



LET'S GET THE PARTY *Started!*

THE NEW CURRICULUM FOR ENGLISH ALLOWS TEACHERS MUCH MORE FREEDOM TO DELIVER CREATIVE, INSPIRING AND EXCITING LESSONS, ESPECIALLY AT KS3 – SO WHY IS NO ONE CELEBRATING, ASKS JILL CARTER...

There is something strange about being the first one awake on December 25th. You know it's a special day, that everyone's been anticipating for weeks – yet the house seems almost eerily quiet as you lie and wait for someone else to say 'Merry Christmas'... just in case you're wrong. This is how the new KS3 curriculum feels to me. I am wondering if I have imagined this happy arrival, as no-one seems to be celebrating. Maybe – I tell myself, hopefully – they do all feel like I do, really; perhaps this is like those parties where no-one wants to be the first to arrive so everyone gets there late. But the truth is, few people have had time to notice the new curriculum – and those who have are mostly considering how much extra work it

will entail. In a typical school's climate, which can only be described as relentless, how many staff will so far have had the luxury of absorbing and appreciating a new, slimmed down curriculum and the demise of those pesky levels and tongue-tangling APP criteria? If I were still a Leader of English, I'd almost certainly be sticking my head right into the sand about it all, and hoping that I might get a chance to think about it properly during the summer. I spoke recently to two

trusty school leaders, who both said, "No-one has time to think about KS3 – we're all too busy with KS4 and GCSE outcomes."

Over time, KS3 has become the relative that we have not visited for years, the one we feel horribly guilty about. We know that KS3 can create the foundations that are

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so badly needed if students are to succeed at KS4, and we can all work out that the increase in intervention at GCSE may well be due to the crumbling curriculum and un-moderated levels lower down the school – but we are always fighting the league table tide. Few of us ever addressed the Y9 chasm created when the SATs vanished. There was a new freedom there that we had not had for years and we didn't react. Why? Because for years the curriculum has been acquisitioned and teachers have not been trusted with spaces they might fill with their own ideas about learning. And we were too busy with KS4.

This is why we must make the new curriculum our own before all those quangos move in on it and morph it into something vast, complicated and unmanageable.

So, what is it we are working with? Last year the DfE announced that it wanted “To give teachers more freedom over their teaching” by “introducing a slimmed-down national curriculum.”

And it would seem that, especially at KS3, we do now have a considerable amount of freedom. But do we know what to do with it? Those of us who came into teaching many years ago know what this freedom looks like but less long-established colleagues may only be familiar with how to operate within a scheme of work that dictates the content of every lesson or, worse still, supplies it on a powerpoint. Let me try to describe it...

The way we were

As teachers in the 1990s, we designed our own lessons and created sequences of learning to suit our own classes, using or adapting ideas from colleagues and textbooks when they seemed apposite. As a team we agreed the units of work and the learning we would aim to achieve and, by and large, it worked. We didn't have to follow the scheme a colleague had written – we took ownership of our teaching. If we had just discovered a new resource or the students were particularly restless because of snow, we veered off piste for a lesson and did some of our best teaching spontaneously. Despite the absence of starters, mains and plenaries, our lessons usually made sense and obviously had a beginning, a middle and an end. If the class was really enjoying an activity or text, we would extend it and exploit their enthusiasm.

We used to have quiet reading lessons – not ten minutes at the start of the lesson but time to get into a book and enjoy it, time to discuss it quietly with a

6 WAYS TO MAKE THE MOST OF THE NEW KS3 ENGLISH CURRICULUM...

- 1** Raise the profile of KS3, using reports like *Moving English Forward (2012)* to support this campaign. Insist that KS3 is allocated funding and training time.
- 2** Buy a package and design termly teaching and learning units around it rather than spending time and energy re-inventing the wheel.
- 3** Experiment with dedicated reading, grammar and vocabulary lessons.
- 4** Create a shared bank of quality digital resources that teachers could use to support their teaching.
- 5** Train staff to “use greater flexibility of approach to planning” (*Moving English Forward 2012*).
- 6** Trial new assessment criteria in the light of strong DfE criticisms of levels and its announcement that they “will be removed” and “not replaced”.

teacher or classroom assistant, time to go off in a group to read together, time to say “Miss, has this bloke written any other books I could read?” I used to hear pupils read aloud to me and our plenaries would consist of a tussle to read “today's favourite bits” to the rest of the class. One of the overarching aims of the new English curriculum is to “develop their love of literature through widespread reading for enjoyment.” It emphasises “reading for pleasure” and “reading widely and often”. What better way to develop these strands than by simply *reading*? In an age of continuous streaming, some pupils never get the opportunity to read a book quietly.

We also used to have skills lessons, about which I'm sure Mr Gove would be very happy. We didn't snatch at snippets of grammar whilst ploughing through another prescribed three-part lesson – we made dedicated time for teaching SPaG skills and actually, the students enjoyed it. There is an ill-founded fear of this kind of work; perhaps once a great deal of learning in English consisted of written grammar exercises but these days they are quite a novelty. Consequently, students can be surprisingly interested in them and those who struggle with the more creative aspects of the subject can find a real sense of achievement in the science of language. Similarly, students love vocabulary work; I recently worked with a Year 11 boy who discovered that searching for alternatives

to “good” and “bad” was exciting. He found that the shapes and sounds of these alternatives were fascinating and he finally grasped the power and precision that words can have. Suddenly, for him, words were like the colours, shapes and components of the best products. He has subsequently started reading.

And there's more...

We used textbooks; teachers have come to believe that working from a textbook is uninspiring but, again, students often love them. They save on photocopying and planning and they do not have that flimsy worksheet flightiness (literally!) Their content is the work of some of our best pedagogues, which means they are often far more inspiring than a downloaded worksheet stumbled upon at midnight. Perhaps they seem uninspiring to us because we revisit them – we need to remember that new and inspiring are different things. One criticism of them has always been lack of flexibility but this flaw has certainly been addressed in the *Ignite English* series I have been co-authoring for Oxford University Press. Someone has realised that a teacher book (or “companion”) is worth having if it gives you a range of additions and tangents for every lesson spread so that you can mix and match your own lesson designs, throw in some films or images, add a few weblinks and adapt some worksheets from Kerboodle if you need them. Assessments and new assessment criteria are included so you could show the leadership team that you are one step ahead of the game. Add in an excellent package like *Dynamic Learning* or Geoff Barton's “Grammar to 14” to underscore skills work. Dovetail some great class readers from any of the big educational publishers, a couple of Cambridge Shakespeares and some lovely poetry from all those exam board anthologies that are propping the shelves up. Use the internet to ensure your non-fiction and Spoken English is bang up to the minute (you have this kind of spontaneity once you have moved away from lesson by lesson SoW) and you're well on your way.

Good luck.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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