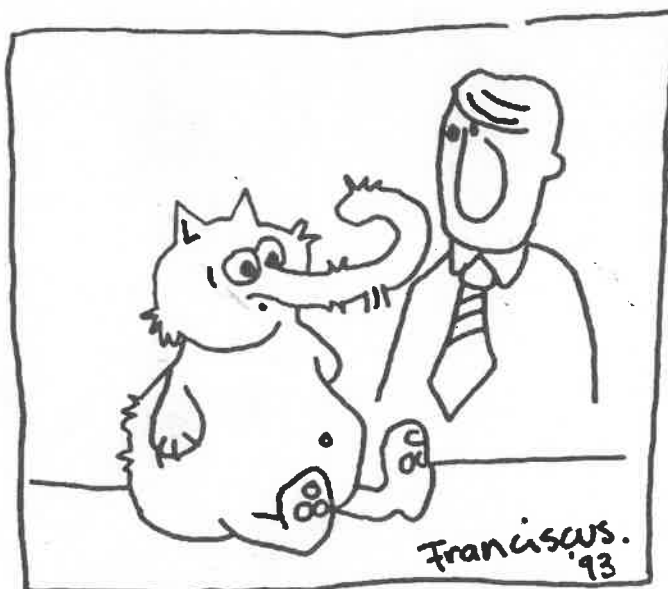


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Thomas Parker's C.A.T.
was assessed to be very
creative but lacking
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THE NEW VCE ENGLISH WRITING CAT: *What Are the Issues?*

MARGARET GILL

In November last year, English teachers learnt that VCAB had approved a hasty proposal for an unseen writing test which would constitute a new and untrials CAT 4 for English. VCAB's justification for the decision (Desklink 18/11/92) was the need to bring the externally assessed component of English to 50% immediately, and without waiting for a properly constituted review of the subject and its assessment procedures.

The framework for the proposed test was initially spelt out in two documents: a paper by Ray Misson, prepared for the VCAB Executive (2/11/92), and a letter by Mary Dove (10/11/92), also directed to the VCAB Executive. These sources are cited in the light of the Chairman of VCAB's denial of their existence (The Age 14/11/92). In fact four days later the test details, identical with the proposals in Mary Dove's letter, were sent to schools via the Desklink message referred to above.

English teachers' concern at this ad hoc style of curriculum decision-making was justified, and their views were canvassed in a VATE survey and expressed widely to VCAB, to the vice-chancellors of the universities and in the press, (see, for example, Mary Mason, senior English Co-ordinator and David Loader, Principal of M.L.C. in The Age (19/11/92). English teachers attending the VATE Forum on 1 December were also unanimous in their opposition to the proposed test. How important was this issue?

All public curriculum and examination boards charged with the development and delivery of publicly mandated curricula are governed by statutory procedures which define their decision-making procedures. Clearly the way in which this particular curriculum decision was made and implemented raises important questions:

- How was it possible to make major changes in an accredited study before the accreditation period had expired, and in the absence of due processes of curriculum review, consultation and evaluation?

- Why, throughout 1992, did VCAB yield to pressures for ad hoc changes to the English Study and the English CATs, on occasions ignoring the recommendations of its own working party, its own project officers, its own test setting panel and its own field of study committee?

These are big issues which will, no doubt, engage curriculum analysts of the future when they come to write the history of VCAB. But there are other questions raised by VCAB's decision to introduce a superfluous writing test and which should remain on the agenda in the continuing debate over the teaching and assessment of English?

▽ Who owns the English curriculum?

The short answer is that everyone thinks they do. One of the demoralising experiences for English teachers over the past four years has been the unrelenting campaign against the VCE English Study waged in the media by different interest groups, united only by their shared predilection for pronouncing curriculum judgements in advance of, or in the absence of, curriculum evidence (Gill 1991). The fourth Northfield Review of VCE (Northfield et al. 1993) has recorded the frustration this phenomenon has generated amongst the teaching profession:

"An overwhelming majority of teachers spoke with varying degrees of disappointment, anger, bitterness and despair of the inability of particular sections of the community to 'let teachers get on with it.' 'Let things settle.' 'Give VCE and us a chance.' Teachers and principals were exasperated at the disjunction between their own knowledge (including knowledge of problem areas) and expertise in delivering the VCE, and media misrepresentations 'by people who don't know what they are talking about.' (p. 55)

It may be some comfort to know that this kind of destructive public debate is not limited to Victoria, or to VCE English. In their critique of English in the U.K., Goodson and Medway (1990) noted that:

"If English teachers decide, as from time to time they do, to reorder the priorities of their subject and accord legitimacy to new forms of writing or to the spoken vernacular..., more is involved than the in-house arrangements of a specialist

subject community. Attempts to control and define the subject move beyond the subject community because changing English is changing schooling... English has been the means through which powerful groups, especially governments, have sought to achieve ends which were ideological and political and not neutrally 'educational'. Where other groups with other agendas – including sometimes English teachers with their own values and priorities – have resisted, English has been a battleground." (p.vii - viii)

Victoria has a history as a battleground for English. In August 1980, for example, VATE chaired a stormy meeting called to defend consensus moderation as the only valid assessment model for the new HSC Group 1 English options. In 1982 debate raged over the design issue of the "flexible core". During 1982 and 1983, when the Victorian Institute of Secondary Education (the forerunner to VCAB) reviewed and queried the compulsory status of English, the public uproar, as recorded in the press, was similar to the present one.

The problem which any curriculum board must resolve when managing major curriculum implementation in such a context is the extent to which educational priorities can be compromised in the face of pressures which, as Goodson and Medway note, are driven by political and ideological agenda. The statutory procedures by which such bodies operate usually ensure that due processes of curriculum review, evaluation and reform occur which will protect a current curriculum from attacks by particular interest groups. In the case of VCE English over the past three years, concessions have been made which are historically unprec-

edented. A major consequence of these changes has been that teachers have felt that, although the responsibility of successfully managing the study was entirely theirs, they did not "own" the course they were teaching, but were at the mercy of directives whose *educational* justifications were questionable. Teachers have complained of being in a state of continual uncertainty about whether they were "getting it right" and what the next "change" would be. The Northfield Review (1993) likened teachers' experience to:

"building an aeroplane while being expected to fly it [and], one could add, that the parts were not always available, the plans kept changing and there were people shooting at the plane". (p.69)

One could also add "and parts of the aeroplane were being removed while it was in the air".

During the development phase of VCE English, VCAB's procedures seemed more secure. Experienced English teachers were appointed as course writers to draft the study, and consultations with all sections of the teaching profession (including universities) were extensive and rigorous. In 1987, for example, when the Accreditation Advisory Group for VCE English was appointed to examine and advise on the accreditation of the new English study, their brief was clearcut.

The following extract from the briefing paper provided for the Group is instructive, and has particular significance in the light of the new writing test CAT:

"It is necessary to provide an assessment and

reporting system which will not provoke serious claims of disadvantage to various groups of students and possibly proliferate demands for a series of courses. No external stand alone test should be used." (Briefing paper to ARG 1987)

In this context VCAB trialled a first set of pilot CATs in 1989. One of those CATs, an unseen writing test, was in fact, a "stand alone" CAT, similar to the current test proposal. As a result of VCAB's own evaluation of that writing test CAT it was, rightly, abandoned. The English Project Team's judgement of the test was unequivocal:

*"It is quite obvious that the writing task is the only CAT which does not have a direct relationship to a work requirement. The decision [to have this test] was made in the hope that the "test" would have minimum impact on the teaching of the study. However... it is already evident that the test is having considerable impact on the curriculum. **It has in practice become the invisible sixth work requirement.** Obviously teachers have to prepare students for this task so a certain proportion of class time is being devoted to undertaking 'practice writing tests.' In essence, this means an increase in workload."* (Report of English Project Team, August 1989)

These were VCAB's own findings. It is not good curriculum development to reinstate what has, on careful evidence, been discredited. The fact that this has been allowed to happen lends chilling support to Goodson and Medway's claim.

▽ How valid is the new test CAT?

There is a basic principle in test design which states that validity must always remain the major consideration in any assessment, while always striving to improve reliability (i.e. how well the markers do their job). Put simply, validity means that a test should accurately test the skills which have been taught and learnt in the relevant study.

There is another basic principle in test design that says a skill can be assessed adequately only in circumstances which as closely as possible approximate those in which the skill will be used (hence tests to obtain a driving licence put the candidate in a car on a road, not in front of a TV screen simulating the "context" of a road). The problem with unseen external examinations in testing skill in the effective use of English is that the examination procedure itself is so constricting in the circumstances it can accommodate, that the claim to be a valid test of ability becomes severely compromised. Only certain limited dimensions of language skill lend themselves to such testing. In this respect the scope of the accredited English CATs in testing a range of language and communication skills in English is a major development over previous Year 12 courses.

There is a further reason why the currently accredited CATs are valid. Language use involves more than the performance of discrete skills. The English Study Design establishes interrelationships between the language modes that constitute the three areas of study, the five work requirements and the four CATs. Thus one of the important design features of the study is that **all** areas of study, that is, a range of language and communication skills, occur in each CAT:

- Critical thinking skills in CAT 1 are developed through a combination of analytical reading and viewing of texts, together with critical discussion and writing.
- Writing workshop skills in CAT 2 are developed through a combination of critical reading, talking and a range of composing activities.
- Text Response is similarly grounded in oral work, critical and creative discussion and a range of writing.
- The Oral CAT again draws (drew?) on all the work requirements.

Thus the claim that the new writing test is "an appropriate, and potentially exciting, assessment instrument" (Mary Dove 10/11/92) because it draws on all three Areas of Study is unconvincing. The skills which the study is designed to develop are *already* tested across the existing CATs. The new test, at best, could be said to re-test what is already rigorously and comprehensively assessed in the existing CATs. This is poor test design. But, and more seriously, the new test cannot validly test those skills; in effect it will trivialise them.

▽ How do tests shape what counts as learning?

Another basic principle of test design is that "trivial testing produces trivial learning". No matter how sound the curriculum principles in a course description may be, the quickest way for anyone to find out what *counts* as the curriculum is to look at old examination papers and examiners' reports. These give teachers and students a realistic answer

about how learning will be evaluated. They become the de facto curriculum. The insidious way in which examiners' reports can come to constrain and distort the curriculum can be illustrated by examining what was happening to HSC Group 1 English, particularly Part 1, the study of a single text, in the final years of HSC.

The primary aim of that section of the Group 1 English course was not dissimilar to elements of the Text Response work requirement:

"the extension and deepening through the close reading of literary works, of students' experience, and the further development of their abilities to reach, clarify and defend considered opinions and outcomes of their reading."
(English Group 1 Course Description p.3)

Yet when we read the Examiners' Reports of that period it is possible to chart a reformulation and reduction of the skills of close reading to a point where, by 1989, what is being prescribed is a set of narrow specifications for an "acceptable" essay, in other words, a de facto teaching formula:

*"There are five basic requirements for an acceptable Part 1 essay: **first** a correct analysis of the question so that all the key ideas are responded to relevantly; **second**, a plan of discussion or argument based on challenging or qualifying the question; **third**, supporting the line of discussion with details from the extract; **fourth** developing the line of argument by linking points in the extract to details of the text; **fifth** blending the above into a fluent, grammatically correct essay within a set time limit."*

(Examiners' Report 1989)

It is true that specifications such as these make for increased marker reliability: markers can be trained to look for the five "basic requirements" and reward them accordingly. However the *validity* of such a procedure is another matter. One of the great strengths of the VCE studies was VCAB's requirement that detailed assessment criteria be developed for each work requirement, thus spelling out exactly what skills were to be evaluated in each CAT. This procedure has the effect of safeguarding the integrity of the study, so that teachers have less need to second guess what the assessment criteria *really* are: they have been made explicit.

The new writing test contains a further danger in that teachers will need to spend time teaching to the particular requirements of the test. The proposal for the test states that "the forms of writing that might be specified will be announced in a briefing paper so that students will be able to become familiar with the kinds of writing the CAT 4 may require, and thus be reassured that they will have a starting point." (letter of Mary Dove 10/11/92)

Translated into plain English this means: Students will get warning so that they can practice the particular forms of writing prescribed for the test. This is not congruent with the ways in which writing competence is developed in the Writing Folio. One would hope that, when a briefing paper is finally released, this extraordinary recommendation will have been removed.

▽ Is the writing test a valid test of reading?

As stated above, the writing test is designed to test all three Areas of Study. How well can it test reading

skills? The Desklink Message to schools on 24/2/93 reiterated the earlier proposal to VCAB Executive that a number of pieces of material "all relating to one scenario" and "written specifically for this task" would be supplied as part of the test. "A context will be provided for each separate piece of material". But what is meant by "context" here and what view of reading competence is implied?

A reader's ability to comprehend a text is determined by prior knowledge and experience of both the text type and the knowledge and experience the text encodes. Such knowledge is grounded in the culture of the reader. Thus there is no such thing as a culturally neutral reading (or writing) test. This is a matter which the present study design handles better than most prescribed curricula: the student is able to select content to study, for example in CAT 1, genuine texts contextualise an authentic topical issue providing the source for the student's critical writing (one thinks of the force and skill with which pilot VCE students from the Mallee cluster schools wrote of the proposed expansion of the Hattah-Kulkyne National Park). Similarly, the range of texts on the text list is designed to accommodate a range of cultural experiences.

Given that the new test cannot offer culturally specific resource material, what kind of culturally universal scenario can it offer? The exemplars suggested in Misson's paper to VCAB (2/11/92) are not reassuring:

Students would be given a scenario focussing around some point of contention (e.g. a local council is going to sell off part of a park for a supermarket to be built; a kindergarten doesn't

want to accept an HIV-positive child; a choice has to be made between three proposals for a Government grant etc)"

Scenarios such as these inevitably embody quite specific assumptions about the nature of "normal" social and cultural life. They call for the student to project herself into a social situation which may be quite alien to her experience. In some cases this may simply be a matter of regional particularity ("a local council is going to sell off part of a park"). More often it is a matter of class culture and social advantage ("Three proposals for a Government grant"). Even more seriously, such tests project a particular social ethos, or a particular moralised version of social behaviour: invisible, socio-moral norms are assumed ("the HIV-positive child"). Such tests often call for the assumption of a public role outside the repertoire of otherwise capable 17 year olds. When students are asked to project themselves into an alien situation, the weakness of the resulting writing may not stem from a lack of communication ability, but from a socially induced incomprehension of the appropriate codes. (Barnes and Seed 1984)

Further, such test "scenarios" are not "contextualised" in any normal meaning of the word. Indeed, the test will not refer to any genuine contemporary "scenario" in case it becomes "predictable". (Again, compare the authentic resource materials that form the backbone of CAT 1). Barnes and Seed call such tests "a ghostly simulation game".

There is a further problem: in using extract materials for the hypothetical scenario, students will be required to go beyond paraphrasing the material to

interpreting it, extrapolating from it, or using it as the basis for invention. But the ability to *interpret* requires the student to draw on her already existing background knowledge in order to "make sense of" the material and thus respond in terms of the hypothetical scenario. If the student does not already have this background knowledge, then she is disadvantaged and can *only* fall back on paraphrase or even transcription.

Higher order reading abilities, such as the ability to "question and analyse ideas and information" are possible only if the student already knows what questions can be asked. Reading is not a decontextualised functional competence. The question, then, is what kind of reading skill is being tested here? This is not a new problem.

To go back to HSC Group 1 for an illustration: Part 3A exposed similar reading comprehension problems, and the 1988 Examiners' Report demonstrates this well. On this particular occasion, the materials provided to support the writing task were drawn from the then current debate over the banning of smoking in public places. In this regard the "scenario" could be said to relate to a genuine public issue and to be within virtually all students' field of knowledge: kids know about smoking regulations. The topic was certainly more culturally accessible than proposals for Government grants and HIV-positive preschoolers.

Nevertheless the Examiners' Report identified the precise problem discussed above:

"The decision this year to provide accessible, factual support material ... was made to

*encourage candidates to build their own arguments, and to use the material in a flexible way in exposition. It was intended to prevent the extensive paraphrasing (even transcription) of the given material which was decried in last year's report. Notices in the VCAB Bulletin to schools continue to remind candidates of the purpose of the support material: to provide a knowledge base on which to develop a piece of writing. Despite these injunctions the practice of transcribing or paraphrasing large slabs of the material has continued. The better answers demonstrated use of the candidate's own knowledge. It was thought that the accessibility of the topic, **smoking**, and its current exposure in the media would have encouraged the use of candidate's own knowledge. Sadly, (sic) this was not the case."*

Support material, or a hypothetical scenario, can only become "knowledge" if it already has a context in the student's sociocultural world. If this is not the case, then it is hardly unreasonable for the student to fall back on paraphrase or transcription. What else can she do?

Perhaps this was not quite such a serious matter for the Group 1 student cohort of 1988 and earlier. It is a critical matter for the VCE students of 1993. For an unseen exam to be fair it must be unseen for every candidate. As Lesley Farrell has said, "Socially advantaged kids have already seen this sort of test before."

▽ **Finally, what about the assessment criteria for this test?**

Lesley Hardcastle, the present chief assessor for CAT 4, is reported as saying that the skills for this sort of exam are "generic". If that is so (whatever it means exactly), it is a further reason why the test is redundant. Language and thinking skills are already identified and spelt out in the assessment criteria sheets of all work requirements. These criteria provide the guidelines by which the student's abilities in each CAT are identified and assessed. The skills that will be rewarded in this unseen test are, in fact, the skills that enable some students to manipulate language quickly and skilfully under pressure, while drawing on already existing cultural resources.

This is not what VCE English was meant to be about.

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