

The Literacy Wars Redux

With the release of her new book, *The Literacy Wars*, Associate Professor Ilana Snyder was pilloried in *The Weekened Australian* (2/2/08). A front page report, a section of the editorial and a column by Kevin Donnelly were all dedicated to reactions to Snyder's book, evidently prompted by criticisms she makes of the way educational issues have been reported in the newspaper. What was most remarkable about this concerted response was the stark contrast (or even *disturbing* contrast for anyone who believes in freedom of intellectual inquiry) provided between the reasoned nature and the reasonable language of the published quotes from Snyder and the vehemence with which she was attacked by the favoured pundits of *The Australian*.

In the central report, Snyder is quoted as making various apparently controversial claims. These include:

1. universal skills tests advantage "certain groups of students and marginalise others ... As a result, differences in literacy achievement as measured by standardised tests need to be approached with caution"
2. literacy itself is a "highly contested word ... It is not a notion like 'car' or 'holiday' which demand a reasonable level of agreement about their meaning"
3. the need for students to be taught to read with a combination of phonics and whole word recognition: "It's not a case of either/or"
4. the "conservative" push for a return to more traditional English literature in secondary school is "related to deeper political discussions about the moral ordering of life and the regulation of people"; studying "books from the Western canon" can "also train students to be governed by an aesthetic and moral code associated with the cultural heritage model, an approach that originated in Victorian England"
5. educational debate in Australia needs to be more focussed on the need for increased funding of public schools.

Let's be clear about what Snyder is actually arguing. As an educational researcher, she urges *caution* in the interpretation of standardised test results. She suggests that a *balanced* approach to reading is required in schools, which includes but is not limited to instruction in phonics. As an educator with research interests in the broader social functions of school English and knowledge of the subject's history, she claims that a twenty-first century English curriculum for Australian students needs to *acknowledge but move beyond* the past and the ambitions Matthew Arnold had for the subject well over a century ago. Similarly, the way we understand literacy in the twenty-first century has necessarily *evolved* beyond common understandings of the word at the end of the 19th century. As a concerned educator and citizen, with an evident interest in social justice, she suggests that it would be in the *national interest* to better fund public schools, which cater for the highest proportion of disadvantaged students.

These are hardly intemperate, radical proposals. Still, they are enough to make the editor of *The Australian* and the newspaper's favoured educational commentators apoplectic. In the editorial, Snyder's beliefs are said to have "the rigidity of 1920s and 1930s totalitarianism", a familiar but debased rhetorical move that trivialises the deaths of victims of the Nazi and Soviet regimes and one which, moreover, might be described as signifying acknowledgement that a debate cannot be won on intellectual substance. The editorial also suggests that Snyder's educational philosophies are "reinforcing social inequality". Professor Kevin Wheldall, a prominent advocate of intensive phonics instruction in the teaching of reading, is quoted in the front page report describing Snyder's beliefs as "barking mad". He, too, suggests she is part of a system of educational thought that further disadvantages the most disadvantaged in our society: "those who oppose

teaching phonics and giving all children the chance to appreciate literature are out to keep Aboriginal children, poor white kids, and migrants for whom English is a second language, in their place.” Professor Ken Wiltshire introduces another hoary old rhetorical slight: the suggestion that a person adopting a contrary position is somehow un-Australian and a threat to the social order. According to Wiltshire, “this author [ie Snyder] is part of a sinister assault on Australia's educational standards and values.” Dr Kevin Donnelly also trots out the usual list of intellectual and moral failings he reserves for those he believes to be aligned with (what he calls elsewhere) the cultural-left: “politically-correct”, “new age”, “postmodern”. (Surprisingly enough, Donnelly’s language is moderate when compared to that of the other three.)

In summary, *The Australian* counter to Snyder appears to be that educational outcomes for the most disadvantaged students in Australia can be improved by a rigorous regime of testing and a return to more traditional English curriculum centered on phonics based reading instruction, drilling in grammar and the teaching of ‘great’ works of literature. The school curriculum and particular teaching approaches can now apparently ensure what social and economic policies have failed to achieve over decades: the amelioration of significant social disadvantage on a massive scale.

Let’s put Snyder’s arguments and the response of *The Australian* and its commentators to the ‘evidence’ test, keeping in mind that Snyder’s critics claim the intellectual and moral high ground by stating that she supports educational “fads” and “gimmicky methods of teaching reading”.

The Facts

1. Standardised testing *does* discriminate against students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Educational researchers have long argued, with clear evidence, that standardised testing does unfairly discriminate (see for example Kohn 2000; McNeil 2001; Sacks 2001). Since the late 1960s, attention has been particularly focussed on the way that the language of standardised tests makes it difficult for some students to demonstrate the requisite knowledge and skills. In an overview of key research undertaken since the 1960s into the relationship between language development and student learning, Professor Richard Andrews (2001) notes that the challenges facing students from homes in which non-standard forms of English are used are heightened when the predominant language of instruction and testing is a standard or mainstream form of English. Without denying that all students have a right to become proficient in standard English, or that this is socially necessary, Andrews argues that policies and practices such as standardised testing tend not to reflect the necessary, “open-minded approach” that allows children to maximise and extend the affordances of the language they bring to school, and which can assist them to improve their learning outcomes. In short, Andrews suggests, educational research indicates that standard English “can oppress as well as liberate”.

Such is the awareness of the discriminatory effects of standardised tests amongst researchers, Robert Adler, writing in *New Scientist* in January 2007, reports that even the process of collecting demographic information at the start of such tests has been found to discriminate against some students.

“The achievement gap ... between any marginalised group and the mainstream - is one of the most worrying and deep-seated problems in the US educational system. The problem stems in part from the stereotypes that society applies to such groups, which can make individuals painfully aware of how critically they are viewed and can have a crippling impact on their

performance. Any situation that reinforces the stereotype - even something as simple as checking off one's race or gender before a test - can threaten a person's sense of themselves as good, competent and valued, which in turn raises anxiety.

For many African Americans, women and members of other marginalised groups, that anxiety can surge to performance-wrecking levels in class or during exams. Researchers have found that students who repeatedly encounter situations like this become frustrated and soon learn to avoid them. This is why many young women come to shun mathematics, sciences and engineering, and why so many African Americans disengage from academic pursuits entirely.”

Snyder's questioning of the authority attributed to standardised tests continues an international trend amongst experts. In October, 2006, Robert J. Sternberg, dean of Tufts University's School of Arts and Sciences and former president of the American Psychological Association, was quoted in *The Washington Post* as suggesting "Merely having a number associated with something makes it sound worthwhile, even if the number isn't all that valid ... [tests] are assigned a value way beyond what they actually have. It has become like a cult." In the same article, Harvard University education professor Daniel Koretz, an expert on assessment and measurement, took a similar position on testing in the US. He suggested that the testing culture "has a lot more momentum than it should" and described it as a massive experiment being imposed on young Americans.

2. Definitions of literacy have changed over time, making the word one that is “contested”.

A quick browse of the shelves of any large bookstore will confirm that we are now required – or at least encouraged – to develop financial, emotional, computer and even kitchen ‘literacies’ if we are to be able to participate successfully in modern life. Accepted usage and understanding of the word ‘literacy’ has well and truly moved beyond the classroom. It is not surprising, then, that even in schools the term encompasses so much more than it has in the past. Where once a literate person was one who could make their mark, students today are expected to be proficient - for starters - in Basic (or Functional) Literacy, Scientific Literacy, Economic Literacy, Technological Literacy, Visual Literacy, Cultural Literacy, Critical Literacy and Information Literacy. Such terminology is readily dismissed as meaningless jargon. However, it does highlight how each subject has its own reading, writing and speaking demands, giving some sense of the complexities of education in this post-Fordist, digital age.

For Snyder to suggest that literacy is a “contested” term is eminently reasonable. Indeed, the likes of the editor of *The Australian*, Wheldall, Donnelly and Wiltshire, who all round on her for making this argument, are themselves vigorous prosecutors of this contestation, precisely because they seek to re-centre understanding of the word to mean no more than a grounding in so-called basic skills and the nebulous notion of a (literary) cultural heritage. Snyder does not reject this limited definition of literacy. She argues that it is necessary but not sufficient for life in the modern world.

3. A balanced approach to the teaching of reading is needed.

Snyder's position here is wholly unremarkable, especially given that the report of the National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy, *Teaching Reading*, cites significant international research that takes the same position (eg DEST 2005: 33). It is incomprehensible, then, that Wheldall, Donnelly and the editor of *The Australian* should suggest that Snyder has a deficient understanding of how children learn to read. In fact, the editor of *The Australian* makes the surprising claim that Snyder's views position her totally in opposition to the *Teaching Reading*

report, suggesting she promotes “fads” and “gimmicky methods of teaching reading” instead of a proper emphasis on phonics. Seemingly, in the universe of *The Australian* there is little room for complexity and nuance – or, indeed, the balance Snyder advocates.

This last point is confirmed by the reckless and unfounded claims made with regards to the powers of phonics. In the responses to Snyder, any notion of the importance of balance in reading programs is absent as phonics is represented as being a necessary and key element in ending profound social disadvantage. According to the editor, citing Wiltshire and Wheldall as supporting his position, “gimmicky methods” (by which he appears to mean whole language teaching and critical literacy) amount to a lowering of educational standards, and are doing “damage” by “reinforcing social inequality”. Wheldall goes as far as to suggest that it is possible that those who oppose the teaching of phonics - an apparent reference to Snyder - are endeavouring to keep disadvantaged students “in their place”. These claims demand close consideration. Given that the *Teaching Reading* report is held up in the responses to Snyder as providing an indisputable evidence base for how to best teach reading, it is instructive to examine what its authors have to say on the ameliorative powers of phonics in overcoming social disadvantage.

Teaching Reading places great stress on the power of teachers, and more particularly particular teaching approaches, to overcome disadvantage (DEST 2005: 56-57). Claims as to the superiority of phonics instruction over other approaches (which might be expected to form part of a balanced reading program) in improving the reading of disadvantaged students largely rest on the results of a seven-year Scottish study, which tracked three groups of mostly disadvantaged students over the course of their primary schooling (Johnston and Watson 2005). The study examined the efficacy of synthetic phonics in comparison to analytical phonics. A key finding of this research, which is quoted without elaboration in *Teaching Reading* (2005: 36), is that “the synthetic phonics programme led to children from lower socio-economic backgrounds performing at the same level as children from advantaged backgrounds for most of their time in primary school. It also led to boys performing better than or as well as girls.” (As an aside, it is worth noting that reports in *The Australian* have made much of this study. On January 10, 2008, education reporter Justine Ferrari claimed that the apparently incontrovertible findings of this study indicate that “Leading Australian education experts continue to reject scientific evidence that teaching phonics improves reading skills in children.”)

What the *Teaching Reading* report skirts over is the data suggesting that any gains in reading comprehension the disadvantaged Scottish students made in comparison to their more advantaged peers disappeared as the students progressed to Primary 7, the final year before the transition to secondary education. In the words of the researchers themselves, the advantaged students were “significantly ahead” of the disadvantaged students in reading comprehension in Years 5 and 7. They suggest “more work” is required to examine why the early gains disadvantaged students experienced were not sustained over the course of their primary schooling – a time frame, it might be pointed out, in which the comprehension demands of the texts students encounter will become more complex, as will the texts themselves. It is notable that by Primary 7, 14% of the students participating in the study were “behind” in reading comprehension by the researchers’ measure. The latest national data for Year 7 students in Australia indicates that 11% of students are not meeting the reading benchmark, a figure which extends out to 13% for students with a language background other than English and 27% for Indigenous students (MCEETYA 2007). This is a result which makes bizarre Kevin Donnelly’s refutation of Snyder’s claim that Australia is a ‘high (educational) quality / low equity’ nation.

Obviously, this is not a comparison of like with like, but it does put the claims being made for the

Scottish study in broader context, suggesting that its Australian boosters do it no favours by attributing to it powers which eclipse Australian approaches. In fact, upon close consideration, the claims being made for the Scottish study in *The Australian* and *Teaching Reading* give off a distinct hint of 'snake oil'. In particular, the claim by Wheldall that intensive phonics instruction can bridge the gap between more and less privileged home backgrounds is not supported by the Scottish researchers. They acknowledge that the greater availability of books in some homes remains an enabling factor for some students, the benefits of which any single teaching method is unlikely to overcome, particularly as students get older and the reading required of them more demanding.

4. English as a subject has historically been associated with a form of moral regulation and (national) identity that is particularly English.

This is a line of argument with which curriculum historians have few problems. According to Griffith (1992), the Newbolt Report of 1921 did much to formalise the study of the great works of English literature in English classrooms as the basis of a 'national education'. Peim (2004) notes how the Newbolt Report was impelled by fears of social division and a fractious working class following World War 1, as revolution became a reality in Europe. According to Peim, the Newbolt Report established a political function for English, which was to bring a potentially revolutionary working class to heel and inoculate them against the insidious influence of popular culture through the great heritage embodied in the genius of English literature and the indelible beauty of the English language. Griffith adds that the Newbolt Report also fostered a particular way of studying (English) literature, which saw the so-called 'great' works as offering insights into 'life' and 'reality' that would otherwise be denied the bulk of the population. This development ensured that "teachers of English had their professional status established and assured; henceforward they could claim to be gatekeepers who permitted access to 'life', this access, of course, only being attainable via the approved access to approved works" (Griffith 1992: 47).

Snyder's argument that a 'cultural heritage' model of English can "also train students to be governed by an aesthetic and moral code associated with the cultural heritage model, an approach that originated in Victorian England" is also one made by non-educators with a professional interest in literature. Fintan O'Toole, the Irish theatre critic, begins the 2002 revised edition of his book *Shakespeare is Hard, but so is Life* with the arresting claim that "The plays of William Shakespeare were written on the playing fields of Eton. Or, at least, the plays of Shakespeare as they have been taught in school, were." Traditional approaches to teaching the Bard, O'Toole suggests, have been the "mental equivalent of a cold shower; shocking, awful, but in some way good for you, bracing you for the terrors of life and keeping your mind off bad thoughts about politics, society and the way world changes" (O'Toole 2002: 1).

In general, the influence of the 'mother country' remained such in Australia throughout the first half of the twentieth century that English literature was simply accepted as the "best that has been thought and said" and it retained a central place in Australian classrooms.

Through all of the fuss surrounding the publication of Snyder's book, a recent key research finding has gone largely unnoticed. The Australian Bureau of Statistics Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey for 2006 confirms that a past 'golden age' in Australian education has never existed. To the contrary, literacy levels tend to decrease with age – in other words the more recently you finished school the more literate you are likely to be (ABS 2008). This finding largely replicates the results of the 1996 ABS survey (ABS 1997).

The exception in 2006 is the 15-19 years age group, which had lower levels of literacy than the 20-24 years age group. Presumably this older group did not escape the supposed tyranny of whole language approaches to the teaching of reading, yet manage to be the most literate in the survey's history. Interestingly, the 15-19 years age group is the first group to have experienced the renewed focus on 'basic skills' and standardised testing that former Federal Minister for Education David Kemp demanded and the states began to introduce from 1997. Further, it has not escaped attention that the recent PISA results saw a declining performance in literacy by the most able Australian students, a result which was off-set by improved results for our lower-achieving students (Thomson and Bortoli 2008).

While obvious caution is needed in attributing cause and effect relationships, on the basis of the ABS and PISA data there appears to be grounds for further investigation into the possibility that a real threat to educational standards in this country is a dangerous narrowing of the curriculum as a result of the 'basics skills' agenda, which is offering a rather uninspiring curriculum to many of our students and inhibiting their intellectual development and academic performance. This is a trend that has been noted in the US in recent years, stemming from an extreme testing culture and reduced professional autonomy for teachers (Cummins, 2007).

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