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English and its environments: the teaching of a subject in suburb and city, 1945-65

Peter Medway¹, Mary Irwin²

¹King's College London, London, United Kingdom, ²University of London Institute of Education, London, United Kingdom

Background

The paper draws on early findings of the project, *Social Change and English: A Study of Three English Departments 1945-1965*, funded by the Leverhulme Trust from 2009-12. Research is revealing that the radically innovative curriculum and pedagogy for the teaching of English that historians have ascribed to the 1960s was well under way in the 1950s. The origins of what is referred to as the 'New English' lie in the post-war climate of democratic optimism and cultural renewal. The project examines what happened in English in three schools.

Research Questions

What changes occurred in the teaching of English 1945-65, what occasioned them, who and what did they come from and what sort of experience resulted for both students and teachers?

We're interested in the teachers concerned (their background, experience, interests and affiliations); and in the effects on English of the location of the schools and the makeup of their populations, and especially what the students and their culture contributed to English as realised in this or that institution.

Methods

Unlike existing histories which draw almost exclusively on published or official sources, our need to get at the texture of life in English departments and classrooms has led us to a case-study approach that relies heavily on oral history. We therefore selected three secondary school English departments whose teacher-led innovations had a disproportionate influence on developments in English.

Our schools are different in interesting and relevant respects. We focus here on the schools on which our studies are furthest advanced: Minchenden Grammar School (Middlesex) and Walworth Comprehensive (London County Council). The former was a post-1918 mixed county grammar school, the latter had started in 1882 as an elementary school and had been re-established in 1946 as an early, mixed 'experimental comprehensive'. Their locations were respectively a suburb whose expansion dates from the 1930s with an influx of mobile families, many Jewish, from East London; and a working-class neighbourhood of nineteenth-century terraces and twentieth-century council flats adjacent to the Surrey docks.

Our main sources are oral history interviews with former students and teachers in the three schools; written accounts elicited from individuals in both groups, including by notices on school websites; documents surviving from the schools and their English departments, including syllabuses, memoranda, photographs and student work; letters home by teachers from the Commonwealth; and contemporary publications by the teachers. In our paper we draw on multiple sources.

Frame

We refer to the typology of 'Versions of English' developed by Barnes, Barnes and Clark (1984) which was based on detailed observation of a number of schools and colleges and took account of sociological and historical studies (e.g. Mathieson, Shayer, Ball) that considered English curricula from the point of view of their relative emphasis on basic skills, cultural heritage (literary canons) and

social experience. Our ambition is in part to produce a more nuanced approach to classification that pays due regard, first, to crossovers and connections, not least through professional associations and affiliations, and secondly to variation according to the specificities of location. Our chosen method being case studies, we hope to give full recognition to the contribution of innovative teachers, to teachers' political and cultural interests and to the cultural interests and loyalties of the students, as well as to the effect of the 'climate of the times' as Britain moved from austerity to affluence and, in a reverse move, from post-war national pride to the lowered self-esteem that followed the loss of Empire and the humiliation of Suez.

Research findings

Our paper addresses English in Minchenden and Walworth Schools in the post-war years to 1965. We focus on how it was affected by their respective geographical and social locations. In both schools a shift occurred around the same time (1956-9), with similar emphases reflecting a shared involvement by key teachers in the London Association for the Teaching of English (LATE). LATE was founded in 1947 to press for the reform of examinations but before long served also for the exchange of professional experience and the consideration of current theory (linguistic, literary, psychological) made available in talks by academics from the London Institute of Education. The thrust of the theory was that language was central to human development, which made English far more serious than the traditional emphasis on functional skills suggested, and that the place for English to start was the language the students brought to school with them. 'Their own language' was found to flourish when dealing with their own experience – a dual emphasis that informed teaching in both schools: the local vernacular was accepted as valid currency for spoken transactions, while the students' experience was drawn on to illuminate the literature they read and provide topics for written composition.

English in the two schools differed, however, in ways that reflected their character. We worked on Walworth first and so know more about it, not least from the quantity of students' work we have collected. English at Walworth drew extensively on community and environment: family meals, weddings, funerals, markets and getting into trouble, and streets, canals, timber yards, bombsites and building sites feature in the students' writing. Such locally focused writing comprised, on the one hand, descriptive pieces, whether free-standing or embedded in stories about local characters, and on the other essays on planning and housing issues as well as social problems. It was a significant innovation for English to take such account of its setting. Whether Minchenden English was inflected in the same way towards the suburban realities of Southgate, with writing on lawnmowers, tennis clubs and bridge parties, is so far looking unlikely; our informants are emphasising instead the ways in which the climate and social relations of the classroom were affected by, first, the leafy and relaxed surroundings (the school building had been a country house) and, second, the intellectually lively and talk-oriented ways of particularly the Jewish students.

References

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