The Persistent Pedagogy of ‘Growth’

Ian Reid

Eeckes: You get quite used to it. It grows on you.
Seagoo: If it grew up me I’d chop it off.
— The Coon Show

In his Introduction to Questions of English, a recent study of what English teachers in Australia, the USA and Britain think about their subject, Robin Peel refers to the durable conviction that good English teaching, by giving scope to ‘the student voice’, could be ‘a liberating process that would allow children to escape the norms of society’ (Peel, Patterson & Gerlach 2000: 8). This wish to emphasise the individual’s expressive potential and emancipatory development, framed in opposition to normative social constraints, has continued to be immensely popular as a motive for studying English. Peel and his co-authors demonstrate that, despite critiques from left and right, ‘personal growth’ approaches to English remain attractive to schoolteachers in all three countries—more attractive, in fact, than any other approach. They present evidence for this finding from questionnaire and interview data, drawing on a range of students, teachers and curriculum specialists. Although there are some differences between one country and another, in general approximately four in every five respondents still identify this model as most in line with their own views.

But what exactly is this model? Does ‘personal growth’ mean much the same thing to everyone? What specific practices and beliefs are associated with it? What are their historical origins? What explains their persistence? Do they constitute a coherent credo for teachers and a clear program for the classroom? Is ‘personal growth’ a
delusory ideal, masking the processes that actually comprise English? Or a defensible, desirable and achievable goal? Can it have a productive relationship with any of the supposedly separate models of English teaching often set in contrast with it?

The most obvious reference point for these questions is John Dixon’s highly influential 1967 book *Growth Through English*, which put forward a polemical schema comprising three concepts of an English curriculum. Dixon regarded with disfavour those focused on ‘skills’ (primarily of literacy) and on ‘cultural heritage’ (embodied in a nationalist literary tradition). The third, enthusiastically advocated in his book, he characterized as a ‘personal growth’ model. It featured experiential learning processes and an active engagement with everyday uses of language.

A compulsion to supplement Dixon’s triad has seemed irresistible to later commentators, who present various taxonomic elaborations in an attempt to cover the range of contemporary practitioners’ views about the main focus of what they teach. For instance the 1989 Cox Report in Britain described five versions of English—not only cultural heritage, personal growth, and skills (renamed ‘adult needs’), but also a cross-curricular model and cultural criticism. Peel and Hargreaves used those categories for their 1995 paper in *English in Education*, reporting the results of a survey of teachers and students in Australia, England and the United States. They found that a high proportion of the respondents, especially students and secondary teachers, ‘agreed, or strongly agreed, with the ‘personal growth’ model of English, being the one which emphasizes the development of the individual as understood in traditional humanist terms’ (Peel & Hargreaves 1995: 44). It has since been noted that this same model continues to enjoy comparable popularity in other countries as well, such as New Zealand (Brown 1998; Locke 2000).

But the matter is not quite so simple: Peel and Hargreaves observe that English specialists ‘embrace a variety of views, some of which appear to be contradictory. Many of the respondents who endorsed the “personal growth” model also agreed with the poststructuralist view that … the meaning of the text is governed by historical and cultural factors’ (Peel & Hargreaves 1995: 45). Peel himself contributes to the confusion when mentioning the popular notion that reading imaginative texts allows a pleasurable ‘escape from self’ into enchanted worlds; he goes on to say that the widespread belief in English as offering ‘a legitimisation of this experience of enchantment’ is ‘evidence of the success of the Personal Growth model’ (Peel et al. 2000: 177). Escape from self is very different from cultivation of self, and the former does not belong to the view of English that John Dixon thought he was encouraging.

As Wayne Sawyer has remarked, the personal growth model popularized by Dixon had two closely related student-centred components: it attached a high value both to individual experience and to an active use of everyday language (Sawyer 1998). Together these were seen as resources for an authentic process of learning, which it was
the English teacher's task to facilitate. Development of self and development of language went hand in hand. Any 'escape' that this model seemed to promise was not from the child's own situation or personality but from inculcory teaching methods and from the heavy band of an established literary tradition.

Yet any insistence on a strict interpretation of the term would be mistaken, for Personal Growth is by no means a fixed doctrine. Indeed Dixon himself reframed his own ideas about it in a new chapter added to the 1975 edition of his book. And those ideas, in any case, were not really 'his', though he was certainly one of their most successful formulations. In order to understand the wide international impact of a pedagogy of growth during the period from the mid-sixties to the mid-eighties, and its tenacity even now, we need to look beyond Dixon's book—to the institutional framework that provided much of its credibility, and then to the historical sources of that framework.

The framework was constructed mainly through the Institute of Education at the University of London. In the few years following the famous 1966 Dartmouth conference, this Institute's version of English had become normative not only for teachers in Britain but also for those elsewhere. The Australian experience exemplifies this, and can be taken here to stand for a larger international pattern in those years.

The 1980 IFTE conference held in Sydney illustrates the contemporary prevalence of ideas disseminated by the London Institute of Education in the collective thinking of the English teaching profession in several countries. Anyone who consults the official publications that came directly out of it can confirm what those of us who participated in the conference will recall clearly: the whole event was shaped by ideas, assumptions and personalities associated with the Institute. English in the Eighties, edited by Robert Eaglestone, featured papers by James Britton, Harold Rosen, Margaret Meek-Spencer and John Dixon. Timely Voices: English Teaching in the 1980s, edited by Roslyn Arnold, included papers by Britton, Meek-Spencer, Dixon, Nancy Martin, and Douglas and Dorothy Barnes. (The Barneses, like Dixon, were not employed by the Institute but nevertheless had a close involvement in much of its work, notably through the Schools Council Writing Project.) The third conference-engendered publication registers just as strongly the Institute's influence: New Essays in the Teaching of Literature (Mallick, Moss & Hansen 1982) is the report of the conference's Literature Commission; and although only one of the Institute celebrities, Margaret Meek-Spencer, contributed to this volume (her colleagues were distributed among other commissions), several of the papers by Australian educators make respectful reference to Britton, Rosen, Dixon and company. More significant is the fact that David Homer, in an admirably independent and incisive paper written for those proceedings, reflected at length on the Institute's status as the seat of supreme orthodoxy, as the authority for ideas that had been 'almost exclusively influential in shaping at least
Secondary English studies in Australian schools during the 1970s (Homer 1982: 76). Acknowledging the ‘profound and beneficial’ effects of this influence, particularly regarding the value of tentative, expressive, uninhibited talk and writing in the classroom, Homer also voiced some ‘unease’ about the reification of the Institute’s ideas. ‘Sadly’, he remarked, ‘what in fact has happened is that as far as English teachers are concerned the ‘Model’ is accepted as all there is to say about language. Such is the fate of theory when embraced by institutional bureaucracies’ (p. 81).

It is certainly true that ideas about personal language development drawn from the London Institute pervaded Australian schools and education systems during the 1970s and remained potent beyond that decade. Homer remarks that ‘countless documents, articles, conference titles and choices of visiting speakers bear witness to this fact’, and he mentions as a salient example the ‘Language Across the Curriculum’ project sponsored by the Australian Schools Commission and endorsed by state Departments of Education in South Australia and Tasmania (pp. 79, 81). As Garth Boomer—its prime mover—later commented, ‘This Australian project replicated and affirmed work in the UK which had provided the inspiration’ (Boomer 1984: 231). Boomer himself had studied at the Institute in 1972–73, later describing those years as ‘a watershed’ in his career and citing Britton, Martin, Rosen and Dixon as people from whom he learned much and to whom English teachers generally were indebted.4 The language-based growth model had already been comprehensively adopted in New South Wales, where the innovative 1971 English Syllabus for forms I-IV made a major impact, as Wayne Sawyer has recently demonstrated in detail and several people had previously noted (Sawyer 2002).5 Ripples spread through the other states. In a 1978 review of English curriculum materials across Australia, Frances Christie and Joan Rothy ‘found that ‘personal growth’ was an enduring theme in all the documents examined’ (Christie 1993: 95).

It would be silly to suggest that this surge of enthusiasm for ‘growth’ as the basis of curriculum and pedagogy was simply produced by a few books and individuals associated with the University of London’s Institute of Education around that time. The seeds sown by Dixon, Britton and others sprouted rapidly (horticultural cliché seems irresistible in this context) because they fell on ground made fertile during the many decades since English had first been delineated as a field of study. A closer look at the ideas promoted by Britton, Rosen and Dixon makes it possible to discern a set of underlying assumptions and their nineteenth-century sources.

Retrieving a sense of this intellectual history is not an antiquarian pursuit. Anyone wanting to be a well informed professional needs to understand certain continuities that link current English curriculum discourses and practices with previous discourses and practices. In a recent paper, Brenton Doocey has argued cogently that some recent theorizing about English and education is marred by a facile condescension towards the
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past. He makes an eloquent appeal to English teachers to draw knowledgeable con-

fidence from their grounding in particular professional traditions. Being properly cogni-
zant of these traditions can help one avoid the twin follies of either rejecting them 

out of hand or merely perpetuating them (Doecke 2002).

· This is certainly applicable to the theme of 'personal growth', which has never 

been a pure dogma or fully theorized position but denotes a cluster of attitudes with a 

hoary lineage. I have argued elsewhere that the formation of English studies was 

bound up historically with the emergence of certain themes including personal 

growth, 'natural' learning, imagination, self-expression, and the vivacity of everyday 

language. These are best understood as produced by a Romantic ideology, and partic-

ularly by an extensive process of appropriating—consciously and unconsciously—ideas 

from the writings of William Wordsworth (1770–1850). To most educators today this 

may seem surprising. Wordsworth's poetry has ceased to have wide popular appeal and 

the views attributed to him have little mainstream currency now. Yet there is plenty of 

evidence that during the Victorian period an educational value system constructed 

from what he wrote exerted normative pressure on the curriculum and pedagogy of the 

nascent subject of English, providing long afterwards a naturalized, taken-for-granted 

set of framing assumptions (Reid 2003).6

Especially important as mediator of that influence was the University of London, 

which in the mid-nineteenth century had a major role in establishing English as an aca-

demic discipline (well before Oxford or Cambridge designed to let it be studied in their 

precincts), a fact that has been well documented.7 And it was the University of London, 

from the early years of the twentieth century onwards, that gave a lead in incorporat-

ing this new subject of English into the education of schoolteachers. The London Day 

Training College, later renamed the Institute for Education, was created as a direct result 

of the Education Act of 1902, which provided a new link between the professional 

accreditation of school teachers and the environment of university education. This 

occurred just at the time when English came into being as a separately identified and 

(in secondary schools) compulsory school subject, having already taken its distinctive 

neo-Romantic shape in the University of London colleges.8 Also virtually simultaneous 

was the inception of the English Association, which quickly became a potent ideological 

mechanism for securing this subject as the centerpiece of the school curriculum in 

Britain and the Empire. Leading figures from the University of London were promi-

nent in setting up the English Association; Wordsworth disciples were remarkably 

preponderant among its most influential early members; and many of the publications 

that it produced or contributed to substantially (such as the influential Newbolt Report, 

an official government policy document written mainly by English Association members) 

were infused with idioms and notions that have an explicitly Wordsworthian colouring.

The Institute of Education (as the London Day Training College was called after
1932) reinforced the program of the English Association in several ways, most notably through shared lecturing arrangements with certain academics in other University of London colleges who were instrumental in education policy formation, and within the Institute through charismatic leaders such as Percy Nunn and Fred Clarke (its successive Directors from 1922 to 1945) and Percy Gurney (Head of English from 1926 to 1948). These key individuals advocated a Wordsworthian view of education in general and English studies in particular, frequently invoking Wordsworth’s poetry—especially his autobiographical work *The Prelude*—to illustrate and authorize their consistent emphasis on nurturing the imaginative experience and expressive language development of the child. By the end of the Second World War the sway once exerted by English Association had diminished, but the London Association for the Teaching of English (LATE) was founded in 1947 to take its place. The Institute of Education controlled LATE from the start; Gurney was the chief initiator, with his colleague Nancy Martin and his former student James Britton being actively involved in shaping it.

Encouragement of ‘expressive language’ based on ‘personal experience’ was central in the LATE agenda through the 1950s and 1960s. Others playing a prominent part in LATE included John Dixon, who studied at the Institute in 1950 and returned there from time to time over the following years for in-service training while teaching in London schools, and Harold Rosen, who joined its English staff in 1962.

Not only, then, through the Institute’s own programs but also through its external vehicle LATE (and subsequently its national counterpart NATE, which soon became dominated by the child-centric expressivism of the Institute), a small number of educators exerted a remarkable sway. From the late 1960s into the 80s, Britton, Dixon, Rosen and their associates virtually set the terms of reference for English teaching throughout Britain and in several countries overseas as well. Their approaches were not, of course, identical. Britton’s primary interest lay in the psychology of linguistic development and Rosen’s in the sociopolitical contexts of language use, while Dixon’s ideal of personal growth moved between individualistic and the communitarian idealism. Some sense of how their different views worked together in a productive dialectic rather than a simple concord can be gleaned from this statement by Rosen:

Perhaps, in the necessary emphasis we have given to personal growth, language for personal development and literature as an intensely personal exploration we have made English sound like the greatest ego-trip ever invented and we have forgotten that when working-class children have responded to our teaching then it is either because we have lured them into a world of private experience and cushioned individualism or because we have seen them as socially constituted human beings who can draw sustenance for the imagination from their own world and its values, from parents, grandparents and neighbours. I believe the best of new English teaching has been of the second kind. (Rosen 1977: 308)
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Romantic. After all, in its Wordsworthian embodiment, Romanticism had as much to
do with social phenomena as with the private inner world of individual experience.
Wordsworth’s monumental work The Prelude was not just the first autobiographical
poem in English; it also testified powerfully to the widespread changes wrought by
political and industrial revolution, and carried the imprint of those changes in its
style and structure. The author described it as being about ‘the growth of [his] own
mind’, but he also said it had ‘society’ as its subject.

Growing up where Wordsworth grew up, studying Wordsworth’s poetry keenly as
an undergraduate and enthusing about it to the young students he taught, John Dixon
then took his Romantic preoccupations with him when he left London in the mid-
1960s to work at Bretton Hall, a Yorkshire college for the training of teachers in the
creative arts. There he teamed up with a young colleague called Peter Moss (who
would later have a significant influence on English teaching in Australia) to devise an
ambitious course on Romanticism, considered not as ‘an historically defined period’
but as a perennial and vital current in cultural expression. 9 Wordsworth was more
prominent in the course than any other writer represented, the emphasis falling on his
evocation in The Prelude of ‘a general theory of natural growth and his own [particular
development] as exemplar’. 81 It was only a few months after beginning to immerse
himself in this teaching project that Dixon, along with Britton and others, went off to
Dartmouth for the landmark conference at which fifty leading British and American
scholars and teachers of English jointly considered the foundations of their curriculum.
Growth Through English was, in an immediate sense, a report on that conference; but it
also articulated the Wordsworthian view of language, learning and self-cultivation
that Dixon had just been putting into curricular shape at Bretton Hall and had previ-
ously acquired, in large measure, through his work with the Institute (which continued
to be his professional reference point; he spent a period of leave there after the book’s
publication).

As mentioned already, the Institute’s emphasis on ‘growth’ goes back long before
Dixon’s time there, being salient in the writings of educators like Percy Nunn, who
joined what was then the London Day Training College in 1903, the year after it
began. A distinctive cluster of Romantic ideas about education has always been part of
the Institute’s mind-set. It would not be difficult to trace some of the tendrils that
reached out from there internationally during the early twentieth century. Just one
example in passing: central to the work of the influential New Zealand educator
Frank Combs (1882–1960) were his convictions about the vital role of creativity in the
educational development of the child, and in this regard he owed much to the writings
of Percy Nunn and of William Wordsworth (Parkyn 1964). The general point, anyway, is this: Dixon's 1967 book, along with various publications around that time by people associated with the Institute, reinscribed the basic tenets of an existing creed. It is partly because of its Wordsworthian latitude that 'personal growth' has been a long-lasting ideology. Being imprecise as a purpose and rationale for English, it continues to appeal to a large number of teachers and students for that very reason: it can mean different things to different people. Some of these notions are dubious, including the fantasy of 'escaping the norms of society' (in Peel's liberationist formulation). But on the other hand the persistence of the growth theme is also attributable to the fact that it can be taken as affirming something of permanent value in the learning process. Through most of its history as a school subject, English has tried to engage students with (among other things) reflection on their own experience and attention to their self-development. In itself this can hardly be deemed inappropriate. While some versions of 'personal growth' may have been muddled and enfeebling, any attempt to eliminate it would be worse than futile. Inviting students to bring their own experiences into the English classroom in their own language, to discuss their emotional responses to what they read, and to explore their attitudes in what they write, is always legitimate and sometimes important—with an important proviso: that these activities are framed by critical and metalinguistic analysis that fosters an understanding of how 'selves' are shaped. In its extreme forms, personalism can be disempowering for students because it disguises the social constructedness of any sense of individual identity. It fails to alert them to the fact that selves, like texts or curricula, are produced by particular frames of interpretation, and can be reframed in order to bring new possibilities into view.

"To thine own self be true" is the implicit motto of personalism. Katherine Mansfield subjects it to justified mockery in her journal: 'True to oneself! Which self! Which of my many—well really, that's what it looks like coming to—hundreds of selves? For what with complexes and repressions and reactions and vibrations and reflections, there are moments when I feel I am nothing but the small clerk of some hotel without a proprietor, who has all his work cut out to enter the names and hand the keys to the wilful guests' (Murry 1984: 205). The figment of a single 'true self' obscures the fact that, in our various uses of language, our mental hotel is accommodating guest selves. To some extent the semblance of a uniquely personal perspective (a student's or a teacher's, a reader's or a writer's) is just one provisional pattern among the plural set of possibilities that different uses of language can create. Of course this does not make light of the fact that someone may have genuine emotions and perceptions to express, but the search for one's 'own voice', a search on which many English teachers have urged their student writers to embark, can encourage a shallow view of 'personal growth'.

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Although the traditionally introspective self-shaping mode of English studies has often been pursued at the expense of a socially critical awareness of language as a public medium, this need not be so. The two can come together. For instance it is demonstrably possible to help students enlarge their repertoire of personal writing by making the authorial ‘I’ problematic and genre-specific—that is, emphasizing its constructedness. But many practitioners and analysts of English despair of any successful integration. Ian Hunter, tracing cursorily the historical emergence of the ethos of the modern English classroom, thinks that its chief problems stem from a dominant ideology of personal inwardness fostered by aesthetic cultivation to the neglect of language skills (Hunter 1988). Richard Andrews believes that the focus on inner experience is habitually so narrow that in practice it fails to move ‘beyond the cherishing of private souls to mediate between individual consciousness and the consciousness and sensibility of others’, and he argues that the neglected outward orientation is best achieved through a renewal of studies in what was once called rhetoric—the technical features of socially situated discourse (Andrews 1993: 19–26). Some who are in general agreement with that view, such as Frances Christie, would want to orient it towards a comprehensive semiotic form of sociolinguistics (Christie 1993). Others espouse a version of cultural critique under the banner of critical literacy, though in some forms this seems just as suffused by naïve emancipatory enthusiasms as the kind of personal growth model that it is attempting to replace.

Perhaps these versions of English are converging towards a new disciplinary identity. Meanwhile the subject continues in some respects to exhibit its earlier Romantic disposition. This may seldom be obtrusively Wordsworthian, but while Wordsworth’s poems no longer have a prominent place in the picture, some of the attitudes they typify still form part of the frame.

Teaching English—helping students to learn versatile competence in their uses of language—is too important to be distracted by needless factional disputes and adversarial postures. As Ian Hunter (1997) suggests, we ought to be able to resist false dichotomies between personal development and social skillings, between critical and vocational literacy. Self-discovery is not only a legitimate focus for the learning of literate practices, it can be itself a basic social skill. Correspondingly, there need be nothing injurious to the individual about formal training in the genres of workplace discourse and public communication media. A fully literate person, skilled across a range of language practices, will combine what we sometimes allow ourselves to separate.

Notes
1 The sample mainly comprised secondary teachers, university lecturers, student teachers, undergraduates, and students aged 16–18 who were contemplating English studies in higher education.
The apparent inconsistency may be partly attributable to definitional problems. For instance, cultural criticism, or 'critical literacy/cultural studies', is glossed in the questionnaire as 'a view which emphasizes the role of English in helping students towards a critical understanding of the way that texts are historically and culturally studied'—not a precise definition.

See for example the references to Dixon on pp. 5–6, 33, and 171–72.

The quoted phrase is from Briner's essay 'Dancing Lessons', and the references to his British mentors are scattered through his writings, including the paper presented at the 1980 IFE conference. See Green (1988) pp. 2, 3, 26–27, 139, 351. Briner was by no means the only channel of influence. For example, Bernard Newsome, who also worked at the Institute and contributed to the Schools Council Writing Project, took his enthusiasm back to Melbourne, where they proved contagious.

Sawyer quotes remarks by Homer, Brock, Davis and Watson, all recognizing the historic importance and London source of this trend-setting curriculum.


In addition to the accounts cited in the previous note, see for example Bacon 1998, and Court 1992.

The argument presented cursorily in the following paragraphs is amplified with supporting evidence in Reid 2002.

See the 1971 account by Dixon's colleague P.D. Moss, 'Romanticism in a College of Education'. Subsequently Peter Moss moved to Australia, joining the staff of the University of Adelaide Education Department, becoming a member of the group that produced Category B (see chapter 19), and making an innovative contribution to the 1980 IFE conference through his advocacy of a (then) new kind of English that would embrace media analysis and cultural critique without discarding the ideal of personal development.

This phrase is quoted from one of the meticulously handwritten notebooks (1965–66) in which Dixon recorded in precise detail his rationale for the course, his reflections and its structure and scope, his lesson plans, his convictions about social class, 'common culture' and 'inner selves', and so forth. These notebooks remain in the author's possession and have been inspected with his kind permission.

A comparable figure in Australia was Peter Board, Director of Education in New South Wales, who wrote about the role of English in developing 'personal culture'; see Green, Cormick & Reid 2000. Board's views are discussed in more detail by Bill Green and Jo-Anne Reid in 'Constructing the Teacher and Schooling the Nation', forthcoming in History of Education Review.

Some of the following remarks are anticipated in Reid 1992.

14 See for instance ‘Writing Yourself’, Brendan Doecke’s 1988 chapter in the textbook for senior English students Writing with a Difference.


References


Green, B. & Reid, J. (forthcoming) ‘Constructing the Teacher and Schooling the Nation’, History of Education Review.


English Teachers at Work


