

## The Teachers' Standards and English Teaching

I have to confess, there are barely suppressed moans and groans when I bring up the topic of the Teachers' Standards (Department for Education, 2013) with my English PGCE students. However, as I've worked with these minimum requirements for teachers' practice and conduct over the years, I've found them to be a useful and sometimes empowering tool for both assessing students and helping them improve. In this article, I intend to outline what the Teachers' Standards might mean for English teachers and explore, perhaps more controversially, how they might be used to nurture creative teaching.

The basic concept of the Teachers' Standards (TS) is that they make teaching more of a 'criterion' based profession, with clear benchmarks about what is expected. While there used to be many standards, now the guidelines have been streamlined so that there are eight. The great advantage of this reduction is that they are relatively easily internalised. They apply to the vast majority of teachers, whatever the stage in their career but it's usually beginning teachers who are most closely scrutinised using their rubric.

### TS1: Set high expectations which inspire, motivate and challenge pupils

I like the fact that inspiration, motivation and challenge are at the forefront here. For English teachers, this is about finding texts and topics which are both challenging *and* motivating. Teresa Cremin and other eminent researchers (2009) have shown that teachers need to read Young Adult (YA) fiction which might be engaging for their students. Their inquiries show that when teachers model high expectations by reading widely in areas of interest to their students, this creates a virtuous circle of high expectations. So having high expectations is not just about expecting great things from pupils but also about having high expectations of yourself in terms of what you read and write. Similarly, the Teachers as Writers (Cremin, T., & Oliver, L., 2017; Smith, J., & Wrigley, S., 2012) initiative shows that when teachers write expressively with their students, they model high expectations, which inspire the students to be more creative in their writing. This does not mean teachers have to be perfect writers; far from it, it's about modelling how you deal with the mistakes you make and show how you learn from them (Watkins, 2011).

### TS2: Promote good progress and outcomes by pupils

This for me is very closely related to TS1, in that when teachers challenge students cognitively then this enables 'good progress' or meaningful learning to happen. This is founded upon Vygotsky's theory of learning which argues that the work set needs to be within students' Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD): not too hard, not too difficult, but just enough to push them onto the next level (Vygotsky, L., Cole, M., 1980). Teachers are currently grappling with teaching pre-1900 texts which are difficult for many students – and teachers! Some English lessons I observe consist of pupils reading texts from the "literary canon" (Wordsworth, Shelley, Shakespeare etc.), with a sizeable minority not particularly enjoying the experience. Unfortunately, sometimes progress is not being made because the students are disengaged. The job of work for the English teacher is to patiently

guide students over a span of years so that they can eventually enjoy these texts. Much research shows that the teachers who get the best results do not teach to the test, but rather are passionate about their subject and are experimental, constantly reflecting upon their practice and seeing what works with each unique class (Petty, 2014, p. 314). Indeed there's some evidence that rather than requiring students to do lots of exam preparation, students make better progress when multimedia is deployed strategically to engage learners and help them think deeply (Martin, 2012). Andrew McCallum's brilliant book, *Creativity and Learning in English*, has many suggestions about how learning can be scaffolded in interesting ways, using the ideas of Vygotsky. His teaching suggestions about using sound to promote a love of reading are very appropriate when teaching pre-1900 texts (McCallum, 2012, p. 93).

Above all, progress is nurtured when the teacher "encourages pupils to take a responsible and conscientious attitude to their own work and study" (Department for Education, 2013). For the English teacher, this means setting up engaging projects which promote wide reading, writing, research and discussion both in and outside the classroom. Get students to film themselves reading poems in different settings, to have a notebook and jot down observations, to enjoy reading with their peers and carers. Students need to understand that learning is not just about being taught, but is about making sense of the world for themselves, and acquiring and creating knowledge by communicating with other people (Watkins, 2011).

### TS3 Demonstrate good subject and curriculum knowledge

Aside from the obvious points about being well-read, I would stress one of the best ways of acquiring good subject knowledge is to really get involved with NATE: go to its conferences, workshops and seminars, read its brilliant magazine and research journal *English in Education!* When you become part of a 'community of practice' of English teachers, you keep up to date with the latest curriculum developments and new approaches (Yandell, 2013). I would also stress that good subject knowledge is not just about knowing the terminology, English teachers need to engage deeply with the meaning of texts, and really 'feel' their power so they impart genuine enthusiasm when teaching them. Exciting new research shows that it is this passion which is the decisive factor when teaching poetry -- often a problem area. Teachers need to read and enjoy poetry for themselves and share that enthusiasm with their students (Dymoke et al. 2016).

### TS4 Plan and teach well structured lessons

I like the fact that that the 'one-size-fits-all' lesson plan has now been junked as a paradigm by the likes Ofsted/DfE, and lessons no longer need to have 'starters' 'main activities' and 'plenaries' as long as there is meaningful learning going on (Ofsted, 2016). Giving students sustained time to work either by themselves, in pairs or groups is really important, and needs to be part of the structuring of lessons (Coultas, 2006). It's also crucial that teachers encourage independent and collaborative learning outside the classroom by setting interesting 'homework' projects such as wide reading on a topic of interest, researching and writing about their local area or reading a book they enjoy (Educational Endowment Foundation, 2018). 'Finish this' for homework is not good enough; teachers need to think about really engaging students to see learning in English as something that happens all the time by giving them fascinating projects to do (Watkins, 2011).

### TS5 Adapt teaching to respond to the strengths and needs of all pupils

Many teachers see this standard as a tricky one and spend many hours 'differentiating' resources for students by supplying learners who are struggling with sentence starters, pictures, writing frames, cloze sheets, word searches and vocabulary lists. This obviously can be entirely appropriate and

often is very helpful, but I would like English teachers to consider whether it really *needs* to be done, and whether it might be better to get students to learn how to do these sorts of things for themselves (if they can), as they might learn more. My worry is that the teacher does all the work, when many students are capable of creating their own sentence starters, finding their own pictures to help them, and writing out their own vocabulary lists. Once they have got used to doing this, they learn how to learn and become problem-solvers and serious thinkers about how they might best learn (Tomlinson, 2015). Furthermore, more attention needs to be given to modelling good speaking and listening in class. I know many teachers are fearful of this, but if proper emphasis is put on it, then it can be the best differentiation there is; students need to learn how to talk about a topic in order to understand it. There's a huge amount of research to back this up (Alexander, 2012) but it has yet to be taken seriously by politicians and educational policy makers. Exciting research now is beginning to emphasise the "neuro-diversity" of all of us (Silberman, 2017) and highlights the importance of giving all learners the chance to figure out how they might learn best in unique contexts; this involves the teacher nurturing meaningful dialogue in the classroom so that students discuss with each other what they don't know and what they feel they need to learn on a regular basis (Alexander, 2012; Watkins, 2011).

## TS6 Make accurate and productive use of assessment

Yes, there are the obvious points about keeping track of pupil data and attainment, but do remember that formative assessment strategies are important to integrate into lessons. Exciting developments like 'in-class' marking (Riches, 2017) and using peer and self-assessment in creative ways (University of Reading, 2018; Petty, 2014, p. 175) can save English teachers acres of time, and improve outcomes very significantly by making students take much more ownership of their learning.

## TS7 Manage behaviour effectively to ensure a good and safe learning environment

Again, we have the obvious points about having firm but fair boundaries, and developing good relationships with students, but let's not forget that the English teacher can often explore the theme of behaviour within the topics/texts they are covering, and thereby get students to reflect upon and improve their own behaviour. Indeed much of what you study in an English lesson can assist with behaviour management. The way to do this is to think of some behaviour problems you are encountering and consider how they might relate to the topic you are doing. For example, if you have got a student who is bullying another person, you might examine the way Lady Macbeth appears to bully Macbeth into murdering King Duncan; if you have students who are off task, you might get them to reflect upon a character, like Eddie Carbone, appears to have lost interest in his wife and work. My advice is focus upon the work if you want to get students to behave and think long-term: sometimes it is best to make a note of poor behaviour and follow it up after the lesson rather than confronting students aggressively in the moment. I have found that doing mindfulness with yourself and possibly with your students (if your school is understanding) can help English teachers "respond" rather than "react": taking a few calming breaths when you are dealing with students being distracted can make the world of difference and give you room to think through what might be the best option (Gilbert, 2018).

## TS8 Fulfil wider professional responsibilities

For me, English teaching becomes much more fun when you set up an extra-curricular activities like reading/creative writing clubs or put on a play etc. Ironically, I have found my life becoming easier as a teacher because you get to know students in more relaxed contexts and relationships improve. Even if you only give up your time for 10-20 minutes a week, it can make a world of difference. Making trusted students the leaders of such groups can help you: such pupils relish the opportunity to have extra responsibilities. Obviously, be strategic and don't overwork yourself, but think about what your overall goal is for such a club and how you might do it in the most efficient manner possible. For example, if you want to promote the enjoyment of reading, setting up pupil-led reading groups can be more effective than you constantly monitoring students' reading.

## Conclusion

While there are definitely oppressive elements to the Teachers' Standards – the mere fact that teachers have to have standards is faintly insulting – there are also ways of using them to nurture creative teaching which makes learning enjoyable.

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