

Summarised Responses from the National Curriculum Feedback Sessions

Below is TATE's response to the National English Curriculum. The responses were obtained from two separate feedback sessions: one in the south of the state (31st March) and one in the north (22nd April). The sessions were attended by a cross-section of TATE members, including teachers, administrators and other interested persons. Some comments were also received via email from our more geographically isolated members.

To provide structure to what was a wide and varied series of discussions, the feedback has been grouped under the headings of the three strands: Literature, Language and Literacy, as well as under the general headings of Organisation, Planning, Time, Elaborations, Pedagogy, Equity, Professional Learning and Assessment. It should be noted that TATE members were keen to provide feedback on the proposed new curriculum and they are hopeful that their response will be seriously taken into consideration by the ACARA committee.

Literature

- The Literature strand mostly matches with what is already “being done” in Tasmanian classes and, for the most part, seems logical and achievable.
- It has been stated by Freebody et al that literature is the starting point and driver for the curriculum. This is not clear from the document and, if it is the case, must be stated.
- Literature needs to be central. The (effective) teaching of Language and Literacy skills can (only) be done through making the study of literature and text central to the English classroom.
- There seems to be a very strong emphasis on Asian and Indigenous texts. This raises some questions around content, clarity and resourcing. It also creates a level of disjointedness from one year level to the next. Is the focus on “Asian Texts” based on geographical connections, or political/economic ones? African texts would have more relevance to many of our schools and students.
- There seems to be little emphasis on the role of literature in providing pleasure, engagement and connection to students' lives. The curriculum focuses on function at the expense of the aesthetic. Where is the fun? Promotion of creativity, critical literacy, authentic tasks and learning that engage with the outside world.
- Teachers' capacity to use the 'big' texts that they know work with students by engaging them, connecting with their lives and providing pleasure, is compromised by the huge scope of the curriculum.
- The literature elaborations are the least well developed. This suggests that this strand is less important.

- There is an equity issue concerning the expectation that students will read a range of literature texts– see the requirements of year 10. It is unreasonable to expect many boys (and girls) to meet this requirement.
- The statement about ‘writing’ films is inappropriate. Should be ‘creating’ or ‘composing’ as there are many skills involved.

Language

- There is an over-emphasis on grammar in this document. There is a fear that all subject time could easily be devoted entirely to the teaching of the grammar content alone. Good English teaching is text-centred; grammar and language conventions are integrated through the literature.
- Some aspects of the grammar required to be taught is overly complex. Many trained English teachers do not know some of this more traditional metalanguage, which begs the question – how important is it for our students to know? Whilst sound literacy skills are needed for most careers, a thorough understanding of the intricacies of grammar is of little use to the vast majority of today’s school leavers.
- Today’s students learn skills and develop understandings that are more relevant and important for them to possess in today’s world than a detailed knowledge of these technical components of the English language. There growing concern that an over-emphasis on correct grammar will stifle student creativity and disengage students, reluctant writers in particular.

Literacy

- On the whole, the Literacy strand for each year group seems “do-able”, although upon close reading of particular elaborations, overly difficult.
- Literacy needs to be present across all subject areas and curriculum documents and not be solely relegated to the realm of the English classroom.

Organisation

- The glossary is very useful and an essential part of the document, however the general language of the document is still far too academic. Clear meaning is lost in the unnecessary overuse of erudite language.
- The document itself doesn’t provide clarity for teachers, especially about the interconnection between the strands. The document is disjointed and at parts lacks continuity and clarity. Is there a clear scope and sequence?
- Why does the document represent literature, language and literacy as three distinct, separate strands, when research says good teaching seamlessly integrates these elements? It is worrying that the document could potentially be segmented and de-contextualised (i.e. that a six week unit on “Language” could be taught). How do we engage students with such a content-based curriculum? How can cohesion be expected?
- Will a parent and/or student version of the document be written that uses clearer, more parent/student-friendly language? Such a thing could be quite useful.
- There is so much in the document that it would be easy to leave elements out. This is potentially dangerous, especially if it is an important skill or area of learning.

- The division into year groups is a huge issue, especially for Tasmania where we have made such progress towards teaching students according to their needs, not their grade levels.

Planning

- It's a positive that the curriculum is a K-10 document. The continuity this should provide would be a positive for students and teachers alike. Similarly, a National Curriculum should provide welcome stability for Tasmanians tired from the recent history of rapid curriculum change.
- When planning, teachers take into account how students learn. This document doesn't do that and, indeed, is too "academic" in both content and nature to meet the needs of some students.
- The document requires more skill in planning than ever before. Because of a lack of clarity about integrating the three strands, programming will be extremely difficult.

Time

- Whether it is practical for this document to be taught in schools will depend on how prescriptive it is. There is a lot of content to get through. There will be a lot of pressure to cover this curriculum within time currently allowed for English in schools timetables.
- What type of record-keeping would be required (For assessment? For between grades? For between schools?) How time consuming would this be for teachers?
- The only way to complete the course will be through allocation of more time, yet all subjects will be saying the same thing.

Elaborations

- These are a major concern, especially in the language strand. The focus on grammar is overly prescriptive and not supported by contemporary research (of which there is very little). Much of what is demanded of students in grammar is unreasonable, though students from other states might be better placed than Tasmanian students. Does being able to identify parts of speech mean you can better use them?
- The status and purpose of the elaborations needs to be clarified. In particular, if elaborations are linked to assessment.
- Whilst equity is everyone's concern at times it appears the document is trying too hard to be too politically correct (i.e. the inclusion of Auslan, Braille, Asia, etc. has a danger of sounding tokenistic).

Pedagogy

- Where is the room for fun in the English classroom? Where is the goal of fostering a love of reading, writing, creating, composing? This document isn't written for students, it treats them like "cogs in a machine". They are not products.
- The document lacks an emphasis on inquiry. This is an area in which we have made great gains in Tasmania. We don't want to lose this under a new curriculum. In Tasmania we educate students for the 21st century through emphasising higher

order thinking, ICT skills, meta-cognition and collaborative learning. These need to be made explicit in the document.

- The curriculum suggests that teachers need to become ‘craftsmen rather than educators’. The ‘implied’ pedagogy is highly didactic, encouraging teacher-directed pedagogy.
- Good pedagogy and purposeful and meaningful teaching is what drives engagement and improves student outcomes. A document alone will not improve student engagement. How the content is taught will do this.

Equity

- Division of the document into year groups will be a roadblock in achieving equity for all students. The issue of differentiation is not adequately met. Not all students will meet the levels of achievement for their year level and how we deal with this is not clear.
- Diversity is not catered for. Will following the proposed curriculum allow teachers to meet the needs of all of their learners in their classrooms? For example, what provisions are made for ESL students?

Professional Learning

- There are major implications for teacher education and professional learning. Many teachers in Tasmania are teaching English out of area. The majority of teachers will need training and PL in order to integrate the Language (grammar) component into their teaching (this is especially the case for beginning and out-of-area teachers).
- No document alone can improve student outcomes. Will resources be provided to allow schools/teachers to skill-up and become familiar with the curriculum? This curriculum will only work if schools/teachers are provided with the resources/support required to implement it successfully.
- Professional development will also be required in areas such as assessment practices, catering for student diversity (additional needs, high needs, gifted and talented, ESL students, disengaged learners, etc.), teaching grammar in context, opportunity to engage in co-planning of learning sequences with colleagues.
- A range of supplementary material could be produced that would be most useful for teachers, including: planning pro-formas, suggested/recommended text lists, example learning sequences, parent and student-friendly versions of the document, etc.
- Teacher training (university courses) needs to be informed by the curriculum.

Assessment

- It is difficult to be giving feedback on this curriculum when we have little to no information about assessment. Assessment and moderation are of utmost importance: like it or not, they can have enormous impact on teaching practice. The document needs the rigour of an assessment framework, providing another tier to the document, providing value and accountability.

- With no inbuilt assessment process/measure of student learning, it's difficult to really know what effect this document will have on student outcomes and how practical it will be to implement. Will it be criterion based?
- The emphatic language used in the achievement standards suggests that assessment will be based on what students can't do, rather than what they can do – as is the case for the Tasmanian Curriculum.
- We are concerned that assessment appears to be being “left to last”. Failings and problems in the area of assessment have previously resulted in the downfall of an otherwise well-constructed and well-implemented curriculum document in Tasmania.
- It would be a major negative if NAPLAN is the only official assessment used. NAPLAN provides only a snapshot of student progress.

In summary

In Tasmania, the concept of a National Curriculum is mostly welcomed by a cohort of English teachers fatigued by seemingly constant curriculum change. Concerns from Tasmania fall into three main categories: equity and assessment, professional learning and funding, and pedagogy and instruction.

Assessment is a key part of any curriculum document, the fact it is absent from the draft is of concern. Tasmanian English teachers would be loathe to grade students on an A-E scale (or similar), especially if this meant hard-working students will receive ‘D’ ratings despite their efforts. The curriculum, and its accompanying assessment framework, needs to provide equity for all students. Another concern is that a National Curriculum will lead to the same “teaching to the test” approach that has failed in other countries.

Professional learning and funding are of utmost importance if this curriculum is to be a success. There are serious concerns about how schools will manage to implement this initiative within their current budgets, timetables and schedules. Without additional time, money, support and resources, teachers will not feel comfortable with the curriculum. As teachers are the people implementing it, the entire initiative could conceivably fail if teachers do not feel supported and valued.

Ultimately, it is pedagogy and instruction that improves student outcomes. A curriculum that details the “what” must be accompanied with the “how” and the “why”. Furthermore, it has been noted that the Language strand is excessive in its scope and poses numerous challenges for classroom teachers. There is much concern that emphasis on such a technical level of grammatical knowledge is not only unnecessary, but may be taught out of context and be at the expense of teaching for understanding, student engagement and teaching and learning for the 21st Century.