

Newbolt and the construction of subject English

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It is approaching 100 years since Sir Henry Newbolt was commissioned to write his report *The Teaching of English in England*. The report, compiled by an eminent group of academics, writers and educationists, followed closely on the heels of two significant “moments” in the development of English education. Firstly, H.A.L. Fisher’s Education Act of 1918, which sought in the immediate wake of the First World War to extend the duration, availability and quality of educational provision; and secondly, the establishment of the first English Literature tripos at Cambridge. Fisher’s landmark act set in motion the shaping of a recognisably “modern” English education system – a system founded upon more equitable principles and within which English (both as language and as literature) had a fundamental role to play. The Cambridge English Literature syllabus forged the subject as a literary discipline independent of the study of the Classics (Latin and Greek). In the wake of these seminal developments, Newbolt sought to establish a new function and direction for English as a subject in the twentieth century.

Upon reading his report, it is striking to note how – a century on – Newbolt’s is still a powerfully relevant voice. The academic, curricular and pedagogic issues he and his fellow committee members encountered seem echoingly familiar to our own era. The committee observes, for instance, the inherent problems associated with a knowledge-based curriculum and those who, “urging that knowledge is power, load the youthful mind with more than it can properly assimilate” (Newbolt et al. 1921, 54). What, Newbolt considers, might be the alternatives to such a situation and how can pupils be provided with more flexible and enabling versions of English? The committee perhaps partially answered this in its identification of the pedagogical importance of practical education: “Learning by doing,” they observe, “is another concurrent educational gospel” (54). Simply “doing” at the expense of being able effectively to contextualise and more broadly and imaginatively apply learning, however, creates particular issues surrounding the possibilities and the functions of English – as both medium and object of learning. The committee was alive to the demands such content and pedagogic issues placed upon the teaching body – problematic issues that continue to face teachers of English. These demands are made more problematic by ideological, political and social impulses that prioritise measurable short-term gains and tend to diminish the role of the Arts and creativity – with their concomitant long-term advantages – within education. Newbolt and his fellow committee members pointed to a threat – a threat we are still facing, or perhaps facing anew, in our contemporary education system: “there is a danger that a true instinct for humanism may be smothered by the demand for measurable results, especially the passing of examinations in a variety of subjects ...” (56). It was against the backdrop of these and other pressing matters that Newbolt sets out his vision for the teaching of English to the benefit of all within society. His wide-ranging and worryingly enduring report sees that a fundamental mismatch exists between what is happening, what is desirable and what is possible with the existing body of

teachers. He therefore calls for a re-conception of “the full meaning and possibilities of national education as a whole” (1) and advocates the central role of literary education in bridging “the social chasms which divide us” (2): English then, as now – if effectively and appropriately taught – is a powerfully liberal and democratising force.

This special issue of *English in Education*, on the eve of the Newbolt centenary, aims to (re)consider the issues and agendas facing those who teach English in the early 21st century. In the light of Newbolt’s construction of the subject, how should today’s teachers of English consider:

- the demands and role of high stakes assessment
- a re-narrowing of the literary curriculum
- a continuous sequence of education reform
- targets related to social mobility, class and widening participation
- contingent questions about the function of literature, creativity and the arts in education

Significant issues also emerge surrounding the promotion of community cohesion, and around the ways in which technological advances might be reshaping what constitutes appropriate literary education. What are the contemporary aims of education in English and of literary education? Where do Classics, the literary canon and works from other literatures around the world fit into current views of what constitutes the study of English? What role, if any, should literary education have in the moral formation of children and young people? It is our hope that these and other questions will be stimulated by this special issue of *English in Education* and that teachers will continue to challenge received ideological and pedagogical “wisdoms” to ensure that their pupils are inspired and enabled by their education in English.

In “The Newbolt Report, the problem of moral legitimacy and the turn to culture”, Alka Sehgal-Cuthbert presents a contemporary reading of aspects of Newbolt in the light of changing and problematic (post-?) Brexit views of nationhood. What, she asks us to consider, is the role of language and culture in shaping and reshaping views of who and what we are as a nation?

These ideas are explored in relation to the conditions and the contingencies under which the original report was developed. Sehgal-Cuthbert's contention is that in the context of a general weakening of commitment to shared liberal humanist values and a widespread questioning of the moral legitimacy of the political classes, we have much to learn from Newbolt's commitment to a democratic vision of education.

As the title of the Newbolt Report makes amply clear, its central concern is the teaching of English. How do visions of desired versions of subject English relate to what teachers are able (and willing?) to teach? How are teachers prepared for what they need to do, and what can be done where there is a mismatch between teachers' actual abilities and knowledge and the kinds of ability and knowledge they need in order to create desired educational change? Rachel Roberts' paper "English – the torch of life: reflections on the Newbolt report from an ITE perspective" argues for the relevance of the report as a stimulus for beginner teachers to consider the questions of what English is and what its purposes are. Recognising that the report's concerns seem so strikingly familiar to a contemporary educational and social context leads to an examination of the extent to which its aims have been achieved, and requires teachers to identify their own position in relation to the torch that has been handed on to them.

Jackie Manuel in "Resonant Continuities: The influence of the Newbolt Report on the formation of English Curriculum in New South Wales, Australia" offers a contribution that moves in a different direction from the other papers in the collection. Rather than assessing its legacy, Manuel considers Newbolt's report in light of 1911's New South Wales English syllabus and sees both documents as expressions or codifications of a wider intellectual milieu that spanned England, Australia and the US. Newbolt's treatment of the ideas of the New Education movement (the "new faith") is anticipated in the earlier document and is read by Manuel as a vindication of those values rather than an originary expression. This placing of Newbolt within a continuous historical arc and a global context constitutes a "retrieval" of intellectual history of the kind that challenges a neoliberal "loss of historical memory" and offers resources of "wisdom and agency necessary for pushing back against the waves of governmental intervention in policy, curriculum and teachers' work".

John Perry's article, "The teaching of English in England through the ages: how have interpretations of the Newbolt Report changed over time?" considers the different ways in which the report has been received, lauded and criticised during the twentieth century. Perry identifies some important limitations of the report – that its evident concern with social justice did not amount to a challenge to entrenched social hierarchies and inequalities, and that it did not conceive of social diversity and complexity in terms beyond class – but also identifies some influential misreadings or misrepresentations. For example, Perry challenges the perception of the report as privileging a conservative literary canon over contemporary literature and poetry that might connect more closely with students' lived experiences. Perry

credits the report with offering an important critique of currently popular Hirschian models of literary knowledge, and with opening up the modern debate about the nature and purpose of English.

Lorna Smith in her paper, “The role of English in the Conversation of Humankind: Humanism and creativity in Newbolt et al. (1921) and the national curriculum (2014)” explores the reasons for creativity’s absence (in a rich sense) or commodification (in a more compartmentalised sense) in the current curriculum. Smith’s interpretation suggests that, on the matter of a conservative canon, the national curriculum fares rather worse than Newbolt’s report did in the eyes of its harshest critics. Of most concern perhaps is what Smith describes as a “suppression” of humanism by precisely those instrumental and economic pressures of which the report warned. Smith makes the case compellingly for the continuing exposure of new English teachers to the history of the subject and the humanistic ideals that have shaped it.

Together, the papers presented in this collection offer a contemporary view of the extent to which English has changed or resisted change in the hundred years since Newbolt, and how far this in fact reflects the needs of English in the twenty-first century.

We hope you enjoy and are challenged by your reading.

[Disclosure statement](#)

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

[Reference](#)

Newbolt, H., et al. 1921. *The Teaching of English in England* (being the Report of the Departmental Committee Appointed by the President of the Board of Education to Inquire into the Position of English in the Educational System of England). London: HMSO.