

Teaching English - a distinctive role

Marie Hartley ...

In response to, and inspired by, the last edition of Elephant Times, I offer some suggestions for how the teaching of English Language and Literature can enable students to develop some of the skills required by the curriculum, and explore ideas relevant to an understanding of the existential threat of climate change, in a dynamic and life affirming way.

I suggest we need to beware of a reliance on measurability alone. It's important to allow the ineffable. In my subject, English Literature, I hope that my students come to have an appreciation of the sublime, of the numinous, to experience awe and wonder, and I believe that those experiences can create the passion and engagement to power their thinking on preserving the planet.

Teaching English Literature is not about searching for plays and stories that illustrate the effects of climate change. Good literature is much more nuanced and complex than that, and education is not about proselytising.

It is vital that we all give credence to students. They are going to inspire their teachers with their passion for change, and the diligence with which they approach the task involved, BUT their lives are not the slightest bit easy.

The curriculum must engage and inspire them, and offer hope so that students can feel that they can be the conduits of change.

And, students, I have every faith, will be passionately committed to making their schools greener. They will drive these initiatives, and inspire their teachers.

Some suggestions for how climate change could be used as a stimulus in English lessons in secondary school.

❑ Younger students will enjoy the following activity:

- ◇ Create an endangered species. Invent habitat and specific details about the species. Draw, paint, make, or use the interactive whiteboard to show the audience a visual representation of the creature.
- ◇ Give a one-minute speech, explaining why the species is in danger from global warming.

The skills of imagination, creativity, persuasion and presentation are to the fore here. This is an initial stimulus which could easily be developed and have further iterations,

❑ Students in the middle secondary school years could practise skills of advocacy, rhetoric, explanation and argument:

- ◇ Role play delegates or protesters at a climate summit.
- ◇ Ask invited guests attending the summit to engage in dialogue, after hearing short speeches from the delegates/ protesters, thus practising the skills of debate in a lively and topical manner.

❑ Shakespeare is timeless. In my experience, students usually love Shakespeare. There is the opportunity, at GCSE level, to be creative.

- ◇ A study of the sheep shearing scene in "The Winter's Tale" will enable them to analyse the language which Shakespeare uses to create the sense of a temperate climate - the one which is now under threat.
- ◇ Students might discuss how the mood and atmosphere of clemency created by Shakespeare in this scene could be represented on stage.

❑ A level or Baccalaureate students, studying English Literature, might read and discuss, perhaps in pairs, using highlighters, the opening chapter of Richard Jefferies' "After London," a post-apocalyptic narrative.

A scrutiny of the ways that Jefferies' style creates a mood of desolation and desuetude might result in pair presentations, or written analysis.