‘The Practice of Freedom’: Thoughts Towards Realigning the Priorities of Secondary and Tertiary Literature Educators

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Abstract: bell hooks’s famous reflections on the limitations and opportunities of education, and on the differences between the secondary and tertiary classroom, still hold true today. Kuttainen and Hansen (2020) also recognise the lack of dialogue between secondary and tertiary study in the field of English Literature. This article outlines some of the misalignments between the priorities of secondary and tertiary educators in English and proposes some ways to move towards realignment. Like hooks, we are interested in the dynamics of the classroom at each level, but we also extend this to focus on what ‘freedom’ might look like in the practice of critical writing – typically the core assessable outcome of any literary studies program. Ultimately, holding ‘education as freedom’ as a priority for both secondary and tertiary educators is a necessary precondition for the alignment and continuity of education for contemporary students.

Keywords: hooks, Freire, secondary English, tertiary English, freedom, academic writing

Introduction

> Urging all of us to open our minds and hearts so that we can think and rethink, so that we can create new visions, I celebrate teaching that enables transgressions – a movement against and beyond boundaries. It is that movement which makes education the practice of freedom. (hooks, 1994, p. 12)

In *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*, hooks (1994) describes her own experience as an undergraduate and postgraduate student, observing that '[i]t surprised and shocked me to sit in classes where professors were not excited about teaching, where they did not seem to have a clue that education was about the practice of freedom' (p. 4). The 'all-black' secondary classrooms in which hooks had studied in the years following the Civil Rights Movement in the United States (1954–1968) had instilled in her a belief in the freedom and opportunity that education could bring; by contrast, the tertiary classroom felt like 'a prison, a place of punishment and confinement rather than a place of promise and possibility' (hooks, 1991, p. 4). As a professor, hooks follows a Freirean philosophy in which it is the educator's core responsibility to reinforce and inspire the conceptualisation of education as freedom in their classroom, whether it is at the secondary or tertiary, or even primary, level. Critically, it is through transgression and disruption that the educator motivates creativity, pleasure and enjoyment in their students, as hooks (1991) makes clear. But 'transgressing boundaries [can be] frightening' (hooks, 1991, p. 9). Educators and students alike find comfort and safety in the quotidian and the dull, or security in the prescribed, such as the four mandated task types in the senior English syllabus (QCAA, 2018). In so doing, they miss education's very purpose: freedom.

hooks's (1991) reflections on the limitations and opportunities of education, and on the differences between secondary and tertiary classrooms, still hold true today. Indeed, in a recent issue of this journal Kuttainen and Hansen (2020) also recognised the lack of dialogue between secondary and tertiary study in the field of English Literature. In this article we outline some of the misalignments between the priorities of secondary and tertiary educators in English and offer some proposals for ways to move towards realignment, always with the 'practice of education as freedom' in mind. Like hooks, we are interested in the dynamics of the classroom at each level, but we also extend this to focus on what 'freedom' might look like in the practice

of critical writing – typically the core assessable outcome of any literary studies program. Ultimately, we conclude, holding 'education as freedom' as a priority for both secondary and tertiary educators is a necessary precondition for the alignment and continuity of education for contemporary students.

Misalignments in purpose and practice

Just a few years ago, Nussbaum (2017) heralded a common belief about the crisis of the humanities: the recognition that

> The humanities and the arts are being cut away, in both primary/secondary and college/university education, in virtually every nation of the world. Seen by policy-makers as useless frills, at a time when nations must cut away all useless things in order to stay competitive in the global market, they are rapidly losing their place in curricula, and also in the minds and hearts of parents and children. (p. 2)

For Kuttainen and Hansen (2020), greater collaboration between secondary and tertiary English literature educators is one strategy which could slow the decline in enrolments in university literature programs. However, while there are both professional development and 'interest and engagement' benefits which can arise from secondary/tertiary relationships, the fundamental forms and functions of the two programs as they appear in Australia do not currently align in a way that would solve the crisis of enrolment in the humanities. Indeed, as Yates et al. (2019) note, 'it is well accepted that the school subject and the disciplinary field have at least some distinct origins, purposes and differences of scope, and possibly major ones' (p. 57).

The satisfactory completion of an ATAR-eligible English course is a prerequisite for enrolment into most Bachelor degrees. This means almost all students seeking an Australian Tertiary Admissions Rank (ATAR) will undertake English, although very few of them will go on to study literature at university (Kuttainen & Hansen, 2020). In Queensland, General

English is the ATAR-eligible option studied by most students. The subject Literature, which includes more literary and canonical texts and hence has greater alignment with tertiary literary studies, is taken by fewer than 3000 students statewide. Queensland also offers English and Literature Extension, which differs markedly from the other offerings and has a strong focus on literary theory. This is the only offering that provides a clear line-of-sight to tertiary literary studies, but only 640 students completed this subject in 2021 (QCAA, 2022).

The gap between secondary and tertiary English can thus be attributed to the fundamentally different purposes of the two programs. Secondary English is designed to develop a broad suite of critical literacy skills that will allow graduates to navigate everyday texts such as popular novels and news media, and develop a toolkit of professional communication skills, including writing for a range of audiences and some public speaking. In contrast, the study of English literature in a tertiary setting is much more targeted towards the close analysis of a range of texts, working within genres, periods or themes. Traditional or canonical literature dominates, but such programs of study also increasingly include film, television and other artefacts of popular culture. The discipline places a heavy emphasis on developing an understanding of those works within both their relevant sociohistorical and cultural contexts and the context of their critical and popular reception, as well as on exploring them through the lenses of narrative and cultural theories. The way students demonstrate this understanding is heavily weighted towards the production of research essays which showcase their analysis of the primary text/s and the secondary materials which collect around it. Although other modes of assessment, such as formal examinations, online quizzes and learning diaries or participation, are frequently implemented, the research essay remains the dominant outcome for which the literature student is trained. The aim is to produce graduates who are confident in not only their grasp of the primary content (the texts), but also their ability to

manipulate the many tools at hand through which that content (and any other) may be understood.

The aims of the secondary-level *Australian Curriculum: English* are that students:

- ‘learn to purposefully and proficiently read, view, listen to, speak, write, create and reflect on increasingly complex texts across a growing range of contexts
- understand how Standard Australian English works in its spoken and written forms, and in combination with non-linguistic forms of communication, to create meaning
- develop interest and skills in examining the aesthetic aspects of texts and develop an informed appreciation of literature
- appreciate, enjoy, analyse, evaluate, adapt and use the richness and power of the English language in all its variations to evoke feelings, form ideas and facilitate interaction with others’. (ACARA, 2022)

The broad scope of these objectives makes the lack of direct alignment between secondary English studies and the study of literature at university clear. The aims of the English Literature major at the University of Southern Queensland, for instance, emphasise employability outcomes as a requirement of Australian Quality Framework Level 7 (Bachelor Degree) (Australian Government Department of Education, 2013), specifying that:

- ‘The English Literature major fosters your passion for great writing and develops valuable skills in forming critical arguments, conducting research and documenting evidence.
- Study in this area encourages you to be analytical and to develop a clear and expressive writing style in a range of modes.
- Explore the great works of literature as well as innovative and contemporary works of poetry, prose, drama, film, new media and critical essays.

- Prepare yourself for the jobs of a changing world by building skills in forming critical arguments, developing cross-cultural understanding, and applying a clear and expressive writing style'. (University of Southern Queensland, 2023)

A 2014 study by the Australian University Heads of English also found little alignment between the goals of secondary and tertiary English. The report observes that English curriculum documents focus on the development of general reading and writing skills, 'emotional intelligence' and skills in sociocultural critique, while neglecting to include strategies which might develop students' skills in interpretation, research, selection of evidence and development of arguments (AUHE 2014, pp. 14–15). Thus the shift from secondary to tertiary study in English appears to also constitute a shift from subjectivity (including 'appreciation' and the goal of 'evok[ing] feelings') to objectivity (being 'analytical', 'clear', and 'critical'). Indeed, a common hurdle we observe for students undertaking undergraduate study is the recognition of the difference between one's feelings or opinions ('I believe …') and an informed interpretation based on evidence ('I argue …'). In this respect, the use of the first-person pronoun in a research essay can cause consternation in students as they begin to navigate the adoption of a critical research persona in their tertiary academic writing, as the secondary curriculum typically asserts that objectivity is only possible through the adoption of a third-person voice.

Another misalignment between secondary and tertiary English lies in the motivation underpinning text selection. While universities have been actively working to decolonise their reading lists and be more inclusive of minority and marginalised voices (see for instance Beyer, 2022), secondary English text selection has become a cultural battleground. As Yates et al. (2019) argue, text selections imply that 'the study of literature has significant fixed cultural and social implications' which 'tacitly assumes literary knowledge as relating to the text itself, rather than being located in the critic or reader' (p. 60). Without guidance in how to situate

texts within the context of poststructuralist theoretical approaches, for instance, student readers can come to see literary meaning as rigid and authoritarian – and indeed, to find false comfort in such rigidity, wherein there is a 'right answer' to be found. Similar false comfort in assumptions of meaning can be seen in an insistence on a text's 'relatability', whereby texts are chosen for the way in which they appeal to young readers, and subsequently and tautologically celebrated for that very alignment with adolescent values. As Gildersleeve et al. (2021) have observed, relatability makes a text difficult to teach well, since its 'comforts' come to provide 'security, possibly too much security, for those seeking to avoid [a] novel's more contested spaces' (p. 87).

Text selection is not only shaped by the ideologies of a curriculum's authors. The prescribed text lists for English and Literature in Queensland offer a wide range of novels, plays, poems and films from which schools may select texts, and include canonical works, works by First Nations authors and a range of diverse voices focused on a broad range of issues (QCAA, 2021). However, the material pressures on secondary teachers in terms of time and resourcing also work to keep the list of texts selected more limited. Text choices are in this sense 'made for practical reasons, and in response to the school's "local realities"', as Brayshaw (2021) observes. As Davies et al. (2021) have found, such

> barriers included a lack of time and support to develop their knowledge, … conservative text selection policies, workload and time pressures, student literacy and the high-stakes assessment environment. Taken together, these various institutional and political restrictions faced by teachers attempting to implement new literary perspectives and curriculum resources exist as deterrents to changing text selection practices. (pp. 824–825)

Jones and Dowsett's (2023) recent work in Western Australia found that the renewed reemphasis on Australian literature, which is akin to that in Queensland's syllabus, has

contributed to a ‘parochial canon’; while Australian writers, including First Nations authors, are now regularly included in school text lists, there are still only a select few who dominate the market, such as Tim Winton and Craig Silvey. Jones and Dowsett (2023) conclude that while this greater representation of Australian voices is valuable, there is scope for expansion in the range of texts selected, and that this could be best achieved through greater ‘participation in the secondary-tertiary nexus through the critical engagement of writers, academics and teachers in robust conversations relating to subject English in Australia and the teaching of Australian literature’ (p. 13). These obstacles to a wide or varied selection of texts ultimately also impact assessment options at the secondary level, compared to tertiary study, where an imperative to consider theoretical approaches and experimental texts as well as to build on the specific research expertise of a course designer implicitly demand greater diversity in both text selection and assessment tasks.

At the secondary level, the Queensland English External Examination provides a list of eight texts from which schools may select the texts they will examine (see Figure 1). This seemingly small number is a subset of 29 novels and prose texts available for selection across all other assessment items in the course (plus two plays by Shakespeare). A large part of this limitation on examination texts is practical: writing comparable examinations for 31 texts, and having a cohort of markers suitably familiar with all of them to undertake marking, is simply unmanageable. The subset, however, echoes some of Jones and Dowsett’s (2023) points about the complexity of text selection and the resultant narrowing that occurs. Here there are three Australian writers (37.5%), with Shakespeare making up another quarter of the options. Rounding out the list are a British and an American canonical work, plus Ishiguro’s and Fowler’s popular contemporary fictions. In other words, while the prescribed text list itself is quite wide-ranging, the EA list is helpful in revealing the underlying priorities of the syllabus: Australian literature, Shakespeare and canonical works still make up the vast majority of the

available texts, and the response is expected to be in essay form, although not one that would be assessed highly in a tertiary setting, as is explored in the next section.

Figure 1

External Examination text list (QCAA, 2021, 3)

Prescribed text list: English and EAL 2023–2025

External assessment texts 2022	External assessment texts 2023
• *Burial Rites* — Hannah Kent • *Cat's Eye* — Margaret Atwood* • *Hamlet* — William Shakespeare • *Jane Eyre* — Charlotte Brontë • *Macbeth* — William Shakespeare • *Nineteen Eighty-Four* — George Orwell* • *The White Earth* — Andrew McGahan • *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves* — Karen Joy Fowler	• *Burial Rites* — Hannah Kent • *Hamlet* — William Shakespeare* • *Jane Eyre* — Charlotte Brontë* • *Macbeth* — William Shakespeare • *Never Let Me Go* — Kazuo Ishiguro • *The White Earth* — Andrew McGahan • *The Yield* — Tara June Winch • *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves* — Karen Joy Fowler
External assessment texts 2024	**External assessment texts 2025**
• *Burial Rites* — Hannah Kent • *Macbeth* — William Shakespeare • *Never Let Me Go* — Kazuo Ishiguro • *Othello* — William Shakespeare • *Pride and Prejudice* — Jane Austen • *The White Earth* — Andrew McGahan* • *The Yield* — Tara June Winch • *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves* — Karen Joy Fowler*	• *All the Light We Cannot See* — Anthony Doerr • *Burial Rites* — Hannah Kent* • *Macbeth* — William Shakespeare* • *Never Let Me Go* — Kazuo Ishiguro • *Othello* — William Shakespeare • *Pride and Prejudice* — Jane Austen • *The Dry* — Jane Harper • *The Yield* — Tara June Winch
Note: * indicates the last year this text will appear on the external assessment list.	

The objectives of secondary and tertiary English, and the initial ways in which these are delivered via the construction of the curriculum and text selection, thus present critical misalignments in purpose and practice, and too often fail to emphasise an ideology of 'education as freedom'. We now turn to a comparison of the ways in which students are required and taught to deliver their understanding of that core content in order to think about how composition – the primary mode of assessment in the literature classroom – might be mobilised towards hooks's ideology.

Misalignments in outcome

The quality and type of student responses produced in secondary and tertiary English courses are significantly misaligned. There are two key issues in this space: modes of assessment and the teaching of academic writing. The senior secondary English curriculum addresses a wide range of text types: using the Queensland senior syllabus as a case study, students are expected to produce creative responses, analyses, and both written and spoken texts (QCAA, 2018). While some tasks are completed as assignments, however, the culminating external assessment is completed under closed-book examination conditions, with no expectation that students will make use of direct quotations, refer to critical secondary materials or use citations in their responses. The value of external examinations such as this – which do not mirror disciplinary expectations, in which emphasis is placed instead on 'conducting research and documenting evidence' (University of Southern Queensland, 2023) – has been shown to be less than that of internal assessments in the humanities, including English (Johnston et al., 2022, pp. 316–317). As this is a culminating assessment at the end of a student's secondary studies, the misalignment with tertiary expectations and learning objectives here is clear. The need for close textual analysis in literary studies means examinations have fallen out of favour in university English courses, and been replaced by a diverse range of assessment practices designed to capture different learning outcomes. Moreover, not only is explicit engagement with the field through effective research vital to the development of critical evaluation skills, but the expectation also that students will follow correct quotation and citation conventions is a core pillar of academic integrity. This mismatch between the expectations of secondary English and tertiary objectives and policies presents challenges as students transition to university study.

This misalignment in expectations around student responses also extends to the anticipated structure of academic writing, particularly the essay. The proscription of assessment task types within the senior syllabus means that teachers seek out a 'formula' that will allow

students to respond effectively. In secondary English and humanities classrooms, this means the five-paragraph essay, which has become the default model for academic writing (Johnson et al., 2003). This approach, which is particularly dominant in the United States at both secondary and tertiary levels and in L2 classrooms (Caplan & Johns, 2019), has also been widely adopted in Australia. As Lucinda McKnight (2023) argues, in Australian schools

> pedagogies including direct instruction, modelling, scaffolding, and genre-based approaches involve the implementation of formulas for writing sentences, paragraphs, and entire essays; this has taken place in the neoliberal context of tightly proscribed, high stakes testing regimes that often demand the reproduction of these formulas. (p. 571)

While there is no doubt that formulaic models provide a sound foundation for learning the core elements of essay structure, the safety of this expected structure discourages students and teachers alike from experimenting and extending upon this base. In addition, it can restrict creative and critical thought by requiring repetition, and can encourage students to tend towards simply signposting, rather than actually making an argument. The weaknesses of this model therefore directly refer to Freire's (1970/2017) discussion of dialogue and authenticity in *Pedagogy of the oppressed*, in which he rails against 'false words', 'idle chatter' – 'an alienated and alienating "blah"' (pp. 60–61). It is precisely in claiming the right to speak, he insists, that the student 'prevent[s] the continuation of … dehumanising aggression' and comes to 'achieve significance as human beings' (Freire, 1970/2017, p. 61). That is, it is only in speaking (or writing) authentically that the student may demonstrate 'education as freedom' rather than the current mode of education as compliance. Such a belief system is also at the core of Shor's (1992) work on the construction of a democratic classroom. Shor (1992) shows how collaboration, revision and dialogue not only improve assessment scores, but also true learning. These ideas and opportunities are more available in tertiary settings, where a wider range of

response styles is both taught and expected. Yet students arrive from their secondary classrooms with the limiting five-paragraph model or other formulaic approach entrenched as their core mode of writing.

Realignments: A way forward?

Given the fundamental differences in the form and function of secondary and tertiary English studies, attempts to create greater connection or coherence between the two are unlikely to achieve significant reform. Rather, an approach that acknowledges each sector's differing objectives and leverages their strengths may have greater impact. While there are only about 600 students taking English and Literature Extension in Year 12, there are tens of thousands of English teachers across the country. As an example, the English Teachers' Association of Queensland caters to approximately 4,500 English teachers through both corporate and personal memberships (T. Purcell, personal communication, January 24, 2023). Targeting teachers rather than students may assist in realigning the secondary/tertiary relationship. Indeed, Kuttainen and Hansen (2020) make the point that particular 'behavioural patterns' (p. 49) are necessary to strengthen and solidify this relationship, including regular, sociable interactions between educators at both levels, diverse and engaging events for both students and teachers, and a fostering of these connections through informality and approachability. In other words, collaboration at the individual level is critical to moving some way towards rectifying some of the misalignments we have outlined here.

Changes to modes of assessment in secondary English in order to place greater emphasis on academic integrity and writing conventions which align with tertiary expectations would also be an 'easy fix' to one of the most problematic issues in terms of academic rigour within the senior syllabus. While the five-paragraph essay is a good foundational structure for basic academic argument, high-quality academic writing is more dynamic and fluid, relying

less on formula. This is not a new insight (Schwartz, 2014; Warner, 2018), yet secondary school systems have not made changes to modes of assessment within the syllabus that would encourage teachers and students to experiment with more complex forms of academic writing. 'Discernment' suggests an ability to tailor the response to enhance the argument, rather than the reproduction of a formulaic response, and it is this ability to organise an essay based on the most logical structure for the argument being made that is prized in tertiary settings. The formulaic paragraph, and essay, should therefore be seen as a 'suitable' response rather than a 'discerning' one, and thus aligned to a C (or satisfactory) grade descriptor: 'suitable use of patterns and conventions' (QCAA, 2019, p. 33). If the quality assurance processes in place made this distinction clear, teachers and students would rapidly move away from the 'safety' of this essay form to perform at the higher standard, and demonstrate genuine discernment and freedom in how they construct their arguments. Tertiary academics should thus work closely with senior secondary English teachers (both in-service and pre-service) via formal education channels and professional development workshops to further develop the academic writing repertoires of teachers, and, in turn, their students.

Systemic change in education, as in many sectors, is glacially slow and impeded by both internal and external forces, a 'network of systems … increasingly directed by external and inward facing pressures that stymie ways of reaching outward across sectors to each other, to focus on the shared, higher goals of engagement and excitement with English literariness and literacy' (Kuttainen & Hansen, 2002, p. 41). Perhaps the greatest hope for change and for a movement towards a value system that prioritises 'education as freedom' is a model that equips secondary students with a range of writing skills that prepare them not only for studies in literature but tertiary academic writing at large. To achieve this, a number of things need to occur. The first is greater connection between university and secondary staff, to allow for professional development. This happens in ad hoc ways now, but a more formal or extensive

relationship could be developed through teachers' associations. It is not uncommon for university lecturers to give guest presentations for teachers' associations, but these tend to be centred on particular texts rather than on teaching academic (or creative) writing. There thus needs to be not only support for the development of local relationships with academics, but also the fostering of a more widespread shared understanding of how students can write in a 'discerning' way, so that the systemic processes of quality assurance do not actively disadvantage those teachers and students who break out of the mould.

By extension, secondary teachers might then engage in more explicit modelling of the expectations of tertiary writing for their students. This might occur through changes to the assessment modes within the syllabus and the use of university assessment responses as examples. One example of this might be revising secondary-level assessment tasks that do not require direct quotes or citations to support responses (QCAA, 2019). These tasks lack the basic academic rigour and integrity expected of any tertiary student, and establish a poor precedent for good academic writing. Such responses are typically produced in examination conditions, where students are not permitted copies of the text being analysed. Universities have moved away from examinations in English literature courses for precisely these reasons, and yet (perhaps in response to concerns around academic integrity) secondary schools seem to be reintroducing more examinations to their syllabi. Modifying examination conditions to allow students to reference copies of the text, or adopting modes of assessment other than the examination, would potentially address this major inconsistency.

The most significant move towards freedom of writing lies in secondary teachers' perception of what a 'discerning' essay looks like: if formulaic essays are getting top marks, there is little impetus to change. The advent of artificial intelligence (AI) chatbots like ChatGPT, which can produce human-like responses, also creates an impetus for change in assessment types in both secondary schools and universities. Creativity in response constitutes

an inducement to distinguish a student response from an AI response. Thus, both assessment modes and the teaching of academic writing are under renewed pressure to change.

Conclusion

While greater collaboration between secondary and tertiary educators will go some way towards realigning student writing, ultimately it is the curriculum that must change. If modes of assessment at secondary level better mirror tertiary expectations, while still catering for the much broader range of form and function that the secondary curriculum has, this would go some way to better supporting students' transitions to tertiary learning and to implementing a philosophy of education as freedom. Most significantly, we propose an insistence on the creation of assessment standards that no longer reward the formulaic essay as 'discerning'. In an educational system where assessment success is core, the only way to achieve real change in teacher and student practice is to move the assessment goalposts so that there is an impetus for change. This requires not only advocacy from secondary teachers, but greater involvement from tertiary educators in the development of the secondary curriculum itself.

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