

Is it really the case that English teachers do not value their subject and want to downgrade literature in the national curriculum?

Compare what was said in *The Australian* (March 1-2, 2009), in a front page article by Justine Ferrari ('Teachers bid to downgrade literature in national curriculum') and editorial ('Time to value English'), to what is actually in the AATE submission responding to the *National English Curriculum: Framing paper*.

<p style="text-align: center;">AATE & REPRESENTATION</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Ms. Ferrari writing in <i>The Australian</i></p>	<p style="text-align: center;">The AATE response to the National English Curriculum: Framing paper</p>
<p>The professional association purporting to represent the view of the nation's English teachers</p>	<p>The following response comes from the fourteen member AATE Council, which comprises six executive officers and eight state and territory delegates. AATE Council members have been involved in the processes of consultation with the membership which have informed the state and territory responses to the framing paper, as well as the writing of these responses. The perspectives garnered from these experiences have been brought to the writing of this response.</p>
<p>Comment: AATE Council has provided a very clear statement of the genesis of its response. Nowhere in the AATE response is it stated that its contents and recommendations capture the singular "view of the nation's English teachers", as Ms. Ferrari intimates. AATE is a professional organisation comprised of volunteers. All members of AATE Council hold elected positions and represent the views of their state constituents. Ultimately, AATE executive and council members are accountable to the membership through an established election cycle.</p>	
<p style="text-align: center;">LITERATURE:</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Ms. Ferrari writing in <i>The Australian</i></p>	<p style="text-align: center;">The AATE response to the National English Curriculum: Framing paper</p>
<p>ENGLISH teachers are seeking to downgrade the importance of literature in the national curriculum to allow the study of an expanded range of texts covering visual and multimodal forms "as essential works in their own right".</p>	<p>It is clearly the case that most citizens are expected to engage with and produce a range of texts that go well beyond the literary. Paragraph 58 [i.e. of the framing paper] goes on to acknowledge this when it states that textual forms and media such as 'cinema, television, and digital and multimedia' also have an imaginative element, making them 'literary' in nature. This attempt to broadly (re)define literature and yet still foreground a traditional understanding of the term pays heed to a traditional but now only partial understanding of the history of the subject. This limitation might be seen to undermine the intellectual integrity and coherence of the proposed curriculum. This is most evident in paragraph 58, with the line 'present works that aim primarily to make the most of the imaginative potential of the language', again highlighting the forced and unproductive distinctions being made through the elements, particularly those made between language and literature.</p>

Comment: Clearly, the issue for AATE is *not* the place of literature in the curriculum (more on this below). It is, instead, with issues of curriculum definition, organisation, coherence and alignment with existing practice. The “study of an expanded range of texts” noted by Ms. Ferrari is proposed in the framing paper, reflecting current practice in schools. It is not a proposal originating with AATE Council, although it is something with which we agree. To acknowledge that, in English, non-literary texts have been, and should continue to be, studied is not to pass judgement on the value and place of literature. It is instead, as the AATE response in fact states, a question of finding an appropriate balance in the national curriculum between different understandings of English. Far from suggesting what this balance should be, with the place of literature consequently being downgraded, the AATE response suggests that this is an issue requiring further consideration by the National Curriculum Board, with a view to clear advice being provided to teachers.

It calls for the end of traditional literature as a discrete element, and for other types of English texts - which would include advertising, TV shows, signage, text messages and websites - to be viewed as essential rather than "add ons" to accompany the understanding of literary texts.

"The place and role of non-literary texts in a national English curriculum needs to be rethought in terms that do not see the value of such texts as being predominantly in their potential to enhance the study of literature," it says.

Non-print forms—eg drama (as performance), film, television, radio—have been studied for many decades. The key point here is that these texts have not been perceived by teachers as ‘add ons’ that, as the framing paper suggests, ‘accompany’ learning in English. Nor do they merely serve some other purpose, such as the provision of an ‘arts-enriched’ curriculum—worthy though such a goal may be. Instead, they are seen as essential texts in their own right and demand to be studied as such. ***The place and role of non - literary texts in a national English curriculum needs to be rethought in terms that do not see the value of such texts as being predominantly in their potential to enhance the study of literature.***

Comment: The charges that Ms. Ferrari levels against AATE are so baseless that she needs to invent the facts of our response. Somehow the AATE list of non-print forms, “drama (as performance), film, television, radio”, becomes “advertising, TV shows, signage, text messages and websites” in Ms. Ferrari’s report. Such blatant misrepresentation is made all the more astounding by the fact that “signage” and “text messages” are not mentioned anywhere in the AATE response, let alone being listed as what she terms “essentials”.

The framing paper’s proposed element of Literature is stated to be inclusive of a list of texts that exceeds “traditional literature”, as Ms. Ferrari calls it, including “past and present works that aim primarily to make the most of the imaginative potential of the language, including as that potential relates to cinema, television, and digital and multimedia.” This is hardly a “traditional understanding” of literature. AATE’s point is that if such textual forms are valuable enough to be mandated within the national curriculum, then they should not just be there simply as adjuncts to the study of literature. For example, media studies has been part of the English curriculum in most states and territories for many decades now – as the framing paper implicitly acknowledges in the list quoted above. Media studies has its own defining pedagogies, a fact which needs to be acknowledged in the national curriculum. These pedagogies go beyond an exclusive concern with aesthetics, important as this concept is to the study of media texts – and to all texts for that matter.

<p>To acknowledge the history of the subject in this way, in the face of what might amount to a significant rewriting of that history, is hardly a radical step on the part of AATE Council. It is, by definition, a <i>conservative</i> one, as it is all about preserving the past as we move into the future.</p>	
<p>"The expansion of the range of texts used in English ... will necessarily mean a significant reconfiguration of the subject, including a relative reduction in the number of literary works, as the term is traditionally conceived, studied."</p>	<p>A significant challenge for the national curriculum will be to provide guidance on the appropriate balance to be achieved amongst the available range of legitimate text types. It needs also to be recognised that the expansion of the range of texts used in English established <i>in this section</i> will necessarily mean a significant reconfiguration of the subject, including a relative reduction in the number of literary works, as the term is traditionally conceived, studied. In fact, it should be noted that this section creates significant tensions for the Literature element. <i>If the texts and activities outlined in this section truly have 'an important place in a national English curriculum', then it is very difficult to understand why the second element is not labelled 'Texts: informed understanding and appreciation of texts' (or something similar), and made inclusive of literary and other texts. This would appear to be a label that is more in keeping with the scope and intent of Element 2, as well as the description provided for it in the framing paper.</i></p>
<p>Comment: Ms. Ferrari's convenient omission of "in this section" totally alters the intent and meaning of the AATE response. She needs to 'edit' the quotation in this way in order to offer it as support for her argument that AATE is pushing for an expanded range of texts at the expense of so-called 'traditional' literature. The words "in this section", missing from quotation, make direct reference to the framing paper itself, and the expanded range of texts it outlines. Again, it is clear that the main concern of the AATE response is with issues of curriculum definition, coherence and balance. The 'downgrading' of literature is Ms. Ferrari's line, and one which is simply unsupported from an impartial reading of the AATE response.</p>	
<p>The AATE challenges the curriculum's view that studying literature is "a form of arts-related and arts-enriched learning experience" related to aesthetic value, saying it is only "true to a point".</p> <p>Rather, studying literature is "inherently a political action in that it is also about 'nation' building through the dissemination of a 'national' culture".</p> <p>"Studying literature also has historically had an ethical function, contributing to the shaping of a certain sort of person that societies have found desirable," it says.</p>	<p>However, studying literature is also inherently a political action in that it is also about 'nation' building through the dissemination of a 'national' culture, <i>as the framing paper itself argues in relation to the teaching of Australian literature.</i> Studying literature also has historically had an ethical function, contributing to the shaping of a certain sort of person that societies have found desirable (cf <i>Peel</i>, 2000). It is difficult to imagine, for example, that the enduring value of works such as <i>Animal Farm</i> and <i>To Kill a Mockingbird</i>, both widely taught in schools, rests solely on their aesthetic qualities. The failure of this section to articulate a broader understanding of the educational, social, cultural and political purposes of studying literature has the potential to limit the range of pedagogical approaches that the national curriculum will support and validate. Any narrowing of what teachers understand to be good practice is a highly undesirable and retrograde step. <i>The national curriculum must take into account the significant historic models of the subject that inform current curriculum frameworks and syllabuses.</i></p>

<p>Comment: Ms. Ferrari's knowledge and understanding of educational matters upon which she reports so confidently are called into question here. The idea that studying literature has historically been concerned with aesthetics, while also serving political ends and being concerned with the ethical formation of individuals is now so widely accepted within the field as to be common place. The references provided for the argument being put forward in the AATE go some way to showing this to be the case. The references are, of course, removed from Ms. Ferrari's piece, suggesting that the position adopted by AATE on these matters is out of step with 'mainstream' thinking. A brief glance at any general survey of the history of the teaching of literature or English would apprise Ms. Ferrari of the fact that the AATE position has a strong basis in accepted scholarship.</p>	
<p>"It is difficult to imagine, for example, that the enduring value of works such as <i>Animal Farm</i> and <i>To Kill a Mockingbird</i>, both widely taught in schools, rests on their aesthetic qualities."</p>	<p>It is difficult to imagine, for example, that the enduring value of works such as <i>Animal Farm</i> and <i>To Kill a Mockingbird</i>, both widely taught in schools, rests solely on their aesthetic qualities.</p>
<p>Comment: Again, some strategic 'editing' of the AATE response, in order to support Ms. Ferrari's rather idiosyncratic reading and interpretation of it, is evident here. The deletion by Ms. Ferrari of the word "solely" from the text of the AATE response is necessary for her edited quote to fit <i>her</i> argument, rather than ours. It is impossible to read the original text of the AATE response as suggesting that the study of literature should be more concerned with politics and ethics than aesthetics. Again, the issue for AATE revolves around the question of how to achieve curriculum coherence, balance and alignment with existing practice.</p>	
<p>LITERATURE:</p> <p>The editor of <i>The Australian</i></p>	<p>The AATE response to the National English Curriculum: Framing paper</p>
<p>In our view, and undoubtedly that of most parents and students, the national curriculum did a good job defining literature clearly as "plays, novels and poems ... cinema, television and multimedia ... poetry, picture books, multimodal texts, short stories and drama, and a variety of nonfiction forms such as biography."</p> <p>Culturally valued by whom? Teenagers at the lower end of the class who prefer Big Brother to Oscar Wilde? Or, more likely, progressive teachers who find it easier to play films than take students through the themes and characters of <i>Pride and Prejudice</i>?</p>	<p>The framing paper attempts to broaden the scope of what is studied in English. This is welcomed and reflects current practice. In keeping with the forward looking perspective of the curriculum, it is entirely appropriate that the materials studied in subject English should embrace visual and multimodal texts as well as print. To suggest otherwise would be to repudiate much of contemporary English teaching practice and the professional judgement of teachers.</p> <p>Statements made in this section as to the importance of literature K-12 are very welcome.</p> <p>Without wishing to suggest that the study of literature does not have a key historic place in English, it must be said that the definition provided here appears to 'paper over' decades of contestation within the field.</p> <p>A statement such as 'literature' being defined in terms of 'important permanent or artistic value' is presented unproblematically, not fully acknowledging issues of 'decidability' associated with such a claim. Who gets to decide such things and to what range of cultural artefacts might such a decision remain relevant and meaningful? Many in our</p>

<p>Many disadvantaged students, and some from affluent homes, do not have access to good books and are not encouraged to read by parents</p>	<p>society would indeed make such a claim for song lyrics written by, for example, Bob Dylan, Paul Kelly, Joni Mitchell and Tupac Shakur. Does this make such work 'literature' and worthy of study as such in classrooms? A particular group of advertising creative directors might make the claim of 'important permanent artistic value' for a particular ground-breaking advertising campaign. Is advertising therefore to be studied as 'literature'? (These, of course, are questions being asked in response to the element description. They're not indicative of a position being taken.) Many valued forms and works, which are now accepted to be 'literary', were of course once seen to possess no 'important permanent artistic value'. The classic example is the novel itself, which, in the words of Jonathan Culler (2000, p. 82), was once believed to be 'a modern upstart, too close to biography or chronicle to be genuinely literary, a popular form that could not aspire to the high callings of lyric and epic poetry'. F.R. Leavis famously did not see that most 'literary' of novels, Joyce's <i>Ulysses</i>, as possessing the permanent or artistic value he was willing to ascribe to other works (see Lucy and Mickler, 2008). On the other hand, a film such as <i>Citizen Kane</i> is now routinely understood to have the very qualities and values that the definition provided in the framing paper ascribes to literature. The point is that the reluctance in the framing paper to use terms such as 'text' and 'texts', apparently on the grounds that these are laden with too much (postmodern) baggage, highlights the problems associated with the term 'literature', and particularly how it might be defined in envisaging a curriculum for the twenty first century.</p>
<p>Comment: 'We are unabashed fans of the modern Western liberal democracy, the literary canon and Judeo-Christian values.' (Editorial, <i>The Australian</i>, 23-24 September, 2006). What a remarkable change of position! The "unabashed fans" of the "canon" at <i>The Australian</i> are now willing to define "cinema, television and multimedia...picture books, multimodal texts, drama, and a variety of nonfiction forms" as literature. But, hang on. Lest this all seem too postmodern, the position shifts very quickly. Only a few more lines into the editorial and screening a film in English becomes the preserve of "progressive" (muddle-headed? incompetent?) teachers, who are not up to teaching the acknowledged 'classics'. Then, by the end of the editorial, we are being told that what English students, particularly the most disadvantaged, really need is access to "good" books – not television programs, films, multimodal texts, picture books and so on. Playing the "all or nothing" game as <i>The Australian</i> does, is a gross distortion of the AATE response and makes no sense of its own flimsily constructed argument.</p>	
<p>TEACHING GRAMMAR</p> <p>The editor of <i>The Australian</i></p>	<p>The AATE response to the National English Curriculum: Framing paper</p>
<p>Teaching grammar, which promises to be a vital improvement in the national curriculum, was dismissed by the NSW teachers as having "no influence on either the accuracy or quality of written</p>	<p>Closer consideration must be given to different grammars and, within broader consideration of the efficacy of grammar teaching in English (see, for example, Andrews et al, 2006 and Myhill, 2005), how and why teachers have found these useful.</p>

language development for 5 to 16-year-olds". As grammar has not been taught widely to Australian students in a generation, that claim is dubious in the extreme.

In editorials relating to educational matters, the editor of *The Australian* has been known to call for a renewed emphasis on "empirical evidence" (Sept 5 2007) in shaping policy and pedagogy. This time, however, when the evidence is not with him, he manages to misrepresent it. The quote he takes from the **draft** ETA(NSW) response to the framing paper is not a statement of position by ETA(NSW), as the editor claims. It is instead a quote taken by the authors of the ETA(NSW) draft response from the report of a major international research study. The research based findings of eminent academics are then made out by the editor to be the "dubious" claims of teachers. The NSW response considers the "empirical evidence" to evaluate the place of grammar in a national English curriculum. However, the editor refuses to even acknowledge it exists. The NSW response is much more circumspect than the editor allows. It is worthwhile quoting at length from the NSW response to gain an overview of the key research. The editorial's quoting stopped before the section in bold below.

The advisory committee will be aware of the recent systematic review by Andrews et al (2004a, 2004b), which addressed all the relevant papers published in Canada, the US, the UK, Australia and New Zealand in English since 1900 on

- i) the issue of whether the formal teaching of sentence grammar was effective in helping 5 to 16-year-olds to write better and
- ii) on whether sentence combining was effective in this respect.

The study concluded that "the teaching of syntax (as part of a traditional or transformational/ generative approach to teaching grammar) appears to have no influence on either the accuracy or quality of written language development for 5 to 16-year-olds", though sentence-combining was found to have a positive effect. **This does not constitute the final word on the subject. In fact, Andrews et al. themselves went on to say, with respect to the teaching of syntax, that "...[t]his does not mean to say that there could be no such influence. It simply means that there have been no significant studies to date that have proved such an effect". Nor does this finding apply to knowledge about language in the more general sense discussed below, nor to studies of grammar teaching other than the grammar of the sentence. In other words, nuance is what is called for in this area...**

Further, the claim that grammar has not been taught to a generation of Australian students is – surprisingly – simply not true. The Northern Territory has as one of 3 *Elements* in the English Learning Area *language structures and features*. The Queensland Essential Learnings has as one of 5 sets of *Knowledge and Understanding(s), language elements. Language* is one of the 3 *strands* in the South Australian English Learning Area. The Tasmanian English literacy K-10 Syllabus emphasises *structure and language features*. Of the 2 *Central and essential concepts* in the Victorian Essential Learnings: English, one is *language*. The Western Australian Outcomes and standards framework for English and the English Learning Area Statement both highlight *conventions* as one of 4 *understandings and skills*. The NSW K-6 Syllabus discusses 2 sets of *knowledges: knowledge about oral language and knowledge about written language*, both of which include *text structure and grammar*.

<p style="text-align: center;">TEACHING READING:</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Ms. Ferrari writing in <i>The Australian</i></p>	<p style="text-align: center;">The AATE response to the National English Curriculum: Framing paper</p>
<p>...recognise a whole-language method for teaching reading rather than exclusively emphasising phonics and the letter-sound relationships as the initial step</p>	<p>The following, taken from the ETA (NSW) website (n.d.), highlights the inadequacies of this section of the framing paper: 'Phonics' refers to that skill which we use in reading which identifies words by their sounds. It is one of three 'cueing' systems we use to make sense of the written word. The others are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • making predictions about words as we read based on what the whole passage or sentence is about. • using our knowledge of the kind of word (grammatically) that occurs in a particular place in a sentence (ie we expect and predict as we read that verbs will occur in verb positions, nouns in noun positions etc. In the sentence 'The boy <i>ran</i> away', a good reader would not substitute 'rat' for the italicised word, since it would make no sense, despite looking like the actual word.) <p>For beginning readers, or for children who have had trouble learning to read, all three cueing systems have to be taught since they don't work in isolation. Different readers with different experiences with language - and with different degrees of familiarity with the reading material in front of them - will use these strategies in different 'proportions' in any particular reading situation.</p> <p>Many beginning readers will rely very strongly on letter sounds and shapes for decoding the words on the page in most situations and all beginners will be taught these strategies. However, an inclusive reading program catering for all learners in a class will mean students are also taught to use the other cueing systems. The argument that phonics is neglected tends to come from those who advocate a 'phonics only' approach, which places little emphasis on meaning, which is the whole point of reading.</p>
<p>Comment: The AATE response does not advocate a particular method for the teaching of reading, "whole-language" or otherwise. It simply suggests that "balance" is required, meaning that the crucial role of all three cueing systems needs to be emphasised in the national curriculum. The ETA(NSW) web site is quoted to make clear the indispensable role of each of the three cueing systems. To suggest, as Ms. Ferrari does, that any student could learn to read through instruction "exclusively emphasising phonics" reveals her total ignorance in this area. The definition of reading provided in <i>Teaching Reading</i> (2005, p.89), the report of the National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy is instructive here: "Reading involves two basic processes: one is learning how to decipher print and the other is understanding what the print means (Center, 2005, p. 7). Clay (1991) defines reading as a 'message-getting, problem-solving activity which increases in power and flexibility the more it is practised' (p. 6); and 'a process by which children can, on the run, extract a sequence of cues from printed texts and relate these, one to the other, so that they understand the message of the text' (p. 22) – the instructional purpose of which is that children are able to read and understand continuous text with ease (see also: Clay, 1993b). Coltheart (2005a) asserts that the basic building blocks of reading are a set of integrated cognitive sub-skills that include: letter symbol</p>	

recognition, letter-sound rules, whole word recognition, and ability to access meaning from the written word.” As the education writer for the only national newspaper, it might be expected that Ms. Ferrari would be more informed about her (combat zone?) area of operation. The AATE response seeks to prevent reading from being reduced to nothing more than making sounds, as Ms. Ferrari’s ill-informed and alarmist criticisms would have it.

But the AATE submission says the emphasis on phonics "comes at the expense of the focus on a balanced reading program", which is the term now applied to whole language methods of teaching reading.

It calls for explicit reference to be made to "all three cueing systems" used to make sense of the written word.

Under the Three Cueing Systems model for teaching reading, the sounding of letters is the least important skill, with children first asked to use semantics, and guess the word based on the context including using pictures and then use the sentence syntax to work out the meaning.

The stress on phonics in this section comes at the expense of the focus on a balanced reading program that has been emphasised in syllabuses around the country for decades, contrary to ill-founded claims as to the supposedly all-pervasive influence of the perverse caricature that some label a ‘look and guess’ approach to the teaching of reading. In fact, the importance of a balanced program is emphasised in research cited in the report of the Australian National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy, *Teaching Reading* (DEST, 2005). It is most puzzling then that the term ‘balanced reading program’ is not to be found in this section of the framing paper, which nonetheless puts emphasis on ‘flexible’ reading programs, catering for the needs of individual students. It is also of concern that all *three* cueing systems, which are so familiar to teachers, are not explicitly named.

Comment: As the AATE response indicates, even the government’s own publication, *Teaching Reading*, advocates ‘balance’ in the teaching of reading. The authors identify the “basic building blocks of reading” (p. 31). They describe these in terms of a “set of integrated sub-skills”: letter-symbol recognition, letter-sound rules (phonemic awareness and phonological knowledge), whole-word recognition and the ability to derive meaning from written text. They then go on to emphasise (p. 34) the importance of “a strong *meaning-based* approach that provides individualised strategy instruction, especially for students during their middle years of schooling. As such, it is important that teachers not over-emphasise one aspect of a complex process.” It would appear, then, that the AATE position on the teaching of reading is an eminently sensible and supportable one.