Examining HSC English - questions and answers

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In marking students’ more formally structured responses (invariably ‘essays’) to Higher School Certificate English Examination questions, certain linguistic stylistics have always been privileged. ‘Sophisticated’ writing for instance, has been marked higher than that deemed ‘pedestrian’ or ‘labored’. Such criteria however, is indicative of markers’ values and biases, more than it is, say, of students’ literary appreciation and understanding. This is demonstrably true for the pre-2000 English syllabi. Drawing on the theoretic work of Bourdieu and its application in Australia by Freebody, Rosser argues that the HSC English marking criteria is more about sanctioning particular enculturation than it is about writing competency.

INTRODUCTION

With the implementation of the new HSC syllabus in English (Stage 6, English, Preliminary and HSC Courses, Approved by the NSW Board of Studies, June, 1999) there are considerable expectations of the HSC English Exam. The syllabus manifests a shift in how the subject English is understood in senior secondary school education in NSW.

The old syllabus - the outcome of a series of syllabi moderately modified from an original produced in 1965 under the Wyndham Scheme - conceived of English as essentially the study of literature, that study being ‘close’ or ‘critical’ or ‘analytical’. Its foundation, so far as literary theory and criticism is concerned, was Leavisism and American New Criticism. Not that these literary positions were separated in syllabus documents. In fact, a hybrid of Leavisism and New Criticism was uniquely formed in the Senior English Syllabus of 1965. With the exception of the Contemporary English Syllabus, introduced in 1988, this notion of English, and its accompanying pedagogical practices, dominated senior English teaching from 1965 to 1999. English was understood as the close study of literary works and the nurturing of students’ responses to them.

The 1999 syllabus redefines English more along the lines of Cultural Studies. It prescribes that texts (not ‘works’) be studied within the frameworks of their historical and cultural contexts. Nor are they just ‘literary’. Students chose from over 120 texts,
ranging from the traditional novels, poetry and drama to non-fiction, films, speeches, multimedia, media and websites. English is now understood as both a close and contextual study of written and some visual material, which is read through particular ideologies - Postmodernist, (neo)Marxist, Feminist, Post-Colonial, for example. Modules in the syllabus require the study of ideas — Change, Consumerism, Image, for instance - with texts (such as Sally Morgan ‘My Place’, half-a-dozen poems of Bruce Dawe, Peter Weir’s The Truman Show) illustrative of them, rather than, study of the texts themselves constituting central attention.

That the new syllabus is indeed ‘new’ on many levels, is something acknowledged by various sources. The NSW Secondary Principals’ Council, for instance, wrote to high schools in September 2001, saying:

Council applauds public school teachers of Year 12 students who over the past two years have been at the forefront of the most significant curriculum change in NSW secondary education since 1967. Teachers have become conversant with new syllabuses, developed and taught different programs, integrated resources and prepared their students for the reshaped Higher School Certificate....Over 20,000 students - almost one third of the entire 2001 candidature - are sitting the most demanding 2 unit English course [2 Unit ADVANCED], compared with less than half this number in the old HSC. These students have accepted the challenge to reach for higher standards. A greater proportion of boys will sit the higher English levels than ever before and both ESL and Fundamentals of English are providing targeted English courses for specific groups of students.

One of the expectations of future HSC English Exams therefore, is what sort of questions will be asked in the final HSC Exam? In the past, this exam has attempted to elicit from students basically textual analysis. It has awarded grades according to ‘the depth of understanding’ of a literary work a student displays, and the ‘degree of sophistication’ of his or her writing skills in responding to exam questions. The challenge of the new exam is to set questions that monitor students’ awareness of the ideological implications of particular texts, and to provide marking criteria which are appropriate to the anticipated responses. In regard to the latter, a new marking scheme - standards-referencing (or criteria) marking - has been introduced. It is hoped that this will produce more equitable results than the predominant marking method of the past - norm marking (or marking to a bell-curve). The scheme, according to the Secondary Principals’ Council, will ‘[give] meaning to the marks’ missing in the previous HSC. ‘Gone is the arbitrary imposition of only 1% or 2% of students who could achieve over 90 in a course regardless of the standards they had reached.’

This paper looks back on past HSC English exams, with an eye to critiquing the questions they asked and the criteria by which they were answered. It assesses their implications for social justice and the influence effected by ‘officialdom’ in the production of literary and institutional knowledge.
HSC ENGLISH EXAM

In many ways the HSC Exam in general has operated as a 'disciplinary technology', in Foucault's sense, meaning that it has functioned as a training and coercive technique of power. In Discipline and Punish Foucault describes how disciplinary power is achieved through hierarchical observation, normalising judgement and examination. Evidence of these mechanisms is to be found in the English Exam. This compulsory Exam has been the outcome of students' continuous surveillance and school assessment over at least two years. It functioned as a final filter for higher learning, punishing those who 'failed' and rewarding those who conformed. It homogenised modes of reading, privileging those (Leavisite/New Critical) literary strategies sanctioned by the state in the syllabi. It produced a distinctive level of meaning for 'English', which sometimes confirmed general public assumptions about the meaning of formal English teaching, and sometimes was at odds with these assumptions. At its completion, it assigned to individual students grades, or rankings on performance bands, according to authorised criteria. Some educators have even seen the HSC Exam as operating as a de facto syllabus, directing not just what teachers teach but what they teach. John Stephens, Chairperson of the 1991 HSC English Examination Committee, for instance, noted that 'when visiting marking centres...I was frequently reminded by markers that the Exam papers were read as the latest version of the Syllabus'.

Within the responses to questions asked of students in HSC English Exam and the criteria used by official assessors in grading these responses, these Foucaultian generalities equally apply. This will be shown in an analysis of the Responses to Literature section of the HSC English Exam, 2/3 Unit, from 1980 to 1989 (inclusive). This sample has been selected for a number of reasons. Historically, the 1980s witnessed the most significant (if not in themselves, profound) alterations in syllabus development between 1965 and 1999. The 1965 syllabus was re-assessed from 1974 to 1976 to produce a syllabus that differed from the original only in its deletion of a compulsory language-study component from First and Second Levels and an affirmation of the study of literature as constituting the subject English. It was again revised in 1982 when two new courses were added. The first of these, Language for Learning, was soon abandoned, and proved significant chiefly as a forerunner to 2 Unit Contemporary. The second, 2 Unit (General), replaced Third Level (later 2 Unit A) as a course designed mainly for those students who did not wish to matriculate. The Introduction to the 2 Unit (General) Syllabus stressed the broad parameters of the course and its integrative, non-prescriptive nature. Although other syllabi, it said,

are sometimes classified as 'literature based', 'skills based', 'experience based' or as following a 'cultural heritage' model, no syllabus can found itself on a single principle without becoming partisan or inflexible. The 2 Unit (General) syllabus is one in which the claims of literary experience, expression and comprehension, oral English, personal writing, the study of non-literary material and the like, are held in balance.
But in the paragraphs which followed this, it becomes increasingly clear that despite a promise of a shift in the conceptualisation of English, the academic study of literature again dominated. For instance: 'the course of reading envisaged will include poetry, novels, short stories and general prose, of different periods and places; and some students will find difficulty with the literariness of this program, but [they are no more than] barriers to be overcome by further reading.' There was no pragmatic attempt to either embrace language study as the basis of a syllabus or to tackle specific deficiencies in student literacy. Rather, the syllabus saw that 'in the study of literature

...the initial problem is usually one of access. A reader may be cut off from a novel or poem or play by the apparent remoteness of its concerns, the unfamiliarity of its use of language, or by an inability to relate to it in a first cursory reading. Those who are interested readers of some kinds of writing may find other kinds too formal and unwinviting. This is a quite healthy state of affairs, which offers scope to widen a student's range of response, and to show the interest and enjoyment that become possible once these barriers are overcome.

Thus, the kernel of the 2 Unit (General) Syllabus comprised analyses of Poetry, Fiction and Drama - the usual generic division offered in Senior English. There was nothing of substance that had not already been expressed in previous syllabi.

The only other alteration to the syllabi before 1999 was the introduction of 2 Unit Contemporary English in 1988. This was the first senior English course that realistically offered a study of English that was useful and interesting in its own right but not literature-oriented, nor necessarily intended to lead to university. The general aim of 2 Unit Contemporary was to 'improve students' ability to use and interpret language effectively according to their needs', which were defined as effective study at secondary and post-secondary levels, successful participation in society, satisfactory personal development, and access to contemporary culture. Each of these was detailed in terms of the acquisition of specific language skills, Speaking, Listening, Reading and Writing. Within five or six years of its implementation it rivalled 2 Unit (General) in student popularity.

The other reason for the choice of this sample is because this part of the paper (HSC English, Paper 2.: Poetry-Fiction-Drama) was common to both 2 and 3 Unit Courses. While, of course, it does include responses from students undertaking the separate 2 Unit Contemporary paper, it does illuminate general understandings of what has been meant by 'English' until the advent of the new HSC syllabus.

The roles played by two subcommittees of the English Syllabus Committee of the Board of Studies are crucial to this discussion. The first of these is the HSC English Examination Committee, which wrote the HSC English Exam papers, thereby indicating, to a large extent, the kinds of responses required of students. From 1980 to 1989 this organisation constituted six members, half of whom were practising NSW secondary teachers and half were from universities. There was a large turn-over of Committee membership, it being rare for anyone to stay on for more than two years. During this
time, the English Syllabus Committee nominated six Examination Committee appointees, and thus, those notions of English within this latter body directly informed the examination-setting structure.

The other subcommittee was the HSC Examination Committee Reports Committee, which published, at the beginning of the year following the HSC Exam, a detailed review of students’ responses to exam questions. These documents - Examiners’ Reports - fed back to the Board of Studies the appropriateness and suitability of the questions set by the Examination Committee, as well as the difficulties encountered by students in answering them. They also communicated to the public and the teaching profession about the nature of the examiners’ expectations and the standards of the candidature.

Finally, acknowledgment must be made of some of the problems involved in analysing HSC Exam questions and answers. Examiners are faced with the unenviable task of devising questions that attempt to determine consistency in student response. Prior to 1999 they have also used marking criteria which frequently varied both from question to question and even within a range of answers to a single question. Factors such as these create difficulty for the researcher. In some cases, for example, it is not at all clear what understandings and skills Exam questions are hoping to elicit from students. In other cases, students’ responses to questions differ from those anticipated by examiners, such questions sometimes being later relegated to a ‘bad questions’ category. Another consideration occurs at the assessment end of this process. Here, assessors might give credit for answers but the criteria by which they do so have not been stated overtly. In other words, despite official guidelines for assessment, assessors have not always been objective. Their own subjectivities have seriously affected their marking. It is this that the new syllabus’ standards-reference marking hopes to eliminate. Whether it will do so, and at what price, remains to be seen.

RESPONSES REQUIRED OF STUDENTS (QUESTIONS)

In their Elements of Writing about a Literary Work: A Study of Response to Literature (1968), Purves and Rippere specify categories into which written responses to literature can be grouped. Although their work is over thirty years old, these categories adequately describe responses that are aimed at assessing literary analysis and students’ writing stylistic features — the two yardsticks for measuring a ‘good response to English’ implicit throughout all senior English syllabi (with the exception of 2 Unit Contemporary English) from 1965 to 1999. Purves and Rippere’s categories are Engagement, Perception, Interpretation and Evaluation. We can use these categories to graph key features of assessors’ requirements of students in the latter’s responses to HSC English Exam questions. This can be done using two methods. First, the wording of the Exam questions is interrogated. Here, the 2/3 Unit Responses to Literature questions from 1980 to 1989 are systematically analysed with each aspect of the question allotted a score on the Purves and Rippere classification matrix. The second method, which checks against the first, is a careful scrutiny of the Examiners’ Report on each question. This confirms, or modifies,
the accuracy of our earlier determination. Putting these methods together, a profile is constructed of what responses are required of students in literature Exam questions.

By *Engagement* Purves and Rippere mean how the student articulates his/her *subjective experience of the text*. This means how the student empathises with characters and situations, what relevance to his/her own life the student discovers from the text's content, and what moral reaction the student forms to the text. Engagement is divided into the sub-categories Engagement General, Reaction to Literature, Reaction to Form and Reaction to Content, each of which is further broken into coded elements. This procedure is followed in all categories. By *Perception* is understood *a formal analysis and discussion the student makes* of the text's content and structure, its characters, setting, plot and themes, and aspects of its language. The sub-categories of *Perception* are Perception General, Language, Literary Devices, Content, Relation of Technique to Content, Structure, Tone, Literary Classification and Contextual Classification. *Interpretation* *suggests the meaning the student gleaned from the work*, the sense s/he makes of it, and the inferences drawn. This is expressed in a relatively dispassionate, personal way, but it is meant to go beyond such bald statements as, 'I just like it', or, 'I think it is good'. Interpretation sub-categories are Interpretation General, Interpretation of Style, Interpretation of Content, Mimetic Interpretation, Typological Interpretation and Hortatory Interpretation. *Evaluation* refers to students' statements of summary judgement of the text, in terms of aesthetic, ethical, psychological or other holistic criteria. Evaluation sub-categories are Evaluation General, Affective Evaluation, Evaluation of Method and Evaluation of Author's Vision.

Purves and Rippere provide a detailed discussion of these notions. Under the category *Interpretation*, for instance, subcategory Interpretation General, and element 'Citation of stance' (code 301), they say: this element refers to the writer's indication of his/her interpretative 'modus operandi': e.g. 'When I read a poem I always look for hidden meanings.' For our purpose, we translate this element to refer to whether or not the exam question is attempting to elicit from the examinee a particular 'modus operandi'; e.g. the question might ask: 'When you read a poem is there anything that you generally look for?' Purves and Rippere's matrix of *Elements of Writing about a Literary Work*... is reproduced below.

Every year from 1980 to 1989 candidates answered three from approximately twenty-five questions set in the * Responses to Literature* section of HSC English - twenty-five being equivalent, incidentally, to the number of prescribed texts set for study in 2/3 Unit. These have been checked against the corresponding remarks in the Examiners' Report. Three examples, one from each of the Poetry, Fiction and Drama parts, might serve to illustrate this methodological process.

In the 1986 exam, the first Poetry question asks:

1. Chaucer.

You will find below two passages from Chaucer.

Passage (a) is taken from the *Wife of Bath's Prologue*.
Passage (b) is taken from the Wife of Bath's Tale.
Choose one of these passages.
Show in what ways the passage you choose is characteristic of the ideas, attitudes and tones of either the Wife of Bath's Prologue or her Tale.

The student's task therefore is basically a logistical one: ideas, attitudes and tones in the passage must be located, then these must be related to the whole text. The first of these procedures entail elements 231 (subject matter), 265 (illusion) and 261 (description of tone) and the second, element 252 (relation of parts to the whole). Elements 223 (imagery), 227 (irony) and 229 (perspective) must also be included, since the Examiners' Report indicated that 'weaker candidates did not show that they had grasped the shifts in...the imagery, irony and humour.' Also, the question assumes an understanding of the meaning of 'ideas', 'attitudes' and 'tones', and a detailed familiarity with at least one text since the Report commented that 'better candidates...were able to quote accurately and effectively from sections of both the Prologue and the Tale other than those printed in the examination paper.' Finally, marks were credited for examinees' contextual classification of the poems elements 284 (intentional) and 285 (historical) - the Examiners' Report stating that 'Candidates...should be reminded that 20th century attitudes do not necessarily apply to narratives written 600 years ago.' It is assumed that students will not query the point that the passages do, in fact, contain features that are to be found in the poems.

What this amounts to is that in this question students are tested only within the Perception category; that is, they are asked only for a formal analysis and discussion of different aspects of the text - they might discuss its use of imagery, irony, perspective (point-of-view), its subject matter, plot and tone, and its historical context. They are not required to write about their subjective experience of the text (Engagement), what meaning they might discover in it (Interpretation) or what judgement they make of it as a whole (Evaluation). What is being assessed here, then, is textual knowledge and knowledge of literary techniques. 'English', in other words, is constructed by this question as knowledge of the formal aspects of literature, and in particular what the Examiners' Reports refer to as 'familiarity with the text'.

The first Fiction question asks:

What uses does Jane Austen make of the role of Jane Fairfax in Emma?

This question requires three focuses in its answer: one discussing characterisation - elements 233 (character identification and description) and 234 (character relationships); one describing structure - element 253 (plot); and one examining the novel as social commentary - element 240 (relation of technique to content). The Report remarked that '...the best answers...saw Jane's "uses" as more than being simply a foil to Emma. They commented on social criticism conveyed by Jane's character and situation, and...compared Jane to other characters...'. It alluded, too, to Austen's stylistic achievement: 'There was a tendency to make black-and white comparisons that
underestimated the subtlety and irony of the novel.' This is noted as element 220 (literary devices).

We can say that this question, then, like that on Chaucer, focuses heavily on discussion and formal textual analysis - element 220 covers literary devices in general, 233 and 234 are to do with textual characterisation and character relationships, 240 is how literary techniques relates to content (in this case it is assumed that the novel will be read in the Leavisite mode as social commentary), and 253 refers to plot. We can notice too, that in answer to both questions the student is expected to discuss the use of irony — noted specifically in the Chaucer question as element 227, and as a more general textual feature in Emma, as element 220. The significance of this is that it suggests a literary value frequently pursued by New Critical practices; the study of 'irony' suggests membership of 'the literary club' as validation.

The first Drama question is:


In what ways do you think Prince Hal's relationships with the King, with Hotspur, and with Falstaff make clear the main concerns of King Henry IV, Part One?

Like the other questions, this one also requires the location of specific textual features — in this case annotated as element 234 (character relations) - and their translation to a general understanding of the wider text - elements 220 (literary devices), 231 (subject matter), 232 (action) and 252 (relation of parts to whole). Again there is an assumption that students will not challenge the premise that particulars - in this case, Hal's relationships with the King, Hotspur and Falstaff - are, in fact, to be found in the whole - King Henry IV, Part One. Examinees must simply show all the 'ways' that this is the case. This is amplified in the Report's comment that 'Weaker candidates did not deal with all the terms of the question, and in particular did not deal adequately with Prince Hal's relationship with the King.' There is, too, an emphasis on the importance of literary characterisation and relationships; this is the case not only in the other two questions but also in the anticipated reading of Emma.

These questions imply, then, a humanist and referential reading behaviour and a mastery of technical knowledge to produce such a reading. They assume a body of responses that are 'true', while ostensibly allowing for neutrality and openmindedness.

Following this procedure, over one-hundred-and-fifty such analyses have then been plotted to form the following bar graph. On it, the horizontal axis represents Purves and Rippere's codified elements, placing them in twenty-four sub-categories and four main categories. The vertical axis indicates the total number of responses - that is, the frequency in which elements occurred in exam questions. These have been rounded up or down to the nearest factor of five.

**DISCUSSION**

In this study there is an overwhelming number of responses (69%) in the category of Perception. In broad terms, this means that the great majority of exam questions required
that students analyse, as impersonally and objectively as they could, formal aspects of
literary texts, such as content, structure and language. Much lesser scope was provided
for students to express their subjective experiences of a text, or discuss the general sense
they made of it, or express their personal assessment. The restrictive reading regime
implied by the questions, in other words, precluded writing that was versed in reader
response, Marxist or feminist theories, for example. Answering questions is conceived as
a sort of engineering strategy, or to use Soliman's metaphor, it is legalistic:

The examination papers emphasise 'close reference', 'detailed discussion', 'illustrating
with specific example', 'referring to specific episodes', supporting, justifying,
providing evidence for one's comments which direct students to recall the content
of the works and to support or refute interpretations or evaluations already provided
in the questions. A legalistic, 'arguing the case' type of writing is encouraged.
(Soliman, 1988, p.18)

Syllabi rhetoric concerning the value of 'personal response', the importance of a text's
'overall meaning' and the development of textually-based 'critical assessment' was not
translated into many aspects of Exam questioning. Rather, the Exam called into being the
sort of student who was adept at recalling the text's content and construing an answer
that met the logistical requirements of the question.

Within Perception, the sub-category receiving the most responses is the 230s,
Perception of Content. This includes questions, or their parts, which require students to
identify and describe such elements as the subject matter - or 'ideas' - within a text,
characters and their relationships, and the physical and temporal context which is
conveyed in a text. This means that most questions require a discussion of texts'
characters, settings and themes - features of a humanist/formalist reading. The next two
most emphasised sub-categories are the 250s, Perception of a Text's Structure, and the
260s, Perception of Tone. The elements that comprise these are a text's organisation, the
relationship between its parts, framing, allegorical references, etc, and its mood, use of
illusions and image patterns, and its author's attitude and point of view, etc.. Questions
about Structure are often expressed as the relationship of part of a text - sometimes
quoted - to the whole. This is the case in the three questions analysed above. Questions
about Tone attempt to elicit students' understanding of a text's atmosphere, attitude and
orientation to subject, and their assessment of authorial approach - as 'positive' or
'negative', 'empathetic', 'detached' etc..

Sub-categories 220s, Perception of Literary Devices, and 240s, the Relation of
Technique to Content, registered an equally high number of responses. Both refer to the
use of language. The first asks for identification of specific poetic devices - for example,
'Discuss the use of imagery...', or 'What literary techniques are used by the author to
convey his/her sense of mood in this work?' The second anticipates responses that link
the use of language to subject matter, plot, characterisation and setting, rather than to,
say, authorial register or point of view. Questions of this kind are 'How does the author's
description of the setting add to the effect of a text?' and 'What is the significance of the
varying use of poetic and prosaic language in this text?'.

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The remaining responses in the Perception category are 210s, Language, 270s, Literary Classification, and 280s, Contextual Classification. The first of these refers to morphology and typography, syntax, sound and sound patterns, diction, etymology and dialect. Questions that refer to these elements usually pertain to drama, where they require the examinee to discuss a passage, or a particular character's language, in terms of these linguistic features, as well as content, structure or meaning. The latter two subcategories indicate classification either generically or historically. In the Chaucer question above, for instance, the examiners' expectation that candidates be familiar with attitudes prevalent at Chaucer's time is classified as intentional (284) and historical (285) contextuality.

After Perception, the category Evaluation is elicited next most frequently by exam questions (14%), though much less than Perception. Responses were registered in the subcategories 410s, Affective Evaluation, 420s, Evaluation of Method, and 430s, Evaluation of Author's Vision. This result indicates that there is very limited opportunity indeed for students to express an overview of the text or to make statements of judgement about it in terms of aesthetics, morality, psychology or any other embracing criterion. The mode of judgement, Evaluation of Method, is the most frequently occurring in the Evaluation. This covers questions that require students to assess a work's formal organisation; consistent use of register, point-of-view and voice; generic identification; and its adequacy in relation to the inferred intention of the author. These, it must be noted, are not necessarily expressions of the student's own opinion or private response. Rather, like the questions in the Perception category, they are referential. They again preserve the idea of impersonal 'scientific' or 'moral' codes of evaluation.

The categories Interpretation (8% of responses), Miscellaneous (5%) and Engagement (4%) register the least frequent responses of all. Under Interpretation are recorded those instances where students are expected to provide responses which ascribe meaning, motive or significance to a text in terms of its author's intent or the way characters are portrayed. These questions ask directly for an interpretative view of a text, which is to be substantiated with appropriate sourcing and contextualisation. Miscellaneous covers those questions which assume some acquaintance with writers or texts not specifically mentioned in the syllabi, or those where examinees are expected to discuss in a lateral way unprescribed ideas and material. Questions of this nature are usually reserved for 3 Unit (Additional) candidates. And finally, Engagement questions require students to express their subjective experiences of texts, usually as a reaction to an issue raised in the text, or to a point of view taken by the author.

The sub-categories in which no responses are recorded are 130s, Reaction to Content, 200s, Perception in General, 300s, Interpretation in General, 330s, Mimetic Interpretation, 350s, Hortatory Interpretation and 400, General Evaluation. This indicates that, on the whole, very few exam questions expected students to express their subjective reaction to a text's overall content, or their personal commitment to — or disassociation from — it (130s), their interpretative analysis of a work in general (200s), or their overall judgment of its form, message or effect (400). Also lacking were many questions relating to textual
meaning, referring either to the text as a whole (300s), as in some way mirroring the world (330s), or as suggesting what should be the nature of things, socially, politically or ethically (350s).

These findings are very similar to Soliman's, which in summary were: 79% of responses were in the Perception category, 9% were Evaluation, 12% were Interpretation, 0% were Engagement and 0% were Miscellaneous. In other words, the general shape of the larger sample - Perception, 69%; Evaluation, 14%, Interpretation, 8%; Engagement, 4%; Miscellaneous, 5% - replicates fairly closely Soliman's graph of the profile of student responses to the two 2 Unit HSC exam papers sat in 1980. This suggests that exam questions for 2/3 Unit candidates did not change in their expectations during the decade of the 1980s. The implication of this is that, for at least literature questions, the kind of reading strategies, which influenced examiners, did not alter either. These strategies were fundamentally from New Critical and Leavisite sources. They showed no appreciation of reader response theories, but reflected humanist and referential reading regimes.

**GRADING STUDENTS’ RESPONSES: OFFICIAL CRITERIA (ANSWERS)**

The second aspect of the HSC English Exam explored here is the criteria by which students’ responses are assessed. There are two key focus areas to this. The first is the official grading criteria referred to and outlined in different Syllabi and other Department of Education documents. While in the Examiners' Reports for 2/3 Unit English between 1980 and 1989 no such criteria were overtly articulated, it was, nevertheless, thoroughly understood by official markers that examinees were to be assessed along strict guidelines. This was made clear by the Board of Studies at preliminary HSC marking sessions of Senior Assessment Markers and their subordinate Teacher Markers. Only after 1990 were these criteria published in full in the annual Examination Reports. It is from this source that we can construct a picture of the official assessment criteria.

For each of the Poetry, Fiction and Drama questions a new set of marking criteria was established, based on an initial sample reading of completed papers. Responses were then scaled from 0 to 15 and as a range of five grades, A to E. Taking the three different sets of criteria throughout the 1980s together, it is possible to generalise about the scaling as a whole. The following is a summation of the main comments.

**A range 15, 14, 13 — well above average**

- display of insights and engagement
- sophistication and flair
- clear, fluent, coherent style
- well-developed, sustained discussion and structure
- effective and extensive use of quotations
- excellent understanding of the text
B range 12, 11, 10 — above average

- may be plodding in thoroughness
- laboured and/or lacking in flair and style
- articulate and competent use of language
- confident control of argument
- selectivity in choice of support material
- good understanding of the text

C range 9,8,7, — average

- may be simplistic or too black-and-white
- lacks selectivity and focus may drift
- competent expression and generally balanced argument
- some preoccupation with outlining narrative or characterisation
- quotations may not be clinching, or directly relevant
- demonstrates a reasonable knowledge of the text

D range 6,5,4, — below average

- often simplistic, pedestrian or verbose and irrelevant
- contains inaccuracies and misunderstandings
- discussion is likely to be vague and imbalanced
- often depends on story-telling approach
- poorly supported arguments
- limited understanding of text or textual inaccuracies

E range 3,2,1,0 — well below average

- outpouring rather than observation
- very tenuous or no link to the question
- complete irrelevancy and inaccuracy
- poor expression and inadequate treatment
- very poor selectivity or no focus
- poor or limited knowledge of text
How does this official set of marking criteria measure against the responses required by students, as indicated as Purves and Rippere's elements? In other words, what is the relationship between the scaling guidelines by which students are assessed and the type of responses they are expected to make in order to gain maximum marks?

First, we can see an obvious disparity between what is called for in Exam questions and what is, in fact, expected in responses. One of the features of an A Range response, for instance, is that it displays 'insights and engagement', neither of which are suggested - overtly or inferentially - in exam questions. Practising this kind of response is encouraged, presumably, in schools as 'class-based skills', rather than purely 'text preparation'.

Second, we can note that questions in Purves and Rippere's Perception and Evaluation categories comprise the bulk of criteria for which marks are awarded. That is to say, despite the above-mentioned exception, there is very high consistency in what is hoped to be elicited from students and what is rewarded. Student essays with 'well-developed, sustained discussion and structure', 'effective and extensive use of quotations', 'excellent understanding of the text', 'confident control of argument', and 'selectivity in choice of support material' achieve much higher grades than those with a 'story-telling approach', 'poorly supported arguments', 'limited understanding of text or textual inaccuracies', 'poor expression and inadequate treatment', 'very poor selectivity or no focus' and 'poor or limited knowledge of text'. Indeed, it can be hypothesised from this data that writing that displays characteristics of reader response theory - e.g. a free (or multi) reading of the text; private response based on projection/identification/intuition; or response modelled on a political reading strategy - will not score as well as that based on conventional reading regimes, by which is meant, here, those stemming from Leavisite and New Critical theoretic and critical positions.

A third factor is evident too. This is what Freebody (Freebody, 1990), following Bourdieu and Passeron (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Bourdieu, 1983), refers to as distinctions based upon students' 'cultural capital'. While these are not measured in the Purves and Rippere matrix, they come through very clearly in the Examiners' Reports, where they are articulated as, for instance, 'sophistication and flair', 'may be plodding in thoroughness', 'laboured and/or lacking in flair and style', 'often simplistic', 'pedestrian or verbose' and 'outpouring rather than observation'. As a generality, we can say that a good workmanlike analysis of the text is not enough to attain a high grade; sophistication and flair, and controlled, but stylish writing is called for. These features may well be the deciding factor in grading.

CULTURAL CAPITAL

Freebody analyses examiners' comments on a large sample of students' responses to the 'Reading', 'Writing' and 'Responses to Literature' sections of HSC English Exams between 1980 and 1987. He looks at the criteria by which examiners make their assessment. He groups the examiners' perceptions of students' work into four bi-polar dimensions: 'flair versus diligence'; 'personal versus conventional responses';
'enthusiasm versus detachment'; and 'cultural versus textual knowledge'. Within these dimensions he cites specific comments from the Examiners' Reports. Some examples of this categorisation and their accompanying comments are:

(i) **Flair versus diligence**

A number of candidates wrote with considerable flair, style and imagination. (1980, Language Use)

This question attracted solid rather than adventurous responses. (1980, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*)

Many responses were fresh and praiseworthy. (1985, Topic Areas)

Answers were always well informed, but also rather pedestrian and dutiful. (1982, General Comments)

At one end of this dimension assessors credited students' 'lightness of touch' in writing, and their fluency, elegance and sophistication; at the other end, 'solid', 'pedestrian' and 'dutiful' writing, was penalised. Controlled but stylish language, in other words, was viewed more favourably than thorough analysis.

(ii) **Personal versus conventional responses**

The ideal goal, of course, is the evolution of a comprehensive, valid, thoughtful and personal response to the issues raised...a mature individual response. (1985, Topic Area)

Less good answers plodded through the narrative from beginning to end, or responded subjectively rather than critically. (1981, *My Brother Jack*)

The best answers gave evidence of a genuine and spontaneous response to the poem. (1982, Poetry)

[These responses] rather make one wonder how perceptive the authors were, how far they had progressed towards the kind of 'individual' response which the syllabus seeks to encourage. (1985, Jane Austen, Fiction)

As already noted, what is expected in exam answers as 'personal', 'spontaneous' and 'individual' responses which show 'engagement', is not what is called for in questioning. Another contradiction highlighted in this dimension is that, in a mass education system, 'conventional' responses do not score well. While there is a uniformity of reading regimes that runs through syllabi directives, classroom practices and the examination system, individuality seems to be encouraged in exams.

(iii) **Enthusiasm versus detachment**

A sense of freshness and engagement seems to be largely missing. (1982, John Donne)
Too strong an emphasis on 'individual response' may tend to encourage naive attitudes of approval or disapproval rather than answers based of thinking. (1984, General Comments)

The better candidates showed a pleasing enthusiasm for Chaucer. (1986, Poetry)

Poor answers...made superficial judgements about right and wrong. (1982, Washington Square)

Here, 'better' students are expected not just to know their texts but to like them, too. This dimension points to the interpellative and consensual nature of the system that surrounds the teaching of Senior English.

(iv) Cultural versus textual knowledge

The best answers...explored the ideas of moral power and integrity. (1982, The Crucible)


Ideas underlying this play, such as the plight of the individual, isolation, lack of intensity, were beyond all but the strong candidate. (1980, Waiting for Godot)

Comments on 'the general lifestyle of the poet' were frequently censorious, projective and dogmatic. (1981, General Poetry)

In this dimension, students who encompass holistic approaches to cultural issues, and display knowledge of broader moral themes affecting society, scored better than those whose remarks are as 'moralistic', narrow, 'banal' or 'trite'. Answers, in other words, that display some historical contextualisation are more highly regarded than those whose references are local.

Again following Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 1974, 1983), Freebody suggests that behind these language features a class-based assessment criterion is operating, whereby expressed cultural values supported by more affluent social members are rewarded in terms of higher grading, while those values upheld by candidates from lower socio-economic brackets are marked down. '[A] certain cultural stance [is] somehow inerable from the discourse', he says, meaning that written exam texts display candidates' different 'cultural capital'. The challenge of poor candidates, then, is to disguise their 'culture'; in Freebody's words, '[T]he balancing act for students is to display in an authentic, poised and natural way their cultural levels on each of these dimensions...'(Freebody, 1990, p.27) This recalls Bourdieu's discussion of the distinction between high and low-brow culture, where he concludes that aspirants to the former display a detached, superior, 'aristocratic' attitude to it - which is manifested as light-handed, ironic, aloof and 'shrewd' - while members of the lower class display such features as plainness, matter-of-factness, commonplaceness, dogmatism and sobriety.
When this relates to education, he says that:

...teachers unconsciously or consciously distinguish between 'natural' ease of expression composed of fluency and elegant lack of constraint, and 'forced' ease of common among lower middle and working-class students, which reflects the effort to conform at the price of not getting quite the right note...the anxiety to impress, and too evidently an attempt to create the right impression to be free of all taint of self-seeking vulgarity. (Bourdieu, 1974, p.114)

Our study of the 2/3 Unit Responses to Literature questions confirms these suggestions. In the Examiners’ Reports of the 1980s, two discursive devices are found to be operating: one that defines formal 'content' knowledge; the other, a student’s cultural stance. In the grading mechanism these are evidenced as (i) 'well-developed, sustained discussion and structure', 'effective and extensive use of quotations', 'excellent understanding of the text', etc. and (ii) 'display of insights and engagement', 'sophistication and flair', 'may be plodding in thoroughness', etc.. They are equally apparent, too, in the General Comments of examiners in sections of their Reports. For instance, that of 1986, Fiction, says:

The Examiners report strong evidence that almost all candidates had a detailed knowledge of their texts, and there were outstanding responses, which showed subtle and sophisticated understanding and a praiseworthy ability to communicate insights. General weaknesses, on the other hand, included the following: a tendency to describe and narrate rather than analyse and think; some use of inappropriate register in writing; some pointless repetition of material used in over-elaborate introductions; and some use of quotation without its being integrated into the structures of the answer as a whole.

It seems implicit in this that the 'educated' Australian citizen (of the 1980s) was culturally elite, schooled not just in high-brow literary texts but in the sophisticated discourse of upper middle-class, essentiality Anglophile Australia as well. There is little room here for the no-nonsense pragmatism of democratic national identity, and mythology, that was widely debated at the time - this was reserved, presumably, for the Contemporary English. Yet, paradoxically, it was precisely about texts whose positions were generally aligned with these sentiments, that 2/3 Unit candidates were required to answer questions. This tension has gone undetected by examiners, who separated the 'objectivity' which they brought to their marking from the conjectural material with which they dealt.

It is also significant that there is general consensus that all students 'knew their texts' and that they had no serious problems in comprehending the questions. Given this level playing field, it is indicated again that factors other than content knowledge affected grading. And indeed, they seem to do so: thus, for instance, 'outstanding' responses demonstrate subtlety and sophistication presumably not plainness and commonplaceness; while use of 'inappropriate' writing registers and 'over-elaborate introductions' are deemed 'weaknesses'. This conclusion clearly tends to confirm Wright,
et. al.'s findings in their interviews with Senior students from three NSW high schools. The comments of two of the interviewees from this research serve as the front-piece of this study. Another refers more specifically to the examination system and shows how there is a fine line between assessment on the basis of language exam register and demonstrated superior exam preparation:

**Researcher: What do you think you need to do to get a good mark?**

Student: Well, I think you have to be able to express your own opinions but to express them well, because I think they place a lot of emphasis on style, because I've seen things that had the same content and had totally different marks so it's gotta be the style. I think they want you to be able to quote bits from it and to know the poems well enough to be actually able to quote passages from the poem and to be able to analyse the use of the language like using dark ( ) and the connotations that go with that. I think you get extra marks for understanding the connotations of each part of the poem; to have some sort of background knowledge of the time you're looking at so you've got an historical context. I think there could be marks in that because that's something you'd have to do yourself a lot of the time and it would show sort of deeper understanding of it. (Wright, et. al., 1995, p.21)

This suggests that while students are encouraged to thoroughly 'know' their texts and research independently, they must express this in a 'style' that will maximise their grading opportunities. Intuitively, as it were, they understand that the HSC Exam privileges those who can draw on that form of cultural capital that shows an appreciation of literature as a detailed analysis of specific (i.e. the prescribed) literary texts, and that writing 'successfully' about such texts must conform to established discourses of institutional English.

**CONCLUSION**

We can conclude from this that the HSC English Exam that has operated under different syllabi since 1965, has attempted to call forth a style of writing that will allow students to 'pass' as members of an upper middle-class, and that to be 'well-educated' under the NSW education system, a citizen is required to be a particular type of society member. What Bourdieu calls the light-handed, detached, 'aristocratic' language of upper middle-class culture is perceived by examiners as 'natural' and superior to the 'forced' language of lower middle and working-class students, whose writing is impregnated with 'the anxiety to impress', 'to create the right impression to be set free of all taint of self-seeking vulgarity'. To this we can add, using Freebody's bi-polar model, that within the context of the NSW exam system, what characterises writing that is privileged is 'flair', 'personal responsiveness', enthusiasm', and knowledge of historicised culture. Features such as 'diligence', 'conventional response', 'detachment' (meaning lack of engagement), and knowledge restricted to local references, on the other hand, are regarded as inferior.

No doubt, norm (or bell-curve) marking attempted to offset some of this prejudice by chiefly valuing 'familiarity with the text' as the fundamental grading criteria against which writing scripts are assessed. There is, apparently, intellectual 'fairness' and
ethical safety in such 'objectivity'. Further proof of this criteria is in the form of Exam questions. Those that seek to elicit from students an analysis of textual content and structure, a discussion of characters, setting, plot and themes, and some observations regarding a text's use of language - in other words, features of Purves and Ripper's Perception category - are in the overwhelmingly majority of HSC English questions. Against this, however, such systemic checks and balances are not without inconsistencies. 'Insights', 'engagement', 'sophistication' and 'flair' are not mentioned in Exam questions but appear on the criteria grid; and even 'thoroughness', if it is 'plodding', and 'laboured', if it is 'lacking style', is insufficient to gain well above average marks. This dilemma points beyond the mechanics of the Exam questions and marking schemes to wider social issues. It points, for example, to the meaning of 'education' in a capitalist democracy, where uniformity in mass learning is espoused at one level (most Exam questions have elicited knowledge of textual content, for instance) but practised at another (grading schedules have favoured writing that demonstrates Leavisite understandings of English and upper middle-class register and language skills). What seems to be tested, as Freebody suggests, is the student as a cultured member of society more than a competent reader of texts. Within this context, the HSC English Exam has produced a particular kind of knowledge and has given preference to a particular kind of individual.

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