

# What Difference Does Writing Make?

## Leading Writers on Writing

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### To Question and Critically Analyse

By Paul Brodie

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As a student, I am, by definition, unlikely to ever feel motivated about accomplishing tasks that have been set by a given teacher. Occasionally, I'll simply give up or refuse to continue it if I don't see any semblance of value in its completion — running around a field 10 times in PE, for instance. But before this turns into an agonisingly angst-filled whinge, I'll make it clear that I'm not out to argue the case for the above. In fact, I'm going to do the exact opposite — I'm going to endorse the worth and value of the “post-modern” and “critical” aspects of our HSC English syllabus. “Heretic! — Burn him at the stake! — Send him to Nauru!” cometh the cries.

Leaving aside the pitchfork-wielding mob for a moment, let's have a little history lesson. Just last April, with an uptight indignation, John Howard tells the ABC that English syllabus is being “dumbed down”. “I share the views of many people about the so-called postmodernism ... I just wish that the independent education authority didn't succumb on occasions to the political correctness it appears to succumb to”, chided the Prime Minister. It wasn't the first time teachers and educators have copped an earful from Mr Howard and his fellow travellers. Rewind to August 20, 2005 and Treasurer Costello decries the biased anti-Americanism of the unwashed leftist teachers, “If your teacher's carrying that bias it tends to get passed on.” Furthermore, “... Anti-Americanism can easily morph into anti-Westernism. Particularly you've seen that with terrorists”. Rupert Murdoch's song sheet, *The Australian*, was

notably venomous in its criticism. “[The] postmodern rot at the core of Australian academic and cultural life seeks to replace skills-based excellence with warmed-over sociology and inject a politicised, deterministic view of the world.” It gets better: “high school English classes are [being] turned into political battlegrounds” where an “attitude of lowest-common-denominator relativism threatens society” and is becoming “ever more divorced from the lives of everyday Australians”. Phew!

Different subjects, granted, but the common theme is present. Teachers who question dominant ideological structures — or even the goodness of the United States — are obviously “succumbing to political correctness”. Better still, being able to question the frankly ridiculous assertions made by George W. Bush and his cohort may render us as “anti-Western” or even “terrorists”! Keep an eye out Osama, the class of 2006 may soon overshadow you.

*The Australian’s* effort leaves the others in its wake to be frank. From reading their numerous editorials on the issue, one could be forgiven for thinking that English classrooms are communist propaganda camps, with humble English teachers as the metaphorical commissars. *The Australian* even patronisingly characterises “everyday Australians” as being divorced from “lowest-common-denominator relativism”. Ah, I get it now. True “everyday Australians” are the unquestioning type, those who believe the interest-rate scare campaign when they see it, those who really believe that there were “reds under the bed”, those who are convinced that they’re in constant danger of terrorists and so on. Thankfully, it is the very aspects of the syllabus they criticise that help ensure that myself, among others, are able to go out in the big, wide world as independent thinkers, confident in our ability to act rationally and not simply as mental pawns of the corporate state.

The criticism of the syllabus from the usual suspects would perhaps gain some traction if it was based in reality, rather than a fanatical ideological zeal to eliminate modes of thought contrary to their own. The fact is, students are being exposed to the classical/canonical literature, and not only that, the syllabus actually demands some thorough writing and English

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skills from students. John Howard may like to try preparing for an 800-word piece of creative writing on an Imaginative Journey, in either the form of a transcript, diary entry, novel or interview. Oh, and by the way, you don't find out the question until you sit the exam. Try and get it finished in around 40 minutes as well. After you've done that, you can come and tell me about how the syllabus is being "dumbed down".

The Bush/Howard Murdochian cheer squad, the aptly named "Dancing Bears" as Mark Latham put it, should perhaps look in the mirror before they criticise lowly English teachers for "politicising" students. There is nothing political about criticism. With the near monopoly on media outlets that Murdoch holds in Australia, it is now more imperative than ever that youth is able to question and critically analyse what is put in front of them. That's what it's all about really. It's not about the supposed comrade commune at the Board of Studies, it's about having a generation of youth that is able to operate properly and rationally within a society that places ever-increasing demands on them. And hell, it's good for the health of democracy while you're at it. That wasn't so bad now was it? Better than 10 laps around an oval for P.E. anyway ...



Paul Brodie wrote this essay in 2006 when he was in Year 12 at Marcellin College, Randwick, New South Wales.