



IBSC

International Boys'
Schools Coalition

IBSC Regional Conference
Reinvigorating English Literature in the Teaching of Boys

Conference Report

Dr Challoner's Grammar School
25 June 2013

Background to the Conference

Initial discussions concerning the Conference focussed on the role of Literature in the teaching of English. As a humane discipline, English Literature has much to teach boys, both from an academic perspective and in terms of character and personal development. It was felt that some innovations in the teaching of English have arguably not benefited boys, whilst matters such as changes to examination syllabuses have compounded the difficulties encountered in raising the achievement of boys in English, and indeed with the whole process of reading.

The conference was held against a background of significant changes to the teaching of English Literature, including imminent changes to public examination syllabi and a new National Curriculum. Although many IBSC schools are not required to follow the National Curriculum, its existence inevitably influences the practice of most schools.

In the United Kingdom, there has been as sustained focus, particularly affecting those working in the maintained (state) sector, on improving pupils' performance in English. Although often at variance with the professional judgement of many English teachers, the dominant trend in many schools has been to focus on the functional aspects of English teaching (for example, technical accuracy in writing or basic reading skills) and to stress examination performance, often at the expense of a more imaginative engagement. Whilst IBSC schools are in no way immune from such pressures, it was felt that teachers of English would benefit most from a very different form of conference, and one which aimed to inspire teachers in their work and refresh the work of English Departments of schools belonging to the IBSC.

Purpose

The Conference sought to address a number of questions:

- What is the role of English Literature in our schools today? Does English have a place beyond the teaching of 'literacy'?
- How does the subject contribute to boys' broader development? How can we rescue English Literature to make it a subject which once again contributes to the development of humane, intelligent young men?
- How can we move beyond the 'cram for exam' approach which has suffocated much teaching, yet also maintain a sense of rigour?
- What can be done to make English a genuinely engaging subject for all boys? What about the needs of our most able students? And if English is such an important subject, how do we establish a place for it at the heart of every school?

The approach adopted sought:

- To blend the academic and the practical;
- To draw on well-regarded educational research;
- To allow time for sharing of successful practice;
- To inspire and enthuse delegates for the next academic year.

Attendance

59 delegates attended, coming from the full spectrum of the boys' schools which comprise the IBSC within the United Kingdom, including boarding and day, maintained and independent, selective and non-selective schools. About a third of delegates were Head of English (or equivalent) in their school. The majority of schools sent two delegates.

Morning Sessions

The Conference began with a welcome and introductory talk from Dr Mark Fenton, Headmaster of Dr Challoner's. It was stressed that despite the different types of school being present, the fact that all were delegates were from boys' schools meant that they had more in common than separated them.

Keynote Speaker: Professor Nicholas Roe, University of St Andrews

Professor Nicholas Roe is author of critically acclaimed studies of Leigh Hunt, Coleridge, Wordsworth and, most recently, John Keats. It emerged on the day of the Conference that not only had he attended an IBSC school (Royal Grammar School in High Wycombe) but that he had spent his teenage years living adjacent to the Conference venue! This was, in fact, significant, for much of his talk emphasised Keats as a poet of the suburbs, whose writing focuses on the threshold between the rural and the city. Rich both in concepts and meticulously researched using primary sources, Professor Roe's lecture argued that Keats has often been the victim of the Romantic myth, portrayed as a somewhat effete young man. Instead, he stressed the political context in which Keats wrote and offered a much more contemporary reading of Keats' poetry. He explored how Keats' poetry, marked by an intense physicality, draws power from its visual and aural components, but that many of these are 'quintessentially' English – and for Keats, it was argued, this is associated with notions of English liberties. It was suggested that Keats' background and the force of Keats' language gives him an enduring appeal to the students we teach.

Keynote Speaker: Dr Gabrielle Cliff Hodges, University of Cambridge

Whilst the first speaker provided inspiration in the form of keeping delegates up to date with university level research into English Literature, Gabrielle Cliff Hodge's lecture drew on respected educational research into the development of students as readers, alongside an exploration, based on classroom experience, of how literature works in the classroom. Dr Cliff Hodges supervises and directs the MPhil course at Cambridge in Children's Literature, and delegates were able to benefit from her expertise. Time and space needs to be made for the teaching of Literature in the classroom, she argued, and the journey of reading is of as much value as the final goal. The physical experience of reading is important, particularly experiences such as reading text aloud. Teaching should focus on whole texts, not just extracts, and particularly in the younger years of secondary school, students need time to explore and find their own routes as readers. Teachers should seek to develop reading through a dialogic approach, knowing how children develop as readers, but also seeing the different ways in which this is possible. She drew particularly on the work of Robert Scholes and his notion of 'textual power'. Textual activity is a way to reflect on and connect with the 'real' world. Teachers need to be writers and readers themselves. Whilst much of this sounds theoretical, it was explored in ways which apply to the classroom. Many delegates responded warmly to her idea of 'Reading Maps' as a way of developing students as readers and encouraging them to reflect on the choices they make.

Afternoon Sessions

A more detailed summary of the findings of the workshops can be found in Appendix 1.

Workshop 1

Raising the Flag for English Literature – Andrew Millar, Dr Challoner's Grammar School

This workshop drew on the experiences of the speaker, considering how English Departments can develop the curriculum and reshape extra-curricular provision to make the

subject more engaging for boys, and so raise achievement. Areas such as text choice and drama were considered.

Workshop 2

Teaching Literature Beyond the Exam: English and Male Identity – Josh Norman, City of London School

This talk was exceptionally well received in feedback. The session explored how English can contribute to character development, and suggestions were given as to suitable texts, many less obvious.

Workshop 3

Engaging Boys – Brigitte Gallagher, Chesham Grammar School (formerly, Dr Challoner's)

The needs of younger boys (Key Stage 3/ 11-14 years old) were explored. Strategies to engage younger students, including the use of technology, were discussed.

Workshop 4

Extending the Able: Maximising Boys' Achievement 14-18 – Felicity Adi, Dr Challoner's Grammar School

This workshop looked at how teachers can develop higher level thinking when responding to Literature and teaching approaches which encourage open ended learning such as 'flipped' classrooms. Some of the approaches drew on the focus of Learning@Challoner's which in turn uses the ideas of Professor Guy Claxton.

Workshop 5

Creating a Culture of Reading

Areas considered included the role of the school library, the role of parents and the teacher and how private reading might be included in English lessons.

Plenary

The day ended with a short plenary, chaired by Andrew Millar with reports from each workshop and concluding comments from Gabrielle Cliff Hodges and Nicholas Roe.

Evaluation

The Conference was enthusiastically received. The day was marked by a very relaxed atmosphere, in part due to the Conference taking place on a day of glorious sunshine. Nonetheless, there was purposefulness to the proceedings and lunchtime provided opportunity for networking and sharing of experiences.

Nicholas Roe commented on the usefulness of the Conference to his own work in Higher Education: universities are interested in the transition between A levels (and their equivalents) and undergraduate study, and he remarked on how the day had helped him to understand better the challenges faced by schools. Gabrielle Cliff Hodges – who is involved in teacher training, leading the PGCE course at Cambridge, and a former teacher – remarked on how the day had deepened her appreciation of different schools, and helped her to understand further the challenges faced by teachers working in different sectors. She also found the workshops useful as a way of finding out more about the practice of different schools.

As they left, several delegates commented positively on the quality of the facilities, standard of catering and organisational arrangements. A number of emails were received, thanking

the school for the day and noting the high quality of the sessions, particularly the keynote speakers.

All delegates were asked to complete an evaluation form (which was included in the delegate welcome pack). Only a minority returned forms; feedback, however, was overwhelmingly positive, including:

- Appreciation of both keynote speakers – respondents were equally split when expressing a preference, and they were variously described as ‘nourishing’, ‘excellent’, ‘interesting’, ‘inspirational’ and ‘thought provoking’.
- Of the workshops, Josh Norman’s session on ‘English and Male Identity’ was particularly well received. A number of respondents also appreciated Workshop 1’s focus on raising the profile of English in schools.
- Many respondents also appreciated the focus on ways of encouraging pupils into reading and most remarked that they left the conference with ideas which they were going to put into practice in their own departments.
- Most felt that the balance between workshop and lecture was right.

A number of suggestions were made about ways in which the day could be improved. Some would have liked more time for discussion during the day, after workshops 1 and 2, and for questions after the lectures; on balance, this is a fair suggestion. There is a difficulty of course in such a route – fewer sessions means less material is covered and the day becomes less attractive in publicity.

As the host school, our observations are:

- The day successfully drew together teachers from a range of schools. Perhaps naturally, informal conversations seemed to be between teachers from quite similar schools. Future planning of events could usefully try to break down some of these barriers.
- Many delegates were interested to hear ideas which we thought were widely known.
- The preparation for, and experience of, presenting/ chairing workshops enabled teachers to reflect critically on their own practice, and all used it as an opportunity to read around on the issues raised by the particular topics their workshop explored.
- The day required significantly less preparation than we initially feared, and we would wholeheartedly encourage other departments in other schools to consider hosting such a day.
- The value of the IBSC was demonstrated: we discovered we were facing very similar challenges and there was much collective wisdom to be shared.

APPENDIX 1

Workshop Findings

- The importance of personal reading to cultivation of interest in literature and attainment in the subject. Some suggestions:
 - Years which need focus are Years 8-10 (ages 13-15) which is when boys tend to drop off in their enthusiasm for reading.
 - Using technology, and drawing on boys' natural interest in this. Consider iPads/ Kindles etc. – though this needs to be in line with school policy. Goodreads.com (also available as an app) – useful website for promotion of reading and recommendations of other books to read.
 - Not restricting reading to fiction – narrative drives much non-fiction as well, and much of the best non-fiction also has a strong sense of narrative. The best biography and the non-fiction writing (especially in history and sport) is often rich in allusion and language.
 - Rooted in Reading programme – a very simple to use and administer system, with much flexibility, and which can be contextualised. Available from NATE. Others interested in Accelerated Reader, a more costly alternative.
 - Stressing the pleasure of reading and not allowing Key Stage 3 (ages 11-14) to be driven by examination focus or beginning iGCSE/ GCSE course too early.
 - Conversely, emphasising the advantages of reading: academic success, university entrance etc.
 - Role modelling by parents, particularly fathers. Bedtime screen bans? Unplug the wifi!
 - Role modelling by teachers – giving recommendations, engaging in debate about reading and being seen to be readers. Teachers need to be those who are seen to 'do' English, who are also readers and writers.
 - Role modelling reading by teachers around the school, particularly from subjects not necessarily perceived as driven by reading e.g. PE.
 - Develop reading lists which are age appropriate – these need regular updating as new books are published and tastes change.
 - Appoint a member of the English Department to be responsible for the promotion of reading – ideal role for someone fairly new to teaching.
 - Make use of opportunities such as World Book Day, Storytelling Day and Poetry Day.
 - The Carnegie Award – encourage students to read through the list of available texts.
 - Mentored reading.

- English Literature is important to the development of students emotionally and provides a context for students to articulate experience. Selecting texts here is particularly important and encouraging a classroom culture of boys opening up.

- Perhaps echoing ideas earlier in the day of the importance of physicalizing text through reading aloud, drama is central to engaging boys in English Literature:
 - It is a way of 'doing' English, involving complex questions of interpretation and nurtures an open ended approach to learning.
 - Cambridge Schools Shakespeare recommended as classroom edition for Years 7-11 (ages 11-16).

- Classroom approaches to drama should be active – properly taught, drama can be a rigorous way of exploring text.
 - Develop extra-curricular provision in drama, particularly in lower years of the secondary phase. Aim for maximum participation, large casts and plays which challenge preconceptions. National Theatre Connections series especially recommended: innovative writers and texts often rich in allusion (e.g. *Success* by Nick Drake – recession, Hogarth – *The Rake's Progress* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*). Most volumes have one or two plays which would work in the context of IBSC schools.
 - Stress links between Drama and English, without undermining the integrity of Drama; many IBSC schools have staff who teach both subjects.
 - Individual desks mean classrooms can be quickly cleared for drama!
- Look for opportunities to raise the status and position of English within the school through:
 - Competition e.g. House drama and house public speaking competitions
 - Engaging teachers from across the school e.g. acting as judges, presenting assemblies on reading etc.
 - Make English an aspirational subject; celebrate its challenge, and highlight successes e.g. students reading the subject at university.
- Curriculum choices should balance the individual creativity, responsibility and choice of the teacher with an experience for pupils which is consistent (though not identical).
 - Importance of whole text – dangers of extract driven approach.
 - Reviewing Key Stage 3 – it's not only a preparation for GCSE; celebrate the validity of some of the strongest writing for teenagers.
 - Find time to teach whole texts – Shakespeare, novels etc.
 - Reverse psychology: the challenging is more engaging for able students.