tions are, at the moment, the fairest way to ensure disadvantaged children are not further disadvantaged, but we should resist allowing assessment to warp the curriculum we teach.
- Children need both grammatical descriptions and metalinguistic knowledge in order to think flexibly about the use of English.
- Children should have access to the canon in order to develop their own ideas about taste and to be able to critique from a position of knowledge rather than ignorance.
- The National Curriculum should be viewed as offering a minimum

standard that schools, if they intend to introduce their own curriculum, should seek to at least equal.

- We should recognise that although the subject derives from a dominant cultural identity, multicultural differences enrich and enlarge the English language and its literature.

Have a go at resolving each set of binaries to arrive at your own vision of what English should be for. Is English, as it's currently conceived, inclined more to the needs of employment, or more towards those of life? Place a cross on each of the continuums in Figure 1.2 to indicate where you think the subject sits.

Figure 1.2 'Traditional' and 'progressive' continuum

Having done this, you may now have a better sense of whether English as it is currently taught and assessed is as it should be, or if it has lost its way.

Has English lost its way?

It seems widely accepted (or at least, widely discussed) that English as a school subject doesn't really know what it is, or has 'lost its way.' This is not a new idea. In *English for the English*, published in 1922, George Sampson railed against the education system of his day. He viewed English as the most important of all school subjects but understood that this depended on "an assumption that the

purpose of … school is really to develop the mind and soul of the children and not merely to provide tame and acquiescent 'labour fodder.'"[4]

In 1956, writing about academic selection, David Holbrook saw that the secondary modern was viewed as where 'the duds' went. The fact that over three quarters of children did not make the grammar school cut was of little importance; these unruly masses, it was assumed, could never be brought to appreciate the glories of English literature. Instead they must be taught something practical, something fitting for a life of labour. Echoing Sampson, Holbrook argued that the skills sought by employers should be the business of employers to teach. "We have no need to concern ourselves," he stated, "with education for 'earning a living': we educate for living."[5]

Sadly, his battle cry went unheard. Or at least, if English teachers ever rallied to its cause, they were roundly defeated by the forces of pragmatism. By 1979, responding to the Bullock Report, Holbrook began *English for Meaning* with an introduction entitled, 'English has lost its way.' There is very little evidence to suggest it has made any great strides in finding itself in the intervening decades. Today some English teachers are more concerned with 'developing radicalism' than they are in overcoming the real injustice that children from disadvantaged backgrounds are disproportionately more likely to fail to learn to read and write fluently than their more affluent peers.[6] But *is* English actually lost? For it to be so it would once have had to have known where it was. Was there then some halcyon time or place when English was of a quality to which we would now like to return?

Maybe, instead of endlessly reinventing second-rate wheels, English teachers today might be better off knowing more about the history of their subject. I say this as someone who taught for fifteen years with only the haziest ideas about where the set of assumptions I had picked up about what English is and how it should be taught had come from. Some of these assumptions – as we'll discuss in chapter 2 – have revealed themselves to be based on faulty logic and flawed premises, but how much better if I had been aware of the tensions and debates that have preoccupied English teachers since

English first came to take its place in the school curriculum.

How did we get here?

From our 21st-century vantage, it might seem that what was done in the past ought to remain there, but to dismiss the lessons of the past we ought to at least know what they are. Like most English teachers, I had only the vaguest notion of what previous generations of teachers had done or said. What I've come to learn is that we can, potentially, learn a lot about the difficulties and debates in which we're currently entrenched by pondering mistakes and solutions which run the risk of being lost from our collective memory.

Despite its current domination of the curriculum, English is a latecomer to the suite of school subjects students are meant to master. Up until the late 19th century, 'English' tended to refer just to the basics of learning to read and write. Only latterly has it come to mean learning to read and write *about literature*. From the Middle Ages to the Renaissance, Latin was the dominant medium of instruction in schools and universities. Even when English began to take over this role in the 16th century, the languages and literatures studied were classical. The emphasis in schools was on handwriting and grammar and, as the effects of print began to make themselves felt from the 18th century onwards, standardised spelling and punctuation. These were not taught with a concern for children's intellectual development, but to ensure they could read and write sufficiently well to satisfy the growing demands of the commercial world.

Only in the late 19th and early 20th centuries did the state begin to take substantial responsibility for school education of any kind, including schooling in English. At the same time, English began to include English literature, and was increasingly charged with a variety of moral roles previously filled by religion. Chief among these were the tasks of refining sensibility, inculcating public morality, and promoting social solidarity and national identity. One of the first and most influential advocates of this use of literature was the school inspector, poet and essayist Matthew Arnold. In *Culture and*

Anarchy, Arnold argued for the civilising effect of great literature. He was scathing of the idea that culture is little more than a badge signifying membership of an elite. In his view, true culture was "the study of perfection."[7] Arnold believed that a full apprehension of the virtues of culture is attained by induction into the best that human culture has to offer, by the free play of the mind over these facts, and by developing a sympathetic attitude towards all that is beautiful.

In his thirty years as an inspector of schools (1851–1882) Arnold had much to say on what he saw as the parlous state of English teaching. In his 1852 report he wrote,

> Young men, whose knowledge of grammar, of the minutest details of geographical and historical facts, and above all, of mathematics, is surprising, often cannot paraphrase a plain passage of prose or poetry without totally misapprehending it, or write half a page of composition on any subject without falling into gross blunders of taste and expression.[8]

In his report for 1860, decrying the lack of literature taught in schools, he says,

> It is not enough remembered how, in many cases, his reading-book forms the whole literature, except his Bible, of the child attending a primary school. If, then, instead of literature, his reading-book, as is too often the case, presents him with a jejune encyclopaedia of positive information, the result is that he has, except his Bible, no literature, no humanising instruction at all.[9]

You can sense his despair when, in 1871, he made this observation:

> What is comprised under the word literature is in itself the greatest power available in education; of this power it is not too much to say that in our elementary schools at present no use is made at all.[10]

Arnold's high-minded ideal that children should be taught to

appreciate truth and beauty was to be put severely to the test when the 1870 Education Act made schooling compulsory for all up to the age of 13. Suddenly, and for the first time, schools had to teach children from the very poorest and most disadvantaged margins of society not only how to read and write, but to appreciate literature. This was a daunting task and, perhaps inevitably, the more affluent a child's background, the broader and deeper the experience of studying English was likely to be.

By 1887 the study of English in schools had come to look like this:

Standard I: (i.e. about aged 7)

- Reading. To read a short paragraph from a book not confined to words of one syllable.
- Writing. Copy in manuscript characters a line of print, and write from dictation not more than ten easy words, commencing with capital letters. Copy books (large or half text hand) to be shown.
- English. To repeat twenty lines of simple verse.

Standard II: (i.e. about aged 8)

- Reading. To read a short paragraph from an elementary reading book.
- Writing. A passage of not more than six lines from the same book, slowly read once, and then dictated word by word. Copy books (large and half text hand) to be shown.
- English. To repeat forty lines of poetry and to know their meaning. To point out nouns and verbs.

Standard III: (i.e. about aged 9)

- Reading. To read a passage from a more advanced reading book, or from stories from English history.
- Writing. Six lines from one of the reading books of the Standard, slowly read once and then dictated. Copy books (capitals and figures, large and small hand) to be shown.
- English. To recite with intelligence and expression 60 lines of poetry, and to know their meaning. To point out nouns, verbs,

adjectives, adverbs and personal pronouns, and to form simple sentences containing them.

Standard IV: (i.e. about aged 10)

- Reading. To read a few lines from a reading book or from a History of England.
- Writing. Eight lines of poetry or prose, slowly read once, and then dictated. Copy books to be shown.
- English. To recite 80 lines of poetry, and to explain the words and allusions. To parse easy sentences, and to show by examples the use of each of the parts of speech.

Standard V: (i.e. about aged 11)

- Reading. To read a passage from some standard author, or from a History of England.
- Writing. Writing from memory the substance of a short story read out twice; spelling, handwriting and correct expression to be considered. Copy books to be shown.
- English. To recite 100 lines from some standard poet, and to explain the words and allusions. To parse and analyse simple sentences, and to know the method of forming English nouns, adjectives and verbs from each other.

Standard VI: (i.e. about aged 12)

- Reading. To read a passage from one of Shakespeare's historical plays, or from some other standard author, or from a History of England.
- Writing. A short theme or letter on an easy subject: spelling, handwriting, and composition to be considered. Copy books to be shown.
- English. To recite 150 lines from Shakespeare or Milton, or some other standard author, and to explain the words and allusions. To parse and analyse a short complex sentence, and to know the meaning and use of Latin prefixes in the formation of English

words.

Standard VII: (i.e. about aged 13)

- Reading. To read a passage from Shakespeare or Milton, or from some other standard author, or from a History of England.
- Writing. A theme or letter. Composition, spelling and handwriting to be considered. Note books and exercise books to be shown.
- English. To recite 150 lines from Shakespeare or Milton, or some other standard author, and to explain the words and allusions. To analyse sentences, and to know prefixes and terminations generally.[11]

Although English teachers today might be impressed that 13-year-olds were expected to learn 150 lines of Shakespeare by heart, the 'English' strand of the standards consisted of little more than the rote learning of lines of poetry and grammatical rules. Such was the frustration with this state of affairs that in 1888, the Cross Report recommended that 'English' should cease to be compulsory. Happily, the recommendation was never taken up.

It is interesting to note what the study of English today has retained and dispensed with. We can see that the idea of a national canon, which must include Shakespeare, can trace its origins back, but so can the practical concerns of transactional and discursive writing. Whilst we have largely ditched an interest in recitation – indeed the idea of learning poetry by heart, whilst it has made something of a resurgence in recent years, is widely considered quaintly old-fashioned – we are as focussed as ever on the need to teach spelling. Grammar teaching has gone in and out of fashion over the decades, and handwriting is now considered the sole preserve of primary schools.

The Newbolt Report

The publication of the Newbolt Report in 1921 underlined the continuing disagreements within and about English. Its brief was to

consider the position the subject occupied in the curriculum, and to make recommendations about how its study could be strengthened and expanded. Prior to Newbolt, English was still seen as being of lesser importance than mathematics and the sciences, and many of the report's recommendations were designed to give English parity with other subjects and to occupy a more central place in the curriculum.

Many practices that have become the norm today began life in the Newbolt Report through such recommendations as the idea that children should be taught to speak standard English using phonetics; that children should be practised, not only in the art of speaking and reading, but also in the art of listening; the centrality of oral work as the foundation on which proficiency in the writing of English is based; and that exams should focus on English as a means of communication rather than on grammatical analysis and spelling. The report also recommended the reading and acting of plays, and that the teaching of literature should include reading aloud and dramatic performances. We can also find early roots for notions of teacher autonomy in the suggestion that literature teachers should be free to draw up their own syllabus and adopt their own methods. Importantly, Newbolt described 'commercial English' as "not only objectionable … but also contrary to the true interests of commercial life,"[12] stating that "'the needs of business' must be strictly subordinated to those of a liberal education."[13]

One aspect of English that has persisted throughout its history as a school subject is the separation of reading, writing and literature. We continue to split English into two separate exam subjects: English Language and English Literature. Language has tended to focus on the more functional aspects of the subject, whilst Literature has been more concerned with character and culture. But are these sensible divisions or are we simply persisting with what we've always done? This somewhat uncomfortable carving up of English is borne of the tension between the practical roots of preparing children for employment in an increasingly literate world, and Arnold's interconnected notions of beauty and virtue.

The humanising effects of English

In the 1930s, Arnold's mantle was taken up by the literary critic and Cambridge don, F.R. Leavis. Leavis was opposed to the Victorian idea that appreciation of literature should be "the direct expression of simple emotions"[14] and instead saw the purpose of studying literature as developing students' intellectual and imaginative faculties in order to make critical judgements. Leavis argued that appreciation of literature led to a growth of intelligence and sensibility that marked the educated out from a debased majority, corrupted by the evils of democratic industrial society. This elitist view had some currency with English teachers during the 1950s and 1960s but had largely fallen out of favour by the 1970s. One of the main objections was to Leavis' notion that culture and the arts were undemocratic. The idea that culture was inherently civilising was challenged, amongst others, by George Steiner who saw that the certainties of Arnold and Leavis seemed absurd when faced with the knowledge that a "man can read Goethe or Rilke in the evening, that he can play Bach and Schubert, and go to his day's work at Auschwitz in the morning."[15] One of the big claims for studying English – that it makes us more empathetic, more rounded human beings – falters in the face of such damning evidence.

The Bullock Report

From the 1970s onwards, this uncomfortable tension between the demands of culture and employment was also expected to accommodate concepts from linguistics. Alan Bullock, appointed by Margaret Thatcher when Education Secretary in 1972, published his report, *A Language for Life*, in 1975. The Bullock Report recommended that children should learn about the nature and function of language, language acquisition, and speaking and writing as social processes, as well as a whole host of other scientific-sounding elements. While the explicit teaching of most of these linguistic infiltrations only made their way onto A-level language courses, they still exert a considerable gravitational pull on English

language teaching throughout secondary school. The inclusion of linguistics was intended to give the subject much-needed objective and scientific rigour. At the same time, Bullock explicitly resisted the idea that English should be concerned with encouraging children's personal growth and development as members of a civilised society.

Although Bullock recommended including concepts from linguistics, it wasn't made very clear how this might work in practice. Some thought was given to adopting the approach pioneered by Noam Chomsky, but transformational – or generative – grammar was too abstract to be of much use in the classroom. When asked how his work might help English teachers, Chomsky himself said,

> I'm hesitant even to suggest an answer to this question. Practitioners have to decide for themselves what is useful in the sciences, and what is not. As a linguist, I have no particular qualifications or knowledge that enables or entitles me to prescribe methods of language instruction.[16]

Bullock agreed saying, "In our view linguistics has a great contribution to make to the teaching of English, but not in this form." Instead, the report made this suggestion:

> Linguistics and other specialist studies of language have a considerable contribution to make to the teaching of English, and they should be used to emphasise the inseparability of language and the human situation. *Linguistics should not enter schools in the form of the teaching of descriptive grammar*.[17]
>
> [emphasis added]

To understand why this was controversial, we need to know something of the grammar wars of the early 20th century. The teaching of grammar had always been entirely *prescriptive*. It was taught as a series of abstract rules about what students must and must not do and, as such, was exceedingly unpopular. Tellingly, the Newbolt Report had noted that "English Grammar has disappeared in all but a few schools, to the joy of children and teacher."[18]

But, instead of attempting to prescribe rules for spoken and written English, the *descriptive* approach attempted to describe how people actually use English. A descriptive approach might observe, for instance, that articles precede nouns, but not to then insist that this *must* be so, just that this is what ordinary speakers actually do. It included the study of semantics and pragmatics to work out why English speakers and writers make the choices they do and what the effects of their choices might be. Descriptive grammar was a direct product of linguistics research; to decide that it must be excluded from schools was, by extension, to exclude the backbone of linguistics. In the words of David Crystal, this was "a remarkable contradiction."[19]

So, despite arguing for a linguistic approach to the teaching of language, Bullock had no meaningful advice for English teachers about what to do in the classroom. On the other side of the argument, David Holbrook argued that the Bullock Report was a "dead end." English, he argued, should be about much more than teaching language; instead it ought to focus on teaching 'significance': "we cannot merely stick at the language, but must see what it points to 'beyond.'"[20] He goes on,

> The hidden planet we have been searching for is meaning: once we accept that man's primary aim is for meaning**,** then we can find a better basis for our work.[21]

Holbrook was less interested in promoting a national literary culture where people read and know books, but was concerned with English as a mechanism for populating society with people who think, reflect and use language as a means to explore identity and the wider world. Because the Bullock Report gave so little attention to literature, Holbrook branded it as "illiterate."[22] Predictably, his criticisms were dismissed as elitist.

Back to basics

Following Bullock, Labour Prime Minister James Callaghan called for

a return to teaching ‘the three Rs’ because, “In today’s world, higher standards are demanded than were required yesterday and there are simply fewer jobs for those without skill.”[23] The subsequent political preoccupation – especially during the years of Margaret Thatcher’s Conservative government – was for a much more concrete and practical approach to teaching English, a move ‘back to basics.’

Bullock’s recommendations have echoed across the years and into the present. It is in his report that we discover the seeds of Ofsted; the notion of whole school policies for language across the curriculum; the systematic teaching of reading, and additional assistance for struggling readers and those with English as a second language.

Over a decade later, in 1988, the Thatcher government commissioned another report into the teaching of English language. The committee was chaired by the mathematician, John Kingman, who, in his introduction to the report, wrote that while mastery of English could be,

> … achieved without an explicit knowledge of the structure of the language … there is no positive advantage in such ignorance. And the worst reason for avoiding teaching about language is that teachers are not confident in their own knowledge.[24]

The report made explicit its rejection of Bullock’s odd dismissal of descriptive grammar, arguing that English should provide “a sound and accessible description of the structure and uses of the English language.” The greatest barrier to this aim was that the practical knowledge of how to go about this no longer existed. The reason children were not taught anything of grammar was because grammar teaching had all but vanished in the 1970s and 80s and few teachers had learned anything themselves.

The National Curriculum

learning as observed in the classroom. Increasingly, *what* was taught in English became of secondary importance to *how* it was taught. This was in stark contrast to an earlier Ofsted report, *English 2000–05*, which made almost no mention of teaching methods, but instead concentrated on the actions needing to be taken at a national and local level. The only recommendation to schools on English teaching in this earlier report was to "develop varied and engaging approaches to learning in the classroom that are flexible enough to stimulate and meet the needs of pupils."[27]

Published in June 2009, *English at the Crossroads* was the culmination of visits to over 240 primary and secondary schools. The report claimed to have isolated the key ingredients of success, and urged all schools to adopt "practical and creative approaches" which "engage pupils by giving them good opportunities to express ideas." English teachers were advised to "find ways to develop pupils' initiative and independent learning" and to "help pupils think for themselves." Teachers were explicitly told to "Resist dictating the form and context of students' work" and to avoid "too much direction." Lessons were outstanding where, "imaginative activities and varied approaches engaged and maintained pupils' interest. Most importantly [pupils should be] actively involved: discussing, trying out ideas, working with others and learning." Unsatisfactory lessons were those where teaching was "passive" and "not all students enjoyed their learning." The English curriculum was praised in those schools where there was a focus on "generic learning skills."

If *English at the Crossroads* provided a baseline picture of what the ideals of teaching of English were considered to be, its follow-up, *Excellence in English*, published in May 2011, addressed ways to improve practice across *all* schools. The report's recommendations emerged from visits to twelve schools deemed to be 'outstanding' and, although it acknowledged, "there are many routes to excellence" and that "there is no simple formula that will make a school outstanding in English," the recommendations were increasingly seen as prescribing 'what Ofsted wanted.'

The report praised departments where teachers "listened very carefully to what pupils said about English, what they enjoyed doing

and how they learnt best" and "involved the pupils in constructing the English curriculum." All the departments praised in the report, "offered a lively and engaging curriculum, supported by active approaches in the classroom with substantial emphasis on discussion and well-managed group work."

A clear connection was established between low standards and an "inappropriate or dull curriculum" where "teaching is held in check" by an "identity" for English that has not been generated or shared by the school. In other words, as there was (and still is) no established consensus on what English was or should be, it was incumbent on English departments to work this out for themselves, presumably with help from their pupils. In this shared vision, anything "inappropriate or dull" should be swapped out for what is relevant and exciting. In the best schools, pupils were "stimulated" and teaching "engaged all the senses." Rather than establishing a curriculum founded on subject expertise and the underlying concepts that open up the subject, effective departments were considered to be those that continually reinvented themselves with whatever was new and exciting.

For instance, one English department was praised for its 'Mr Men' scheme of work for Key Stage Three pupils:

> The unit begins with an exploration of the notion of stereotypes. Students then review and extend their knowledge of grammar focusing on the use of adjectives, onomatopoeia and alliteration. This leads into an analysis of Mr Men characters, analysing the author's use of these techniques before students create their own new character.[28]

In another outstanding English department,

> [S]tudents applied their knowledge of TV programmes such as the Jeremy Kyle show to JB Priestley's An Inspector Calls. Characters from the play appeared in turn to be grilled by the presenter. Their work combined good understanding of the play alongside very good knowledge of the TV programme. 'Mr

‘emotional literacy.’ One lesson singled out for praise,

> explored the relationship between Pip’s adoptive parents in *Great Expectations*. The teacher’s plan included family relationships and resolution of family issues. Students chose to explore these ideas by role-playing marriage guidance sessions and hot-seating different characters.[30]

In another school, a department described as “innovative” had developed schemes of work focussed on ‘independent learning’:

> Planned units in Year 7 include: organising a lunchtime or after-school club; improving the English department; and planning and teaching a unit of work for Year 6 pupils. The unit on ‘improving the English department,’ for example, aims to give students the opportunity to consider the best way to use an allocated amount of money in order to improve the department. As part of this work, students are expected to research and audit the resources currently available and to conduct a survey to discover how teachers and students would like to see the department improved. The unit includes meetings of students in order to narrow the range of options, research possible cross-curricular initiatives, and prepare proposals for the chosen projects to include costings and technical advice. Groups of students will present their ideas to the rest of the class. This will lead to a whole-class decision about the best proposals which will then be presented formally by students to the rest of Year 7 and to the school’s senior leadership team and English department.[31]

In this school, a teacher was praised because they “withdrew from the learning and handed responsibility to the students” for deciding how they would complete a task. “Inevitably, there were disagreements and time was wasted but the students came to realise that they would have to compromise, agree and accept different roles, listen to others, and work effectively together.” This

wasted time was deemed acceptable because, presumably, children never got to compromise, listen and discuss anywhere except in English classrooms.

As late as February 2014, Ofsted continued to recommend that English lessons should be "engaging" and "fun":

> The fun elements to all lessons switch students on. Verbal and pictorial references to students' cultural knowledge and experience humorously engage students and encourage creative and active thinking. … The active tasks involve physical movement and are embedded in the presentation, highlighted by the humorous reference to the dance song, 'I like to move it, move it'. Thinking skills activities, like the use of boggle boxes, are included in all lessons.[32]

There is clear, unambiguous praise for "creative and active thinking," and "active tasks" that "involve physical movement" are considered desirable. Ofsted's continued preference for the content of lessons to be culturally familiar rather than culturally rich was made clear. "Detective reader, murder mystery, and crime scene investigation approaches engage students and draw on their cultural experience." Teachers were praised for "combining high-quality visual stimulus and active learning methods to engage all levels of learners." And, rather than working to produce a curriculum to stand the test of time, "the team is always updating schemes of work and incorporating new things they come across."

Since then, Ofsted's focus has altered sharply. As teachers' presence on social media grew, so too did vocal criticism of Ofsted's approach to inspection. In February 2014, I and several other 'teacher bloggers' met with senior Ofsted officials which heralded a new era of openness and a concerted attempt to communicate with teachers.[33] I was consulted on an update to the inspection handbook published in July 2014 which did away with lesson grading once and for all and since then the trajectory has been to minimise the harm caused by teachers trying to replicate 'what Ofsted want.'

When Amanda Spielman took over as Chief Inspector in 2017 this

process accelerated further and, with the introduction of a new inspection framework in 2019, the inspectorate has stopped making judgements on 'Teaching and Learning' and is instead judging schools on the 'Quality of Education' offered. The focus is now on what pupils are remembering over time. Not only that, a new appreciation of evidence from cognitive science has led to an acknowledgement that children need to learn knowledge. Schools are praised when "curriculum leaders have planned what pupils will learn in each subject in detail … detailed planning supports current pupils to remember the knowledge they need."[34] And schools are criticised where the curriculum has not been carefully sequenced: "The order of topics is random. Pupils struggle with this because they have not remembered the vocabulary from previous lessons."[35]

Gove's reforms

Michael Gove, Secretary of State for Education from 2010–2014, succeeded in making sweeping (if unpopular) changes to the curriculum, public examinations and the ranking of schools on performance tables. Gove saw an academic, subject-based education as the right of every child, regardless of background or perceived ability. The 2015 National Curriculum was conceived as a 'knowledge-rich' alternative to the 'knowledge-lite' version that had preceded it. Any who objected were dismissed as 'enemies of promise.'

Gove's vision for English was for authors such as Byron, Keats, Austen, Dickens and Hardy to be reinstated and that there would be a renewed emphasis on the teaching of spelling, punctuation and grammar. Arguably, Gove was justified in his reaction to the excesses of what had gone before, with its emphasis on vaguely defined 'personal learning and thinking skills,' but, perhaps understandably, his reforms were widely criticised as 'backward looking' and 'elitist.'

The new National Curriculum for English states its aim as promoting,

well as more modern examples of literature.
5. The study of language as a vehicle for conceptual thought.

It is hard to see that these aims are all united by one neat, unifying purpose. What potential inconsistencies or conflict do you notice between the various aims of English?

Gove's curriculum reforms failed to ask, let alone answer, important questions about how to help teachers ensure students grasp the curriculum sufficiently to think beyond it and help schools create a curriculum that engages students before they have lost interest in acquiring new knowledge. Some of these questions are:

- What subject knowledge is essential to making meaning in English?
- How do we prevent an English curriculum degenerating into lists of knowledge to be learned or skills to be acquired?
- How are judgements made in English?
- How do students make progress in English?
- What is the 'how to' knowledge students need to make meaning in English?
- What connections are there between English and other subjects?

Addressing these concerns requires that teachers have access to curricular expertise on the form knowledge should take in English and how to support students in acquiring that knowledge. But, as yet, these questions have gone largely unasked and wholly unanswered.

This chapter has sought to answer the question, what is English for? Well, it's more than adding to the store of students' knowledge; it's also an attempt to confront young people with something beautiful, moving and profound. Although English should strive for them to become knowledgeable about the story of English literature, and skilled and fluent readers and writers, we should also value children's ability to think critically and creatively. As well as helping students master the discipline, we must also, as Sampson put it,

2 Problems in English

If we're not entirely sure what English is for, then we are even less confident about how it should be taught. For the sake of argument, let's agree that the aims of the current National Curriculum are the right ones (see pages 33–34). How then can these aims be achieved? Some are perhaps more straightforward to tackle than others, but all require careful thought. How, for instance, would you get a child who is not currently reading fluently to do so? What is the process required to ensure children develop the habit of reading widely and often? Do we know how to teach children to understand grammar and to appreciate our literary heritage? Maybe you feel surer about how to go about teaching children to write clearly, accurately and coherently, but are you equally clear about how to get them to elaborate and explain their ideas?

The point is, we don't have a codified body of knowledge of how to achieve these aims. To be sure, pieces of the puzzle are out there, scattered across the blogosphere, hidden in little-known academic papers and mouldering books, but they haven't been collated and placed in the hands of English teachers in an easily digestible form. Instead, English has become a folk discipline with craft knowledge passed down in individual departments without much recourse to empirical observation or evaluation. As a result, a great deal of poorly understood and ill-thought through ideas continue to be passed

feedback on how to improve, but writing extended comments for each student is a particularly inefficient and ineffective way of going about this. Thankfully, teachers have started rejecting the orthodoxy that students must have work marked, individually and at length, and are moving towards systems for providing whole class feedback. But, the fact that this information disappeared from our collective pool of knowledge sometime in the past century is both a frustration and a concern. How do we ensure that what we currently know is passed on to future generations of teachers?

Some of the problems English teachers have faced and continue to contend with are reactions against similar axiomatic beliefs about English. The most pernicious of these beliefs is this:

> *The 'skills-based' subject assumption*: because English is made up of transferable disciplinary skills it doesn't much matter what students read or write about.

This assumption is at the root of a great many problems encountered in teaching English. If English is 'skills-based' then it obviously makes sense to teach these skills, and specific content is more or less irrelevant. This being the case, it makes sense to get students to practise the skills we want them to develop by providing them with the most accessible and familiar texts and prompts to practise on. In this way, students up and down the country are taught English day in, day out. How do we know it works? Because some children are successful. What about the ones who aren't? Well, what can you do with kids like that?

This is precisely the same kind of critical analysis that led doctors to believe that by bleeding patients their humours

would be rebalanced: it obviously worked because so many patients recovered. It was all too easy to ignore all the dead ones because they don't have much to say on the matter. Like reluctant medics who slowly became aware that the world wasn't organised the way they supposed, we need to understand that skill in English is based on knowledge.

Michael Oakeshott understood that the knowledge needed to make meaning in any field "cannot be learned or taught in principle, only in detail."[2] Chasing general principles is to take a short cut that doesn't exist. Oakeshott saw teaching as any approach that would impart knowledge and show how it could be used to make meaning, such as,

> … hinting, suggesting, urging, coaxing, encouraging, guiding, pointing out, conversing, instructing, informing, narrating, lecturing, demonstrating, exercising, testing, examining, criticizing, correcting, tutoring, drilling and so on – everything, indeed, which does not belie the engagement to impart an understanding.[3]

The sadness is that a great deal of what goes on in English lessons does, in fact, belie that engagement.

We can't teach skill; we can *only* teach knowledge

Let's say you want to teach the skill of punctuation, or the skill of selecting textual evidence. Or maybe something broader like the skill of reading. Where would you begin? You might think that you can teach a skill by showing somebody how to *do* something.

Let's say you decide to teach the skill of punctuation by showing your students how to end a sentence with a full stop. You write your sentence and then at the end add a full stop.

Look everyone, the full stop shows where you have ended the sentence.

You could then go through a few more examples and get children to add their own full stops, first to some pre-prepared examples and then to a few sentences of their own. What will they have learned? Well, perhaps they will now know that at the end of something called a sentence comes a dot which can be made by pressing a pencil onto paper or by tapping a key on a keyboard. Can they punctuate? Of course not. And the reason they can't is because they don't know *enough*. To avoid just scattering dots throughout their writing they need to know what a sentence is. (*Even English teachers sometimes struggle to explain what a sentence is, although they know one when they see one; it becomes an instinctive, intuitive sense picked up from doing lots of reading or writing.*)

But, teachers' lived experience is that these sorts of exercises result in some children learning the skill of basic punctuation. Is this proof you *can* teach a skill? The children who seem to acquire skills quickly already possess much of the knowledge they need to make sense of instruction. What they already know acts like intellectual Velcro; new knowledge sticks easily. The students who seem most resistant to this type of teaching are, on average, the less advantaged. They fail to acquire the skills we teach not because they're less able but because they've done a lot less reading. Because they don't have as much relevant prior knowledge they sometimes seem to possess the equivalent of intellectual Teflon: new knowledge has little relevant to grip onto.

If we take instead the example of teaching a skill like juggling, things are likely to go differently. Few, if any, children possess much prior juggling knowledge but all will have the basic folk knowledge of what happens if you throw objects in

the air and then try to catch them. Juggling requires you to keep track of at least three objects at once, but anyone who wants to teach juggling is likely to start by showing how to throw and catch just one ball. When juggling three balls, only one ball is thrown at a time, while holding the other two. The ball should pop off your hand rather than rolling off your fingertips. If the ball spins, it has been thrown incorrectly. Balls must travel in a figure 8 pattern, with the hand carrying them from outside to inside, so that they don't hit each other. This is not instinctive and the vast majority of people need it carefully explained and patiently demonstrated before they begin to get it.

If you continued your juggling tutorial, children would, eventually, know enough to be able to practise. With practice they would start to acquire skill; the more they practise, the more skilled they become. Eventually, with effort and determination, they will have acquired the skill of juggling. Of course, some children are likely to be better jugglers than others – all abilities tend to distribute normally – but pretty much anyone in possession of the requisite physical attributes can learn to juggle. Or to read, punctuate and select textual evidence.

Although students need to acquire a range of skills, we can only teach them knowledge. Different kinds of knowledge may be taught differently: some things you can explain, others you have to point out during practice, but as all this knowledge accumulates, it begins to chunk together. To start, each item of knowledge is known inflexibly but, through repetition and practice, items become increasingly flexible the more they cohere with other related knowledge. *Knowledge becomes skill through application within the area in which we hope to become skilled.*

Let's imagine you want to teach the skill of using quotations