encouraging scholarship

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A few months ago I facilitated a Scholarship English seminar in Christchurch. There was a wide range of experience amongst the teachers attending – some were wondering how to help one or two students in a small school attempt Scholarship and others were already running established and successful programmes in large urban schools. In this short article I’d like to share my thoughts – enriched by the discussion in Christchurch – about what a successful Scholarship programme should smell, taste and look like.

My own story of teaching Scholarship is one of self-doubt, early disappointment and then, finally, some pleasing success. Until recently I was Head of English in an inner-city Wellington school where delivering a Scholarship course is relatively easy – the place is large enough to accommodate a dedicated Scholarship class and it is, probably more importantly, a high-decile institution. The school has a proud academic history and has always excelled in English. The previous HOD was outstanding and had set up a highly successful Scholarship programme. I felt the weight of expectation and doubted I had the intellectual clout required to squeeze the best out of such intelligent students. I duly dug out my university notes and tried to pitch the lessons as high as I possibly could. The result was predictably disappointing – significantly fewer Scholarships than the year before and no Outstanding Scholarships whatsoever.

I had to re-think my approach. The first and, I think, most important change I made was to stop pretending I was delivering lectures to stage three varsity students. They were intelligent and aware 17 year olds but they didn’t have the life experience necessary to instantly grasp new concepts and recognise complex literary and social allusions. It was simply bad teaching to stand there and feed them all this new, demanding material as if it were some treasured and holy secret. That’s not to say they don’t need steering in the right direction some times – that’s an important part of any teacher’s job in the real world of assessments and qualifications – but I wanted them to be more involved in their own learning.
I came to the conclusion that the most important element in a successful Scholarship programme was the peer group. I was lucky enough to have a timetabled class so I just had to work out the best way to create some kind of co-operative group. This will always be difficult for someone from a smaller school, but if there's more than one candidate, the teacher needs to get them meeting regularly to discuss literature and ideas (I did this for a group of students who couldn’t be in the Scholarship class). Even if there's only one student they could be put in touch with someone from a nearby school.

Of course, the simple way to create an instant learning community is to get them blogging. 'Studyit' is a great place to start – the way kids help each other on that site renews my faith in the basic decency of our young people. My predecessor had already introduced a culture of blogging to the enrichment classes and it was clearly a winner. However, I still had to set compulsory homework blogging tasks to get my students started. Their brief was to blog about any text (TV show, film, cartoon, novel, poem, radio news, painting, song, advertisement, etc) or idea they wanted. However, I wanted them to occasionally find connections between what they were discussing and the texts we studied in class. I wanted them to think about the similarities and differences and, most importantly, why they existed. Once they were underway their natural urge to argue and show-off took over – it was great! Here's a couple of excerpts from two students’ blogs.

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Firstly, here's my very brief interpretation of Jerusalem Sonnets 1: JKB is basically having a bit of an epiphany; he realises that he's not as deep and spiritual and like the lost link with god or anything, but he's just a human like the rest of us. He's still woken up by fleas, and trying to pass himself off as something more just makes him look like a fool - kind of like the Cold Hub when he realises how 'manky' it is, and kind of softens the message at the end.

September the 13th 1999!
While being laid up with a chest infection I found myself watching my aunt's extensive collection of 1970's TV DVDs. One of these sets was Space 1999, a programme I thought would be trivial and stupid. But not so. It is an excellent piece of 20th century television and makes far better viewing than any daytime television.

This programme, made over thirty years ago is addressing similar issues that we are facing today, sustainability and the impact of technology on nature. I was surprised by this and kept watching. Another excellent programme, Stingray, which is set underwater, explores the issue of what humanity can do once we have exhausted the natural resources that we have come to take for granted.

Kids gained confidence after a few posts and enjoyed commenting, often hilariously, on each other's work. The fun only stopped when I decided to enter the fray with a comment – teacher jokes are obviously extremely lame! Yes, many of the entries were flippant and often trite but it got them to look at the world with a critical eye and there was generally more true analysis than you’d find in any set essay.

Another effective way to push kids towards an appreciation of intertextuality is to include the 3.7 Research activity, 'In Search Of' in your programme. As we all know, it's not really research – it's a comparative close reading exercise. Encouraging them to include pop culture texts gives them ownership of the exercise and it often leads to discoveries of real insight. The exemplar questions cover the importance of perspective and context to the portrayals of theme in the chosen texts, and ask what these portrayals reveal about society. The students are thinking about how and why a text is constructed – there's the basis of a Section C essay right there.

Students need guidance when attempting Scholarship English and they need to feel they are doing something special just to get them through the necessary workload. A programme booklet is a must – it gives them some structure and re-assures them that it's not just random teacher waffle. It should contain NZQA exam material, an outline of the course texts, some readings, practice activities, etc.
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Emphasising the 'elite' nature of a Scholarship programme can have its disadvantages, however. Students can feel intimidated by the academic requirements, which are quite substantial—a working knowledge of basic terminology, an ability to evaluate texts critically and a confidence in written expression to name just a few. However, I believe that anyone with slightly-above-average reading comprehension skills can comfortably pick all this up over the course of the year. The idea is to avoid scaring them away early in the piece. Don't start with an overview of post-modern theory or demand they read all Shakespeare's comedies by the end of the first term (I wasn't quite this bad but I did set the level of class debate far too high far too early and it was just confusing for most of them; I was teaching to the top end of the class and articulate kids often give the impression they understand more than they actually do).

Taking a simple approach to a complicated text is a good activity to show kids that analysis is something everybody can do. Ask them to look only for positively and negatively toned words in a text and to see where they are placed in the structure of the piece. After this they should be able to make some comments about tone if nothing else. Add other elements to this exercise and they are starting to understand aspects of how a text is constructed for effect. Kids need an 'in' to difficult tasks like close reading – they don't recognise the usual clues we do. An old colleague of mine, Gerald O'Connor from Palmerston North Boys' uses a close reading check sheet with his students and this has given them the confidence to attack the dreaded Section A: Unfamiliar Texts.

Another thing I decided to do was to create a culture of debate amongst the students. I wanted them to question anything I said and I also wanted them to be able to support their own positions on ideas and issues. This isn't as easy as it sounds because most of these kids have done very nicely thank-you-very-much in their high school assessments by playing the game: assiduously taking notes and churning out the required answers. Scholarship English isn't like that. I decided to start an argument. Most of the boys in the class played soccer so I pointed out how their sport was mostly made up of middle class Pakeha who were escaping — scuttling away from — the rigours of a Pacific Islander dominated rugby. Soccer didn't contain the best athletes available in the school or the district, so any honours they gained were hollow. In fact, their sport was elitist and shouldn't receive any SPARC funding at all! (I know this isn't completely true but it was fun).

Needless to say the lads were enraged. However, I had a well put together and practised argument so it took some time before they could construct a response that I couldn't just easily crush. This set a tone of challenge and debate which fed into our text discussions. The students learned that their statements needed to be backed with evidence and plausible argument. One student stormed out of class saying that our discussions were moving too far away from the subject and I was using my elevated position as a teacher to push my opinions on the class. We debated that and decided that everything was grist for the mill in Scholarship English (By the way, I've always felt that most kids are aware that their teacher is an individual with his/her own views. It's good for them to hear a range of opinions and philosophies from their teachers). Although I can't prove it, I feel that this class debate definitely improved the students' essay writing skills.

Thinking critically about texts needs to extend to some sort of evaluation of the criticism surrounding the texts and the ideas thrown up by them. I chose texts that had some obvious thematic links. Students could then read the texts with the purpose of finding out how that theme is presented – this emphasises the concept of the text as something constructed. I also chose texts that had flaws and we investigated some secondary reading around each text such as Bloom's thoughts on the cardboard cut-out nature of Richard in Richard III and the feminist savaging of Fight Club. The students were encouraged to debate these ideas and include them or dismiss them in their essays. Of course, this can get out of hand. Hearing that Baxter was 'a patronising wanker' and Richard III was 'completely without merit' was a bit too much and I had to climb in boots and all to defend our
canon (something I never thought I’d do).

The references to other texts that the students found in the secondary reading were also really helpful. Extracts from Marlowe’s *Jew of Malta*, and Shakespeare’s *Titus*, *Othello* and *Macbeth* were used to show the development of the villain in drama. The students realised that they didn’t need to be experts on these plays to come to some conclusions on the nature of villains and that gave them the confidence to make connections to texts they studied in other subjects and texts they had sourced themselves – they started to see the value of the pop culture texts that they knew so much about. I’ve read quite a few students’ exam scripts and I’m convinced it’s this breadth that the markers reward – an awareness that texts spring from and reflect the values of communities and cultures. By the third year the number of students receiving Scholarships had nearly doubled and quite a few had picked up Outstanding Scholarships. I feel that the changes I made to my boring delivery contributed to this turn-around in results. Getting the students more involved in their own learning also contributed to a much more enriching and rewarding experience for us all. This is obviously only broad brush stuff and I have barely touched on how to tackle the exam itself. My approach is all about letting the student find his/her own level – pretty simple material. For a much more cerebral methodology of teaching Scholarship English, try to catch one of the seminars put on by Gerald O’Connor.

Whatever you do, let your own passion for the subject lead you. Kids will engage with a text – any text – if you show that it really means something to you.

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