

Submission  
No 41

**INQUIRY INTO REVIEW OF THE NEW SOUTH WALES  
SCHOOL CURRICULUM**

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Partially  
Confidential

## **Submission relating to government inquiry into the NSW Curriculum Review by Professor Geoff Masters**

**Personal introduction:** I have been teaching Senior English since 2002 and have marked the HSC every year since 2005 covering all Advanced modules and Extension 1 English. I was made a Judge Marker of Extension 1 English in 2015. It has been my role for the past few years to field or write questions for school based assessments including compiling the trial HSC examinations for both Advanced and Extension 1 English. Last year, in 2019, I completed a Master of Educational Psychology at Sydney University and submitted for my major project a critique of the new 2017 Stage 6 English syllabus focusing on NESA’s substantial support material. I taught at Homebush Boys High School for my first three years of teaching and have taught subsequently at a number of Private Independent schools while also mentoring Beginning and Practicum Teachers. In the last six years I have moved between Kambala (Rose Bay) and Cranbrook (Bellevue Hill) in a consulting role as my interest in Educational Psychology grew and also as the Enrichment Coordinator responsible for extending all students but with a focus on the highest achieving Stage 6 students. In 2019 I instructed 3<sup>rd</sup> year and post-grad teaching students in educational psychology and programming a unit of work in the evenings at Notre Dame University.

### ***“Mind the Gap”***

#### *A dual educational psychology/English teaching perspective of the NSW Curriculum Review:*

Masters’ proposals are based on decades of rigorously validated research; work on learning with understanding began in the late 70’s. (I will expand somewhat on the research evidence base below). His ingenious “learning progressions” apply elements of John Biggs’ SOLO taxonomy and Hattie’s phases of learning, and if implemented well, could halt and improve Australia’s declining student success at both the top and low achieving levels across English, Mathematics and Science (see PISA 2018). Masters’ review also recognises the needs and growth of the individual student – to maximise their capabilities in preparing for study/work/life beyond school, rather than what is thought needs to be taught (at a predetermined rate) to meet a generic set of outcomes by Year 12. Hong Kong and Canada are two countries that overhauled their education systems to encourage learning with understanding. Framing it colloquially, it is to focus on the journey of every student at every stage of their learning. Hong Kong and Canada are now at the top of the PISA league tables. As the review acknowledges, in Australia, we are at a pivotal point in education as we slide below countries against which a decade ago we compared well and two decades earlier,

vastly exceeded; and on every measure: Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom in Reading, Mathematics and Science. But any implementation will expose the persistent gap between what is generally understood in the teaching community about research and theory in education and what can easily be communicated in order to change teaching practices. I am concerned also that the basis of learning progressions in the review has not been fully explained.

Too often explanation or interpretation is lacking in this review, instead we read “research shows” “research has found”. The word research occurring 176 times. But John Hattie persuades us, “The days of evidence are kind of over, the days of interpreting the evidence are what matters now, and that is what I am most interested in,” he says. “We are very good at curating evidence and making evidence, but let’s switch and talk about *dissemination and utilisation*. (2020) There is some useful analysis such as that on the difference between how experts and novices think and the implications or importance therefore of a conceptual based emphasis in a new syllabus with students needing to acquire a deep domain specific knowledge. But an omission of the need for student “experts” to be stretched so as to avoid the “expertise reversal effect” or “guidance fading effect” at this point seems an oversight. The emphasis on “alignment” between all elements of teaching and assessment is well put. It is an essential component of curriculum design as Trigwell & Prosser (2014) state in describing Constructive Alignment as a “powerful curriculum design idea” that has emerged over two decades.

The review, rightly, concedes that understanding and communication are challenges, “Professional capacity building: The successful implementation of the new curriculum depends on teachers *understanding* its intentions and having the requisite professional knowledge and skills for implementation.” And the need to, “Implement a *communications plan* to explain the urgency of curriculum reform and the key intentions, guiding principles and underpinning evidence base for the new curriculum, including by clarifying what is not intended.” So the first step is a coherent communication strategy which recognises prior knowledge. Its prospective authors may be interested therefore in what is readily observable of teachers’ knowledge base and interest in pedagogy (educational psychology) – not their subject, because rarely are teachers not passionate and well informed about their subject. For instance take two concepts and pedagogies emphasised in the review, “Problem-based learning” and secondly “Learning with understanding” or “deep understanding” as part of that. The concept of “deeper understanding” has appeared more recently in the 2017 Stage 6 English syllabus and was emphasised in the “Stronger HSC Standards” document promoted at the time. While I have discussed Problem Based or Project Based learning with colleagues and most have some knowledge and even experience of it, I have never heard a single teacher or Professional Development course mention deeper learning.

### ***Problem based learning***

Problem based learning or project based learning (PBL) is generally understood to mean minimally guided learning environments and this is how it has been implemented in schools. A school on Sydney's Lower North Shore taught Year 12 physics by dismantling and rebuilding an old Mini. The principal of a Catholic secondary school in Parramatta was so enthused about Project based learning he argued that all subjects in all years should be taught this way and strove in Stage 4 and 5 to have at least one term devoted to PBL in each year and subject. But PBL had been denounced as an ineffective teaching methodology for over two decades by 2004!

In that year UNSW's John Sweller, Paul Kirschner, and Richard E. Clark wrote a scathing denunciation and explanation for PBL's hydra-headed capacity to regenerate even after 50 years of failed applications. Citing how it had reappeared under various guises "Discovery learning", "Inquiry learning", "Problem based learning" "Constructivist learning" and "Project Based learning" even after these unequivocal failures. Cognitive Load theory, an extremely well-validated instructional design theory, explains the cognitive load impact when students don't know what they need to know to solve a problem. Hattie wearily declares in a 2016 paper, "It hardly seems necessary to run another problem-based program" citing the extensive research, "11 meta-analyses relating to problem-based learning based on 509 studies" noting that "many programs that seem to lead to developing deeper processing have very low effect sizes (e.g., inquiry based methods,  $d = 0.31$ ; problem-based learning,  $d = 0.15$ ). But to re-iterate what I said at the beginning in affirming the solid evidence base of Masters' Curriculum Review which promotes "problem or project based learning", Hattie rates ***problem-solving*** (note NOT *problem-based* learning environments) as having a high .68 positive effect size. Hattie explains it in this way, "The reason for this low effect (of problem-based learning) seems to be related to using problem-based methods before attaining sufficient surface knowledge."

And of course, this is how Masters in his review is proposing "problem based" teaching situations or "project based learning". That is ***after*** students have acquired the "knowledge skills" to be able to apply them or when the guidance is provided ***alongside*** the problem. In the same way that Maths teachers have always used worked examples or scaffolding to build knowledge and skills and then posed a fresh problem for students to solve using those skills. But why not call it ***problem-solving*** as Hattie does, not ***problem based learning***? Why confuse? Masters is making an assumption based on a key distinction which is not commonly understood. Furthermore Hattie is widely read and constantly cited by teachers – in some cases *Visible Learning* is the only reputable reading on educational psychology teachers have done. The review (not the Executive Summary) does explain the distinction and even contains a breakout box reiterating it, "Strongly linked to the development of knowledge basics, ***and not***

*separate to it or isolated from it*, is the development of skills and the capacity to apply knowledge. Problem based learning has widely been used to motivate students and support the development of other skills.” And a few lines later, “*Such skills cannot be learned in isolation of a knowledge base and must not be thought separate from it.*” University of Technology Sydney.

But people often see what they want to see and ignore the qualifying statements; nearly twenty years of teaching has shown me that. And more importantly this is not problem based learning because a problem is not the singular basis or motivation of and for the learning but rather the more directed or “alongside” and integrated teaching that 50 years of research has shown yields better results. For with knowledge and mental schemas acquired from having seen and practised worked-examples from the direct teaching period prior to the problem-solving sessions, students will experience less cognitive load and solve more complex problems as experts do. “The characteristics of the learner are only relevant in that what constitutes an element will depend on a learner's knowledge level (Prior knowledge). **Multiple interacting elements** for one learner with low knowledge levels may constitute **a single element** for a learner with a higher level of knowledge.” (Sweller 2010)

A Project Based Learning experience or a problem solving situation placed *after* the content knowledge has been acquired will overcome the limitations of PBL as a teaching and learning tool. Using what is now understood of the differences between novices and experts, of cognitive load and of cognitive architecture, problem-solving and even an appropriate project could provide a valuable space to apply learning, hone metacognition, self-regulate learning and motivation, and craft critical thinking. It could even offer what PBL claims to provide - the ability to solve unstructured problems, situated in authentic real-world settings “collaborating, communicating, and thinking critically and creatively” (NSW Curriculum Review) which the review states is a major aim as part of a strategy: To collapse the academic-vocational dichotomy and pathway currently existing to students’ post-school destinations.

### ***Deeper Understanding***

To adopt the rhetoric of a concept such as “deep understanding” or “learning with understanding” with its vague and obvious connotations, is relatively easy for a teacher wishing to create the right impression. To expect them to actually change their practice, without understanding and reflecting on the research narrative compiled over 40 years that also connects deep/surface approaches to learning progressions (levels of understanding), is almost guaranteeing a surface acquisition of what deeper learning requires. Especially at a time when Prime Ministers and Presidents without any scientific expertise casually dismiss the findings of experts on climate change or virology. “The fundamental assumption, that it is what the student does that is the important thing (in creating deep understanding), may have entered the **constructivist-**

*type rhetoric* of many teachers, but it remains aloof from practice.” (John Biggs 2012) Brackets are mine. What is needed Biggs also puts eloquently, “The acquisition of information in itself does not bring about such a change, but the way we structure that information and think with it does. Thus, education is about conceptual change, not just the acquisition of information.” (Biggs 2012)

It is why saying “research shows” or citing effect sizes as evidence for “what works best” such as for feedback or prior knowledge as I have frequently heard teachers say, is tantamount to saying “it just does” and will not induce the deep understanding or conceptual changes, in those teachers disposed to surface learning *themselves*, to shift classroom practice in a meaningful way. Somewhat ironically it is a “good” example of the surface learning that the review wants to minimise in secondary school students and why it will not change in students unless it changes first in teachers. Ultimately communicating complexity and a deeper understanding of learning to be able to foster deeper learning in all students with all teachers, is the task of this review.

It should be noted here that some students are innately disposed to deep learning or surface learning as early experiments on student learning approaches showed. “Student learning research originated in Sweden, with Marton and Säljö’s (1976) study of surface and deep approaches to learning. They gave students a text to read, and told them they would be asked questions afterwards. Students responded in two different ways. The first group learned in anticipation of the questions, concentrating anxiously on the facts and details that might be asked. They “skated along the surface of the text”, as Marton and Säljö” put it, using a surface approach to learning. What these students remembered was a list of disjointed facts; they did not comprehend the point the author was making. The second group on the other hand set out to understand the meaning of what the author was trying to say. They went below the surface of the text to interpret that meaning, using a deep approach. They saw the big picture and how the facts and details made the author’s case. Note that the terms “deep” and “surface” as used here describe ways of learning a particular task, not, as many subsequently used the terms, as describing characteristics of students. This series of studies struck a chord with ongoing work in other countries; in particular with that of Entwistle in the UK (Entwistle & Ramsden 1983), and that of Biggs in Australia (e.g., 1979, 1987).” (Biggs 2012)

Teachers who habitually induce deeper learning are described as Conceptual change/student-focused (CCSF) while those who activate surface learning approaches in students as Information transmission/teacher-focused (ITTF). It is why I would advocate in any communication plan, alongside explaining new pedagogies and the theories behind them, using the many instruments designed to assess SAL (student approaches to learning) *to stimulate reflection and re-appraisal in teachers and students*. They are all self-reporting questionnaires such as the ATI (Approaches to Teaching Inventories) Trigwell & Prosser – *for teachers*, the ASI (Approaches to

Study Inventory) Entwistle & Ramsden and the SPQ (Study process questionnaire) Bigg, Kember & Leung for *tertiary students* and Biggs LPQ (Learning Process Questionnaire) Biggs, Kember & Leung designed especially for *secondary students*. John Biggs' questionnaire for secondary students was found to be richly revealing of students' approaches to study when administered in Hong Kong when he was teaching at Hong University and advising the Education department in the early 2000's. I have included it in this submission, obtaining it personally from John Biggs. Testing *both* teachers and students at the same time will reveal the self-reporting bias of teachers and students and either corroborate or dispute each other's claims.

**Below a sample of questions in an ATI for teachers and below that Biggs et al's LPQ for students:**

From an ATI: Emphasis on Independence and Conceptual change student-focused approach: Students here are given a lot of choice in the work they do





**Appendix B. Scales in the Revised Learning Process Questionnaire (R-LPQ-2F)**

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### ***Learning Progressions:***

*Biggs SOLO taxonomy for fostering a deeper understanding, Hattie and Donoghue's 2016 Learning strategies: A synthesis and conceptual model, ETA's/DoE's "English textual concepts", Threshold Concepts and the relationship of all these to Masters' Learning Progressions suggests that it is not a hazardous experiment but rather an improvement or logical development of what has been successfully implemented all over the world: A curriculum design model that would break the nexus between school years and assessment and instead assess each student based on their progress at each learning level in order to prescribe either, consolidation or acceleration.*

John Biggs SOLO (structure of observed learning outcomes) taxonomy and its conceptual relationship to learning progressions within a stage.

#### **Unistructural verbs that reflect this initial level of learning:**

Memorise, identify, recognise, count, define, draw, find, label, match, name, quote, recall, recite, order, write, imitate

#### **Multi-structural verbs that reflect this second level of learning:**

Classify, describe, list, report, discuss, illustrate, select, narrate, compute, sequence, outline, separate

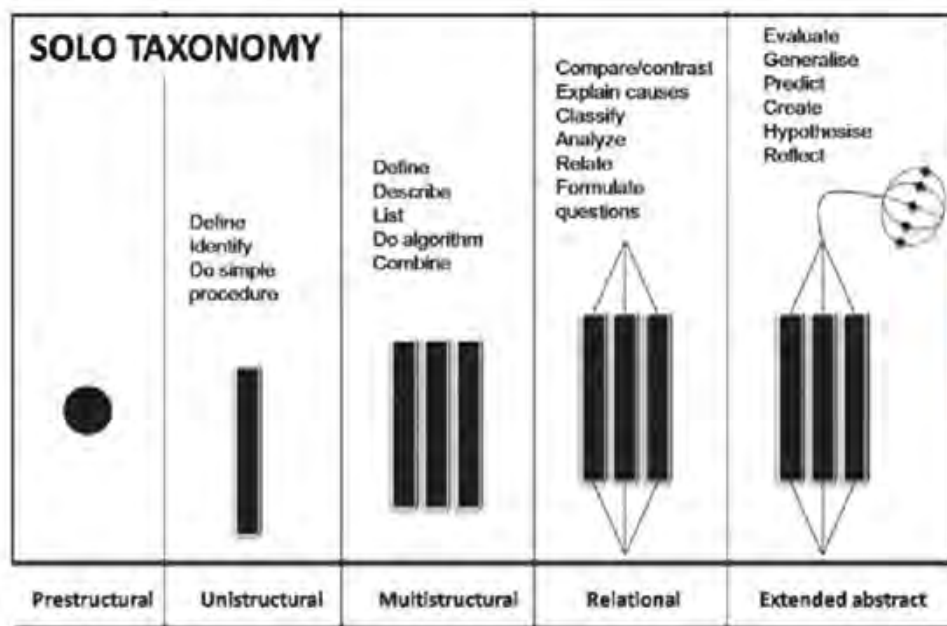
#### **Relational verbs that encompass a more critical thinking approach:**

analyse, explain, predict, conclude, summarise (precis), review, argue, transfer, make a plan, characterise, compare, contrast, differentiate, organise, debate, make a case, construct, review and re-write, examine

#### **Extended abstract – verbs that engage deeper learning and critical thinking:**

Theorize, hypothesize, generalize, reflect, generate, create, compose, invent, originate, prove from first principles, make an original case, solve from first principles.

Diagram sourced



Subgroups of the SOLO taxonomy

Diagram sourced from Researchgate, 2019

Hattie (2016) provides his own levels or phases of deepening understanding which are, “Acquiring surface learning, consolidating surface learning, acquiring deep learning, consolidating deep learning and transfer” but pays tribute to Biggs’ original model (see above). “A most powerful model to illustrate this distinction between surface and deep is the structure of observed learning outcomes,” or SOLO, (Hattie 2016). The Review cites research of its learning progressions as being “constructed from empirical evidence” and assumes again an act of faith on the part of the reader/teacher, “Research into learning pathways has included studies of ‘learning progressions’, defined as descriptions and illustrations of increasing understanding or proficiency in an area of learning. Unlike sequences of proposed learning found in many curriculum frameworks, learning progressions are constructed from empirical evidence about how proficiency typically develops in practice.” And its genesis, “The belief is that more explicit, evidence-based descriptions of how learning occurs in practice will provide an improved basis for structuring curricula and deciding appropriate instructional sequences, as well as better frames of reference for establishing where learners are in their learning and monitoring improvements over time.” It cites New Zealand’s recent adoption of the term ‘capabilities’ and a ‘capabilities framework’ that was not linked to school years, but allowed students to demonstrate mastery of capabilities ‘and then move on’. Biggs SOLO taxonomy, however, has been applied successfully around the world in Singapore, Malaysia, Hong Kong, Japan, the United Kingdom, Denmark, USA, Canada and in Australia and New Zealand. It has been

favoured in universities e.g. “During 2007 all Danish university curricula were reformulated to explicitly state course objectives due to the adoption of a new Danish national grading scale which stipulated that grades were to be given based on how well students meet explicit course objectives. The Faculties of Science at University of Aarhus and University of Southern Denmark interpreted “course objectives” as “intended learning outcomes” (ILO) and systematically formulated all such as competencies using the SOLO taxonomy that operates with five numbered progressive levels of competencies.” (Braband & Dahl, 2009)

What happens too often with the current syllabus is the teacher (and some students) begin to see near the end of the unit that they, (both the student and teacher by implication) are going to fail the assessment and try to offer remedial learning. For example a model program for English Advanced written by NESA and available on its website offers, “Teachers can use information gathered from this plan to make decisions regarding any required revision or additional learning to assist students with their understanding of the module and their essay writing.” Learning progressions will anticipate this and obviate it.

### **Learning Progressions and decluttering the syllabus of content**

There is ample research to show that content heavy syllabus and when students are overloaded with assessments they revert to surface approaches and it should be noted that problem based learning because of its heavy workload such as I have seen with the International Baccalaureate or Extension 2 projects in English rather than encouraging deeper learning can result in the opposite – surface approaches. “Case-based learning may however lead to excessive workloads for both teacher and student (McNaught et al. 2007; McCabe et al. 2009). McNaught et al. found that in the first run of a service science course in first-year physics students achieved higher level learning outcomes than previously, but in the course evaluation the students complained of too heavy a workload, which was also reflected in a significant increase in surface approach scores in the Study Process Questionnaire.” John Bigg, 2011, *Teaching for Quality Learning at University (Fourth edition)*

### **The excellent *English textual concepts* website – post-structuralism and postmodernism**

(see <http://www.englishtextualconcepts.nsw.edu.au/>) compiled by ETA and the Department of Education to encourage conceptual programming has already codified levels of understanding or learning progressions to some extent under the headings “Argument, Authority, Character, Code and Convention, Connotation, Imagery and Symbol, Context, Genre, Intertextuality, Literary value, Narrative, Perspective, Point of view, Representation, Style, and Theme”. These would need to be further delineated for each unit of work. The textual

concepts approach seems also to be gaining some traction since I have seen teachers referring to it on the ETA Facebook site as this inspiring one with a cross curriculum priority does below (NB: the visitor/download counter on the site is not working, it shows the same numbers in November 2019):

8:57



Howdy folks,  
We're teaching Niki Caro's 'The Whale Rider' to a Stage 4 class as part of an integrated unit called 'Rock and Water'.

We're also teaching 'The Polynesian Expansion Across the Pacific' in History and 'Water in the World' in Geography.

Anyhoo, for each unit we do, we look to explicitly teach two of the English Textual Concepts and this time we're doing 'Perspective' and 'Literary Value'. These were chosen as they line up with the STEM content quite nicely.

*(Apologies to whoever posted this for not referencing it. I hope my compliments compensate somewhat?)*

### ***Post-structuralism and deconstruction***

But just one quibble which is not to denigrate overall, what is so good about these learning processes or progressions, is the level defined as appropriate for a Stage 6 understanding of ***Representation*** via the written word (I'm leaving

aside images as they open up another essential investigation into the role of popular myth in constructing meaning, from another poststructuralist, Roland Barthes): That is, if we are going to use Derrida's term "deconstruction" in the descriptors referring to the different learning levels that we utilise his key idea of "**Différance**" (a conflation of difference and deferral) and examine the deconstruction of meaning in two phases. First the referential aspect of words as they relate to objects, feelings and ideas and then in the second phase how inevitably we uncover language or representation's political intent which Derrida saw the process of deconstruction as disclosing and dismantling. Over the course of his writing Derrida refined deconstruction making it a political exercise to seek justice for the marginalised voices of minority groups and disenfranchised peoples. The suggested two phase approach, therefore, is a mere primer but I hope useful.

In the first phase we see that the meaning of words (semiotics) is contingent and contiguous rather than referential, is endlessly deferred, and is infinitely divisible (differentiated) with the presence/absence of numerous *traces* or associations (e.g. the word "dog" conjures the word "cat") An understanding easily communicated to a student by asking them to look up in a dictionary the word pink, "adjective: of a colour intermediate between red and white, as of coral or salmon." Contingent= dependent on another meaning, red and white, or coral and salmon - assuming we know what coral and salmon are; contiguous= bordering white and red. Then if we look up "red" in the dictionary that meaning will also be deferred, "of a colour at the end of the spectrum next to orange and opposite violet, as of blood, fire, or rubies." Lastly "pink" has traces of other meanings – both present and absent, too numerous to mention beyond the eponymous pop-rock singer, *Pink*.

We become aware very early of the political aspect of language as certain lingering old fashioned meanings (master=in control, mistress=louche) appear hierarchical and binary based on the dualistic values of dominant groups at the time. What Derrida referred to as logocentrism (a belief in and attempt to make language structurally coherent, hierarchical and stable) and then phallogocentrism, if it was orientated as well to the masculine. But if we simply upend the "old" meanings and recalibrate them to suit a new orthodoxy but in exactly the same way that the old dominant groups did, we are simply imposing or inventing another hierarchy and binaries for similar purposes. ***And if we pretend a word amongst all this instability can mean whatever we want it to mean, i.e. "Freedom is slavery" or that there really are "alternative facts" we may have a very sinister motive indeed.***

At present all that the conceptual stages of representation illuminate, from ES1 through to Stage 6, is that representation has an intention subjectively construed

and received – allowing for a small Derrida tribute in Stage 6 that “the very act of representation is an act of invention”.

The second phase of the goal of deconstruction therefore is to break down, uncover or analyse the signification of these relationships, tensions, differences and the paradoxes or aporias that we encounter. To evaluate also historical usages of words. A word like “fat” once a sign of prosperity, health and higher class has now almost the opposite signification. We discover, Derrida argues in this process, the inevitable political intention behind the representation and the values embedded in it by a powerful dominant institution. That institution can of course be one we perceive as good if what it represents, “all men are created equal” we perceive as good because we adhere to those values. But in George Orwell’s novel about a totalitarian state, *1984*, a powerful institution (the Ministry of Truth ☺) is trying to change the meaning of freedom held by most people in Western democracies. Its slogan is “Freedom is slavery” – an antithetical coupling of great tension which attempts to confuse and cancel out the meaning of the opposite. Eventually “Newspeak” aims to extinguish the word freedom thereby extinguishing the concept of freedom.

***Otherwise attempts to incorporate Derrida’s theories of deconstruction into the syllabus (and to use the term so loosely) have resulted in some practices in teaching which categorically induce surface learning (identifying and recognising – see SOLO).*** I am speaking of the hunt for “techniques” e.g. “the poem uses alliteration to express the man’s feelings” or “Churchill uses hypophora to explain his war policy, “You ask, what is our policy? I will say: It is to wage war, by sea, land, and air, with all our might and with all the strength..”

***This is something that a set of new syllabuses should address and eradicate because it is obviating or even preventing a conceptual approach to a deeper understanding while embedding a surface approach.*** As an HSC marker and judge marker since 2005 I have seen how this first arose (the 2005 HSC marking criteria specified the **number** of techniques required in a response) prompting students and teachers who sought shortcuts to understanding to adopt the practice. NESA’s subsequent attempts to stamp out the practice, from about 2010 onwards, with its strongly worded memos condemning shopping “lists of techniques” have largely failed. It is more expedient, easier, quicker to give students a list of techniques and instruct them to “go find at least two in the text” than facilitate a deeper understanding. And yet Australia had moved to standards based marking – emphasising qualitative rather than quantitative measures in 2001.



If students could arrive at a basic conceptual understanding of representation as deconstructed by Derrida and Foucault for the written word and Barthes for images (they are all post-structuralists) and appropriate to their level, that would have real world benefits for their ability to think critically and deepen their understanding of how language including visual language is used - not just to refer to an object, idea, person, situation or value and attitude but to change people's thinking.

### ***Postmodernism***

Of the associated concern that the 2001 English syllabus aimed to teach postmodernism and the new syllabuses will too, I share some concerns. But not because there is no need. Rather in the West we are becoming numb, like Winston Smith, the protagonist of the post-modern world of *1984*, to extraordinary levels of dissembling by an American president, to a relativism or denial of objective reality without precedent and to the manipulation of language that is creating a 21<sup>st</sup> *Newspeak* robbed of meaning or accountability. "It's under control as much as you can control it." "It's going to disappear... I hope."

Most texts written after the 1950's are in some way warning of a growing postmodern relativism while employing various postmodern stylistic features. (If one takes postmodern relativism to mean depicting the world as a field of contesting explanations none of which can claim any authority or transcendent warrant.) Typically there is a questioning of Western culture categorised as an ancient white overbearing patriarchal authority ☺. Ironically practised mostly by white male writers (although the Modernist Virginia Woolf does it superbly, absent the humour and irreverence of a postmodern classic like *Catch-22*). But only the latter, the attacks on the white capitalist patriarchy, would be true of its teaching.

Because while teachers may sincerely aim to teach an understanding of postmodern relativism, and it is intrinsically complex and therefore time consuming, they frequently overlook how they are seeding a singular simplistic narrative to the exclusion of others - by shooting down the patriarchy and replacing it with what *they* consider a modern perspective with modern values... they are not giving children the freedom to choose their own.

Postmodern relativism, randomness, contingency, along with its questioning of institutional authority and power conveyed in these texts either thematically, or stylistically with pastiche, intertextuality, fragmentation and disorder, is not being understood as an expression of freedom and a quest for individual validation. Accepting of course that validation or appearance will end in failure is the human condition. All along holding an awareness, paradoxically, of our physicality and physical circumstances. E.g. Typically in Kazuo Ishiguro's Postmodern novels such as *An Artist of the Floating World*, a man is out of step

with his time (Post WWII) but dogmatically denying, hiding and resisting the daunting truth, to both himself and the reader, that what he claimed was his duty in Imperial Japan was heartless and self-serving and that he betrayed good people.

That the official “left” or “liberal” is becoming coercive and dogmatic is causing great concern among writers today as much as it did George Orwell in 1949 (among them Noam Chomsky, Margaret Atwood and Malcolm Gladwell) who have done considerably more for Left wing causes, Feminist causes and equality than the people now “trolling” them online. I am talking of the open letter of July 7, 2020, “A Letter on Justice and Open Debate” to Harper’s Magazine”

“The forces of illiberalism are gaining strength throughout the world and have a powerful ally in Donald Trump ... **resistance must not be allowed to harden into its own brand of dogma or coercion**—which right-wing demagogues are already exploiting.

The free exchange of information and ideas, the lifeblood of a liberal society, is daily becoming more constricted. While we have come to expect this on the radical right, censoriousness is also spreading more widely in our culture: an intolerance of opposing views, a vogue for public shaming and ostracism, and **the tendency to dissolve complex policy issues in a blinding moral certainty.**”

It would seem therefore that I agree with an aspect of Mark Latham’s article “The Heavy Cost of Education’s Failed Experiment” on the consequences of teaching a Postmodern view in the 2001 syllabus. Yes, certainly in the methodology of its teaching and that was, as I explain below, largely the result of poor dissemination at the time e.g. How was an understanding of Postmodernism earlier manifested in students and teacher’s responses in the HSC? Confusedly. From 2002 until about 2009 essays on Critical study of texts (Module B) in the HSC, which I was marking, would frequently begin with what was purportedly the student’s own interpretation of the text (e.g. Shakespeare’s *King Lear*). That would commonly be an Existentialist or Feminist critique but then dangling from it like useless appendages were a number of alternative “readings” - Marxist, Postmodern, Post-colonial .... Disconnected, superficial, stilted and clearly not the student’s own. But regardless they would have involved hours of study and reading by an anxious student doing their best and probably a teacher in the same predicament. Again after a few years NESAC started to send out memorandums to schools with feedback criticising this approach but even so certain teachers were persisting with it as late as 2010 – nine years after the introduction of the syllabus. The initial wording of the Module B (Critical study of text) rubric of

the **2001 syllabus** was partly to blame, it read, “They (students) refine their own understanding and interpretations of the prescribed text and critically consider these in the light of the perspectives of others.” Critical study of text has continued in the **new 2017 syllabus** but the wording makes NESA’s intentions much clearer and therefore the student’s understanding, “Central to this study is the close analysis of the text’s **construction**, content and language to develop **students’ own rich interpretation of the text**, basing their judgements on detailed evidence drawn from their research and reading.” Clearly this is a much better understanding of what students should do for a postmodern relativistic reading before they settle on their own. Because it is signalled to the teacher and student with the reference and precedence given to a student’s “own rich interpretation”. Consider “contesting explanations” but value your own. Here is how Orwell in *1984* shows what a postmodern “understanding” of the world’s worst people and governments reveals when Winston (the protagonist) learns with horror about what Ingsoc (English “socialism”) or Big Brother actually stands for, as O’Brien bluntly tells him, it has no ideology, beliefs or values or even laws –no transcendent warrant at all:

“The Party seeks power entirely for its own sake. We are not interested in the good of others; we are interested solely in power. Not wealth or luxury or long life or happiness: only power, pure power. What pure power means you will understand presently. We are different from all the oligarchies of the past, in that we know what we are doing. All the others, even those who resembled ourselves, were cowards and hypocrites. The German Nazis and the Russian Communists came very close to us in their methods, but they never had the courage to recognize their own motives. They pretended, perhaps they even believed, that they had seized power unwillingly and for a limited time, and that just round the corner there lay a paradise where human beings would be free and equal. We are not like that. We know that no one ever seizes power with the intention of relinquishing it. Power is not a means, it is an end. One does not establish a dictatorship in order to safeguard a revolution; one makes the revolution in order to establish the dictatorship. The object of persecution is persecution. The object of torture is torture. The object of power is power. Now do you begin to understand me?”

So I advocate instead for better communication (and the 2017 syllabus has been implemented superbly by NESA - please see my critique of it as part of this submission) and the careful timely introduction of ideas or concepts that are difficult to grasp so that they are properly understood by students and teachers. And this is what Master’s review aims to do. Postmodernism or its linguistic branch, post-structuralism, a semiotic theory, should not be “dumbed down”,

made ludicrously reductive because this is the precise opposite of what post-structuralists/postmodernists like Derrida, Foucault or Barthes intended to show. And a deep understanding of it will help the best students to make sense of a novel like George Orwell's *1984* and the geopolitics of what could be happening right now in our part of the world. Is China a danger to Australia? Perhaps it is, perhaps it is not 😊 but we need people to be able to read its political rhetoric correctly.

**Note: I should add *1984* is not a postmodern novel, its tone is far too serious and it lacks the stylistic features of a postmodern novel while it also seeks to establish boundaries and truths. Postmodern texts are also less explicitly didactic. The world of *1984* – “Oceania”, however, is postmodern. Some classic postmodern novels: *Slaughterhouse-Five*, *Gravity's Rainbow*, *Catch-22*. Postmodern novels and films reveal the worst aspects of the world and governments (hypocrisies, contradictions, absurdities and evils) they do not advocate for them but warn us against them. Stylistically they break all the rules of older texts.**

### ***Cross-curriculum priorities***

Regarding “cross-curriculum priorities”; with the number of Asian and students of various ethnicities in Australian schools and with the aim of inclusivity, an essential element of self-efficacy, (see more below under Teacher expectations) we should teach quality literary works by Asian and other nationalities. Learning from Indigenous use of the Australian bushland prior to white settlement has a holistic, moral, cultural imperative out of respect for the original dwellers of this country and our early Anglo-Celtic heritage (Australia was a confronting harsh environment for English, Irish and Scottish settlers) and as well a common sense one in social and sustainability terms. Bruce Pascoe's *Dark Emu* which has documented accounts of Aboriginal back-burning practices during the cooler, wetter winter months has great relevance today; the horrendous bushfires in Australia this year should convince the most hardened sceptic of the need to think about what an extraordinary culture, over thousands of years, learned in order to survive, and can teach us. Are there any scientific principles or is there scientific reasoning behind such practices? Not in the way that Western science and the word is understood, although I recently heard a government sycophant refer to Indigenous “science”. When these practices, logically, would have been experientially derived even if consequentially that is good science. But to flatter to deceive and debase the scientific method and the word will have us drinking bleach or believing as a broken Winston of *1984* does finally, that,  $2 + 2 = 5$ .

### ***Threshold Concepts***

I am puzzled as to why there is no mention of “threshold concepts” in the Review since this is a rich area of research and of critical importance in learning progressions. In teaching English, for some time now, I have greatly emphasised the course rubric and when they are well written can usually discern a “threshold concept”. Biggs (2011) sees “threshold concepts” as one of the pivots enabling students to move from declarative to functioning knowledge. Threshold concepts (also referred to as “troublesome concepts”) can be, for instance, understanding the relationship between “being and thinking” or “being and remembering” in terms of identity in Hamlet. When properly and deeply grasped they can act like a portal to a new plane of understanding, transformational, giving the student a new capacity to apply knowledge in a functional way. “It (the threshold concept) represents a transformed way of understanding, or interpreting, or viewing something, without which the learner cannot progress, and results in a reformulation of the learners’ frame of meaning (Timmermans, 2010).

### ***Teacher expectancies and its connection to student motivation and self-efficacy – self-regulation of it in particular***

“This principle is based on the belief that high expectations should be set for every student’s learning. The principle has two components: first, every student should be expected to make excellent ongoing progress in their learning, where ‘excellent’ progress may be differently defined for different students; and second, every student should be expected to achieve high standards in a small number of specified learning areas by the time they complete their schooling.”  
NSW Curriculum Review, 2020

There have been some key findings in this field of research quite recently in New Zealand, an education system and demographic similar to our own. A 2014 study entitled, “A teacher expectation intervention: Modelling the practices of high expectation teachers” conducted by Christine M. Rubie-Davies, Elizabeth R. Peterson, Chris G. Sibley and Robert Rosenthal of the original and famous “Pygmalion in the classroom” Harvard study of 1968 which opened this field of research in teacher expectancy theory. As the title suggests the intervention gave teachers a mere four workshops in which they were instructed in how to emulate the practices of high expectation/low differentiating teachers. Its positive outcomes augur well for any school wishing to implement a similar intervention. “Low differentiating” meaning here that these teachers did not allow prejudices about cultural background or ethnicity or knowledge about students’ abilities and attitudes to differentiate their expectations of them, either because they were weak or strong students, but rather to have high expectations

and treat all students equally. “In a study of this kind, Tenenbaum and Ruck (2007) have shown that student ethnicity can influence teacher expectations with teachers having higher expectations for white and Asian students when compared with non-Asian ethnic minorities.” Rubie-Davis et al, 2014.

It was conducted in Auckland across 12 schools, 90 teachers and 2408 students of varying ethnicity and was the first to attempt to positively influence student achievement with an intervention designed to change teacher practices and beliefs to replicate those of teachers with high expectation for all their students. It was successful achieving growth in students’ mathematics scores over the control equivalent to three months of an academic year (28%). Up to this point studies had assumed that merely by making teachers aware of the interactions with students that contributed to high expectancy effects they would change. Brophy in a 1983 study identified 17 teacher behaviours and interactions for equity. But no studies were done to see if this was realised in practice. Brophy (1985) showed teachers’ tendency to wait less time for low expectation students (lows) to respond to a question than they do for high expectation students (highs), to criticise lows more often for failure than highs, but praise them less frequently for success than highs, and to call on lows less frequently than highs to answer questions. Quite disturbing reading!

“When teachers have high expectations for student achievement they interact with their students in ways that cause their expectations to become realised (Good & Nicole, 2001). Madon, Jussim, and Eccles (1997) controlled for prior mathematics ability and showed that in mathematics for both high and low achievers, teachers’ under- as well as over-estimates of achievements produced self-fulfilling prophecy effects.” Rubie-Davies et al, 2014.

The study also revealed some added benefits according to Zimmerman’s definition of Self-regulation which is, “the degree to which students are metacognitively, motivationally, and behaviourally active participants in their own learning processes’ (p. 137). The commonality was evident to such an extent that teachers identified by Rubie-Davis et al as having high expectations for *all* their students “differ markedly ... setting achievable goals, giving regular feedback, promoting student autonomy” could be identified as instilling or modelling the first two levels of student self-regulation (see Zimmerman’s multi-level training). Furthermore, as well as continuous feedback, “goal setting” a major and essential emphasis for advocates of self-regulation (Zimmerman, Wolters and Schunk) what was also at the core of these teachers’ practices, was that “providing students with a choice resulted in greater intrinsic motivation to complete the task, increased self-competence beliefs, and improved performance on a test when compared with those students who were given no choice.”

So quite conclusively the emphasis in this review on High Expectations by all teachers for all students is a necessary component for a new curriculum which may have students sitting several levels below or above others. It would be wise, however, to heed the work of Elisha Babad on Teacher Expectancy Effects (1995) which revealed that *simply telling teachers what they needed to do is insufficient*, “a subsequent post-measurement (unpublished) did not reveal any change in the measured variables.” They didn’t change negative practices. The workshops instituted by Rubie et al in their 2014 study are a necessary constructive and reflective exercise to enact real and permanent change in teacher expectations. NESAs should provide similar workshops or approve a Professional Development course provider and make attendance mandatory.

### **Cognitive load theory**

“CLT is one of our best theories,” he (Hattie) says. “It has been around for many, many years and is now in high interest.” (Hattie 2020). Hattie and Yates suggest that a cognitive theory of how the mind learns can yield insight into effective teaching: “This is a theory that generates many useful and practical ideas about instruction that are consistent with the wisdom and experiences of many senior teachers.” Youtube, Oct 26, 2013. This view that Cognitive Load theory should be taught to all teachers of all subjects is evidently shared by the Department of Education’s **CESE** (Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation) in citing Dylan Wiliam’s tribute to it as, “the single most important thing for teachers to know.” (Wiliam, 2017)

During the past two decades, cognitive load theory (CLT: Paas et al. 2003a, 2004; Sweller 1988; Sweller et al. 1998; Van Merriënboer and Sweller 2005) has become an influential theory in the fields of educational psychology and instructional design. Paas, van Gog and Sweller (2010) speak of Cognitive Load theory’s longevity and relevance citing the “scientific and practical reasons why CLT has survived and become influential”: That it has survived, “rigorous tests of falsification, consistent confirmation of existing hypotheses, timely modifications of the theory as required by new data, and generation of new hypotheses.” For those involved in instructional design it has “generated over the last two decades a unique variety of useful and effective instructional designs and procedures” Van Merriënboer and Sweller 2005 (as cited in (Paas, van Gog, & Sweller, 2010)).

Cognitive Load theory (CLT) can explain many learning situations a teacher will encounter and design and the reasons for important considerations and instructional design choices. Among them the reasons prior knowledge is so important; why “busy work” which some students like because they can listen to music at the same time and it “keeps them quiet”, is overlooking that little or

no learning takes place when intrinsic cognitive load is low, (Chandler 1994); how not stretching students can make them go backwards. The expertise reversal effect “With increasing expertise, those intrinsic, interacting elements become extraneous to further learning because they are already part of long-term memory with learning *being enhanced* if the elements are eliminated.” (Sweller 2010); what the goal-free effect is and how it works; why collaborative learning or group work can be more productive than individual work.

The CESE has done some valuable work in unpacking Cognitive Load Theory effects into instructional design and teaching strategies although I think Sweller’s own explanations of his theory would be perfectly coherent to teachers who would quickly grasp CLT’s relevance to their work. But I have never been made aware of CESE’s extremely useful publications (prior to studying Educational Psychology) or seen them disseminated to private independent schools. Nor did it seem that third year university students studying teaching had any idea of CESE’s existence or of Cognitive Load theory. Researchers *need* to consult and workshop with teachers (practitioners) to see how educational theory can be implemented.

***This is another critical gap I am referring to in my concerns about a new syllabus being implemented.***

CESE in its 2018 Classroom Practice Guide to Cognitive Load theory provides teaching examples, in English, up to Year 10. But I am afraid, these are perhaps too prosaic, at least in English, unlikely to excite teachers to learn more about what Hattie, Wiliam and other leading researchers see as a transformational learning theory for educators. Many strategies and effects can be intuitively understood such as scaffolding or the Worked example or Problem completion effect but the deeper understanding of how CLT applies would embed them more effectively in practice. That is what needs to be done. Others like the Goal-free effect (not included in the guide) would validate teachers at more senior levels who have learned over the years that open problems develop students’ own thinking. One example would be “open questions” after *first* providing rich context with direct instruction: Early on in a study of Hamlet ask the class, “How do you think Hamlet’s royal and filial resistance or detachment, ‘O cursèd spite, / That ever I was born to set it right!’ will complicate the dramatic conflict and a resolution - and involve the audience in his problem?” At a time when Elizabethans are beginning to see the possibilities of choosing their own destinies in opposition to Medieval notions of a fixed station in life and yet Francis Bacon, an influential figure, is arguing that, “*Revenge is a kind of wild justice, which the more a man's nature runs to, the more ought law to weed it out.*” Inferring and hypothesising in order to interpret are the most effective critical thinking habits to develop in students (Abrami et al



2008). To reduce rigid “goal states” and given “means-ends” strategies in teaching because of the elemental overload they involve as the student tries to work out the “right answer” or what’s in the teacher’s head. When teaching Shakespeare’s plays to ease up on the tables comprising boxes to be filled in containing “quote+technique+purpose+ effect” that students slave over exasperatedly!

An example of the Guidance fading effect or Expertise Reversal effect found in a study (Oksa, Kalyuga, & Chandler, 2010) examining the teaching of Shakespeare may be familiar to teachers already. When students struggle with Shakespeare’s language, teachers will often resort to “No Fear Shakespeare” which provides an online contemporary version of Shakespeare’s English alongside the original text. With more able students and as students become more adept in the language this element (the contemporary version) becomes extraneous to their intrinsic processing of the meaning of the text. It should then be removed because it is actually slowing the learning (Guidance Fading effect) or worse, regressing it (Expertise Reversal effect), turning experts back into novices.

### ***My own review of the 2017 syllabus that I did for the major project of my Master in Educational Psychology in 2019***

My own critique of the 2017 syllabus through an educational psychology lens shared the main concerns of Masters’ review about the greater need for the application of skills (functioning knowledge or performances of understanding) rather than the assessment of content or declarative knowledge. I saw this in the syllabus as the difference between students studying the Representations of other writers and doing their own Representing with their own ideas. I have included it in this submission and sent it earlier this year to NESA to check any discrepancies with the intention of publishing it at some point.

### **Conclusion**

Finally I hope for all teachers who work so hard and give so much of their personal lives over to this vocation that Geoff Masters’ Review implements real pedagogical change because it communicates the need for it authentically. Learning progressions as a mechanism is a compelling argument for reform. Students lack writing skills, even in Year 12 Advanced English I have seen them struggle to write a paragraph in an hour. This must not be something that is allowed to pass before they progress to a higher level; and learning progressions provides that opportunity. Problem solving and writing synthesise at the highest levels of cognition when students can understand and explain why, for instance, the tortured protagonist of *The Joker* comments so frequently on the nature of the constructed world he inhabits. Why our constructed world blurs fiction and reality so that a reality show host becomes a real president.

And runs the country like he's still in one with weekly dramas involving sackings, spiteful gossip and near death reprieves. It's very postmodern! We live in a world of faster communication, mass mediated reality, consumer fetishism and the commodification of deeply held human values, a greater diversity of cultures and mores and a consequent pluralism. Postmodern texts and readings pose many moral conundrums and the opportunities to develop the sophisticated critical thinking needed to understand our complex media driven world in order to make correct judgements. But the application and development of writing skills in expositions to represent students' own deep thinking must be one of the primary goals of a new English curriculum.