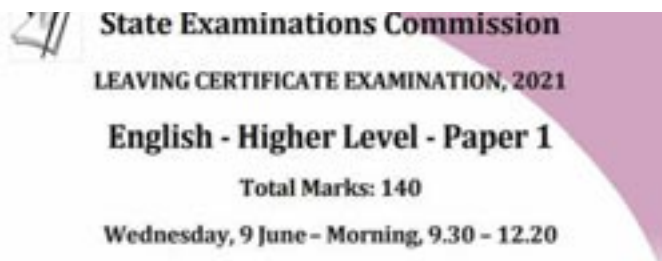


Senior Cycle Reform in English

Julian Girdham



There are few more emotive issues in Irish society than, absurdly, the Leaving Certificate. Is there another country which reports on its age-18 terminal exams in the national media as they happen? In English, this notoriously manifests itself in speculation about 'which poets will be on', and it would not be surprising to see a Paddy Power ad offering 5/2 Heaney, 4/1 Dickinson, 9/2 Boland, 10/1 Bishop... And why not chance a tenner at 7/2 on a character question on Lady Macbeth in the 16:40 in the Sports Hall?

Public analysis of the Leaving Certificate rarely goes beyond the sloppy and uninformed. Commentators automatically reach for the supposedly damning phrase 'rote learning' and then sit back smugly, their case proven (I have written about how 'rote learning' is irrelevant to Leaving Certificate English - <https://www.juliangirdham.com/blog/on-rote-learning-in-english>).

The pandemic certainly did not dampen down the hysteria. As with so much during that dismal event, cool rationale was missing and hyperbole all too dominant. It overlapped with the latter stages of the formal Senior Cycle review, and in March the Minister announced an outline of proposed assessment changes. There was much to absorb in that announcement, but in this piece I will concentrate on my own subject: I have been teaching the Leaving Certificate English course for 38 years, including the last 20 while also a school leader. There has been little deep-thinking about English as a subject in Ireland over the years, compared to our neighbours across the water, as David Didau describes in his

comprehensive overview of teaching in England, *Making Meaning in English*, and this intellectual thinness is particularly obvious right now.

For English, the headline announcement was that Paper 1 (the Language element) will be taken at the end of Fifth Year (as an 'interim measure'), with Paper 2 (Literature) left in its current position at the end of secondary school. There are two reasons to find this dismaying: firstly, for its impact on school life, and secondly, its impact on students' experience of English in the classroom.

Was the extraordinary decision to remove *all* Language teaching and learning from Sixth Year informed by knowledgeable practitioners, by people who actually teach the course? As is so dismayingly common, 'ordinary' teachers have curriculum and exam structures foisted on them, without these being stress-tested by experts in schools. We get sops as contributions: we might have an online survey thrown at us (few complete these). But, overwhelmingly, decisions are driven by official bodies and politicians, despite all the worthy talk of consultation. Very few teachers know anything that is going on until a tome drops from the Department of Education, or the Minister makes an announcement.

This was startlingly the case in March when English teachers found out that INOTE, the Irish National Organisation for Teachers of English, was not consulted about this fundamental change to the English course. On 29 March, the Chair, Conor Murphy from Skibbereen Community School, wrote to the Minister on behalf of INOTE welcoming the general principle of Senior Cycle reform 'in its vision to provide greater inclusivity and flexibility in education for all students' but asking her 'to reconsider this action and allow students to fully develop their voice, their creativity, and their individuality, the very elements that should be at the centre of English, a subject she once taught'.

On 10 May the Minister's office sent a response which, as

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INOTE stated, did not respond to any of its own specific concerns. (The correspondence can all be seen at inote.ie.) An online survey of members indicated that 96% disagreed with the Paper 1 decision, 96% believed the move would be damaging to their students and 97% considered the skills for Paper 1 to be developmental over two years.

The superficially convincing theory is: reduce the stress of terminal exams, so therefore move some earlier in the course. Ironically, the examination which requires least preparation and produces *least* stress in English will be the one to move and will introduce extra stress at a time when students are less ready for it. It is not being moved for pedagogical reasons, though, and the move to Fifth Year ironically reinforces the idea that the Leaving Certificate examination matters more than anything else. The impact on school?

Even for just two subjects for the moment (Irish being the other), this is a change that gives children less breathing space to develop intellectually, and the message is that from the start of Fifth Year they should reconsider how much time they give to sport, to the school musical, to the chess club. Despite the oft-proclaimed public emphasis on 'well-being', bringing high-stakes and possibly career-defining assessments earlier in a child's school career is likely to undermine that aspiration. If the Leaving Certificate were properly decoupled from third-level entry, then this would not matter greatly, but there has been no suggestion that that critical link will be reformed and without such a change all other reforms mean little. The assessment will remain high-stakes, whether in the form of examinations, continuous assessment or project work. The CAO system will be waiting for students still, like rapids at the end of a stretch of river.

Now to the reasons why moving Paper 1 damages English as a subject and reduces the experience of the students, actually undermining one of the three official 'tenets' of this reform, which is to "*enrich the student experience and build on what's strong in our current system*".

With this move, the final year becomes solely devoted to literature, plainly because that is the part of the course which needs most 'preparation'. The ways language and literature intertwine now become essentially redundant in Sixth Year: there would be no point in setting a language task based on a character in a text, for instance. The voyage of intellectual and linguistic discovery that is learning how to write an effective short story, how to shape a powerful personal essay, how to craft an evocative descriptive piece, stops short suddenly at the end of Fifth Year, when there is a randomly-chosen and excessively-early assessment point.

And it will stop *just as* pupils are learning, as they are developing, before – so often – they 'get it' in Sixth Year. Now that opportunity has gone, as well as the opportunity to write

the kind of creative pieces that pupils enjoy as a break from literary analysis and - if we want to cite wellbeing - benefit them in terms of mental health, expressiveness and sense of self.

Every year I tell my Sixth Year pupils to get out their language work from the previous year and spend an evening re-reading it. Next day in class I ask them what they think of it now. Cue embarrassed smiles. Over the following terms, as they learn, grow into young adulthood, read and write more, their writing *develops*. That will all go. Because of the examinations. Because third-level entry requirements trump everything else.

Every curriculum decision – perhaps especially the superficially sensible ones – risks unintended consequences, and here they are for Senior Cycle reform: the dangers of widening the disadvantage gap, spreading rather than reducing stress, and eroding enriching elements of school life.

Meanwhile what have teachers been doing during the last two years as decisions on and judgments about *their* work were being made?

Well, they've been fearful of catching a potentially lethal virus in their freezing classrooms, they've been trying not to bring it home to vulnerable relatives, they've been catching it, they've been developing long-COVID, they've been sitting in school carparks eating lunchtime sandwiches because their staff rooms have limited capacity, they've been struggling to teach while wearing masks and struggling to discern their students' faces and see the hundreds of micro-expressions that help understand them, they've had periods of sitting in front of laptops in their bedrooms trying to learn how to teach remotely for the first time, they've been panicking at how to use Google Classroom and how to get material to children without internet access, they've been managing the loss of their classroom set-ups, they've been teaching in echoing sports' halls, they've been covering for their sick colleagues, they've been calculating grades, and of course they've been doing all the things that they always do – marking essays, constructing schemes of work, enthusing their pupils about literature and drawing out their creativity.

Those last two things are why English teachers went into the job in the first place: let us hope that they will be allowed to continue to do them as effectively as ever, and to help their students truly flourish. This poorly thought-through change is easily reversed



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