Minutes from panel discussion: 'Falling Numbers, Barriers, and the Way Forward'

Following introductions, Dr Sos Eltis invited Dr Gary Snapper to begin the discussion with his presentation on the decline in A-Level English uptake and its causes (please see his powerpoint notes for the statistics).

Following on, the other panellists were asked for their experiences of falling numbers, gender ratios, and the transition from GCSE to A-Level. Julia Gibson identified students as “victims of the subject’s success”, as the challenges of English concealed earlier in their school journey were unenjoyable surprises at A-Level. There was shock and noticeably less desire among students to push through the challenges of English in comparison to Maths, where challenge and reward are the foundation of the subject’s interest. Gary Snapper noted that Barbara Bleiman’s notion of Big Picture English is a good way to introduce the challenges earlier on and that introducing theory, politics, and cultural commentaries to English studies is an excellent way to engage and motivate (with politics, especially) male students. Sos Eltis noted that she encourages her undergraduates to “steer into difficulty” when thinking about literature, in order to reap the greatest reward. Glenn Tapp pointed to how easily reducible challenges and ‘the point’ of KS3 English are to “this is on your GCSE” – the disinteresting telos of the current syllabus. By contrast, he noted that the observed rise in numbers taking English at his school appears linked to freedom in teaching, away from “dreaded” AOs, due to the government’s cancellation of exams during the pandemic. Charlotte Richer argued the challenge in English was a perception of difficulty not resulting in any clear reward – the non-linearity of the subject can be very off-putting to students. She also called for the need to show English as a taught subject, as opposed to a reading subject where students could feel lost and unsupported.

She continued that the idea of students as readers – that an English degree is perceived as only for voracious readers – presents problems. There needs to be a new emphasis on reading and its space for fun which does not neglect the demands of the curriculum and its exams. She suggested that the recent boom in high-quality young adult literature is slowing the transition of students to reading degree-level material and that there is a lost zone between comfort reading and reading-for-school that can be exploited to stress the variety of literature available within an English degree. Gary Snapper suggested that if students conceive of English as more akin to cultural studies, there may be more success in retaining numbers from the start. Film studies and cultural criticism is a good way to attract male students to English. He continued that snobbiness about reading choices – what you are *supposed* to read – is patently off-putting. Less judgement within reading and a freer space in which to explore it will be beneficial. Sos Eltis pointed to the rise in Joint School degrees (i.e. English and History) as potentially linked to teaching English so that it speaks to other subjects. If so taught from lower years, could this ameliorate the difficulties or dilemmas students face when selecting their A-Levels?

Julia Gibson spoke of her positive experience in switching from *Hamlet* to *Measure for Measure*, which made modern questions of gender relevant to the studied text. The contextual background of the set text could be compared and contrasted to students’ knowledge from their other A-Level choices, notably History, which created a sense of purpose for studying English. Gary Snapper noted that it is important to link old and new texts in order to create excitement. Imagine the potential of students who had been taught the saga tradition (*Beowulf* through to *Harry Potter*) starting in Year 7. Sos Eltis supported “dialogues across history” but acknowledged the current reality of compartmentalising and dividing the subject into easily-teachable bites. Glenn Tapp noted that links across subjects at A-Level were powerful when relevant but that teachers have to gamble and rely on the subject combinations chosen by their students. He also argued cross-curricular links most benefit the strongest students, so care must be taken.

Sos Eltis then moved the discussion to employability and career pathways following an English degree. Charlotte Richer responded that employability is becoming a bad word and needs more nuance. She cited her students’ interest in environmental and sustainable careers as a possible springboard into literature. Connecting an English degree to emerging themes and areas of employment and demonstrating how an it will assist with job satisfaction, as opposed to a dull presentation of graduate earnings statistics, would be a good way for universities to help. Julia Gibson noted that her school was not very good at advertising English A-Level and that support in recruitment would be very useful. Sos Eltis asked whether that meant earlier interventions would be better. They agreed that targeting Year 11s could galvanise a longer-term sense of English as a pathway, not simply a subject that would be abandoned after GCSE or A-Level. Glenn Tapp noted that the public drive towards pragmatism is a battleground for English: debt dissuades so students must be sure their degree will financially benefit them further down the line. Dull earning information is necessary, however, passionate role models are the single best influence on students. Happiness and contentment in a job is fast becoming a top priority for many young people, so an English degree should demonstrate how it can enable this pursuit.

The floor was then opened for questions and comments. Ashleigh Armstrong shared her experiences of teaching male A-Level students, noting their love of Robert Browning and interest in how they could define themselves (their masculinity) using literature. Again, comparing old and new texts was discussed as a beneficial way to find contemporary meaning and purpose for English as an A-Level choice. NEA choice was roundly agreed as crucial for keeping (male) students engaged. Jaquie Reid said that the reliability of marking has been an historic issue at her school. Both GCSE and A-Level marking appeared far more variable in English than in sciences and even other humanities. Although the English uptake at her school was falling, the quality and commitment of her students increased – is this an acceptable trade-off? Gary Snapper noted the extraordinary irony of increased variability in marking when exam boards are struggling to find good markers who understand the subject. He continued that the shocking unreliability of marking is an issue upon which students pick up and internalise as a dissuading influence in choosing English. Jaquie Reid replied that certainty in marking would encourage degree uptake as students would feel surer in their ability and ambition for employment certainty. Gary Snapper ended the panel discussion with his belief that the gender imbalance issue is wrapped up with the (perceptions of the) viability of English as a subject and as a pathway beyond formal study. The gender question will be the focus of the next issue of *Teaching English*, published by the National Association for the Teaching of English and edited by Gary Snapper.