

The english national curriculum essay

Literature, Russian Literature



The title of my presentation is “ Does the NC provide a varied and balanced approach for teaching English or is it a restrictive hinderance. ” I want to begin by explaining why I chose this topic for my presentation. During research I” ve found that some teachers are opposed to the “ rigid” guidelines laid out in the NC – a particular gripe in various forums ie TES messageboards. They argue that the NC is too prescriptive and leaves them with no freedom of choice – as evidenced by handout. To be fair and impartial I decided to give some consideration to their argument. They complain about the lack of choice in choosing authors saying that those selected are stilted, dry and in some cases inappropriate for the modern era. The current reading lists, long lists of long dead authors, could give credence to this claim but a cursory glance at the authors contained in these lists dispels this theory. The range of choice is vast – from Jane Austen to George Orwell. Each section that teachers have to choose from has a wide range of choice to satisfy everyone’s needs. I would conclude that a rich and varied choice is found throughout.

On the other end of the scale, I believe that complete autonomy would result in students nationwide receiving a vastly different education. The centralization of education policies has enabled schools nationwide to follow the same program which gives students the length and breadth of the country the same opportunities, therefore leveling the playing field. The NC framework also ensures that we don” t discard our own literary heritage.

Drawing from personal experience, I felt I missed out by not studying Shakespeare in years 7 -11. It was only when I changed schools and took A-

levels that I was exposed to any Shakespeare – and I felt disadvantaged because everyone else in my year had. This highlights my earlier point of everyone receiving a differing education. Instead we had spent almost two years studying American writers – my question is what is wrong with our own writers? And the NC answers this empathically. There is nothing wrong with studying them. Fortunately the NC has recognised that pupils don't want to spend their academic careers only studying canonical works – traditionally white middle class authors. It recognises the potential of non canonical literature in the curriculum and as such has tried to maintain a balance between the two. The inclusion of such helps to widen the pupils experience, broadening their horizons.

Giving the NC a cursory glance I can see how they could reach such an opinion that freedom of choice is eliminated but would argue that such an opinion is myopic in nature as the NC does incorporate a degree of freedom – as we have already discovered. It is also my opinion that they fail to recognise the other positives contained in the document. So what are the positives? Due to time constraints I've only focused on two or three. At first reading my attention was immediately drawn to the speaking, listening and group discussion sections. To sum up, it details that pupils should be taught to speak clearly and effectively – using illustrations and examples to back up what they are saying as well as being able to listen in order to understand. I feel the next step to be one of the most important. Group discussions are to be encouraged so that pupils will be taught to listen to and accept other people points of view. These are skills that need to be developed and if the

teacher is successful in teaching them then they have equipped the student with necessary life skills under the guise of teaching them English.

Students will need to rely on their communication skills for the rest of their lives and it is the teachers duty to ensure that they develop these skills. I mentioned earlier that some teachers regard some of the required texts as being inappropriate for this day and age. I would imagine that students agree with this assumption – I know I did when I was younger. I was of the opinion of “ how can a play written 500 years ago have any relevance to me today? ” Little did I know that Shakespeare’s themes transcend time and are relevant even now. Take the Merchant of Venice for example – the themes of racial prejudice, justice, the rights of an ethnic minority in their adopted homeland are all questions we are grappling with today.

The same could be said of Jane Austen novels with regards to feminism. The NC provides the opportunity for teachers to explore these texts with their pupils and not just consign them to a place in history. Another part of the national curriculum that is worth commenting on is the inclusion of writers from different cultures and traditions. Studying such material enables students to gain a better understanding of other cultures, which in our multi cultural society is definitely a good thing as understanding may lead to a reduction in tension. This has perhaps become more relevant since Sept 11th. Fear of the unknown – in this case Islam – has driven a wedge between the West and Islamic cultures. By providing us with an opportunity to learn about these differing cultures the NC can help reduce the fear somewhat.

And it is through studying literature that we realise that people are the same the world over. They write about the same problems and carry the same themes as our own writers. So now we” ve identified that the NC does contain variety, we need to consider whether it is balanced.

I would argue that it appears so. As I” ve already mentioned, it strives to maintain a balance between canonical and non canonical works of literature. It also places the core skills that need to be developed – speaking, listening, reading, writing – on an equal footing. Admittedly it doesn” t detail how much time a teacher should spend on each one: it leaves the choice up to them. The NC recognises the individuality of every learning environment and as a result is a guideline that enables teachers to adapt and conform to it as their needs dictate. In my opinion the NC is a valuable guideline that is varied and balanced. I would argue that the NC, if adhered to, will help young people understand other cultures through literature, whilst acknowledging and having pride in their own literary heritage.

But I would say that whilst it is a guideline for teaching English the main objective of the curriculum is to “ prepare children for the opportunities, challenges and responsibilities of adult life”.