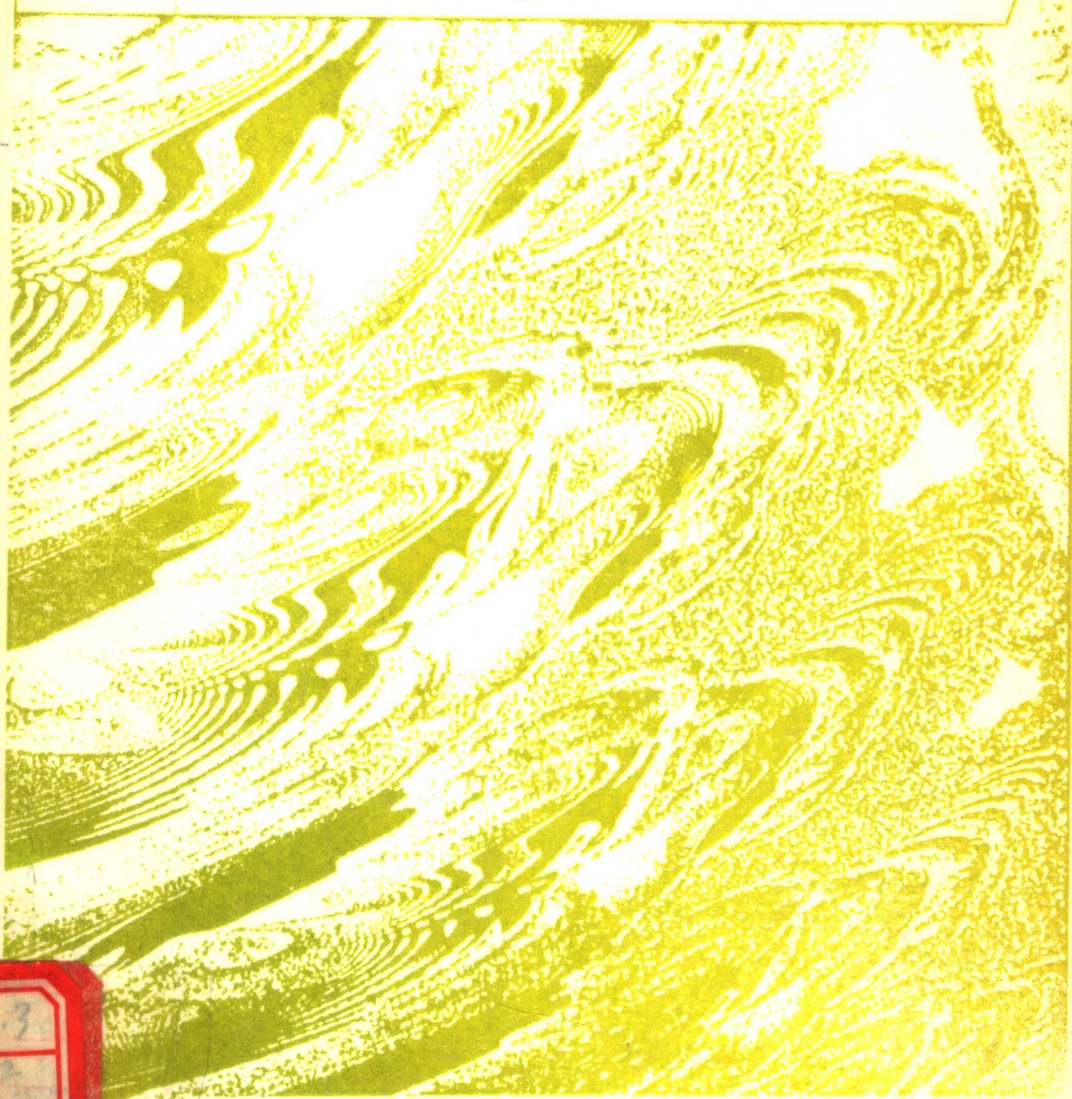
ENGLISH, LANGUAGE, AND EDUCATION

Developing English



Edited by PETER DOUGILL

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DEVELOPING ENGLISH

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English, Language, and Education series

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Eudora Welty

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General editor's introduction

When this book was first proposed to me for this series I was attracted mainly by the possibility of a book growing out of the Southern Regional Conference, which I had had the honour of addressing on two occasions. This long standing annual meeting of theorists, local advisers, HMI and teachers working together in the region seemed (and still seems) to me an excellent model for continuing in-service work in English. Peter Dougill's idea was to bring together a number of the recently presented talks to the conference and some of their outcomes in terms of classroom work as described in case studies presented by individual teachers from the region. The present volume provides the final outcome.

This has led to a remarkable combination of talents. Many of the contributors to major chapters in the book are likely to be already well known to its readers. Most of the teacher contributors are unlikely (as yet anyway) to be known outside the region. However, it seems to me that this combination breaks new ground both in in-service work and its outcomes in important respects. It shows ways in which the theory and practice of English teaching can be brought very closely together. The authors of the case studies went away from their annual conference inspired to try out new things in their classrooms and sustained, in many cases, by those who had presented some of the theoretical positions to them in the first place. This gives the lie to the often advanced and, in my view, mistaken, proposition that there is a dichotomy between 'theory' and 'practice' so that the two need never meet. (Indeed I think the originally proposed title of the book was *Theory into Practice* and it is one that in many ways I am sorry to have lost.)

However, the present title is, without doubt, the correct one. We are post-Kingman, post-Cox, and (at the time of writing) awaiting Statutory Orders for English in the National Curriculum. Overseas readers may find this extraordinary but it is a fact that, until the Education Act of 1988, there has been no compulsory curriculum in England and Wales. The introduction of a compulsory curriculum on a statutory basis marks a complete change in the philosophy of dealing with curriculum issues. In this sense English (like other key subjects) is 'developing' at the present time and it is good to see so many of the contributors to

this book anchoring their arguments so firmly (even if not always with complete agreement) to the issues raised in the key reports that have shaped the way in which the English curriculum is likely to emerge in practice.

The other major development at present is the move to local management of schools (LMS). This means that schools will be working out, to a large extent, their own priorities for their own in-service programmes (buying in help as it is seen to be needed) and much such work will be school based. While there are some virtues in this (it has been all too easy for in-service work to seem remote from the classroom), the danger is that schools will become too inward looking, too much concerned with local issues, and local problems and solutions, to be able to see things in the wider perspective. The power of the Southern Regional Conference to draw upon a national repertoire of speakers, to enable teachers to meet together on a regular basis but free from the immediate constraints of their more parochial situation, and to provide, through the advisory services, for sustaining the work of the classroom when the members had returned to the school, has been very great indeed.

Its fruits can be seen, in part at least, in this book. The rest can be seen in the work that has been done in the classrooms. One fears that with LMS such fruits may be under threat.

Anthony Adams

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Introduction

The title *Developing English* is intended to indicate at least two kinds of movement. The first suggests possible shifts in the stance of those involved with the teaching of English in the 1990s. These shifts have been made more explicit through the deliberations of a sequence of working parties ranging from the Committee of Inquiry into the Teaching of English chaired by Sir John Kingman to the National Curriculum English Working Group chaired by Professor Brian Cox coupled with subsequent interventions and adjustments made by the National Curriculum Council and the DES. These various groups have drawn upon the expertise of classroom teachers which in turn has been represented by such bodies as NATE or through the work of the two national projects which have concentrated on written and spoken language. In short, there has been a tradition of reflection and development in English which has been codified by the national curriculum. If Kingman, Cox, and the national curriculum have not actually invented good practice but rather have drawn upon an existing and growing reservoir of good practice they have, nevertheless, highlighted gaps and possible weaknesses.

However, *Developing English* is not intended to be a Baedeker for use while travelling through the intricate delta of attainment targets and programmes of study. Neither does it pretend that the national curriculum is a passing fancy. Instead, it is intended to help teachers of English locate their own positions in order that they might start to accommodate the demands of national curriculum while at the same time retaining what they consider is important and what stamps them with a particular identity as teachers.

In order to attempt this the book has been organized so that movement from theory to practice is also suggested. Keynote theoretical chapters are linked to case studies which describe how these ideas have been implemented in classrooms.

As David Allen says in the opening chapter, 'there has never been a more important time to evaluate the curriculum in the classroom and the whole management of that by the department.' In one sense the chapters which follow

David Allen's are all intended to be evaluative; consequently this is the only chapter which is not paired with a case study. It is hoped that the material which follows will generate the kind of questions which may help to support English departments at a time when they are increasingly pressed not only to say what they do but why they do it.

Much, but not all, of the work represented here has come out of the Southern Conference for Development Work in English, a loosely knit group involving a number of LEAs in a form of collaborative in-service training which has allowed teachers, advisers, HMI and teacher trainers to work closely together over a number of years.

PART ONE
Evaluation

1 Evaluating the English department

DAVID ALLEN

There are plenty of bullets flying about just now. It is difficult to preserve the detachment necessary to review one's own work calmly when there are bullets flying overhead. The media and other opinion formers are enjoying the snipe season. It is altogether understandable that teachers should keep their heads down. But not very useful. The only advantage to an ostrich when it buries its head in the sand is that it limits the choice of where precisely it is shot. It will probably not be in the head.

Not that much has changed. Of all teachers, English teachers are still among the most resistant to the very idea of evaluation and accountability. Perhaps the dangers of narrowness are too well understood. Perhaps, too, they fear that the flame of art at the centre of the best of English will be so easily snuffed out by mechanical processes. If English is indeed about growth (how can it not be?), about imagination, about cultural recreation, will it wilt under rough mechanical treatment? Certainly we cannot insert evaluation into lifeless soil and expect to see new growth. A worthwhile English curriculum does not start with evaluation. It should come out of an attempt to create an experience of some merit and should in turn enhance new forms by providing evidence of effectiveness or failure. It might also help to clarify the purposes of the enterprise. It is part of the process, not its end. If evaluation is applied to the lifeless body of an inarticulate curriculum, it is really a post mortem (which is one kind of evaluation, I suppose). It may identify the fact of death; it is not much use in creating further life.

The central role of evaluation is in generating renewal and refreshment in cycle after cycle; the alternative is an unexercised atrophy, a hardening of the arteries. Evaluation can be a process that supports the living learning of children and teachers and it needs a structure that is sensitive but strong enough to provide hard information. Now, more than ever, we need a means of supporting good work by evidence rather than assertion against the many calls for reduction, for compliance, for obedience. Now, more than ever, we need evidence to keep the pointless, the ineffective, the dead, out of the classroom.

English teachers have long been able to pride themselves on the energy and

liveliness of the best of their teaching. In the last twenty years or so great efforts have gone into the planning of courses and resources. But on what evidence of success or failure has the course been continued or changed? English teachers often say that they are not happy presenting the same material year after year, following the same lines. But how are the changes made? Are they on the grounds of personal taste or of ineffectiveness? How much notice is taken of the most vociferous of reaction from pupils? How much notice should be taken? Is the sense of novelty for the teacher to carry more weight than the benefit to the learner? Is the rhetoric that engaging the personal taste of the teacher makes for positive lessons so overridingly central that there are no occasions when the teacher should continue with effective material in spite of personal preference? Are there no occasions when teachers should abandon lesson methods and material they personally find attractive because the evidence, when collected and heeded, would point to unwanted effects and a need to change? The grounds for continuity or change surely need careful weighing. This is the role of evaluation or review.

Now that many of the traditional choices of the teacher are being taken away by the centralization of the national curriculum, some are saying that there is no longer any need for evaluation. Teachers are to be told in detail what to do. They are to be no more than 'classroom learning implementation operatives'. Certainly the government intends to pick up the praise if the changes lead to improvement. Only the brickbats and the work are left for the teachers to pick up. Whose work are we now evaluating?

I believe there has never been a more important time to evaluate the curriculum in the classroom and the whole management of that by the department. Many parts of the national curriculum have never been examined in practice in any systematic way and are still suspect until proved. Many kinds of good work are excluded and need to be reconsidered for inclusion as the curriculum is reviewed – as all bodies agree it must be.

There have always been good reasons to be wary of the drive to make English teaching accountable. A major one is that we may be held accountable on grounds that are unacceptable to us and run counter to the lessons learned in the classrooms where the curriculum has to be delivered. There is plenty of crass, uninformed, not to say ignorant, commentary available weekly from the media, politicians and even some parents. There are times when the kind of remarks passed provokes stunned disbelief in teachers. It is as if all the experience of working with children in classrooms is to count for nothing. How can common ground be discovered?

The common ground has to be the educational welfare of children. And one of the most profitable ways of working on this common ground has to be through the consideration of evidence collected while evaluating work in progress.

A second reason for wariness is the reluctance to have our uncertainties and inconsistencies brought out into the light, whether ours or someone else's. It is an essential characteristic of any teacher of integrity that there are doubts to live