

idiom

Volume XXI, Number 1, 1986

Journal of the Victorian Association for the Teaching of English
P.O. Box 265, Carlton South, 3053.
(03) 347 3918

Contents

Extinguishing the Response, <i>Neil Bechervaise</i>	3
Reading Mums at Hoppers Crossing Post Primary School, <i>Bob Graham</i>	5
Censorship or Selection?, <i>Jillian Dellit</i>	7
Using the Word Processor with Reluctant Writers, <i>Pat Craddock</i>	10
The Obsessive It, <i>Jan Osmotherly</i>	12
Writing: Making Meaning	17
A Personal Piece, <i>Robin Bourke</i>	18
Reviews	19

Editor Peta Heywood

Editorial Committee Terry Hayes, Kaye Nolan, Chris Reynolds, Pat Craddock
Greg Shepherd, Doug McCurry, Susan Knopfelmacher

Publication No.VBP0219
Price \$4 plus postage

Typesetting: Ann Pedersen
Printing: John Clark Services

THE OBSESSIVE IT

by Jan Osmotherly

An article about Production — a unit which promises to rejuvenate your teaching whilst making you cheerfully redundant! (well — almost!).

I have thought of endless ways to begin this article — I have littered my lounge-room floor with scrawled-on, screwed-up bits of paper; I have gazed endlessly out the window counting the petunias in the hanging baskets; I have retreated to the mountain peaks for inspiration in tranquil solitude — (it didn't come); eaten my way through all the left-over Christmas bounty and in desperation, sunk down beside my dozing dog and asked her advice. She snored.

.....Indescribable frustration.....Why should it be so hard?.....

I have lived, breathed, dreamt Production for so long now. In my capacity as Convenor and teacher of English B, an HSC Group 2 subject, from which the Production unit originates — I have spoken to hundreds of parents, students, teachers and administrators about IT. But for some reason — getting IT down on paper, neatly in black and white exactly what IT is — is so damn hard!And maybe I have just struck upon the reason — because Production is not something that can be neatly ordered or explained. It is unlike anything I have ever 'taught' before — there is a framework, certainly, but there really are no boundaries. It is one of the most difficult learning experiences to control, because once it is underway, control is something you have little of. The students are in command. For that reason, it can be a teachers' nightmare; it can leave you feeling frustrated, powerless — and when Production is working at its best — redundant!

OK — so much for the build-up — what is IT?

The following is an extract from the VISE English B Course Description Booklet which outlines the unit (p.74):

10. PRODUCTION

This option is to enable students to do two things. Firstly, to follow through the process of developing a whole language task in a realistic manner, with a purpose and direction strictly modified by the demands of the nature of the task and the intended effect on an audience.

Secondly, to develop in a sophisticated fashion a project based on their own interests.

Students who undertake this option are warned that it is not an easy task, but one which should be very rewarding.

10.1 GOALS

Students will

- 1. produce pieces of work related in a clear fashion, or an extensive piece of work, which has use of language as its basis, for a public audience*
- 2. conduct an extensive interview or shorter series of interviews, with a person who pursues professionally what the student intends doing, and to make the information collected in that interview available to the class*
- 3. provide the teacher with a clear, reasonably detailed statement about the work program and the intended product*
- 4. report on at least three occasions at regular intervals on the progress of the work to the person supervising the project*
- 5. provide a written or oral report on the project at its completion, concentrating on*
 - a. a description of the nature and demands of the process*
 - b. what has been learnt*
 - c. reaction to the product.*

10.2 NOTES ON THE GOALS

PRODUCTION

Production for our purposes implies a finished work. One of the great dangers of which students undertaking this unit should be forewarned is not meeting the deadline. As this task is intended to reflect a real situation, having work ready on time must be considered of major importance.

PUBLIC AUDIENCE

The minimum 'public audience' should be considered to be a large proportion of the school community. It is preferable to include members of the community outside the school.

The nature of the audience will depend on the project. This is expanded in the notes on specific suggestions.

This does point to the need for a thoughtful considered decision before choosing this option, and careful planning which may entail making a schedule which allows some latitude for problems.

Teachers should have this in mind when counselling students.

A PROFESSIONAL CONSULTANT

This has been included because of the insight that such a person can provide about the task. It is also of value in itself, in rising to the demands of meeting and talking to a new person.

The product of the meeting should be shared, because it is too valuable, whatever the outcome, for the students to keep to themselves.

One idea would be for the student to arrange for the consultant to come to a class for the interview, thus allowing other students to ask questions. This would quite acceptably satisfy the achievement of the second goal.

While the teacher may make suggestions, it is the student's responsibility to arrange the meeting, to prepare questions and carry out the task of interviewing.

Some projects may make finding a consultant more difficult than others, as will some situations. A country student may have difficulty finding a professional poet or advertising person. Either these problems will be solved with a little ingenuity, or another more suitable project should be undertaken.

It would be ideal (and unusual) if the professional would agree to be the supervisor.

Reporting should be a consistent process over the whole period of the project. Three reports are required, more may be necessary.

PLANNING

Before agreement is reached about proceeding with this option a statement should be submitted to the teacher. This might include a proposed schedule, and should certainly include details of the work to be undertaken, how it is to be presented and to whom. If the work is to be a long piece of writing there should be a broad synopsis.

It is not to be prescriptive, but is rather a statement of intention subject to modification.

This should be done at the beginning of the school year in which the course is undertaken, or, preferably, in the year before.

REPORTING AND SUPERVISION

The person supervising the project does not have to be the teacher, but will be responsible to the teacher, which means that the proposed supervisor must be acceptable to the teacher. The teacher will be responsible for assessment of the achievement of the goals.

ANALYSIS OF THE TASK

This should be undertaken at the completion of the project, and should be in some detail. If written, 750 words would be an appropriate length, if oral, then about half an hour, including the contributions of the person making the assessment.

To give you some idea of what this can lead to, here are some examples of **Production** projects in 1985.

- * Running a Community Awareness Program about the Handicapped.
- * Putting on an Entertainment Evening for the local elderly citizens.
- * Setting up and running a radio station at the school.
- * Making a video on "Behind the Scenes of TV News Reporting".
- * Writing and performing a play for primary school students.
- * Producing a magazine for newsagent distribution on the local music industry.
- * Organizing a reading promotions week at the school and initiating, running a junior reading program.
- * Designing garments and a whole advertising promotions exercise for Coca-Cola executive.
- * Making an audio-visual kit about "Youth Views on Current Trends in Education".
- * Creating a book of written and photographic portraits of three elderly women.

ETCETERA!!!!

And how do you get these types of projects off and running smoothly *in practice*?

After supervising over 300 Year 11 and 12 students completing **Production** and observing the many pitfalls and problems, I have made many additional guidelines and devised organizational strategies to prevent, or at the least, minimise difficulties. These include the following:—

- * meeting with the students AND parents BEFORE unit is begun, so everyone is aware of what it is about.
- * Students fill out a contract which accompanies their detailed statement of work program (GOAL 3) which sets out certain conditions such as:— they will not take time off from other classes for **Production**; that they will fill

out the available consent form if it is necessary to leave school and have it signed by relevant authorities (e.g. parent, teacher, Year Level Co-Ord.); that there be a limit to financial expenditure, agreed to by parents, on the project; and that accurate records are kept of any financial transactions; that detailed notes of all their activities are kept in a **Production** log-book which is regularly checked by their teacher; that they work either individually or in *pairs* (past experience has shown that groups of three or more have often had problems with equitable distribution of workload, etc.).

After the initial few periods you spend explaining all of the above, giving advice to students on what they could do — the practicalities of their ideas, possible resources, and so on — your role becomes minimal. Now, for the next few months (ideally, **Production** is the equivalent of a term's work in English — approximately 40 hours — but works best when these are spread out over a six month period), you watch, listen, counsel, pacify, console, inevitably worry AND get excited with them about their projects.

It is difficult to surrender control and be passive whilst they are trying to organize a school excursion, run the school dinner dance, take the elderly citizens away for the weekend, conduct a fashion parade in Centre Court of the local shopping complex, go off and interview Ian Cathie, Bert Newton, Managers of Sportsgirl, political leaders, drug addicts, prostitutes and pop stars. But they do it, and most of the time they do it well! I know my grey hair population has increased, and I've bitten chunks from my tongue, thinking of all the things that could go wrong but not saying them, and nervously relinquishing control. I must give them the right, I tell myself, the responsibility to make mistakes and learn from them — *they* have to worry about getting quotes from bus companies, hiring a hall, manoeuvring timetable swaps, arranging interviews, of living up to promises, commitments made to others.

Alongside the responsibility, they have to endure and overcome the frustrations of being let down by others, of turning up for an interview only to find the secretary had forgotten to remind the 'Honourable Minister' and he was out to lunch, of finally making it into Daryl Somer's office —

all your questions prepared and your partner has forgotten the camera and the tape recorder, of 100 local primary school students lined up outside excitedly awaiting the puppet show you have worked for months to put on for them and Mrs. Smith has forgotten the room change you had organized weeks ago and where are you going to go? AAAGH!!!!

From my experience, and information from other English B teachers, I estimate about 10% of students have had negative feelings about **Production**. Usually, it is because they have experienced problems similar to those above and have found them 'too much'. Their most frequent criticisms are:— "*It's too much hard work*"; "*too much pressure*"; "*so frustrating*"; "*too much like real life!*"; "*I'd rather sit an exam any day*" and in all these instances I say long live **Production**!!!!

However, for the large majority of students, it ceases to be a 'school assignment' — it becomes a personal commitment. One instance (and by no means an isolated one!):—

Chris began visiting the old women at a local retirement village in May. He had decided that his **Production** would be a booklet of photographic and written portraits of some elderly people. To begin with, it was an 'assignment'. He dutifully made notes in a journal, snapped photos, exchanged pleasantries — but before long, his weekly visits assumed a far greater significance in his and their lives. Old Ivy and Mrs. Hobbs weren't pieces of resource material — they were lonely, loving friends with dreams still to share and vivid pasts to recreate.

Chris completed his **Production**. He created a sensitive, soul-stirring tribute to these women in photos and prose. No-one who read his book remained unmoved. The assignment may have been over but *his* commitment, *their* friendship wasn't. They are a part of his life — he, theirs..... It's four months since **Production** finished; yet most Sundays, he still breezes through the doors of the retirement village, whistling; clapping hands, kissing cheeks, shouting hellos.

HOW DO YOU GIVE THAT A MARK??????

Huh? It seems ridiculous to throw that question in, yet silly as it may seem, it is unfortunately

relevant. For **Production** is a part of the curriculum, and as such, it is to be assessed, and whenever the question of assessment rears its head — so do the words — marks and grades. And quite simply, they are unnecessary, inappropriate. More than that — if a teacher gave a mark to a **Production** — it would be arrogant impertinence!

Here we have the perfect example of an English unit where the assessment is intrinsic in the work itself — it is continuous; it is based on real feedback from a variety of sources of which the teacher is only one; it is by no means a definable endpoint in itself. The teacher is the catalyst, the advisor, sometimes the instructor — but he/she is not the *judge*. How do you dare 'judge', 'compare', 'rate' Chris's project? How do you competitively grade a student-run dinner-dance with a student-initiated junior reading scheme? You can't. You have no right to. You don't *need* to. Just as *you know* if you have taught a good lesson because of the students' response, so the students know if they have fulfilled their aims because of the response of their intended public audience. That is their real assessment. If the response is not good, as of course sometimes happens, this does not mean failure, because the students have to analyse why their project didn't work as intended, in their report. We all know how much you learn from your mistakes. **Production** allows you to make dozens of mistakes — and **LEARN** from them. As long as you fulfill/complete the goals as outlined earlier in the English B handbook extract, you have succeeded.

The same philosophy applies to the whole English B Course. There is no threatening with grades or marks; no failure of work completed. If it isn't quite right, together we analyse why and do it again. What of reward? The reward is inherent in the work itself. Students don't do **Production** for me the teacher, or for a gilded but nebulous "A" — they do it for themselves, for their own self-esteem, and they do it for some other **REAL** public audience, not an anonymous one, such as examiners. They must put **ALL** their language skills to work for a definite, meaningful purpose, that they initiated. The same principle applies to all the other elements of the course. Every piece of writing, every discussion has a purpose other than "I'm doing it so I'll pass English" — the reward then, is in working on that something until

it is the best it could possibly be — and recognising that.

English B is unfortunately often seen as the 'vegie HSC English' — it's for those who couldn't cope with Group 1 Expression — though thankfully, this image is changing as the evidence speaks for itself. Some highly 'successful' English students are drawn to the course because of the challenges and the almost unlimited scope for individual initiatives that it offers. Still, in the main, the consequence of the 'vegie' image tends to be that at the start of every year I look around my class and see a group of young people with little confidence in themselves, and even less in their ability to 'do English'. They are used to failing or scraping 'D's'. Most are afraid to speak up in class — somehow they'd got through eleven years of school, hiding in the classroom, speaking only when spoken to. They were scared, lacking confidence, initiative — feeling that they had little to offer

The transformation by the end of the year has, in my experience been nothing short of stunning. The growth in confidence, maturity, self-respect and *language skills* has been amazing and **Production** has played a very significant role.

I think it's best at this stage to let the students speak for themselves. Here is, (believe it or not) a representative sample of student responses taken from their **Production** reports, to the question of what they feel they have learnt from **Production** ...

* *"Above everything else, Production was a major learning experience for me. Not only did I have to learn to get along with and deal with other people, I had to learn to rely on myself I found that near the end of Production I was using my own initiative and trusting my own instincts. It made me aware of a lot of realities and frustrations of life, and it also taught me a lot that I didn't know about myself."*

* *"The satisfaction of knowing you are setting your own goals is very rewarding. It makes you work harder towards achieving them. It has also taught me that I can learn outside class and school and how beneficial that learning can be."*

* *"Everything had to come from you, there was no-one else who'd do it for you. As a result,*

I learnt to depend more on myself rather than seek guidance and help all the time. It has helped me boost my non-existent confidence I hated having to ring people asking for information, etc., now I think nothing of it. I can now also speak in front of an audience without feeling on the verge of fainting. I felt so proud when it was completed -cos I'd done it all myself."

* *"We learnt never to give up persistence will pay off if you stand on your own two feet and believe you can do it. We learnt to go for the top first and then if you can't get it, work your way down."*

* *"I learnt how to use the school camera, how to conduct conversations with important people, how to get through secretaries quickly. I learnt to be direct and demanding on the phone. You've got to know exactly what you want and not let them trample over you. I learnt how to write letters to important people and how to talk to them. I learnt that organization of yourself is vital and a major part of completing something successfully. The major thing I learnt was how important youth views are and how necessary it is for us to make opportunities for youth to express them. My final comment is*

not about our Production but about Production as a whole. I think it is the best thing that could be included in an English course. Students need the responsibility and chance to show their maturity or gain it if they haven't got it."

It would be easy to go on — to relate more case studies of amazing successful projects, of the 50 or so cases where a **Production** has led directly to job offers, and even of the elaborate 'failures' through which much has been learnt. Maybe another time there will be an opportunity (how about it Editor?) for some of the students' **Production** reports to be published. I have never had more satisfying "correction" — they are great reading.

Well, my dog Sprocket, is still snoring, although now I have a different problem — how to STOP writing!!!! But I will — now. (almost...)

Thank you for the opportunity to effuse about my favourite obsession — the most threatening but most exciting, worthwhile experience of my teaching career.

Jan Osmotherly is English B Convenor and English teacher at Carwatha High School.

P.S. Through a chain of circumstances, Chris's Production, referred to in this article, was given to Geoff Maslen. Months later, in the summer holidays, as I sat sipping my morning cuppa, digesting Saturday's AGE — I nearly choked on my muesli as I turned to page two of the Saturday Extra and saw an extract from Chris's book IN PRINT!!

The future is only a dream

By Chris Makris

MY NOSTRILS TWITCH at the heavy smell of disinfectant in the air. So clean and sterile. The white bed sheets starched and stiff make a slight scuffing sound if I run my hand across them. The whole place exudes a strange feeling of stillness. A lack of energy that drains me whenever I enter.

The hallway sometimes seems so long. I glance into rooms as I pass them by on my way to the last room down the hall. Those inside look like circus exhibits on display as they wait in their cages to be viewed. Usually there are four beds to a room all in a row — uniformly spaced apart. Most rooms are empty except for faint whisperings. "I'm thinking about leaving here. I want to get married again. I don't want to die here. I want to die in my own home."

"Who's the lucky man?" I asked.
"Well, how am I meant to know his name. I haven't met him yet."

Until that moment my eyes welled up and I ran into mine. She held my gaze as if woken from a deep slumber. Her hands searched for mine. A brief grapple as she 'ugged my hand downward onto her lap, forcing me to kneel beside her chair. The back of her warm hands reminded me of a road map, knuckles white like mountains, small blue veins like rivers ran a network of intersections through a landscape speckled with brown spots and bruises.

"Oh, don't leave," she muttered like it when you go." There was a long pause. "You ones who have been buried and forgotten. Maybe that is why so often old people talk about the past because what little future they have is too painful to think about."

Ivy's head begins to nod. Her eyelids falling, shutting out the dim light in the corner of the room. Ivy Caroline Cunningham, maybe you are dreaming about a colorful parade, the parade of your youth. But it has passed you Ivy, and it will not be back again.

CHRIS MAKRIS is a student at Carwatha High School Technical School and visited a nursing home as part of a school assignment. He continued to visit his elderly friends long after the project was completed.

The Age Dec 28, 1986