



ENGLISH IN AUSTRALIA

December, 1991

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Dilemmas in Theory and Practice: A Case Study of English Teachers and School-Based Curriculum Development and Assessment

ERROL VIETH

'Assessment is the tail that wags the dog of curriculum' was a teacher's response to an article I wrote on school-based assessment.¹

She was, and remains, right. Against all expectations, in the face of all theory predicting, once again, the end of curriculum design predicated by assessment requirements, assessment in English in Queensland's school-based curriculum and assessment program retains and has increased its stranglehold on curriculum. Increased its stranglehold? Well, one of the major disadvantages of external exams was that pupils were taught so that they could answer exam questions. The stated intention of school-based curriculum development was to amputate this diseased tail. In fact, the assessment disease has spread throughout the dog's body politic and has wormed its way into every aspect of the English curriculum.

The theory of school-based curriculum development and assessment is that assessment would be an on-going process which derived naturally from the curriculum of the classroom. But in practice this is not the case. Theory and practice are not only widely different; they are mutually antagonistic. Practice not only contradicts theory; the implementation of theory has resulted in a practice which is the opposite to that suggested by the theory.

In this paper I'll focus on the system of school-based curriculum development and assessment in Queensland in the subject English. A small group of teachers of English allowed me to interview them, and that material is used to suggest areas of investigation. The Queensland system — and I use the term *system* quite consciously — and other systems which parallel the Queensland system, exhibit all the paradoxes normally found when one compares any educational theory with the practice. Such paradoxes are not unusual, you might say, and you would be right. Paradoxes between theory and practice do not necessarily negate the theory; anomalies can be fed back into the system and adjustments made.

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But in this case the practice contradicts the theory. The practice contradicts all the appearances, which are assumed to be the reality by enthusiasts such as Paul Nay-Brock in his AATE published book *Who's doing what?: The senior English curriculum in Australian schools*.² He sings the praises of the Queensland system. But the reality is that the freedom, the empowerment, the flexibility, the enjoyment, the invigoration, the commitment, the love of teaching, if you like — all the promises of school-based curriculum development and assessment are reversed by the practice of the system as it exists in Queensland at the current time. Nay-Brock is correct in suggesting that content, in the sense of the material used as resources, is not stipulated. What is not flexible is assessment, and it is assessment which is now the curriculum; it is assessment which is the content of the Senior English course.

What exists in teaching English at the senior level is a prescriptive syllabus in terms of everything other than resources. The reality is contradictory, centralised and reified assessment practices, very little flexibility and little opportunity for negotiation between pupils and teachers. An adversarial relationship between teachers and pupils exists; pupils learn very quickly that they are competing against each other for marks, which are vitally important. There is certainly no empowerment. In this respect little has changed from the days of external exams. In other respects, much has. Teachers have to work much harder.

Paul Nay-Brock analyses the Queensland system at the level of the documents which describe the system and the syllabus. These documents were written by those who are working within the system and who have played some part in its creation and therefore support it in some way. Hence the documents should be viewed critically rather than with the uncritical acceptance — nay, the enthusiastic embrace — of Nay-Brock's work. He uses such terms as 'splendid schematic overview' and a 'fine blend of...'. While such analysis is useful it must be balanced by research into what happens in classrooms and with teachers. Little has been done in this area, which is surprising. Answers to the question 'What's really happening here?' need to be found, rather than answers to the question 'What purports to be happening here?' We should have come far enough down the road of educational research to realise that there is a gap between theory and practice, and to use practice as the field of research rather than the theory.

The system of school-based curriculum development and assessment in Queensland is known by the acronym ROSBA — Review of School-based Assessment. The title came from the 1978 Scott report that

examined the earlier scheme of school-based curriculum development and assessment known as the Radford scheme.³ To clarify: up to 1968 there were senior and junior public exams — external exams. Then the Radford scheme was introduced, followed by ROSBA which was introduced progressively up to 1987. The title of the latest report; that is, *A review of school-based assessment*, is worth comment: a system of assessment was to be the review's focus, rather than school-based curriculum development. The importance of this lies in the fact that until the Radford scheme was introduced, content of year 11 and 12 English teaching was stipulated in the syllabus. The Radford scheme introduced both school-based curriculum development and school-based assessment. But the focus of *A review of School-based assessment* was assessment.

A complete description and analysis of ROSBA, and its implications for the teacher, would require a complete edition of this journal. I will examine a number of strands in the web of ROSBA, but that will not give a clear indication of the whole web.

Teachers also perceived only some strands in the web. They were partially aware of what it meant for them in terms of their classroom teaching and assessment; that is, the practices they had to follow for assessment purposes. But they knew little about other strands in ROSBA's web.

Most began their interviews by stating that they did not know much about ROSBA. Liz reported that it was very confusing in the sense that her understanding of the system was vague and patchy:

Liz: I'm not all that clear on it [ROSBA]. I thought it related to pupil's individual development, but when it comes to assessment, you have to assess them in relation to criteria and other levels. It's confusing.

Note here the reference to assessment. I'll simply draw this to your attention now. Throughout this paper the emphasis on ROSBA as assessment will become clear. Liz has recognized, through her practice, one paradox — assessment and development — which confuses her, as all paradoxes do until they are understood. The understanding that resolves this particular paradox is that ROSBA has nothing to do with the pupils' individual development, nothing to do with the personal growth model lauded by Nay-Brock, and all to do with assessment.

Another teacher, Lyn, wasn't confused at all:

Lyn: ROSBA...I can't remember what the letters stand for ... I really don't know what ROSBA is.

Participants lacked theoretical knowledge of ROSBA. On the other hand, they knew about the practice of it, as it related to their classrooms, in intimate detail — at least those things which they thought were to do with its practice. They were able to speak at length on these practices and intuitively theorise about them without taking the next step of formalising their theorising. However, the general lack of knowledge of the theory and the reasons for the changes which school-based assessment has necessitated reflects poorly, not on the teachers, but on the system which introduced these changes without making teachers aware of the theoretical paradigm of the system.

In-service is generally the channel through which new programs are implemented in schools. Most participants noted the absence of any in-service in the introduction of ROSBA, which is strange.

Here then is another paradox. Teachers were being asked to introduce a new system which was fairly complex and required quite sophisticated understanding if it were to be properly implemented. Yet little was done to explain ROSBA to them, and no time was given for the extra work that teachers needed to do. Imagine a business where a completely new scheme was to be introduced. I'm using business as a comparison because teachers are constantly being harassed to follow the principles of business. So in this business three weeks training may be given for the people involved in the changes to be able to re-orient their thinking. But this didn't happen in schools.

RJ was an experienced teacher who had taught in more geographically remote areas of the state. She was appalled at the way ROSBA was introduced:

RJ: It was dreadful. It was horrific. It was more horrific the more remote you were.

While she had been to some in-service sessions she was critical of the thinking behind these in-service meetings:

RJ: ROSBA in-service hasn't been kept up enough. There's been too much of an idea that 'We'll send one person to a seminar and that person will teach the other 18 of you everything.'

Here she was critical of the 'seeding' or 'ripple effect' model of introducing change to schools. In this model one person is sent to a seminar and that person then becomes the expert who teaches the other teachers. This is an inexpensive method of introducing changes, and 'economy' is one of the criteria which determines the viability of

educational change. Financial economy may have been the driving force behind the introduction of ROSBA.

Perhaps you might think that recently graduated teachers would be better off than those who had been teaching for some years in terms of their understanding of ROSBA. Given that ROSBA is so important, you might expect that teacher education institutions would have given student teachers some insights into school-based curriculum and assessment. You would be wrong. Those participants who had recently graduated from teacher-preparation courses pointed to a lack of any attention being given to ROSBA in these courses. Jill was a recent graduate of the education faculty of a university:

Jill: We waited for four years at Uni to find out about ROSBA. No-one really told us anything. ROSBA was talked about in glowing terms, but it was never explained to us. We went into schools and they talked about work programs and ROSBA systems and it meant nothing to us.

Jill's comments reveal that university lecturers fell into the same trap as Paul Nay-Brock — the theory is seductive.

Lyn is a very recent graduate of a college of advanced education. Her acquaintance with ROSBA during her teacher education was even briefer than Jill's.

Lyn: It's [ROSBA] been mentioned only when brought up in conversation by students if we were looking at a program or looking at examples of lesson plans — usually in the Maths course, I think, not in English. I think only once it had been brought up in examples I can remember, and that was last year.

Mary, another fairly recent graduate of a college of advanced education, also pointed out the lack of education about ROSBA at college and the lack of in-service since it was introduced.

Leon Lessinger in *Every kid a winner* argued that the best model for teachers was an 'educational engineers'.⁴ If education is defined as the 'mastery of a set of skills', the educational engineer would ask such questions as 'What can I achieve that can be measured?', 'How can these be defined in terms of performance criteria?' and then, 'How can I assess what I have tried to accomplish in terms of these performance criteria?' Unfortunately for English teachers and teaching, these are the questions that teachers have to ask themselves in this system of school-based assessment.

Teachers, then, are constructed as 'educational engineers' by the system: they can implement the changes but without any understanding of the aims of ROSBA or its essential nature. Any analysis of the program is not for teachers to make; they exist simply to implement and are employed for this ability. They are not to question.

The method of introducing ROSBA appears at first glance to be puzzling. Under ROSBA, teachers have a certain amount of control over the curriculum, or so the theory goes. If this were so, it might be expected that teachers would be given a great deal of in-service so that the changes they made would be effective, so that they would know what school-based curriculum development was about. As Connell states, with regard to curriculum change:

Teachers on their own are certainly not able to carry through the whole of the reforms..., which depend also on the involvement of parents, administrators, unions — and researchers. *But these other groups, without the involvement of classroom teachers, can do precisely nothing* [my italics].⁵

Why then have teachers been overlooked in these changes? Two possibilities exist. Either in the plans for the assumed changes the reality of Connell's statement has been overlooked, or another more nefarious possibility existed. This is that teachers were not really supposed to make too many changes. As will become apparent throughout this study, ROSBA makes teachers accountable for what happens in the classroom at least in the eyes of the parents and the pupils. It places all responsibility on them, but keeps fairly tight control of assessment and curriculum while apparently giving responsibility to teachers, thereby absolving itself of responsibility.

I want to focus now on the topic of assessment. As I've already suggested, ROSBA is less to do with school-based curriculum development and more to do with assessment. Of course, school-based curriculum development may still be important, but only insofar as such curriculum can be assessed in ways stipulated by the syllabus. The Queensland syllabus is concerned with assessment. Paul Nay-Brock enthusiastically points out that the 1981 syllabus in Queensland devoted one quarter of its total length to 'directions concerning the assessment of the process, content, skill and affective objectives'⁶, resulting in a 'most comprehensive' section of the document. The current 1987 syllabus has almost one-half (44/100) of its pages devoted to assessment, which reflects the increasing importance of assessment, or at least the fact that syllabus writers and the Board of Secondary School Studies

believed that the description of assessment had to be even more comprehensive.

Teachers were aware through their practice of ROSBA that it was a system of assessment rather than a system of teaching or instruction. RJ saw ROSBA as being a whole new way of organising a course and assessment, and coping with a vast marking load. She pointed out that she was never 'trained', to use her term, for these aspects of ROSBA. Hill said:

The first thing that should be said is that ROSBA is an assessment system rather than an instructional system.

This notion now pervades every aspect of the teaching of English. RJ again:

RJ: I originally thought that ROSBA was going to downplay the intensity of what's assessable and what isn't assessable. [But] now we teach only what we're going to assess. The whole approach has become a unit approach where we forget other types of content and explorations of the subject.

Liz's perception of the place of assessment in school was more direct:

Liz: School has become an assessment factory.

Doesn't this comment hark back to the days of external exams, when teaching and learning were for the purpose of examinations? What has changed?

And how can flexibility be practised when the syllabus states this?

Students are to be made aware early in the course of the way the Exit Achievement will be determined.

This seemingly innocuous statement immediately contradicts any notion of flexibility, and notion of negotiation. In practice each pupil has to be informed of the assessment items at the beginning of the year. The end result of teaching was to arrive at a certain assignment, a certain measurable product, and much of the teaching was directed to that. Mary perceived that this degree of planning had the effect of preventing classroom activities from branching into those areas which might come up in the classroom as other areas of interest, as tangents but in areas in which pupils showed an interest.

In addition, such an assignment list produced a mentality in the students that they should not do anything unless it was for assessment. Pupils are now enveloped in the notion of assessment. There is, of course, no reason why they should not be. Assessment requirements permeate their lives, in all subjects. They are, in general, not concerned about the comments made on the various pieces of work but only with

the final result. This is a natural consequence of the emphasis placed on assessment by the syllabus and the 'measurement' syndrome which permeates education to the exclusion of other notions of education.

This agrees with Scott's finding that, under Radford,

testing and ranking of students have increased in frequency and are having a detrimental effect on students, teachers and school administrators.⁷

However, the implementation of the Scott Report — ROSBA — has not resulted in a lessening of testing and ranking, rather the opposite. Consequently the detrimental effect has multiplied.

Here then is another paradox. One argument against external exams was that teaching was designed to enable students to get a good result. Teaching was a preparation for the exam. School-based curriculum development and assessment was supposed to change that. Now, however, all teaching is directed to the end result of an assignment, a product, rather than other affective aspects of education:

Bill: The important thing is, unfortunately, that the teaching of anything is geared to getting good results on the assessment, not to increasing the kids' awareness, not to increasing their desire to want to read and get involved in literature.

We come back to the same problem all the time: that what we teach has to be for assessment; letter grades on paper. Then we're cut off at the knees.

This last is an interesting statement because it points to the fundamental dilemma of teaching already canvassed in this article; namely, that teachers perceive that their potential to educate, in the broadest sense of the word, is compromised by the needs of the system posing as society, to assess and select. While school-based curricula is perceived to be the answer to the problems raised in, for example, *Making the difference*, the systemic demand for measurement contradicts school-based curriculum theory.

Bill's statement — 'We're cut off at the knees' — as do those of the other teachers realises the 'cleavage' which Nash and Agne prophesy in a system geared to achievement, performance and production (remember the analogy of the factory):

The creeping extrusion into education of an ethos which defines the successful educational experience primarily in terms of systems engineering and measurable outputs signifies a tragic loss of larger vision and purpose amongst

educators. The unsettling implication is that the nearer we come to the realization of accountability in our educational institutions ... the greater will be the cleavage between our educational ideas and our actual practices; and the greater will be the consequent clamour for sweeping educational reform.⁸

Jill's earlier metaphor of school as assessment factory reflects the degree to which Nash and Agne's prophecy has been realised. And the metaphor is not new. Jill was just a baby when Cobb's cartoons containing the school as factory metaphor were published in the late sixties. The metaphor of a factory connotes negativity for many teachers. The metaphor removes any degree of humanity from the school and indicates that the school takes no cognisance of the humanity of pupils or teachers. The metaphor can be sustained further: a factory produces goods from raw products which can then be used by a consumer in some way. There is a value-added component. This product is either or both assessment items or assessed pupils.

Bill's perception illustrates the dichotomy that exists between the notion that affective objectives are important in ROSBA and that these objectives are an important part of education. Of course there is a link with the notion that affective objectives cannot be assessed. Hence both teachers and pupils may not be interested in these objectives; pupils are perceived to have, understandably, accepted the premise that education is synonymous with assessment. Teacher perceptions bear this out:

RJ: I don't really think that most of them [pupils] give a stuff about whether they can think about a film or have insight. Some of them do — that's when teaching is really delightful. I don't think that's their first priority. I think that if they can enjoy it they think: 'Well that's nice and that's an unexpected bonus. But the important thing is that I get these marks'.

Bill: The aim is to get a TE score — it all has a practical basis instead of a humanistic basis.

RJ: Kids are looking for an approval slip that will give them an entree to the world.

One perception was that assessment was important in terms of its utilitarian value. Entwined with this notion is that of the aim of education being 'to get jobs which suit their interests and their capabilities':

Mary: Assessment should be still the most important thing.

Jill, however, did not like the fascination which students had for assessment. She found it frustrating that pupils didn't read the comments she had written on a piece of work, but rather were interested only in the mark. Her concern was that the students hadn't learned from what they were doing, that the concern for 'marks' was all-consuming.

The universities must take some of the responsibility for this fascination for marks and grades. The history of the introduction of ROSBA shows their reticence to accept a system which does not rank order students (see above). Their response to changes in the assessment system has been something less than enthusiastic. Bill, especially, had some intuitive knowledge that universities were the controllers of the situation:

Bill: It's all a facade to cover up the fact that educational systems exist so that universities can select the top candidates... It's my gut feeling, my suspicion.

Assessment, then, is of overriding concern for both teachers and pupils. Some pupils do not care about TE scores and achievement levels; in the particular school that was obvious from the large minority of pupils who regularly did not submit work for assessment. Approximately 30% of the year 12 pupils were assessed in the two levels below 'sound achievement', mainly because assignments were not submitted. Perhaps this signified the degree to which resistance was practised by the pupils.

Teachers work and accountability

The notion of accountability is an interesting one. It is closely linked to the notion of measurement, or assessment. Teachers are responsible for what they teach and how they teach it, or so the story goes. As a result they are accountable. Yet how much freedom do they have? In Queensland they have to have at least 9 pieces of assessment for year 12 before the September holidays. One of those pieces may be done in year 11. So there are at least eight items of assessment for each student. Let's think this through. Say a teacher has 4 senior classes of 25 pupils each. In a year from January to September, that's 4 classes x 25 pupils x 8 items of assessment which is 800 items of assessment the teacher has to assess. Of course, the teachers also have other classes to teach, so we can add the assessment load to that.

The assessment requirements of genre have added greatly to the workload of pupils and teachers of English. Not only does the subject have to 'use as resources' 4 to 6 prose works, at least 30 poems, 2 to 4 stage plays and 2 to 3 mass media resources, pupils also have to learn

the particular features of the many genres of product. A study of Shakespeare would require some work on the text with the help of a film to make the text meaningful. This would take three weeks in itself. Discussion of the various characters or other interesting elements of the play and some dramatisation would take another three weeks if it were to be done in any depth at all. If the final 'product' for assessment were to be a newspaper or whatever on the program, then elements of newspaper design and journalistic writing style would need to be taught and practised — another 3 weeks at the least. Hence a total of nine weeks would be spent on the unit with one assessable 'product'. Spread this over one and a half semesters and the most that can be expected is three items of assessment.

In this 13 week unit then one literary text has been covered and one, perhaps two 'products' have been assessed. A further 20 weeks remain in the year 12 school year to 'produce' another 6 items of assessment, assuming that one item has been done in year 11. Assuming that half the literary resources mentioned above have been studied in year 11, then there are still 2 to 3 prose works, 15 poems, 1 or two mass media resources to study in the remaining 20 weeks, along with work on the production of different genres which may tie in with these resources.

For both pupil and teacher then, the task becomes difficult and pressured. The syllabus does not allow for learning or individual development or addressing the needs of the pupils or allowing the pupils to have input into their own learning. It negates all the theory simply through the demands it makes. Is there any notion of flexibility here? Where is the practice of the personal growth model? The model is, in fact, the measurement of performance. The ambience of English is performance and the measurement of that performance. There is no time for interest to develop, to grow.

And we're not just talking about a quick read through of an essay. They should be graded according to certain criteria. It's not possible to just slip a mark on it. It takes a bit of time.

So who has time to plan anything, to critically think about it?

So who can blame teachers for saying that school is just an assessment factory?

Why does this have to be done? Because the syllabus says so. Because at the end of the year a sample from each school has to go to a panel whose task it is to ensure that standards are comparable, that the achievement levels awarded to the students are justified by the evidence of the students' folios. The teacher is accountable. The pupil has to be measured in ways which are set down in the syllabus.

Teachers are constructed as being accountable. After all, the programs they implement are supposedly their own. They decide what is to be taught. Hence they can be blamed if something goes wrong. But not only do they supposedly make decisions about what is to be taught, they make decisions about what levels of achievement will be awarded to pupils. To parents, pupils, the school administration and the education bureaucracy, teachers are accountable. Teachers are placed in an invidious situation, as Connell points out:

The people who are in the gun, in the campaigns for 'accountability' and tighter central control, are classroom teachers.⁹

However, in reality teachers are not able to be blamed. There can be no accountability without autonomy. As I have attempted to show throughout this paper, teachers really do not have autonomy. Every decision they appear to make is circumscribed by the syllabus and the work program, which is the school document explaining how the syllabus is to be implemented.

There is one interesting aspect to these paradoxes, one possible resolution which I cannot prove but only suggest to you. It is that ROSBA is simply a way of making assessment cheaper than any other method. Two or three years ago it cost \$6 million to produce TE scores in Queensland; it cost \$22 million to administer the NSW external exams in NSW. So behind the high-sounding educational rhetoric might be the simple motivating factor of economy.

My conclusion is that ROSBA, or any scheme of school-based curriculum development and assessment, has to be carefully examined to discover what the realities are. While the theory might be humanistic and laudable, the implementation of the theory should be the object of study and criticism if necessary. If the practice reveals the theory to be technocratic, if all teachers and pupils do in classrooms is engage in performance and measurement, then English as a subject is no longer worth teaching. Teachers become 'educational engineers'; pupils become 'engineered'.

- 1 Vieth, E. 1988 'ROSBA: The void between hope and happening' *Queensland Teachers Journal* May, 12, 13.
- 2 Nay-Brock, P. 1987 *Who's doing what?* Australian Association for the Teaching of English, 49-90.
- 3 Scott, E. et al 1978 *A review of school-based assessment in Queensland secondary schools* Board of Secondary School Studies.
- 4 Lessinger, L. 1970 *Every kid a winner* New York: Simon and Schuster, 133.
- 5 Connell, R., Ashenden, D., Kessler, S., Dowsett, G. 1982 *Making the difference* Sydney: George Allen & Unwin, 205.

- 6 Nay-Brock, P. 1987, 57.
- 7 Scott, E. et al 1978, 5-7.
- 8 Nash R.J. & R.M. Agne 1972 'The ethos of accountability — a critique' *Teachers College Record* 73(3), 357.
- 9 Connell 1982, 205.

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