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&

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To the Course Advisory Committee: Literature, including the Principal Consultant and English Area Manager.

Re: Literature Course Review

The English Teachers Association of Western Australia (ETAWA) and their research partners, the University of Western Australia's English and Literary Studies discipline group, formally submit the following for consideration in discussing the pressing need for an ATAR Literature course review.

This submission is structured in three parts: the course scope, the syllabus and assessment. The submission represents findings from The Big Picture Project (a joint project between ETAWA and UWA), as well as specific consultation with secondary and tertiary English teachers regarding the English and Literature courses, including a teacher survey. To date, the ETAWA have invested a total of \$576,719 in the project which has, in part, focused on investigating teachers concerns about the senior secondary courses, and the need for a review of ATAR English and Literature.

As has previously been presented to The Authority's executive group and the English group, some of the most pressing concerns for subject English and the future of the subject in WA could be resolved by reviewing the senior secondary English and Literature courses.

Part 1: Scope of the Course

Enrolment and Student Range

The continued low enrolment numbers in Literature means this course is not considered viable by many school administrators. Despite the valiant efforts of many English departments and individual English teachers, the number of schools that can offer ATAR Literature is disappointing as a state-wide figure. As outlined below, this is exacerbated by socio-educational factors, meaning that WA students are often told the course is too difficult for them, or that this course is not accessible to them because of their wider contextual situation. This is particularly pertinent to government schools where there has been a significant drop in schools offering the Literature course. In addition, the small, high-scoring cohort impacts the standardisation process, with students scoring low B grades often seeing their results decreased in the statistical process. This often results in many students are discouraged from studying the course as it is believed they may be 'safer' in English, or even score better in that course. This is a conversation reported time and again by teachers that has

a demoralising effect on both teachers and students, and the causes of this sentiment should be considered in the reasons for reviewing this course.

Hidden Curriculum

We acknowledge that with all educational systems and curriculum documents there is a ‘hidden curriculum’¹; however, work within The Big Picture project has been exploring this as a critical problem with the Literature course. Following the work of Garth Boomer (“Negotiating the Curriculum”), as well as Bill Green (“Curriculum Inquiry in Australia: Towards a Local Genealogy of the Curriculum Field”), the project has considered the various ways in which teachers and students are guided to *think* and *work* in relation to the Literature course.

Ways of working

- There are methods of writing, including the use of specific cultural studies discourse, which are rewarded in Literature answers, but they are not explicitly required by the course itself. This leads to a culture of “ventriloquism”² within the subject with students repeating phrasing around specific texts, devices, ideological positions or developments in the field of Literature that they don’t necessarily understand or have control of.
- There are also interpretations of literary methods that are unique within this Western Australian context. For example, the use of Close Reading in Section One of the examination to incorporate different reading practices (see below).
- There is an unclear requirement for post-structural readings in this course. While there is only one syllabus point relating to reading practices or strategies, the teaching of reading practices is a large preoccupation in Literature classrooms. In the 2018 audit materials, 88 Literature course outlines were interrogated, and 487 individual listings of specific post-structural reading practices were included. In addition, there is a perception of ‘right-readings’³—that there are expected ways students should read texts that will be rewarded. This is also evident in the marking key for the ATAR Literature WACE examination and sample graded assessments in The Authority’s website. This notion of ‘right readings’ is cited as a specific concern for new teachers of Literature.

Ways of thinking

- It is difficult to avoid attribution of specific cultural values in a course that looks to literary history in an Anglophone context. There are, however, considerations for the impact of this canonical tradition and feelings of alienation for a number of students across the WA cohort. (See comments below relating to the text list.)
- Considering the patterns of schools studying Literature within the state, it can also be seen to indicate attitudes to the ‘value’ attributed to Literature (and all associated understanding) in Western Australian schools and local communities. This includes whether schools believe Literature should have a role in students’ formative experience, as well as career ambitions. Considering the data of the My Schools website provides clear evidence of the socio-educational correlation outlined above.

¹ “The hidden-curriculum concept is based on the recognition that students absorb lessons in school that may or may not be part of the formal course of study—... The hidden curriculum is described as “hidden” because it is usually unacknowledged or unexamined by students, educators, and the wider community”. (<https://www.edglossary.org/hidden-curriculum/>)

² See Terry Threadgold’s work regarding student ventriloquism

³ A term used by Marnie O’Neill and Annette Patterson regarding the course changes in the 1990s when post-structural reading practices were embedded in the WA course. This concept is still observable today.

- Average of schools offering Literature
 - Average ICSEA value of schools offering ATAR Literature 1072.38
 - Average ICSEA rank of schools offering ATAR Literature 73.29
- Average of all WA schools
 - 1011.2 (National Average 1000)
 - Percentile 54.0
- Not offering ATAR Literature
 - 972.9
 - Percentile 41.1
- In addition, there are also points to explore in relation to national cultural agendas in the current Literature course document and the framing of Australian literary interpretations of national history.
- There is also a separation of Australian Literature and Western canonical traditions, presenting Australian literature as an exceptional or combative literature⁴, as part of this document that should be reviewed.

The Project Lead of The Big Picture Project is happy to speak to these concerns. There is also a recorded academic presentation regarding “Literature and Hidden Curriculum” on The Big Picture website.

Course Standard

The expected level of understanding and performance by the ATAR Literature courses are a critical concern for teachers. Students completing the Year 12 examination are required to demonstrate a level of literary understanding more complex than many first-year university courses for students specialising in Literary Studies. This elevated standard is not necessarily apparent from the syllabus or grade descriptions, but is supported by various documents in circulation including the graded work samples and the ETAWA Good Answers guides, as well as comments in the examination marking guides and examination reports specifying specific Poststructuralist reading positions and wide-ranging contextual connections to unseen texts.

Influence in Lower School Learning

With fewer enrolments in Literature we find the lower school courses increasingly moving away from ‘literary’ forms of stage drama and poetry. Hence, selection of Literature in Year 11 and 12 is a departure for many students rather than a continuation of their lower school learning. Some schools do run a Literature stream in Year 10 and replicate the ATAR Literature examination for this cohort.

Part 2: The Syllabus

Theoretical Discrepancy

In a recent survey of Literature teachers conducted by the ETAWA, almost 70% of the respondents felt that “refining content” was the most crucial improvement that could be made to the Literature course. On more detailed submissions, teachers reported confusion between the syllabus content and glossary definitions, as well as differences between the English and Literature terms, as the cause for a lack of confidence in teaching the course. Considering the teachers of Literature are

⁴ See work of Janice Radway and Pascale Casanova

often some of the most experienced teachers in English departments, these results are cause for close consideration of the course content.

A detailed analysis of the theoretical basis for the WA English and Literature courses can provide reasons for much of the confusion that teachers experience. As an adapted form of the Australian Curriculum senior secondary courses, WA's English courses are infused a Cultural Studies inflection from our previous state-derived courses into the nationally derived courses that are based on Literary Studies and Functional Literacy models. This means that the theoretic model that we work with contains tensions. These tensions are felt at various levels of the syllabus, including the use of terminology, conceptual frameworks, and assessment. These tensions complicate pedagogical choices and cannot be resolved by teachers to achieve clear explanations for classroom teaching or ensure confidence in teachers or students that full understanding of the course can be achieved. It is necessary to resolve some of these tensions through a review of the English and Literature courses. Consideration by teachers and scholars of curriculum history is needed to determine what theoretical tensions are present within the courses. Resolving these competing theoretical pressures, through small amendments to the phrasing of course content, would enable greater cohesion in the course and alleviate much of the anxiety associated with the teaching of the course.

In addition, the Literature and English courses need to be reviewed simultaneously to help resolve some of these tensions.

Close Reading Methodology

Close Reading is an established method. However, in ATAR Literature it has a relatively fluid meaning. The term is not used in the syllabus document other than in the Assessment Table and the Examination Design Brief, and it is not defined in the glossary. Students are asked to produce a close reading for one entire section of the examination and while we might extrapolate from the syllabus' reference to close critical analysis and close textual analysis, the theoretical underpinning of the course and the methodology of Close Reading create a tension borne out on students and their confusion as to what is expected of them in Section One of the examination. While there now exists years of student examples of 'Close Readings', there is still an awkward relationship between the term, the course, and a requested form of writing.

This is often exacerbated by published marking keys for the external examination which prioritise Poststructuralist interpretations of unseen texts over close textual analysis. It would be helpful if teachers and students were entirely clear about this methodology or reading practice, and the other forms of responses that markers are looking for in the examination. This might require a different prompt in Section One, or a more clear, shared understanding of Close Reading in keeping with the field of Literary Studies.

Prescribed Text List

Despite recent amendments to the Prescribed Text List, it is still imperative that the list be further considered for the following reasons;

- From the 2018 audit materials, it was found that only 34% of the entire text list is being studied in schools. Many of the titles on the list are out of print or are not wholly suitable for the current course being studied and are essentially a legacy of previous courses.
- The current list excludes works from many global contexts and does not accurately reflect the student body, or indeed teachers of the course. The list would benefit from greater inclusion of female writers, as well as works that include representation of non-binary and

non-cis figures, or represent homosexual writers or characters. In addition, First Nations writers should have greater inclusion on this list. Where First Nation writers are included, their works are generally popular for program inclusion, but there are very few writers included on the list. (First Nations writers constitute 3% of the 2018 poetry list yet 7% of teacher choices and 7% of the drama list and 11% of teacher choices.)

- A set of criteria guiding the selection for the syllabus text list, as well as classroom use, would be a helpful inclusion. Many other Australian state curricular include such a list, and not only would this provide a clear process for text inclusion, it would also guide teachers in their own choices for school-based choices. A set of criteria was drafted as part of the recent Text List Working Party.
- A set revision process for the text list could be incorporated into the syllabus document. This would ensure there is a process to include recent, worthy publications, as well as cycling some works off the list that are no longer popular or considered useful for the teaching of the course. This is a process already done in other Australian states as part of text list revisions.
- Statements in the text list about the cultural value of texts might be revised by the CAC. For example, “[i]n addition to the plays listed below, teachers may choose to use plays by Shakespeare, George Bernard Shaw, Henrik Ibsen and any play belonging to Greek Tragedy or Greek or Roman Comedy.” This selective grouping of European playwrights, rather than text titles as with the complete prescribed list, speaks to a Eurocentric idea of literary value in line with the ‘Great Man’ theory promoted by writers such as Thomas Carlyle.

Transformation and Text Type

- A specific concern of teachers relates to the examinable content points pertaining to the interpretation of texts over time and generally the concepts of adaptation, transformation and intertextual. Several teachers have reported hesitancy (from themselves and students) referring to film versions and other textual productions that are not on the prescribed text list in the external examination. (For example, considering how recent film versions of Macbeth might illustrate how contextual factors shape a response to the original Shakespeare play.) A clear ruling on this aspect of the syllabus would be helpful for teachers so they can confidently address this aspect of the syllabus without fear of examination penalty.

Part 3: Assessment of the Course

Number of School-Based Assessments

The Authority has previously made the recommendation for schools to reduce the number of school-based assessments to 6 tasks plus 2 school-based examinations a year. It is not possible for Literature teachers to follow this recommendation with the current assessment outline for the Literature Syllabus which requires four assessment types be completed each semester, plus school-based examinations.

From the 2018 audit materials, the average number of school-based task was 11.3 plus 2 school-based examinations, as teachers seek to provide multiple opportunities for students to improve throughout the year. Therefore, a review of the assessment table is necessary for Literature to comply with The Authority’s recommendation, as well as Literature remaining competitive for

student selection in comparison to the English course, which can comply with this recommendation and reduce the student assessment load. It is acknowledged that schools are not required to comply with this reduction until a course is reviewed, but with other courses able to follow the ruling, and some courses in the process of review, Literature will be left in an unappealing position when it comes to subject selection.

Reliance on Examination Models for Assessment

Findings from The Big Picture project indicated a reliance on the ATAR exam as a model for creating programs. This was particularly evident in the questions being asked of students in assessments as these were taken directly from past exams or labelled “Section 1” or “Section 2” response. A large number of schools have adapted the “Extended Written Response” to be a series of short responses, or indeed a journal of exam-style responses, thus negating the idea of extended writing and constructing an argument that moves outside the confines of examination, or simply analytical writing. Oral tasks are also modelled on examination sections with students delivering a response to a past-examination question to the audience.

The most problematic task type in Literature appears to be the “Creative production of written texts”. Both the 2018 audit materials, as well as teacher surveys and anecdotal discussion, show that this task is often labelled as a creative production but is in fact a close reading response or an oral production that presents analytical work, with some justifications of ‘a reading’ as a creative act. There are also assessments labelled creative production but are presentations where the act of presenting is the creative element. While some of these examples are legitimately creative productions, many are yet another examination revision task.

It would be helpful to consider ways that the school-based teaching of this course might be liberated somewhat from the examination design brief. Fewer assessments might be helpful to this end; and it would be attractive to both teachers and students if the course explored the original intentions of assessment that would prepare students for further studies in this field.

Revision of Marking Practices

Consideration of various marking models would be helpful for teachers. ETAWA has been offering to collaborate on a study into the efficacy of different methods in English and Literature for several years. While the current Literature examination marking key has been amended to address teacher concerns, the embedded use of this style of key for all Literature school-based marking is problematic. We acknowledge school-based marking is not mandated by The Authority, but teachers lack confidence to move away from this model, despite the problems they report in relation to criteria being accurate for the task, or the descriptions providing an adequate understanding of a standard. This is cultural change that is needed, and it could be addressed as part of the review, with different marking methods referenced as part of the sample tasks on The Authority extranet.

The analysis and recommendations represented in this submission are presented with the idea of managing anxiety. As explained above, Literature teachers report various elements of stress in relation to the teaching of this course, and changing the syllabus content, course standard or assessment structure will address some of these pressures. However, change often induces anxiety.

Acting proactively, and expeditiously, to make amendments to this course now will avoid wide-scale change in coming years.

We thank you for your consideration of this submission. ETAWA are committed to supporting teachers looking for improvements in this course by representing their views to the Course Advisory Committee and providing peer-reviewed and referenced research on issues relating to subject English in WA. We are also committed to producing resources and providing Professional Development through various platforms to assist transition to an improved course and look forward to collaborating with the CAC and The Authority's representatives when the review is scheduled.

Yours sincerely,

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Lead Researcher – The Big Picture