

Critical Thinking and the Concept of Literacy

MICHAEL SCRIVEN *University of Western Australia*

Introduction

Literacy is a ghost that haunts the teaching of critical thinking and informal logic. Few of us have taught in that area without running into the problem of literacy—that is, the problem of its absence—and feeling distressed because no-one has provided our present students with the basic skills of language use. We also wonder whether and to what extent we should take on—or are in fact taking on—what amounts to remedial literacy teaching. Many of the skills we think of as part of the CT repertoire are refinements or extensions of literacy skills. Argument analysis, for example, builds on the ability to understand the meaning of paragraphs. But if we are dealing with students who really cannot make much sense of long sentences, let alone passages, we have a possibly unsolvable problem of pedagogy on our hands.

Is someone to blame? Is there a fix? Are things worse than they were? What is the difference between literacy and informal logic/critical thinking skills? A few years ago, I was placed in a position where it became part of my responsibility to answer those questions—in the case of Western Australia¹. There turns out to be nothing very different about that state, compared to others in the English-speaking world at least. It also turned out that a number of aspects of the problem themselves involved exercises in critical thinking—and in the teaching of critical thinking—which were of considerable intrinsic interest, and possibly of some pedagogical value. For example, the problem of *defining* literacy provides a nice example of the

distinction between terms that are *borderline imprecise* and those that are *centrally unclear* (or whatever terms you prefer to express that distinction); and of the notion of *context dependent definition*. It is not trivial to get all this right; and the effort to do so raises a number of other conceptual and practical problems. This kind of issue is important because it illustrates the peculiarly intimate relation of theory to practice in our field.

The emotional arguments that arose about the literacy issue provided a number of outstanding examples of the absence of critical thinking skills in the elected representatives of the professional association of English teachers. They turned out to be unable to cope with some of the standard distinctions, such as the distinction between sufficient and necessary conditions, or between causation and inevitability. They were firm believers in the Fallacy of the Conservation of Blame (“someone else is at fault, so I’m off the hook”). Hence it seems to me that the issue provides an interesting case-study from which teachers of critical thinking as well as students and citizens could draw examples to illustrate points in informal logic *and at the same time* learn something interesting and perhaps valuable in itself. I am always looking for examples of this kind myself, because I think the double pay-off they provide substantially increases the chance of worthwhile learning. (Hereafter, I drop the use of the term ‘critical thinking’ to refer to the curriculum domain, and use ‘reasoning skills’ instead, to avoid the suggestion that creative thinking is to be excluded from the domain of interest. The term ‘informal logic’ is still used to

refer to the discipline itself.)

The piece is also intended to illustrate four further points about teaching reasoning: (i) various devices that are useful in the teaching of English are worth considering in the teaching of 'critical thinking'; (ii) the value of diagrams for *conceptual clarification*, (by contrast with argument analysis); (iii) the frequent importance of carrying analysis on to the point of *analyzing practical suggestions that are supposed to follow from conceptual analysis*; (iv) the process of *extracting implicit definitions from practice* and not just from writing or speech.

The last two points are especially important if one is to avoid the common complaint that one is talking about a problem instead of helping to solve it. I think that the infologic 'movement', if one may call it that, is still a little short on emphasizing the practical aspect of critical thinking skills. It's just as important to look at the specific recommendations for the alcoholic's life style that AA puts forward, as it is at their use of the term 'disease' in defining alcoholism. The latter is confused, but the former do not depend on it, and have much more to be said for them.

Identifying implicit definitions from a series of practices is a good basis for work on implicit values. In the case of literacy, I extracted the implicit definition of literacy in the English-teaching community in Western Australia from examining the syllabus, the exams, the marking key, the (absence of) texts or references, and from interviews with experienced and beginning teachers, teachers of teachers, and curriculum consultants. The implicit definition was, roughly, "high verbal fluency, with essentially zero weighting of skill in punctuation, grammar, spelling, and near-zero weighting of logical skills". (This closely matched the situation that turned up in the United States, in the course of evaluating the Bay Area (later National) Writing project for the Carnegie Corporation.)

Of course, the items discussed in this essay do not constitute all that was required to get the situation improved. One has to apply critical skills to the whole network of the social institution of literacy in order to decide where to put in the effort, and I provide an End-note for those interested in making a similar effort in their own jurisdiction.

An Overview of the Concept of Literacy

Literacy is an evaluative term. It refers to a complex of context-dependent standards that happen not to have precise boundaries. In this respect it is just like most of the terms that we use to run all practical affairs—terms like 'financially sound', 'good driver', or 'solidly constructed'—but it makes academics nervous. They relapse into talking about how it would be 'arbitrary' to set standards for a literacy test. It is only arbitrary in the trivial sense of having *some borderline imprecision*, like most of the useful terms in the language. There's nothing *conceptually confused* (i.e. capricious, not based on a real distinction) about it. The difference between the literate person and the semi-literate or illiterate person is clear enough in typical cases, and is based on objective, visible evidence and on the common meaning of a common term—just like the difference between financial soundness and insolvency. The reason that the distinction is not absolutely precise, like the difference between a triangle and a quadrilateral, is not because we're dealing with something too disgracefully confused to be admissible to science, but because we're talking about a useful, practical concept that already exists rather than one from mathematics or mathematical physics—or one that some little clique in the academy has just invented.

If you can't spell a great many common words, and you can't use punctuation correctly in simple contexts, and you can't consistently compose gram-

matical sentences, you're not fully literate in the usual sense today. If, despite these failings, you can write more or less intelligibly, we wouldn't say you're *completely* illiterate—you're just semi-literate, you're in the grey area. But that means you're not literate in the sense and to the degree *that is expected of the school leaver today*. In fact, that is the implicit definition of literacy in the community, particularly the employer's group. I suggest that it is in fact the correct definition of literacy in the English language; and that those using another are in fact, in this one respect, exhibiting the kind of misuse of language which in the aggregate we characterize as illiteracy.

The Connection to Reality: Employment

Literacy in the basic sense is quite properly expected by almost all employers; this is not some bizarre imposition by narrow-minded conservatives. Basic literacy—the avoidance of the kind of errors just listed—(i) facilitates communication, and (ii) exhibits something about its possessor's care for quality in general by demonstrating that care for quality in the case of written presentation. Writing at this basic level of literacy is (iii) often a job necessity, but even entrants to some jobs that do not immediately require writing skills aspire to promotion to higher echelons later, where (iv) it will be required. Since the employers hope to be able to promote the best of the entrants to those higher echelons, they are looking for—and will prefer—those with potential over those with minimal immediate competence. Moreover, (v) the employer often reasons that mastery of the minimum conventions of language use is an indicator of competent schooling in other areas.

Nor is literacy an excessive demand: ten or twelve years of schooling is more than enough to bring virtually any student to the point of mastery of the

mechanics of the local tongue *without distorting the syllabus into boring drill-and-practice*. An easy way to ensure this is to restrict the proportion of the English class time that is spent on 'mechanics', so that it's never more than half, perhaps only a third—and *that* only till a reasonable level of mastery is achieved. This leaves plenty of time for things that teachers (and possibly—though not certainly—students²) find more exciting.

It is quite true that in some jobs literacy is not essential. I know some good mechanics who can't write and a very good Australian philosopher who spells very badly. If any of your students want to be mechanics who never advance to the supervisor level, or plan to be philosophers or computer programmers—and if they have some way of ensuring lifetime employment in those specialties and an absolute guarantee they will never change their preferences—you should not insist on their literacy.

Should literacy be required across the board for admission to tertiary institutions? It should be *expected*, surely; but probably only *required* for certain faculties. And even in those faculties, it might make sense to allow the summer before admission to make up a literacy deficiency. There's no point in making a fetish of this. But even in the mild form just described, literacy is required in such a wide range of occupations that no primary or secondary teacher should 'write off' any student as incapable of attaining it, this side of extreme brain damage.

Literacy of Students as an Indicator of Teacher Performance

Given the above arguments for the importance of basic literacy, we have to face the question whether (essentially) all students can attain it. Teachers often point to a number of factors that make it hard to bring students to this level: non-English speaking early background,

poor motivation towards school, lack of home support for study of any kind (especially homework), lack of English-speakers at home now, poor support for discipline in the school (from community and principals), large groups of students now going on in school that did not do so in earlier generations (with consequent reduction in ability level in upper secondary), and larger numbers in English classes than in many other classes. Nevertheless, the failure of large numbers of students to have mastered elementary literacy guarantees that there was poor teaching for some extended stage in the student's education (not necessarily or not only by the current English teacher). There's no way around that, except in the case of the severely handicapped child. And if poor teaching occurred in English, where the main responsibility obviously lies (despite the disgraceful attempts to deny this), then—the employer often, and not unreasonably, argues—there must have been poor supervision of the teachers in the school, and so one must fear poor teaching in other subjects. In fact, since literacy has now been clearly identified by the Ministry as an across-the-curriculum subject—that is, as one for which all teachers are responsible—it is a truism that there was poor teaching across the board *and* poor administrative leadership in any schools which semi-literates attend for more than a year or two. And of course it is the unfortunate students who are the victims in this welter of buck-passing and incompetence.

In making critical remarks, it must be remembered that there are more students passing this test than failing it. Some of them, at least, had really excellent teachers. Others of those who succeeded, by their account, had hopeless teachers but keen parents who simply took over the task, or did it themselves. One of the most poignant comments from the many English teachers who have contacted me is that they had to teach their own children to

read, or spell, because they weren't learning these things at school. Others have written to tell, sadly, about the way in which they are treated as idiots by the other staff—and eventually, following that lead, by the students—at their school because they continue to insist on, or try to insist on, care in the mechanics of writing. As usual, it's the students who suffer from the teacher's trendiness.

It is clear that the professional association of English teachers in Western Australia have not taken the stand that was needed to get this job done, and have—in the past at least—fought hard to eliminate substantial requirements of elementary literacy from the English curriculum. I have often heard active members of the association comment favourably on what they regard as their triumph in 'eliminating the curriculum in English'; that is, in eliminating all required texts and all specific statements of what topics must be covered and of what skills must be acquired. Not having a job description certainly makes for an easier job. And I have heard them argue that the mechanics of literacy is not something for which they should be held fully *or even primarily* responsible, but is in fact something for which they have *no more responsibility than any other teacher*. These rather trivial matters, they say, are the shared task of all teachers' subjects to deal with, while their specific task is to deal with 'higher matters' such as creative writing. A professional association which condones or encourages that kind of self-serving nonsense about their duties is making a bed in which all English teachers and possibly all other teachers will have to lie. It is a bed surrounded by massive community hostility, guaranteed flight to the private schools, and greatly reduced chance of better working conditions. It is simply the abrogation of responsibility disguised by ideological claptrap.

There are of course plenty of teachers who view this arrogant attitude as

treason to the subject and the students; but, so far, there are not enough of them to reverse the pattern of irresponsible behaviour. These exceptions to the dominant pattern, these teachers who care about getting their students to care about the use of language, should be identified, given moral support, provided with public appreciation, and appointed to the better jobs. Doing all that is not something that simply happens. Getting it to happen is part of the duty of the principal, peers, parents, and the public, not to mention professors. If you're not helping with those efforts at appreciation, you're part of the problem. *Nobody* escapes responsibility for a feature of schooling as fundamental as a widespread failure of basic literacy instruction.

Implications for the Curriculum

There's a good test of whether these 'minor matters'—as English teachers often call them—are worth keeping in the specific or general curriculum. If your semi-literate student applied for a job for which there were a good many applicants, how would the application be treated? The reply from the employers is clear enough; they simply won't bother with the semi-literate letters; they are tossed out without careful scrutiny. It's not much good talking about how these 'mechanical details' or 'trivial aspects' of the use of language 'really aren't important as long as you can get the idea across'—the song and dance one hears from many English teachers (and others, including professors of English)—when the simple fact is that if students can't master them, they'll lose many jobs they really want. Nor is this due to inappropriate selection practices; as was mentioned earlier, even if the entry-level job doesn't require writing and correcting memos, letters or reports, these skills are almost certainly going to be required if the employee is to be promoted. Sensibly enough,

employers prefer candidates with a future. But they also prefer candidates from an educational background that shows signs of appropriate supervision, since that's an indication of what the science and mathematics knowledge is going to be like.

The cure is not the return to the dreary attempts to teach elaborate pseudo-disciplines of grammar and syntax or to rote spelling memorization. Those approaches do not justify the time they took. But, all too often, the good reasons for abandoning them have led to abandoning *all efforts* to teach the practical skills of basic literacy that the old approach was aiming for, albeit in a misguided way.

Converting the Concept into the Test: "Operational Definition"

The first point to emphasize is that the terms 'reading' and 'writing'—and 'listening' and 'speaking', but we'll focus on the more familiar ones—are *each* complex evaluative terms. To say that someone is able to read is not to say that they can look at the pages in a book; not even to say that they are 'sounding out' or even understanding all the *words* in the book. It means that they are comprehending the content *message* to a substantial though context-dependent degree. What content messages; to what degree; in what context? It depends on the age of the reader and the aim of the exercise. The key context for us is the context of the school leaver at the end of the tenth grade. At that point, being able to read, which is part of being literate, does not mean "is able to read kindergarten material"; it means being able to read virtually everything in a newspaper or a novel or an instruction book that comes with an appliance, etc. Even the vocabulary in those has substantially increased in size over the last few decades, let alone the complexity of the constructions.

Obviously, being literate doesn't

mean being able to read and write your own name and nothing else, although once upon a time that's all it meant. So we have to give at least rough answers to questions like, How much reading of what kind of material with what level of comprehension and care? This is the moment when those who can't survive away from the ivory tower start talking about arbitrariness. Those of a more practical persuasion simply roll up their sleeves and start looking at the kind of material that the student and citizen *have to* read with understanding. We will take our samples from newspaper articles on current crucial issues; job application and income tax forms; the 'fine print', the implications, and the assumptions in advertisements (including those on television) and on small loan contracts; reference books; street maps (yes, reading maps is one kind of reading); reading the diagrams (another kind) as well as the text in the instructions on medicine bottles or household chemicals or foodstuffs or first aid kits; handwriting and display fonts; and of course text books of the kind that the student may need to manage in the following year.

The required *level* of understanding is also defined by the real world, not by some 'arbitrary academic decision'. It is the level that avoids serious errors of the kind that are described (with demonstrable truth) as due to 'not reading it carefully'. This is *functional literacy* that we are talking about, not some fancy 'literary literacy', and we have plenty of good sources for finding material and setting the standards. Especially since there is not the slightest reason to set a precise cutting score; we can let the marking system reflect the existence of a gray area as long as we don't lose our nerve and think that there is no black and no white area.

We need to hold firmly to this same pragmatic attitude when we turn to the question of exactly how to test these skills. Multiple choice tests of reading ability are easy to mark, but they may not correspond to any real-world situation.

'Fill the blank' may be better, 'express in other words' may be better still; sometimes 'perform the right action' may be best (e.g., show you have understood the instructions on how to set the date on the VCR, by setting the date). Of course, as we get more realistic we begin to bring in other skills (in this last example, 'technological literacy'). Doesn't this contaminate the test? Only if you use just one type of item, but what sort of a test of real-world reading skills would have only one type of item!

Testing or assessment procedures often involve more than one of these skills. For example, to test spelling, one can speak the words that are to be written down or spelled out loud—this involves speaking and listening skills, skills in composing and conveying appropriate contexts, and inscribing skills (handwriting or typing) as well as spelling skills. Or one may offer various versions of the spelling and ask the student to identify the correct one; this involves reading skills and restricts the choices and possible errors in an unrealistic way. Or one may set a proof-reading task, which involves perceptual, recognition-of-error skills that are as close to reading skills as to writing skills. There is really no pure test of spelling specific words. Teachers often think that the real test of spelling is the dictation test; but it is probably the least pure, and it is not a clear winner for its importance in real-world literacy (unless you become a secretary). One must therefore use more than one of these approaches in the teaching process as well as in the testing process. The ramifications of this point often escape even researchers in literacy.

For example, Monash University has just released a Commonwealth-funded study which allegedly shows that "the standard of student English appears generally to have improved over a ten-year period"³. It's typically academic to focus on that question. The crucial question is whether students are literate now, or whether they are more or less literate now than ten years ago, and the Monash

researchers avoid that question even though they have the data to answer it, albeit only for their atypical population. What the study actually shows is that the composition performance of students taking the British History course at Monash hasn't changed much (their spelling has deteriorated). God only knows what that tells us about anything of general interest. It doesn't even tell us anything about *history students* at Monash (since we have no idea as to the effect that changes in that course and in student interests have produced in the intake population for British History since 1974). It doesn't tell us about *students at Monash* (what were the changes in the quality level of the Monash intake across that period, if, for example, the University of Melbourne's quotas tightened up?); and of course it tells us absolutely nothing about *tertiary students* in general, let alone *high school students* in general. So it tells us nothing of general interest about a question of secondary interest. What is interesting is something that was not mentioned in the original paper, which is HOW GOOD was the spelling, grammar, etc. The answer is, PRETTY BAD. But that wasn't thought to be worth mentioning; I had to request the error rate from the researchers. And of course, the conclusion that the results are 'pretty bad' is my interpretation of their raw error rate; they thought it quite arbitrary to suggest it could be interpreted in any such way. In my view, there's nothing arbitrary about identifying work that would strike most employers as a sign of a deficiency in literacy.

What the study does illustrate is the many traps in the usual methods of investigating these questions about *basic* literacy—mastery of the minimum mechanics of the language. A further example: the Monash researchers used the number of spelling errors made *in compositions* as a measure of spelling ability. But a composition task allows the student to avoid words which s/he cannot spell, so it always gives an overly

favourable impression. The advantage of using a proof-reading task as a test of spelling—as we did at UWA—is that it can test the ability to recognize errors in words that the student would not normally use, but which may occur in material they have to make notes on from a talk, or record, or pass on over their name. The proof-reading task can also test punctuation⁴ and grammar skills; the advantage of the composition approach is that it also tests composition skills. We use both approaches at the University of Western Australia. Our conclusions are simply that many recent Western Australia tertiary graduates are seriously lacking in some literacy skills.

Our experience with listening and reading tasks is that our tertiary graduates are good at these, which is how they got through their degree programs. They are not good at composition; and they are very poor at editing (more exactly, proof-reading⁵), the skill on which the transmission of literacy probably depends more than any other. Since this test is the one about which most of the fuss has occurred, it is worth summing up the arguments for its use as *one* indicator of basic literacy:

1. It's one of the most important cognitive/perceptual skills for future teachers, and should be thoroughly tested before anyone is graduated or hired for a teaching job. Since virtually everyone has to be a teacher of writing to some extent—they teach/instruct/assist their children, those they supervise or employ, and their co-workers on joint projects—this is not just an essential test for the vocational group 'school teachers' but a real-world test for essentially everyone.
2. Used in the school, it is also a useful test of a skill that pays off within education, as well as in the external world, since many joint projects as well as the editing occurring in many school activities (e.g. working on a school newspaper) call for this skill directly.
3. It's one good type of test of spelling

(punctuation, grammar, etc.), though not the only one. It has the advantage of testing spelling (as well as grammar, etc.) in a *controlled* context (unlike dictation tests), and of avoiding *overcuing* the examinee by providing a short list of alternative possibilities which is known to contain the correct answer (as in multiple-choice test).

4. It's a reasonable test of one skill involved in basic composition, in that the student has to be able to pick up errors in his/her own compositions, and picking them up in something written by another is a close approximation to that (as well as having intrinsic merit, as indicated above). And it tests a wider variety of words, constructions, etc. than will appear in a free composition.

5. It's a test of one significant reading skill, namely, reading with attention to the medium, as apposed to reading for sense. Media courses often teach the equivalent skill in watching film, but it is equally if not more important in the case of the print medium.

6. There are a couple of much weaker inferences that can be made from performance on proof-reading.

6A. It is significant to hear English teachers claim that proof-reading is irrelevant to contemporary English teaching, for two reasons. First, proof-reading is part of the complex process model often put forward as a recommended model for modern composition teaching (pre-writing, outlining, writing, editing, post-writing and possibly conferencing), for example by the National Writing Project in the United States. Secondly, as mentioned earlier, proof-reading is a way of testing spelling (etc.) that is as good as or better than any other; indeed, the only spelling test listed in the Australian Council for Educational Research catalogue at the moment is a proof-reading test⁶. The remark thus makes clear that the speaker—often a Senior Master of English—is un-

familiar with either modern methods of testing spelling or modern approaches to composition instruction⁷. Of course, a professional could perfectly well have good reasons for having selected another approach to composition instruction or spelling testing; but if this was the case, they would only have said that proof-reading was irrelevant to *their* approach or to *some legitimate* approaches. The test is, for this extra reason, a modest indicator of competent composition instruction and hence of what one may expect in composition performance—as we have observed from the high correlation of scores on the composition and the proof-reading test.

6B. Proof-reading is a craft skill. Doing it well requires sustained attention to detail and an interest in polishing and perfecting prose. This is one instance of a general care about and interest in perfecting things that many employers and friends value in the real world.

Determining a Passing Mark

Suppose one used a wide variety of items in a two-hour test at Year 10 to test basic literacy—and the rest of functional literacy (e.g. the ability to use prose for practical rather than literary purposes). How would one set the passing mark on the test of basic skills? Should it be 50%? 75%? 95%? In plain English, and near enough, one would set it so that everyone had to do well enough *in every essential area* to meet the common core of community, business, and educational standards. This would eventually require some careful empirical and analytical validation studies, but none of those can disguise the fact that reality often obliges us to draw a sharp line where in fact there is a gray area. That's what the need to make selection decisions always involves, and it's part of vocational training to explain that fact to

students. Not that they are exactly ignorant of the fact that admission to tertiary institutions and getting jobs is always like this, and for good reason; it's just that the attack on a literacy test is usually done by ignoring all the rules of practical reason.

It may be of some interest to look carefully at exactly what happens in this process of refining or converting a fuzzy-edged concept into a more precise one. It is a common occurrence with terms in our language, as they get used in the real world, and it is exactly the kind of matter that should be discussed and clarified in secondary English classes. Unfortunately, the comments made by many English teachers—and educational researchers—to the effect that any literacy test is essentially arbitrary show that they have not thought about this issue seriously.

We need to be quite clear about the difference between two different properties of concepts that are often appealed to as evidence that they are being used arbitrarily. On the one hand there is the arbitrariness that is evident in much art criticism and wine criticism, where the *core* of an evaluative concept depends on a *mere matter of taste*, or involves the *absence of any objective basis*, although the concept is being used as if it had some objective meaning. On the other hand, there is the situation resulting when a practical concept with *indisputable central cases and contrast cases*⁸, that nevertheless has some *peripheral imprecision*, is replaced—for certain practical purposes—by one with 'sharp edges'. When that happens, some cases are classified as falling on one side or the other of the new sharp edge where as in the past they fell into the fuzzy area that previously formed the periphery of the concept. That rather modest change of status (not involving a sudden reclassification of anyone previously called 'literate' into the category of 'illiterate') is the only basis for complaint about cutting scores in well-designed literacy tests.

The first matter to understand is that more practical concepts, unlike geometrical ones, are not completely precise around the edges *because they are more useful that way*, for the same reason that axes aren't sharpened like razors. But there are many practical cases where we *have* to divide people into two classes with respect to their performance on one of these peripherally imprecise properties (e.g. 'a good risk for a loan', 'a good choice for the job', etc.). In such cases we have to create a parallel concept which compresses the gray area into a single line, and it's true that this concept is—in this one respect—significantly different from the original one. Someone who would have been in the gray area of the original concept may be excluded by the new one. No one who was a clear winner or loser in terms of the old concept will be mis-categorized by the new one; and some who would have been doubtful on the old one will actually succeed on the new one. We can, with care, minimize the adverse consequences of this absolutely necessary simplification. For example, we can tell the unsuccessful loan applicant that they only missed by a very small amount, and hence would be likely to have a good chance elsewhere, or even here in a few months time; or we give a good reference to the candidate who only just misses the job.

In general, when defining a cutting score on a scale that measures a peripherally imprecise concept, two precautions are required. First, we must select a score that locates the edge of the concept *as well as it can be located*. Suppose, in the case of literacy, we get the opinions of 6-10 carefully chosen consultants on where to draw the line between literacy and illiteracy, as we go down a stack of sample papers with gradually declining scores⁹. At the top of the pile, where there are no mistakes at all, everyone says "literate". As we move down towards the bottom where everyone says "illiterate", we will come to the beginning of the gray area in

which one and then more and more will change their vote from “literate” to “illiterate”. Let’s define the passing score as the point at which half the consultants have decided we have reached their point of maximum tolerance of error. There is nothing *capricious* about this choice, although there is nothing sacrosanct about it either. It’s just a sensible kind of way to provide a practical solution.

There are other ways. One might say that students were literate as long as they scored above the lowest score that any of the raters set as their threshold. This is an attempt to give everyone the benefit of all doubts, by including the whole of the gray area into the white area. It’s too far from the common standard to be acceptable¹⁰. But it makes clear that one can easily use standards which cannot be criticized.

In addition to taking care to set up a reasonable cutting score, we should try to reduce the cost to students of being just light of the passing mark. Thus, for the school leaving test of ‘functional language skills’ (which would normally be taken at the end of Year 9, and could optionally be taken much earlier), we might give a grade from A to F. D would stand for Doubtful—not a clear Satisfactory (the C grade), but not a clear Fail. So, in the first place, no one would be *failed* at this point when they were one mark short of a C; they would get the appropriate grade to indicate that they were in the gray area—and plenty of time to do better. These students with a D—or an F—at the end of Year 9 would be encouraged to do some more work on the areas the test had diagnosed as weak, and take the test again at the end of Year 10. This test would of course cover a substantial number of functional literacy skills that go well beyond basic literacy; the ability to write a sensible letter applying for a job, to summarize a passage, to criticize a bad argument, etc.

In the end, there will be someone who is one mark short of the passing score on the Year 10 test and they will

not pass, just as a sprinter who is a tenth of a second slower than the winner does not win. In another year, with better luck, with more time to prepare, they might have passed—or failed by a larger margin. But the grade they will get on literacy is not Fail. It is D, and that means they are in a region where other outstanding qualities will offset the D for many jobs. Thus, we can reflect the gray area in our scoring scales, and reflect our fallibility, too. It would be unnecessarily cruel and unhelpful to do otherwise. However, the English establishment in Western Australia has elected to do otherwise.

Technical Incompetence in the English-teaching Community

The treatment of the technical issues in literacy testing by the English establishment in Western Australia, as in many other jurisdictions, is incompetent in almost every respect. A recent example, only headed off at the Secondary Education Authority’s final approval level, was the submission of descriptive equivalents for the grades in literacy, according to which the performance required to achieve the minimum passing grade was defined as ‘failing to achieve any of the standards required for higher grades’. Of course, that means that no-one could fail.

After more-or-less correcting this blunder, the next set of standards—the current ones—includes the absurd feature that the standards to be met for grades of A, B, C, and D on basic literacy *are all the same*; this being the only language skill on which they make no distinction. In fact, this set of skills is probably the most important one on which to make such distinctions. What they have done is to insist that students be given no information about how well they are doing on the many aspects of basic literacy except Pass/Fail, a mean and incompetent policy; they have converted a gray scale into black and white.

Why should the craft-sensitive students who virtually never make a mistake in these respects not be distinguished from those who make dozens of errors, but one less than the number that would fail them? Why should *their* pride be disallowed, whereas in every other type of language use the distinction between doing well and scraping by is clearly labelled as a distinction of merit? Presumably because this is thought to be a set of skills that is beneath refined appraisal.

The next proof of incompetence in these people is that the standard for F on basic literacy skills only applies if one spells words (or punctuates, etc.) *inconsistently*, not just if one spells (or punctuates, etc.) *incorrectly*. Upon questioning, the committee said that they had given this point much thought and insisted that the term to be used was 'inconsistent'. Note that they do not mean 'inconsistent with the standards of correct use', they mean 'not consistent', that is not done in the same way all the time. This is a pretty good one-sentence proof that a major problem with (the most prominent) English teachers is that they do not know how to use English. Failing in spelling involves making errors of spelling, and a spelling error is an *incorrect* use of letters to form a word, not an *inconsistent* one. Further proof of linguistic incompetence is afforded by a careful reading of the standards, especially those for basic literacy. They are so loosely defined that a literal interpretation of them is perfectly consistent with *either* (i) failing every student that takes the tests *or* (ii) giving them all an A.

Another example of incompetence is the decision to save 'comparability' by legislating that students taking the lower level English units are not to be allowed to get a B or an A. If the mathematicians took this kind of reasoning seriously it would of course mean that students taking the general math courses should never be given an A or a B. The very idea of dooming everyone who enters courses appropriate for their skill and in-

terest level to low grades is so distasteful, so stultifying, so inconsistent with the entire practice of education and good pedagogy in the world today, as to raise questions of ethics as well as competence.

When the leaders of a profession make a series of mistakes like the ones detailed above, the profession—not every member of it—is in deep trouble.

A slightly less ridiculous error is involved in their latest set of proposed standards for English Literature, where they suggest that 10% or 20% of the mark would be allocated for literacy. In the first place, they show no sign of thinking out how that would be assured (e.g. by providing—and checking on the use of—an objectively defined scoring key), but it is in any case a conceptually confused approach. *Basic* literacy is not something you trade off against creativity, or knowledge of literature. It should be a *minimum necessary condition* for passing the subject English, and—one might suppose—the subject English Literature. You can't represent that situation by giving it *any* percentage of the marks.

You can't 'trade off' weakness in this area any more than you can trade off incompetence in swimming against first-aid skills in the surf lifesaver's merit badge test. You might as well suggest that in the Surgery exam we give 20% of the marks for being able to distinguish the appendix from the gall bladder. Our common sense tells us that no one should get 80% of the marks for doing an operation on the wrong organ, no matter how neatly they perform it.

And the solution is not to give 40% or 80% of the marks in Surgery for recognizing the organ correctly. That recognition skill is a *minimum necessary condition* for graduating in Surgery, and the best way to handle it is to teach it—and examine it—under another heading; as a prerequisite subject, Anatomy. Similarly, it seems plausible to say that passing English Literature should be reserved for those students who can

manage the language themselves. You don't have to be able to write *excellent* prose to comment on excellent writers, but surely you need to be able to write *literate* prose. It must be put in the category of a joke to suggest that someone who can't spell any word of four or more letters, and can't construct sentences grammatically, can still get 80% on an English Literature test. You shouldn't pick up 20% for being literate; you should pick up nothing at all without it, and with it—you should get whatever mark up to 100% that your knowledge of the subject English Literature deserves.

Scoring on the literacy dimension would be easily done; one mark would be subtracted for every indisputable error of spelling, punctuation grammar or expression. It might be the case that a total of five clear errors would disqualify you. (Or six? Or ten? It would be interesting to see what standard the English establishment is willing to publish.) The standard should be established by showing the samples to consultants, in the manner previously described.

Doesn't 'English across the curriculum' mean that a student should not even be allowed to pass *Social Studies* with that degree of incompetence? If not, isn't it an empty proclamation? No, there is a better way to handle the situation in subjects other than English (and presumably English Literature). Teachers of those subjects, at any level, are reluctant to take marks off a student's performance 'in their subject' for illiteracy. In fact, they usually won't do it; but that situation should never arise. We can avoid it, in the following way.

Dealing with Literacy in Subjects Other than English

1. In the present situation, where a good grade in English, even at Year 12, does not ensure basic literacy—in fact, nor does a degree in English from

UWA¹¹—it's very helpful if other teachers mark for English literacy. But they can only be expected to do this if the mark they give on English *is separate from the one they give on their own subject*. The term report form should have an extra column added to it, so that there are two grades on each subject, one for content knowledge and one for literacy (which might be called 'language skills', if more than the basics are to be rated). A bad grade on literacy is a flag for the English teacher to do something, and for the parents and the principal to make sure that something is being done.

2. The literacy marking system used by teachers should give the student information as to the type of problem involved (spelling rather than or as well as grammar, etc.), information which can be passed on to the English teacher and parents. It's essential that, in adding this to the requirements placed on teachers other than English teachers, we find a way to do this without excessive burden. One way is to issue a stamp which lists the dimensions of basic literacy and leaves room for a tick or a cross (acceptable or unacceptable) in each category. It can be quickly stamped on to the front or back of a student assignment, and might look like this:

SPELLING	
PUNCTUATION	
GRAMMAR	
EXPRESSION	
ORGANIZATION	
OVERALL	

At the least, the teacher can, with one mark, indicate his or her satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the literacy dimension of the student's work. (If dissatisfied, of course, there should be at least one mark in a box other than the Overall box.)

3. The system for calculating the overall grade on skills which have several dimensions, on each of which there is a minimum, is simple: if there

is an x on *any* dimensions, the Overall grade is x. Otherwise, it's a tick for acceptable.

4. It's much more helpful, and only a little more effort, to use letter grades since they give the student a more exact idea of the situation. The usual scale is A/Excellent; B/Good; C/Satisfactory; D/Doubtful; F/Unsatisfactory. The combining rule is then: one or more Fs, Overall is F; No Fs, but one or more Ds, Overall is D; No Ds or Fs, average the grades that are given or just guess—precision in awarding the higher grades, outside English, is not important¹².

5. Since an assignment often gives no basis for the distinction between the upper grades, it's perfectly satisfactory to use a hybrid approach, with the tick/cross in such cases and Ds or As (etc.) when the evidence seems adequate.

6. On the student's written work, a simple x can be put wherever an error occurs, and if it isn't obvious what the error is, a single letter—the initial letter of the type of error, such as S for Spelling—can be put in the margin.

7. How should a teacher decide whether 6 spelling errors in an assignment represents a D, an F, or is acceptable? It is entirely up to the teacher's judgement, but of course it depends on the difficulty level, the age level, and the length of the assignment. The page is a handy—though not ideal—unit to use in setting up a rule of thumb. In upper secondary, if the typical page of composition has 2-3 errors on it, of whatever type, the rule of thumb would score the assignment unacceptable (F). If the pages typically exhibit one or perhaps two errors, the assignment is marginal (D). For students that write relatively few words per page, drop the allowable error rate to 1-2 and 1. Note that while composition and note-taking occur in most subjects, both of which are tests of spelling, only the latter tests spelling of words not selected by the writer and it is the latter that is almost never marked. So testing spelling/grammar/etc. via dictation or

note-taking or by setting proof-reading and other tasks must be arranged—and the results improved, where necessary—by the English teacher.

8. Eventually, an overall literacy grade has to be determined for the graduation certificate. This should report both the results of an external exam, and the internal rating, e.g. as "B- (external); C+ (internal)". One way to calculate the internal grade is to average all grades given in the latest term for which marks are available. A slightly preferable approach is to drop the top and bottom grades and average the rest.

9. Extended literacy. If the external and internal tests cover the other skills of functional literacy besides the basic mechanics of the language, the temptation will once again arise to pass students who do well or very well on the other skills even if they do badly on the basics. Of course, these other skills—summarizing, giving directions and explanations, criticizing and formulating arguments, etc.—are not only important but in most contexts more important than the basics. That's irrelevant; it's a replay of the error of offering to reserve 20% of the mark on English Literature for literacy. It's getting into the same mess that results when you ask teachers to reduce the marks in Social Studies because of the illiteracy. These currencies are not convertible and one should not try to set up some amount in the one that is to be allocated to the other. Since the basic skill performance controls access to many desirable entry-level jobs and some higher education paths, it—not an average of it and something else—needs to be done at an acceptable level. Therefore it must be separately graded. Therefore, if the literacy or language skill tests cover other material, the results should be reported in terms of two grades—one for 'mechanics' and one for practical English.

Of course, secondary English should cover these practical skills and give the same two grades as everyone else in the school; one for the specific content and

one for the basic literacy. Then it makes good sense, for the external test should do the same.

If this 'segregation of the basic literacy grade' is not strictly adhered to, you eliminate all motivation to improve in every student who finds, in their first shot at the literacy test at Year 7 or so, that their overall grade is C or better because they can do the other tricks well enough to offset their incompetence with the mechanics.

The Full Treatment

1. A functional literacy test—it is essential for credibility that it be external—should be offered once a year¹³. In the first year it would make excellent sense to allow it to be voluntary, as a trial run. In fact, there's no compelling need ever to make it compulsory, if the Ministry prefers to take the heat for not doing so over the heat for doing so. (We can count on School-Community Councils to express their views about this.) It could be taken by students in any year (or any number of years) they wished, from year 6 to 10. Combined with a serious system for the evaluation of teachers¹⁴, the basic literacy problem would be solved inside a year. Not because every student would pass the test in a year; but because the wheels would at last be rolling towards that goal. (I think it would only take three years to get almost all students to a passing grade of C.) The test should be constructed by using the existing tests of the big employers as well as school and professional expertise, and it would then constitute useful advance evaluation of one aspect of one's qualifications in the job competition. Of course, sample versions of it should be released for schools to use in working towards improved literacy.

2. The tertiary institutions might require that both grades on literacy are C or better—that is, the averaged grades from the teachers and the grade from

the external exam. They might allow non-native speakers the chance to pass the external test within the first two years at the tertiary institution. Or, since there are people who can make a great contribution without ever becoming very good at spelling etc., some faculties may simply require that the test be taken and the results shown on the transcript, but not require success.

3. Naturally, it would be constructive for the Ministry to issue some supporting materials, including notes on how to go about teaching basic skills in the literacy area, Pocket Spellers, some of the little language calculators that contain spellers, good spelling games, inservices, etc. But they are about 1% as valuable as the test, unless combined with the test, in which case they might contribute 50% of the gains.

4. Sooner or later, teachers already in the schools should be tested on basic language skills, since it is now clear that many lack them¹⁵. It may be politically easier to test only those teachers whose pupils are not doing as well on basic literacy as comparable pupils of other teachers; but it is logistically easier, much more effective, and gets remediation started much faster, to run across-the-board tests.

5. The subject of secondary and in particular upper secondary English, for too long running as a completely phony extra subject which the English Literature students sit without any specific preparation at all, needs further specification so that it includes not just serious attention to basic literacy, but to all the many fascinating and crucial skills that functional English comprises¹⁶.

6. The bottom line on all this is that English is far too important a subject to be left to English teachers. They have had their way in Western Australia, first cancelling out all specific content from the syllabus and now taking charge of the revision that was supposed to constitute an implementation of the Beazley recommendations. Once more, they

have managed to dilute the contents beyond the point where English serves practical reality. The conscientious ones, who are trying to avoid setting the students up for failure in the outside world, need help from school administrators all the way up to the Ministry to support what they are trying to do and defend them against the scorn of their 'avant-garde' colleagues. We need to change the balance of power so that once more there will be pride in mastering the language and in teaching that mastery and that pride.

Endnote

The action connection. In the next few years after the report came out, I served on the 'reform committee' of curriculum specialists which redefined the English curriculum in order to reintroduce the basic skills. These committees are almost always, for obvious reasons, composed of English teachers and consultants, who are in fact the establishment. It's essential to have alternative voices on them, although it's a tough job serving as the representative of what is seen as 'the enemy'. (A good issue to discuss is the explanation of this phenomenon and ways to cope with it.) The same applies to the testing side, since changes in the curriculum are 'unreal' until they are scored for in the tests and the scores implemented in the selection processes that depend on test scores. The reformers were all counting on the Ministry of Education to design a literacy test (a key part of the recommendations). But this effort collapsed under political pressure: no one wanted to take the heat for putting teeth into testing.

So I designed a literacy test and—with the support and assistance of the Head of the Education Department at the University of Western Australia—we applied it as a filter to all the students attempting to pick up a teaching credential at this university. (The general point

is that when progress slows down externally, one must make the progress occur by some action within one's own power.) The discovery that 40% of the students in the diploma course failed the test, despite the extremely generous pass mark and the fact that all of them have university degrees in other subjects before beginning the course, led to a good deal of media attention and further disputes with the English teachers' association, which were quite good for clarifying oversimplifications on both sides. A crucial infological issue here was the distinction between excuses and explanations. "The teachers are not to blame because so many factors make it hard for them—poor home support, poor knowledge of English, poor motivation towards school work, poor school and community support for discipline, etc." Critique: (i) it fails to distinguish between the most-disadvantaged students and the rest; (ii) it fails to distinguish between, Is it hard? and, Can it be done?

The good news about the test that we instituted and gave in the first few weeks of the year was that about 95% of those who failed it were able to pass it by the end of their year here, after being pointed in the direction of remedial materials—books, computer-assisted instruction, and very limited tutorial assistance. The simple fact was that most of them had never been told that they had a problem, let alone been put in touch with practical self-help material. This success of self-improvement activities by students already carrying a heavy load makes it very difficult to argue for the view that everything that could be done within reasons was being done at the schools they attended. Of course, one can't generalize the numbers because this group is more motivated and academically superior to the school leavers group as a whole.

With the help of the Minister and the media, we were able to extend the testing so that the identical test was taken by a couple of classes at an average/weak

school in the city. It turned out that their fail rate was only slightly higher. This result, albeit informal, creates a presumption that the problem is largely one of failing to tackle the task.

A big study in Melbourne came out at about the same time which was advertised as showing that literacy skills had not declined. This study illustrated half a dozen errors in logic, discussed above in the paper, and critiquing it was good for further attention, up to the Cabinet level.

I also met with the executive committee of the professional association and provided a long list of ways in which they could massively upgrade the profession's achievements, ranging from videotapes of super-teachers to improved action research (classroom studies run by teachers) to supporting an externally run test for diagnostic purposes.

Naturally, one has to give numbers of talks to the annual meetings of school principals, teachers, and parents' associations, about the literacy scene and how to improve it. Once one makes clear that one does not profess skills in teaching, but only in evaluating, then the usual line of argument about "You couldn't do any better, so who are you to talk" becomes a bit stale and one can get down to, "Are the obvious things being done? These include: stating what's needed (in an official syllabus), providing the obvious support (lists of useful texts and references and possibly courseware, and if possible videos of highly successful teachers), requiring that it be done (the principal's duty, but you have to check that the principal is held to doing it and encouraged to do it), testing to see if it has been done (the Ministry's job¹⁷), remediating those who need extra help (teacher plus special classes), avoiding the 'out of the frying pan into the fire' i.e., distortion of the curriculum by spending most of the time on the mechanics of English, etc.

Since none of this was part of my normal workload, it represents overtime volunteer work and much more could

be done by someone who found they could commit even quarter-time. This kind of job only needs critical skills and sustained effort; without either, nothing gets done. Treating the action plan as a task for infological appraisal, just like an argument, is an extremely successful way to improve it, and a welcome addition to the usual list of examples in the CT course.

So what was the outcome? In the end, there is no end. We have a new curriculum with most of the right things in it. We have a set of standards for marking that is gradually spreading. We have tertiary admissions committees that are gradually coming around to requiring a genuine literacy test. We have two schools of education that won't graduate future teachers that are strikingly unable to identify and correct misspelling etc. And we have enough public support to keep the pot warm on the stove for a while. That support is widespread in Australia, as in North America, and has now elected a government in another state that is committed to serious teacher evaluation and state-wide testing. Given that there are very serious problems with the state assessment programs in the United States, revealed by the recent study showing that all fifty states are scoring above the median (how *that* came about makes a good exercise for the infologic class), Australia will have a chance to learn from others' experience and do better.

But entropy will take over again, if the watchful citizen doesn't remain watchful. And watchfulness is useless if the watcher has no observation skills. So the job of training the watchers remains crucial, and that's our job.

Notes

- 1 A new government fulfilled an election promise by setting up full reviews of secondary education and of college admission procedures in the state, with a commitment to implement the

recommendations of at least the first of the two committees (the 'Beazley Committee' and the 'McGaw Committee'). In the event, they did try to implement nearly all of the hundreds of recommendations and succeeded with most of them; but they dropped the ball on literacy testing and teacher competency testing, arguably two of the most important.

- 2 It might seem obvious that students will find 'literature' or 'creative writing' more interesting than spelling, punctuation and simple grammar. Of course, they should learn spelling (etc.) even if the teacher can't make it interesting. But since what the teacher thinks is interesting literature is often boring for many students (as is 'creative writing'), and since there are some very interesting ways to teach spelling, etc., in the context of interesting writing tasks, or as part of a game, or as part of team-editing projects such as a school newspaper, the race might be quite close. Unfortunately, the problem is all-too-often that the teacher can't spell and hence is likely to avoid the subject; and/or disdains such humble matters as beneath the dignity of English teachers; and/or has never been taught how to make these topics interesting for pupils. All of these problems reflect on the induction and preservice training and 'disciplinary leadership' provided by tertiary institutions such as my own; but they also all reflect on poor employment practices by the school systems, poor leadership by the professional associations, and poor or non-existent teacher evaluation procedures on a continuing basis.
- 3 *Monash Review*, April, 1988
- 4 We include capitalization under punctuation, and paragraphation under expression.
- 5 The difference is that editing involves improving style and expression, and possibly altering length; proof-reading simply requires the identification and correction of basic errors of punctuation, grammar, spelling and formatting.
- 6 The PRETOS test, which it describes under the heading of "Proof Reading Tests of Spelling" as a "means of assessing spelling through a student's ability to discriminate between misspelt words and correctly spelled words when presented in context."
- 7 Some of which are discussed in *The Evaluation of Composition Instruction*, by Davis, Scriven and Thomas, 2nd Edition, Teachers College Press, Columbia University, 1987.
- 8 An 'indisputable contrast case' is one to which the term certainly does not apply.
- 9 The consultants must at least include representatives of the 'consumers' in the sense of employers and teachers at the next level in the educational hierarchy, as well as 'providers' (the English teachers) as well as one or two specialists in the area.
- 10 It's methodologically preferable to set the line at the point when the second, rather than the first, judge is willing to say that someone has fallen from grace.
- 11 An English degree presumably, and in our experience, does ensure semi-literacy; that is, the ability to write more-or-less intelligible material marred by many errors in the use of the language. In fact, it probably ensures articulatory, i.e. fluency and some ingenuity in the production of language.
- 12 Unless a prize is being awarded for outstanding achievement or improvement on the basic literacy dimension.
- 13 Of course, one might prefer to call it an English Skills Test or Practical Language Skills Test, just as we call ours the Teacher Language Skills Test.

¹⁴ Alternatives for this are discussed in "The State of the Art in Teacher Evaluation", in *Teacher Assessment*, ed. Jan Lokan, Australian Council for Educational Research (forthcoming, 1988). Preprints are available for comment.

¹⁵ Apart from a great deal of specific evidence about individual cases, which cannot be ignored, there is a general argument. Both WACAE and UWA are reporting fail rates of (approximately) 40% now that they are testing. There is no reason to think that the cohorts prior to the ones tested were massively better. Therefore we—and presumably Murdoch and Curtin—have turned out, and the Ministry has employed, thousands of teachers in the last few years alone who lack minimum literacy skills. While it is possible in principle that all such teachers have remediated themselves, it would be absurd to assume it. It would also be absurd to assume that the situation is any better in science or mathematics or social studies. If similar evidence appears, tertiary faculty should also be retested on the extent to which they have kept up to date with the subject they teach, or subjects they need to know even if they do not teach them (pre-requisites).

¹⁶ It is pathetic to listen to brilliant students at the University talk about their hatred of the 'English' which they were taught at high school, by being forced to attend English classes in which nothing functional and substantial was taught or appreciated. Details of what a respectable high school English course could contain, material which they say they would have found valuable and worthy of respect, are in "Functional English" in *English In Australia*, 1984, pp. 33-43, 67.

¹⁷ The hard part of this is defining and implementing the cutting scores, because that's when people begin to

get very unpopular. (This is impossible without some external remarking of papers.) Hence the discussion in the paper on this point.

Professor Michael Scriven, Department of Education, University of Western Australia, Nedlands, Western Australia 6009, Australia □