

# inote

[ Irish National Organisation  
for Teachers of English ]



## Magazine November 2021

# EDITORIAL

~~As we enter another year with lockdown.~~

~~Now that the pandemic is over.~~

No.

We are neither at the beginning nor the end of this pandemic, we are somewhere in a vague middle ground. A limbo that we aren't sure is our new reality or a place where we will soon move on from.

-Insert relevant quote/literary/cinematic reference here-

But this is where we are and this is where we will remain for the rest of the school year.

Luckily you have this! The INOTE magazine!

-remove exclamation marks, teachers hate exclamation marks-

We gave ourselves a theme, "The Thing With Feathers", to add a bit of cohesiveness to the magazine this year. Hope for the future, hope that we have learned something from the past, and hope that the present fills us with a sense of worth.

This last is my hope. We often look at the negative in these situations but what about what we, as individuals, have achieved and continue to achieve. INOTE has many purposes but one of the most important is the promotion of our own sense of professionalism, on an individual level.

There are so many webinars taking place. So many teachers sharing their own practice.

-mention yourself doing them but in a self-deprecating manner-

With all of these webinars zooming around the internet (pause for laughter) we can often question our own classroom practice, question our own professionalism. But we have to remember that those giving the webinars are just like us, they are "just" teachers. We all have our own tactics, methods, pedagogical approaches, all as valid as those that are being shared.

We should always look to improve but we should also acknowledge our own abilities, professionalism, and talents.

-insert inspirational paragraph about how teachers are talented-

INOTE has accomplished a huge amount this year.

We continued the upgrade of our website. A task that has proved to be much more onerous than we had anticipated. Not only is it time consuming for a volunteer organisation it also requires a level of knowledge not usually associated with teachers of English. Luckily the members of our committee tasked with the job were not only enthusiastic but also meticulous. Hopefully the full power of the new website will be released this year.

We continued to give CPD through Zoom Webinars (including Community of Practice, especially through Joe Rolston). We have a number of public webinars planned for the new year, plus a few "members only" events.

One of the Community of Practice webinars we have set up is one consisting of twenty teachers that meet regularly to discuss various elements of the English Classroom. We hope to set up a few more of these groups over the coming months.

We continue our work on the two NCCA text committees (Junior Cycle and Senior Cycle) as well as on SARG. Through these groups we are able to communicate our members concerns.

One of the more important jobs of the last year were our surveys on the Junior Cycle exam and the Leaving Cert exam. Through these surveys we were able to pass on our members concerns around how the exams might proceed in our current circumstances.

As ever we would like to remind everyone that we are volunteers. We have school work, family work (yes, I said work) and a social life (well, the other members do). We do INOTE for free. We receive nothing but a warm feeling of satisfaction.

If you, too, would like to receive a warm feeling of satisfaction please contact us and volunteer!

We look forward to hearing from you.

In the meantime, enjoy the magazine.

-rewrite the last paragraph with a big call to arms finish-

Conor Murphy  
@conorsmurf

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# ... 'the thing with feathers'

By Orla Keane

Immediately, without a single breath being taken its Emily isn't it? Dickinson? 'Hope is a thing with feathers' the single greatest line of the single greatest poem from the single greatest poet, Emily Dickinson. Through time and space I've read, studied analysed, revised this poem, among many others, in my role as an English teacher. Every time, every single time, without any exceptions, there has been a new perspective, a new vista, vignette, viewpoint, angle from which to bring this poem to life. This year however, oh yes, this year, must be the best! Unprecedented, unexpected, as sneaky as the fingers that unbound Dickinson's hidden treasure trove of words, Covid 19 snuck across the world and into our lives, shaking our patterns, rhythms, energy, focus, intent and joy. Untouchable we had been, in our work, our relationships, our journeys, our plans. But C 19 certainly showed us that 'there go I but for the grace of god' as they used to say.

I've a course to start, there's poetry, comparative, single text, not to mention the 'unseen', the composition, which will always be the essay to me. We'll never have the time, it'll never be covered, never mind revised. No, it'll all be grand by Christmas. Christmas makes everything alright, the 'elf on the shelf' will work his magic. Do you know what, until then, we'll concentrate on the big stuff, try to get the guidelines covered so that they can work away on their own if we do go into 'lockdown'. I mean lockdown, when in your life did you think that would ever be a sentence you would utter through a medical mask, to your colleague who is similarly muzzled? Our lessons are now punctuated with don't forget to sanitise on your way in, on your way out and at all times in between. While you are reviewing your PCLM remember also the criteria for success now includes keep your distance, walk to the left, follow the arrows, masks over your nose.

I better start the Handmaids Tale, it'll take ages to set the context, explain a society in upheaval, a dystopia in which life is not what it seems and freedom of movement is stifled by checkpoints. Actually Gilead and a country in the grip of a global pandemic have much in common and were these texts in the Comparative analysing the Cultural context mode we may draw some very interesting parallels. The very idea of contemplating the theme of complex relationships would be incredibly enlightening as we review and compare the main characters and their family, sibling, romantic and working relationships.

"The cultural context can have a significant influence on the behaviour of the central character/s in a text". Compare the way in which the behaviour of the central characters in three of your texts is influenced by the cultural context of those texts. Who would be your central character in the Irish pandemic text? Would you say they were significantly influenced by their CC? I must say that the distraction of placing our current situation in a literary context, to view ourselves, for the first time as the oddity, is really compelling.

- Can you relate to the Handmaid and the time she must spend alone, confined and only allowed out with one person to go to a designated destination?

- Do we feel more at one with Lear as his world is thrown in to disarray and all that he has known is changed?

- Do you ever feel like Eilis and long to see and speak to your family and friends and feel like you might as well be in Brooklyn?

- Have you been on that many virtual tours of museums that you now have a backstory for more than just the Arnolfini Wedding?

- Have you been left with nothing but Questions of Travel? Especially when??

I have suggested to students that they could find hope and encouragement in poetry. Within your 5k corral, I implored, you could try to catch 'a tremendous fish' or take bog walks over 'waterlogged trunks Of great firs. I proposed that they may be content to remain inside like Boland viewing the onslaught of the rambling horse outside, ravaging the hedge or like Frost believe that 'good fences make good neighbours'. Whatever they decide I will always circle back to my favoured words which were never as poignant in any other year.

'Hope is a thing with feathers –  
That perches in the soul –  
And sings the tune without the  
words –  
And never stops – at all – '



## Senior Cycle Review: Time For Change

by Conor Murphy

IT'S THE 20-YEAR anniversary of the "new" English Leaving Cert.

The dream was a course, and an exam paper, that gave more freedom to students to express their opinion, based around questions asking you to write whether you liked Sylvia Plath's poetry or not, or asked you to write a letter to Seamus Heaney. Unfortunately this often led the opposite; rote learning of essays.

But the paper has changed bit by bit until now the student is encouraged to give their opinion, albeit one directed precisely by the question asked.

The texts continue to change. Where before it was a staid list of white men and Emily Dickinson, the poems now embrace the new as well as the old.

Film was introduced and has, over the last five or six years, eventually given us a wide range of films you would want to study.

But now things are about to change again.

If you listened to the media, and some politicians, the Leaving Cert is an unmitigated disaster area that traumatises our nation and needs to change. There have been calls for more continuous assessment, for teachers to correct their students' work, and for a reduction in the number of subjects studied.

The reality is that nobody knows what changes might happen.

At the time of writing Norma Foley hasn't published the final report of the Senior Cycle Review and thus hasn't decided whether to accept or reject the recommendations it contains, whatever they may be.

They are all just speculating in a void.

If we do want to have a "hint" at where we may be going the best place to look is at new Leaving Cert subjects or subjects that are changing right now.

Polish, Portuguese, Lithuanian, Mandarin Chinese, Physical Education, Computer Science, Agricultural Science, Classical Studies, Art, and Economics all have new specifications.

Irish in the middle of the consultation stage.

As you can see, change is happening right now.

I had a quick look at another new curriculum, Politics and Society, (as well as Ag Science and Classical Studies for comparison) to get a feel of where things were heading.

The first thing to note is the use of Learning Outcomes. We are now all used to these from the Junior Cycle and it makes sense to connect JC and SC teaching and learning through LOs, even if we might have reservations around this.

Pol and Soc has four strands and within them eight topics (Classical studies has just 4 topics). Think of these in terms of JC English's three strands.

I have been critical of the phrasing of the LOs in JC English and it was interesting to note how the Pol and Soc LOs had a clarity I could only wish for.

"Critically evaluate the view that modern Irish society has always been a patriarchy."

"Define what is meant by social class."

Imagine that clarity in JC English!

I'm sure that those teaching the subject have quibbles with some of them, implementation often differs from planning, but, from the perspective of the first subject experimented on with these LOs, they are an improvement.

It is worth noting that the specification does outline how the subject should be approached in class as well as the inclusion of a Reflection Journal for the students.

But the real revelation for some of us is that this is a fundamental change from where we are.

The whole course will be changed. Will there still be a comparative element? Will we be able to compare poets? Poems? What will be pushed to the fore? Will we still have two papers? Will the course be split into two subjects?

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

Assessment.

Assessment often dictates how a course is actually taught, despite all the hope of those designing the course (hello JC English).

Politics and Society is split 80/20.

80% for a final exam.

20% for a written report.

Both will be sent to the SEC for correction.

This is similar to all the other new specifications, with some adjustments depending on the subject. Ag Sc, for instance, is split 75/25, Irish 55/45 etc.

Like History at the moment the 20% topic is published every year and the students work from that.

The layout of the final exam is, broadly, given.

This then is what we might be getting.

A Learning Outcome based specification.

A written Continuous Assessment piece worth 20%, corrected by the SEC.

A final exam worth 80%, corrected by the SEC.

What might the piece be? Creative writing? Comparative? Poets? Research?

Or will all of this be scrapped and replaced with something brand new?

The Board for Senior Cycle and Council will have to audit and review all of these specifications before anything new happens.

And we still have to wait for Norma Foley to publish that report.

Who knows what will happen.



# From Apathy to Action

## Encouraging purposeful student engagement with the writing process.

by Sandra Donohue

An intervention I developed that improved engagement with the writing process amongst First Year students; the Reflective Dialogue Journal.

As an English teacher I spend hours correcting the same mistakes. The difficulties students have with written expression are extreme points of frustration for me: grammar, punctuation, syntax, appropriate use of register, lack of variation in vocabulary, poor penmanship - the list goes on. Students continue to make the same errors, year after year, cohort after cohort. The reason I developed this intervention was that I saw a huge level of apathy amongst students when it came to writing. I wanted to find a different way to help my students become more confident in their ability to articulate themselves and therefore produce a higher standard of written work. In an age where everyone has an opinion and the freedom and social media platforms to share it, I believe that the English classroom is one of the best and indeed, most appropriate places to learn how to articulate yourself in a meaningful way. This intervention is student focused, and based on the practice of reflection, and student-teacher relationships. While students are now asked to reflect as part of the new Junior Cycle curriculum, it is often specific to a set task and writing genre. Generally, these reflections are never looked at again by students as the task has been completed and they have moved on. The Reflective Dialogue Journal method of engagement I developed moves beyond the 'box-ticking' use of reflection as it is used as a genuine learning tool.



Quite simply, this intervention requires pen and paper. I gifted each student with a journal and put a number of questions to them. The questions were delivered in two phases: phase one consisted of lower order questions revolving around things in class such as whether or not they liked group work. I collected their responses and wrote replies to them. I did not correct any mistakes in the journals, therefore the 'fear of failure' that some students experience was eliminated.



The students came to understand that whatever they wrote would be given a positive, genuine written response from me. Additionally, I acted on their answers - for example, when students said they enjoyed DEAR classes (Drop Everything And Read) I rescheduled lesson plans to incorporate these classes more often. Phase two of the questions required a little more thought and effort from the students as they encountered higher order questions that necessitated reflection. Once again, when I collected the journals and responded, I made no corrections.

All of the questions asked were based on the students' opinions rather than curriculum-specific topics. This was not an assessment, there were no grades given, just written feedback to their answers. However, what I noticed when I collected the journals for the second time was a marked improvement in the students' writing. They made a greater effort to broaden their

vocabulary and to 'self-correct' their responses before handing them up. Issues with punctuation and sentence structure were less severe - their opinions and ideas were more clearly presented. The goal of this intervention was to improve student awareness of their own writing, and that goal was achieved. This learning was also evident in the students' writing on a more general level as I began to see less mistakes in their class work and homework. There was a marked improvement in the standard of writing after students completed the Reflective Dialogue Journal exercises.

My classroom experience to date has taught me that unless a Junior Cycle student is particularly interested in literature they are unable to find real value in English as a subject. For the most part, if I ask a Junior Cycle student what subjects they like in school, English rarely appears on their list of top three favourites - yet it is a core subject. A lot of the time students compartmentalise English into simply class work and homework. I believe that this intervention encouraged

and enabled students to view the subject more panoramically. It is also cross-curricular as it centres on their ability to express an opinion rather than simply respond to a curriculum based stimulus that is subject specific. The Reflective Dialogue Journal, or value interventions encouraged my first year students to think on a deeper level about what they were doing each time they entered my classroom. As they were given the freedom to express their honest opinions about our English classes this encouraged them to connect more fully with both me their teacher and the lessons. A sense of partnership developed as they saw how I incorporated their opinions into the classes as we progressed. This in turn helped them to become more aware of what and how they were writing. They become more keenly aware of what constitutes good, effective written communication. A personal touch is fundamental and vital if my students are to preform at their best, and this can easily be achieved using the Reflective Dialogue Journal.





# ALONE IT STANDS

Alone It Stands: Junior Cycle Play

by Amyrose Forder (@ForderMs)

John Breen's *Alone It Stands* is currently a prescribed text for Junior Cycle English. The play is based on the real-life match between Munster and New Zealand in Thomond Park in October 1978. Munster triumphed, winning 12-0 - the first time any Irish team beat the All Blacks (a statistic which remained until 2016!). It has been performed across the Western world since 2002. Set in Limerick, where "rugby is like a religion", the biblical match is personalised by offering a taster of fictional surrounding stories of spectators that day. It is a true story of David versus Goliath - and we all love an underdog!

A key feature of *Alone It Stands* is its many characters - 62, by final count. The colourful ensemble includes the real players, fictional spectators, Bunratty singers, a dog, and even a personified ball. Just six actors portray these characters, ensuring a watchful eye is needed when reading the stage directions to understand who is playing who. The exposition sets out four story lines - two Munster-mad fans eager to get tickets for the game, a 12-year old gang-leader looking to make an easy buck, a young couple about to become parents, and the two teams each preparing for the match in very different ways. As Act One unfolds and the match begins, these plots begin to interweave. Our large cast of characters connect in surprising and often hilarious ways.

*Alone It Stands* is a comedy. Breen amalgamates elements of physical comedy, satire, and farce to produce a genuinely funny play. Every Irish stereotype under the sun (and some New Zealand ones ...) makes an appearance. Watching the play takes on the corporeal quality of watching an actual rugby match; limbs and heads tangle and weave. At times, though, the subtler comedy is pitched at a maturity level above that of Junior Cycle students. The scenes are short and snappy (often only a page) and when the momentum is right, the play can bounce along at a lively pace. Mixed with the constantly changing ensemble, this means that the reader can switch from watching a Munster player score a victorious try to immediately witnessing the birth of twins in a single line.

There are many positives to teaching *Alone It Stands*. First of all, it is unlikely anyone in the class will have encountered the text before. Secondly, its dramatic elements are interesting; it is a parochial play, written in colloquial language, with many different accents ranging from Limerick to clipped BBC Received Pronunciation to Kiwi. Such punchy dialogue offers great potential for acting out scenes or moments (in a non-covid classroom of course!). As well, the play's themes are generative and applicable to Junior Cycle students: triumph over adversity; friendship; community. If your students are a sporty bunch, or even just competitive, the scope for engagement with this play is fantastic.



Yet, if you think the play sounds frantic ... you are right. The jumpy, short scenes and constant switching of actors into different roles mean that readers/viewers can easily become lost. The play lacks a diverse character list, and the few women in the play act as stock characters. It is also worth noting that there are few professional performances of the play available to watch or purchase. Students will likely have plenty of opinions as to where this play could be improved - what scenes are filler and what story lines or characters could be developed - and this is all fruitful discussion as long as opinions are backed up with evidence. Such unsavoury elements of the play offer opportunities to discuss how Irish society has changed or developed since the 1970s. Educate.ie have published a specific Junior Cycle text version of the play, which omits some of the cruder language of the play.

Here are some suggested classroom activities that worked for me (for context, this year I taught the play to 1st years in a mixed, inner-city Dublin school.



## Pre-reading

Walking debates to start conversation about sport, themes, dramatic elements of the text. Understanding the context of 1970s Ireland (and specifically Limerick) is key to understanding our central characters. My students also enjoyed watching footage of the Haka to understand the strength of the All-Black team.



## During reading

My students definitely benefited from a 'warm read' of *Alone It Stands*, meaning they approached each scene with a small summary of what would happen. Short retrieval practice questions at the start of each lesson helped ensure comprehension and recall of the plot and characters. The quirky nature of the play means it is extremely generative for functional writing activities: advertisements, reviews, diary entries and debates.

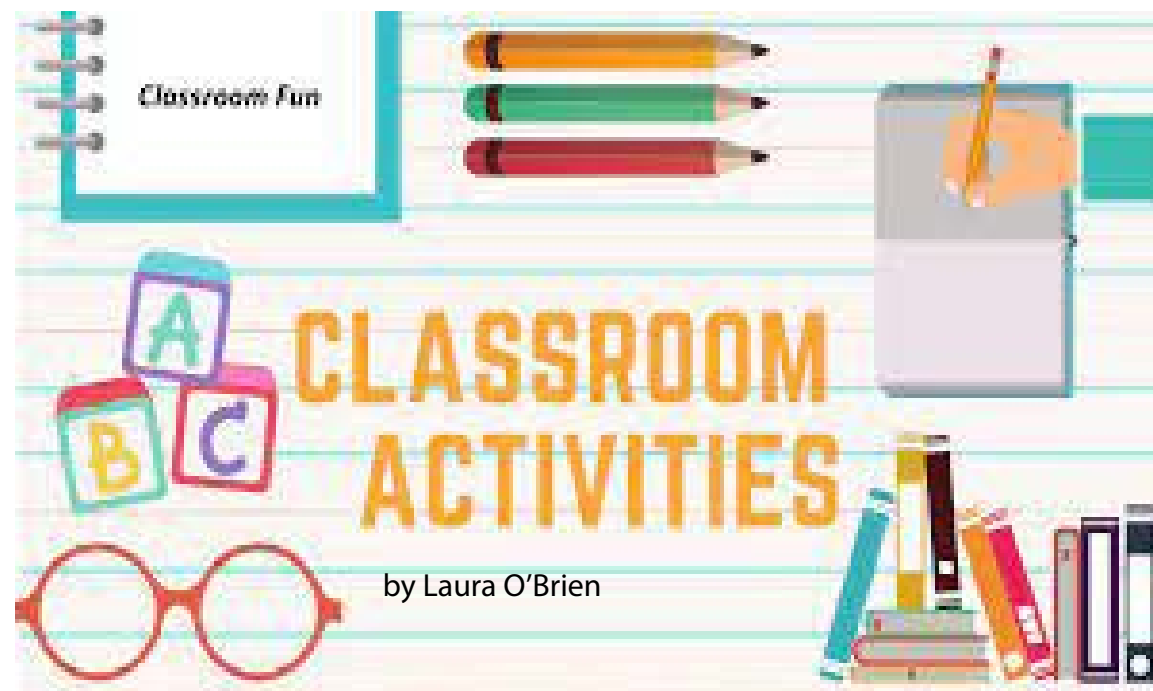


## Post-reading

Character and plot graphic organisers; video footage from the actual rugby match (including this Guinness advert which could connect nicely to media studies); creative writing dialogue tasks; play report; Junior-Cycle style analytical questions. My students enjoyed comparing the depiction of the match in the play with primary source newspaper articles to see what events Breen included/omitted.







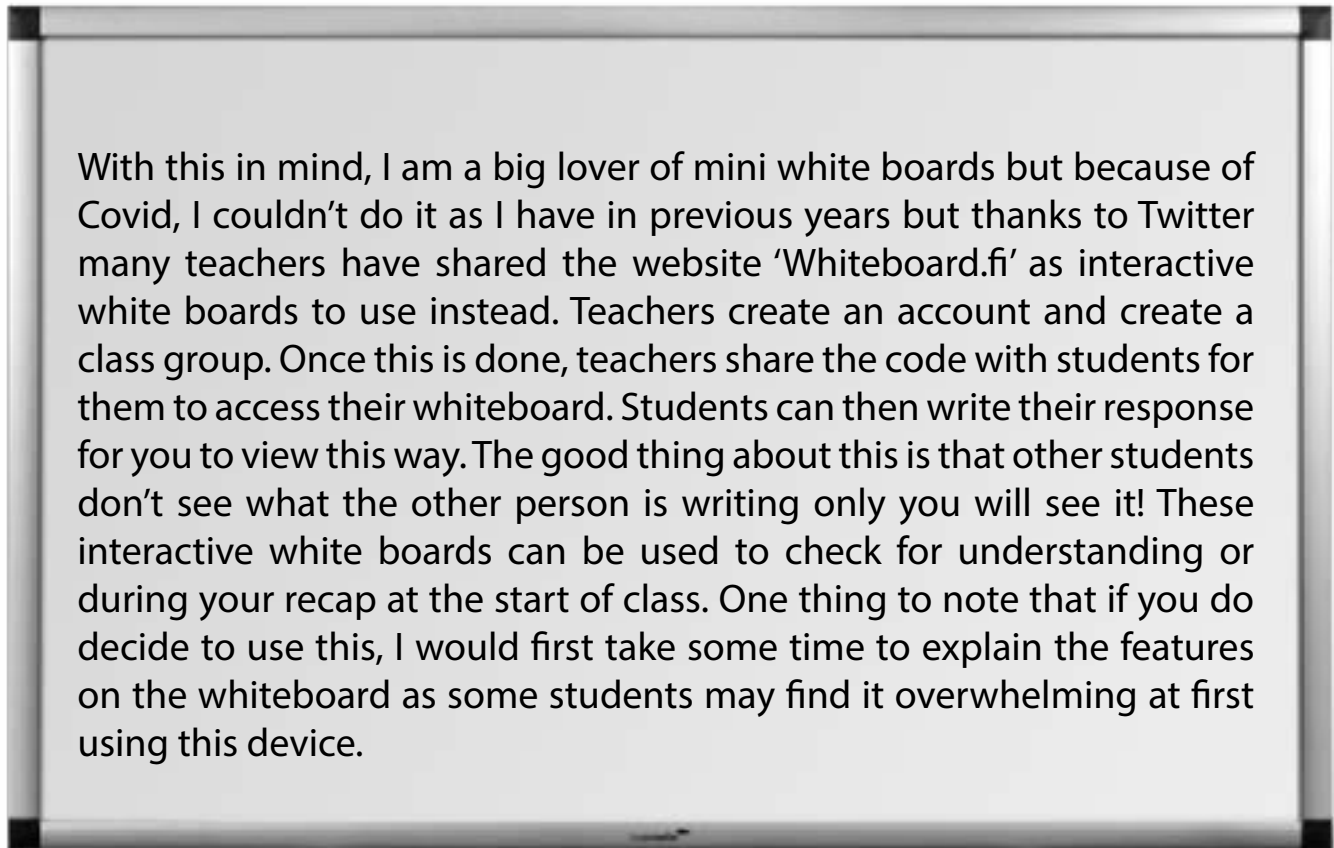
**Teachers have had to face new challenges with the ‘new norm’ of teaching. Not seeing students’ facial expressions, changing our teaching style, wearing a face mask and possibly using a microphone to project your voice through the classroom.**

So, what has been a classroom activity that has worked? Maximising I.C.T. for the face-to-face lessons and incorporating group work online have been just some of the classroom activities that have worked for me during the last year.

Firstly, for the face-to-face classroom, I have found using ‘**Mentimeter**’ and ‘**Kahoot**’ as some of the tools to make lessons engaging through the PPE that staff and students have had to wear. **Mentimeter** is an online website that allows you to pose a question to others and allow them to use a code to answer it. This works well when asking the class higher and lower order questions and for group discussions on the novel/play/film. Since teachers may find that hearing the responses of students may be difficult, **Mentimeter** can allow you to overcome this!

**Kahoot** has been around for a while but I certainly have used it a lot more in the last year. It is an online quiz game that students can join using a code (like Mentimeter). It can be a simple formative assessment to check students’ understanding of a topic. I tend to use **Kahoot** when I have finished covering the themes/characters/plot of a play/film/novel just so you have a greater scoop to ask the questions about.

When approaching the online classes I find that I needed to plan more and be even more creative with class time. I would still be using the above technology but also bring other face-to-face activities like mini white boards and group work through the online platform as well to enhance this learning



With this in mind, I am a big lover of mini white boards but because of Covid, I couldn’t do it as I have in previous years but thanks to Twitter many teachers have shared the website ‘Whiteboard.fi’ as interactive white boards to use instead. Teachers create an account and create a class group. Once this is done, teachers share the code with students for them to access their whiteboard. Students can then write their response for you to view this way. The good thing about this is that other students don’t see what the other person is writing only you will see it! These interactive white boards can be used to check for understanding or during your recap at the start of class. One thing to note that if you do decide to use this, I would first take some time to explain the features on the whiteboard as some students may find it overwhelming at first using this device.

Finally, while sticking with the online classroom, group work can be a difficult one to manage online but with Microsoft Teams and Google classroom breakout rooms this can be an enthralling tool to use. From listening to the Podcasts that were suggested in last year’s magazine ‘The Cult of Pedagogy Podcast’ it has an episode on using these breakout rooms effectively. Normally, I try to make group work last about 8-10 minutes when students were in the face-to-face classroom and with the online classes I have tried to follow the same time frame but breaking the time up to more. ‘The Cult of Pedagogy Podcast’ recommends that group work starts with an ice-break activity for the first 2 minutes of the task. i.e. the person with the smallest shoe size. Everyone shares their shoe sizes and whoever is the smallest is the presenter of the group. This gets the students interacting with one another and a speaker of the group has been chosen all in the space of two minutes.

After the icebreaker, students can complete the required task set out. When the time is up and when everyone has ‘returned’ to the main classroom, all responses from each group have been shared and a class discussion can stem from this. These breakout rooms most definitely have been a saviour through remote learning.





**T**HERE HAS BEEN much reflection as we emerge blinking from the pandemic with its many variations on schooling and there is no doubt it has been a very difficult year. However, one of the most significant advantages that I experienced from a teaching perspective was that it gave me a chance to step off the hamster-like wheel of prep, correct and feedback just long enough to have an opportunity to consider the way I teach and what I'd like to trial going forward. Having taught now for 24 years, I have always found that the biggest challenge is my constant need to keep things fresh for both my students as well as myself. I like to be as innovative as possible but it can be exhausting at times too. In the first few weeks immediately after the initial lockdown I watched a webinar that allowed me to give all of the panic a little bit of perspective. I came across it by accident. It was Paul Kirschner's

10 Tips for Emergency Remote Teaching and he caught me right at the beginning when



he differentiated between distance learning and emergency remote teaching. He maintained that distance learning is well prepared including time to prepare

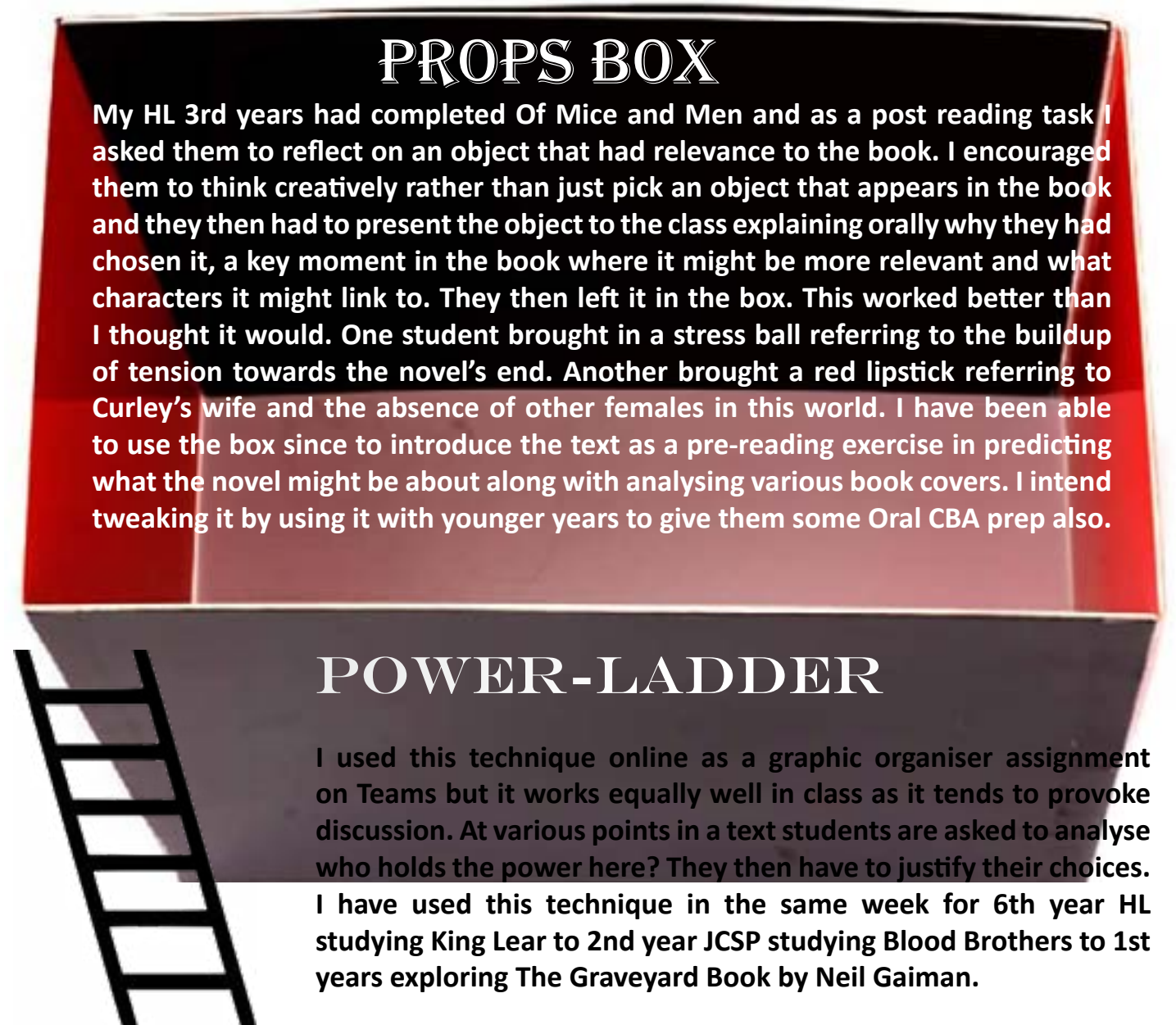


whereas Covid 19 had projected us into Emergency Remote Teaching. I still remember the relief I felt when I heard that so I took a deep breath and

decided to upskill in a number of areas regarding my teaching that I had been looking at playing with. I had already taken a course in Magenta Principles and found that this linked in well with Retrieval Practice so I tapped into a few online webinars and read



"Love to Teach" by Kate Jones which made me feel really excited about teaching again, rather than overwhelmed and underprepared. The following are just some things that I have trialled in my classes since, some online and some in person that I have found helpful:



Wordwall and Knoword: These are two free online platforms I have used a lot this year. Wordwall I use for retrieval (I have used it with 5th years to revise Yeats when we returned to the classroom having studied his work in online classes and with 6th years to revise *King Lear*). With Knoword, I have started a league in school with all of the years competing once a week to achieve the highest score. The game gives you a definition and the first letter of a word and challenges you to figure out the word. This is good for literacy and vocabulary building.



**F**INALLY THE MOST enjoyable class I have had online was one with my 1st years where I wanted to encourage them to continue reading during lockdown. It was Ireland Reads Day and I asked them to fill out a Mentimeter to explain how reading made them feel and where their favourite place to read was. Perhaps I was overly cynical or too jaded from lockdown but the responses were uplifting: "I love when I am 5 minutes into a book and already feeling I am the protagonist", "Reading can be boring but if you find the right book you can disappear to a place where only you are allowed" and "My favourite place to read is on a plane on the way to sunshine" was particularly poignant!



# Lightbulb Moment



Teachers share some methods that have worked in their classrooms

by Will Byrne



## The Charge of the Light Brigade

### Rationale:

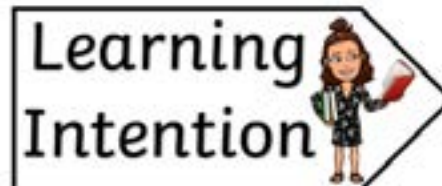
There are many reasons why I teach this poem. The poem flows in chronological order of any battle which will be beneficial to low order students. The imagery is so vivid and easy to remember. I do not tell my students to learn quotes from the poem, they just remember 'valley of death', 'mouth of hell'. Depending on how you want to teach this poem, you can make it very student led which can be the foundations for the rest of the year.

### Before this lesson:

Quite simply before this lesson, I will have taught all of the poetic techniques, and rhyming scheme that will be found. When it comes to teaching the lesson then, it should be the students saying, 'this is a metaphor', 'this is a simile' and so on.

### The start of the lesson:

Firstly, I give the students the learning intentions and success criteria – why we are studying the poem, here is how you know if you are learning. The learning intentions and success criteria can be whatever you wish but do link them back to the learning outcomes.



Learning Intention

We are learning to analyse how Tennyson felt about this war. Identify how poetic techniques make powerful images.



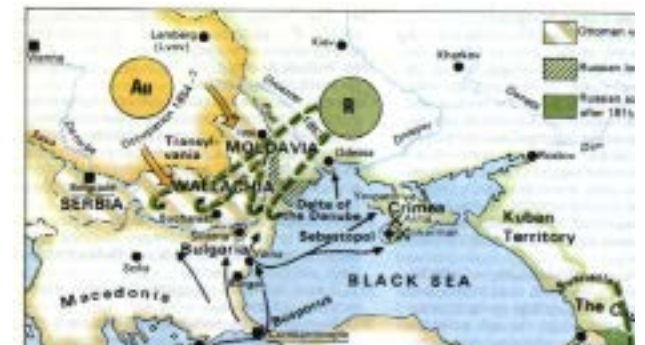
Success Criteria

Being able to explain how Tennyson felt about the charge. Being able to explain the effect the poetic techniques had on the poem.

Then, I explain what the topic is, 'The Charge of the Light Brigade' by Alfred, Lord Tennyson. I love using questions to stimulate a flow in the class. In all my classes I use high/low order questions and guided questions. When you think of a reading comprehension or an unseen poem, the students' opinion is important, so they need to be established in giving a thought-out opinion.

Offer a moment for students to discuss if they know anything about the poem, poet, or battle. If a student raises their hand, they can tell us what they know for a few minutes. Then we move on to the background. Then move to the gradual release of responsibility. Here, you explain some of the work and you gradually place the responsibility of the learning onto the students. I will explain some of the background to the students, so they have context. They will take notes down from the board.

I will ask them 'do you know where Crimea is?' 'How might you have heard of Crimea in the last few years?' (These questions link in with geography and CSPE).



After a discussion here, I will explain the next task. In their pairs, they will read a historical article that I have provided on the battle. They are to write down three things they learned about the battle, and three things they learned about the light brigade. The purpose of pair work is to generate discussion amongst the students. You want the students to know each other, this reduces any pressure or fear they may have about talking in class. I move around the room checking in on each group. Providing low order or guided questions to those who are struggling, and high order questions to those that are doing well. This activity may take five minutes. At the end, I will write up what they have learned on the board, making sure to praise each student for their contribution.

Then we move into reading the poem, I play a YouTube reading of the poem twice for the class. The first time, we simply read along. The second time, I will get the students to identify if Tennyson referred to the mistake in orders and to identify different poetic techniques in the poem. After listening to the poem for the second time, I again move around the room providing support to students. I normally let the students work alone here to assess if the students know their poetic techniques.

When it comes to taking notes on the poem, I use the left-hand margin to note poetic techniques and I use the right-hand margin to explain each verse. This provides the students with a structure and keeps the notes on the page as organised as possible. Depending on your class, you will either take charge here or you will ask them to make sense of the poem. The use of guided questions is so important for either a weak or a quiet class, 'what does "charge for the guns" relate to?' 'Why does he call it the "valley of death?"'



# BULLYING: And Mice... And Men

by Jeremy Clarke

**ATTENDED AN ALL-BOYS** school in Dublin's city centre. Bullying was endemic. If you weren't a victim of it, you were dishing it out. The law of the jungle prevailed and it was ugly.

Bullying is now the one thing I am completely allergic to. So, in Second Year English class, we got talking about an idea that came out of an excerpt of a novel in our textbook that suggested all classrooms can be divided into classifications of types and that one type was the "bottom feeder." The discussion got interesting.

One second year boy, in front of my nose, tried to indicate to the coolest and blondest boy in class just who he thought was the "bottom feeder." His reasoning for feeling the need to indicate who he felt was the weakest member of the class is beyond me. Anyway, long story short, situation was handled. Or, so I thought.

Jump forward to a couple of weeks later, right in the middle of the US Presidential election, and we started Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*. I love Steinbeck and we had a Zoom call with a pal of mine who is massively political (and literary) and lives in Montana. John (the pal) gave background to the text and to the social and political issues that gave rise to the drifter class of Lennie and George. Job done, students engaged.

Anyway, those beautiful natural descriptions that are found in the opening pages were not lost on the class either. The metaphor that suggests the weak in nature are predated by the strong was swiftly

grasped. The strength of George and the vulnerability of Lennie were also appreciated by all in class.

We reached a climax of understanding when poor old Candy's dog was unceremoniously shot by Carlson. It seemed that any discussion or writing on the text organically came back to the idea of the weak being preyed on by the strong.

Then, word broke through the DP channels that an incident occurred where the "bottom feeder" was bullied in PE and that a few of the girls in the class were instrumental in stopping the bullying and informing the PE teacher about it.

The next day in class the conversation centred on the behaviours of Curley and why he needed to be a threat to the weak. It came back to the notion that the weak are inevitability consumed by the strong. I couldn't help myself.

A teacher friend who does Leaving Cert RE is big on van Gennep and his theory of separation, incorporation and transition. It goes that by engaging in ideas we go beyond ourselves, we make those lessons a part of us, and then, we change. I pedal that theory in class too.

I asked the class to imagine a situation where bullying was occurring and I asked them to consider what they would do about it. I asked them how they felt for the weak in *Of Mice and Men* and how they felt for the cruel strong in the novel too. I asked them to consider who they wanted to be, and why. The girls who had stepped in during

the PE lesson had already and successfully processed these notions. I like to think that they had changed, for the better, because of the lessons to be found in Steinbeck's writing. I like to think, they had become better individuals because of their ability to consider concepts found in literature.

The other boys of the class, the bullies during PE, despite making the correct sounds about the novel's concepts in their work, were not able to incorporate those lessons and to therefore change.

Is it a question of maturity? Is it a question of being able to actually think for themselves?

I cannot explain the actions of the boys and why they chose to bully this lovely chap who they deemed to be the "bottom feeder."

I do, however, admire the few other students who stepped in that day to help. I knew who they were and discreetly thanked them at the end of a class for having the courage to do the right thing.

I am mostly grateful that students got to see that classic literature can reward and educate in so many ways.

Whenever we teach literature, students have the vast rewards that are offered, literally in their hands. Is it a pipe dream to hope that all students can reap these rewards? I suppose it is. On the ranch in the novel, it was Slim alone who reached out. One man from many.

Realistically, I suppose, I would settle for "one from many" being changed for the better through the lessons to be found in the words we read.



## ASSESSMENT FOR LEARNING in a Covid Classroom

by Will Byrne

**At the time of writing, we will return to the classroom in September with last year's Covid-19 policies in place. My normal routine of students doing group work, students moving around the room, students teaching students, and correcting each other's work was all put on the back burner. I used last year as an opportunity to see what AfL strategies I could use as normal and which ones needed to be tweaked. As I get ready for September, I am already planning which ideas I will use with certain topics.**

My PME dissertation focused on AfL in the classroom. During my research, I found Black and Wiliam's five key strategies to AfL (2009) which I have used as my bible.

**1** **NGCTP R I "R VGP VQP U"** j c x g not changed. At the beginning of the class, they are on a PowerPoint and explained to the class. At Junior Cycle, the learning intentions are adapted from the Learning Outcomes into student friendly language. At Senior Cycle, the learning intentions are created based on the text we are studying and the final goal.

**2** **GHGGE V&G" S WGU VQP R I "** j c u not changed all that much. Effective questioning is simply questioning that builds on prior learning and pushes students to expand their thought. You will know your students and you know what the level of questioning that will do this. Typically, in my class, oral questioning of high/low order questioning, guided questioning has not changed. This is similar with written questions, I do not use them to fill up time, only to get the students thinking.

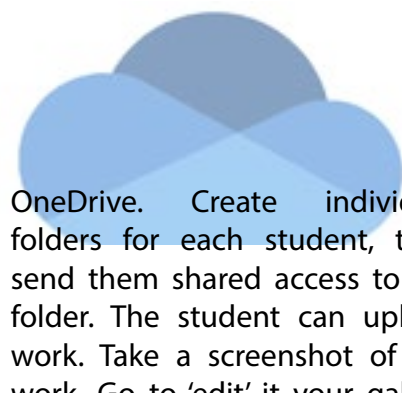
**3** **EFFECTIVE FEEDBACK** has had to adapt due to Covid-19. Like questioning, with feedback I normally use oral and written. Again, oral feedback has not changed too much. I do not say 'well done' but I say 'well done because of x, y, z.' Let the students know what they did well. Written feedback has been tweaked. Initially, I had students leave their work in a folder for a few days and then I corrected it, gave it time, and handed the work back. This created a massive backlog of work and I felt students had almost forgotten what the work I was handing back was about. This had to change.



My experiences last year were with Microsoft TEAMS, OneDrive and Notebook. If your school has a contract with Microsoft and you want to correct in a different way to picking up the copies you should try all three of these.



TEAMS. The app was brilliant for assigning homework. It offers scheduled posts, a submission deadline, availability to add resources, and teacher feedback. The only issue I found with the feedback zone was it was quite small, and I could not mark the page. To get around this, I would note in the feedback, 'your second paragraph...' Very useful for assigning work. Effective for feedback but my students gave a mixed response to it.



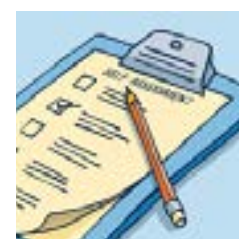
OneDrive. Create individual folders for each student, then send them shared access to the folder. The student can upload work. Take a screenshot of the work. Go to 'edit' it your gallery and write on the essay. If you want, you can take it up a notch. I screen recorded oral feedback on the work as I corrected it. Some videos were 3-4 minutes long some were 11 minutes. This received the best feedback from my students. They liked how I explained this just that bit more than I would have on a page. When you upload the feedback, you can check if they have viewed the feedback. This takes time to get used to, but it is worth it!



Notebook. Like the OneDrive it allows the students to have their only folders which only you and they have access to. It keeps everything nice and neat. You have the option to type or write feedback on homework here. Unfortunately, while you can give oral feedback, you can not edit the homework at the same time. It is slightly limited in that way but again you might find it most effective for your class.



c. Get coloured paper. Back to the traffic lights again! When it comes to CBA 2, I have the students get a folder and keep all their work from second and third year. The students assess their work as well as me. In their folders, they have a red section, stuff they feel least confident about, an orange section, this stuff needs to be read over a few times, and the green section, this is the stuff students feel they know extremely well. When it comes to the parent-student-teacher meeting, and I get asked 'what does Johnny need to revise?' I show the parent the folder and explain the stuff in the red section is what the student themselves feel they need to go over the most. This is the same at senior cycle. I like having my students being able to go back over their work and seeing the difference between a paragraph on Plath in September compared to October.



d. Self-assessing. The students are self-assessing when they put an essay into the colour coordinated folder. As well as that, they can assess their work in more detail. Both state examination scripts are to be scanned this year and students are asked to write in black. As such, I will have mine write in black. Before they hand up or submit work online, I will give them five minutes in

## 4



**STUDENT AS AN INDEPENDENT LEARNER** Part of the job is that we must make sure the students are learning. You're after doing a brand-new topic, you look around the room and there are a few 1,000 yards stares coming back at you. You want to know did everything just go over their heads.

a. Traffic Lights. Get a few packets of sticky notes and at the start of the year, give all the students a red, yellow, and green note. Have them put the notes on individual pages in the journal. Some students may be a bit hesitant engaging in this activity, but after a while, they will come around to it. If I get a majority of red and orange responses, I would try to have a heart to heart to see what went wrong. This may not work; some students may not want to be the first one to say they did not get it.

b. If that happens, one option is to use more sticky notes. On the wall beside the door in my room I have three poly pocket sheets with a red, yellow, and green sheet attached to them. Give out a note each and ask the students to jot down what went well or did not and put them into the corresponding pocket as they leave. By in large this does work well. I have never received feedback where I needed to go to the year head. The first few times the feedback might be one or two words but once the students are used to it, they will write more confidently.



## 5

**STUDENT AS A RESOURCE THE LEARNING OF OTHERS.** Covid has killed my love of this part of AfL. But we have to think of new ways for students to help each other in a Covid classroom come September.

a. **Peer-assessment.** Going back to the OneDrive and Notebook, this is a great tool for peer assessment in the classroom. Students can take photos of each other's work, assess it on either app, then give that feedback to the student while maintaining two metres.

b. **Group work.** I am fond of a placemat. On the Notebook, there is a shared resources folder. In here I can upload a placemat we are going to do for the lesson. Have the students download the placemat, give them a section to do each. Have one student forward their work to the other who merges it and reuploads to the main folder. The students can talk to each other in class, they are not sharing pens or the one page, both students keep a digital copy of their work.

c. **Students teaching students.** Pre-Covid, if I had a few students who was excelling and a few who were needing a hand, I would design a full student teaching student class. Unfortunately, we cannot have students roaming around the room. An alternative that I am going to try is ask the student can we talk through their work as a class beforehand, give the students the example of good work on Notebook, engage in effective discussion and questioning, identify what we have learned, then have the student discuss their work to the class.

Some of these ideas will work straight away. Some will need time to bed in. I will give them all a shot this year and see how students respond to them.





# REPRESENTATION & the student VOICE

A Project on Contemporary Poetry by **Kev Dowling**

Representation matters, in poetry, as in life. When you read a line that resonates within every fibre of your being, when an image chimes with your lived experience – when you feel that instant connection to something expressed through the written word. For students at Junior Cycle, this concept of connection is incredibly important. Poetry can at times seem abstract, and often, students need a way in that is more concrete and real – to encounter poets who understand and mirror their experiences.

Over three years at Junior Cycle, my class group, like most others across the country, have read Heaney, Sassoon, Owen, Angelou, Auden and many others, and while yes, there were great discussions and responses to these poets, for me, that deeper level of connection always seemed slightly beyond their reach.

In March, I decided to address this and designed a Unit of Learning around Contemporary Irish Poetry. Ireland, at present, is awash with some exceptionally talented young poets- Stephen James Smith, Feli Speaks, Natalya O'Flaherty, Emmet Kirwan, and a host of others. In all honesty, I could have chosen any of them however, in this case, I chose Adam Mohamed – a fantastic young poet from Ballymun, and his debut piece 'Untitled'; and Denise Chaila, a Hip-Hop artist from Limerick, and her poem 'Duel

Citizenship'. We began by listening to the texts repeatedly and reciting sections which we found interesting. The connection the students felt to these works was instant and deep.

The conversations that followed were incredibly rich and diverse. What struck me was how students connected to such varied images and phrases in the poems – and the immediate recognition of the shifts in language, the fluid nature through which each poet glides between their perceived identities. Mohamed, part Sudanese, seamlessly blends Arabic and Irish into his phrasing, while Chaila, hailing from Limerick by way of Zambia, riffs on the links between traditional Lenje stories and Seanacháí, and the shared collective subjugation of identities that do not fit neatly into a particular box.

What these poems, and poets, embody, is the diversity and fluidity of identity in modern Irish society – and it was something that my students latched onto. In their peer groups, the diversity of backgrounds is apparent – yet not something which is reflected in much of the work they study. Not only were they seeing and hearing themselves represented in these poems, in language that was relevant to their experiences, but they were learning about the backgrounds and the lived experiences of their friends.



The richness of the conversations which followed encouraged me to take a chance and contact both poets. We sent a list of questions about their work and thanked them for the connection we felt while discussing their poems. They responded, and then some. In fact, the generosity shown by both poets cannot be overemphasised. We revelled in these responses, picked apart their answers and brought them back into our understanding of the poems. One line that Denise Chaila had written stuck with us – 'If silence is the tool of destruction, your voice is one of the most beautiful instruments of love and change and goodness we have'. The students were enthralled with this validation.

With that in mind, I sought to draw together poetry and Student Voice– to see students take inspiration, not only from the words of these poets, but from the bravery they demonstrated in the act of writing. We need to actively teach our young people to speak out, to verbalise their discontent and to use their voices to affect change – and so we created a project outline together. The outline was simple – students were to address something that they saw as a failing in society and use their voice to raise awareness about it. They could choose to do so in whatever form appealed to them.

The work that was created was incredible – pieces of poetry about sexual identity, racism, the gender pay gap; speeches written on issues as diverse as the loss of Irish language and discrimination in

sport; a video about the hypocrisy of homelessness existing in a developed country, a personal essay about the shame we should feel as a society for allowing period stigma to exist; and a ferocious polemic about discrimination against people with disabilities, written by the quietest and most unassuming girl in the class.

What struck me about each of these disparate ideas was that they all shared one thing very clearly – a voice that was empowered and demanding of change – voices that were railing against the idea of things being 'just the way things are' – voices which will go on to affect future change in a significant way.

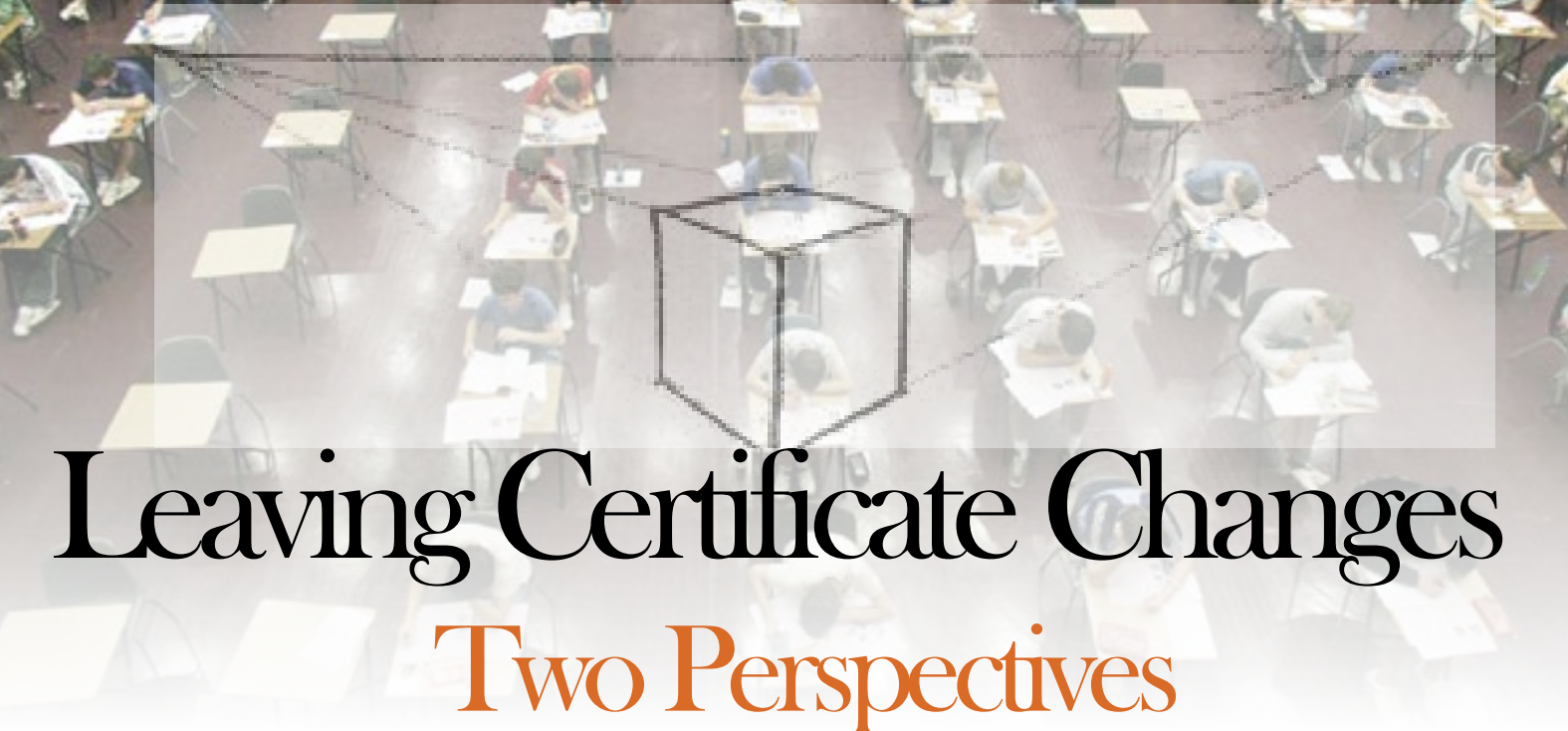
In a moment of reflection at the end of the project, students were asked what they felt the most important thing they learned was – 'That I am not the only one who goes through these challenges and that my voice has power' – that's good enough for me.

*Right: "Dcmf o wp "Rqgv"  
Cf co "Oqj co gf*

*Top: Fgpkug "Ej ckr."  
J kr /J qr "ctvkvv"ltqo "  
Nlo gtle m*







# Leaving Certificate Changes

## Two Perspectives

### Examined Leaving Certificate English: What's the right answer?

by Susan Donnelly Healy

The draft report on senior-cycle reform from the NCCA is landing on Minister Foley's desk this term. The culmination of a four-year process of research and consultation with teachers, students and parents, it heralds the beginning of a new framework for the senior cycle. Methods of assessment will change, with greater weighting given to continual assessment, projects or other coursework over a two-year period. At the recent NAPD conference COVID 19 was also cited as a 'game changer' that had exposed the flaws of a system over-reliant on final written examination. I suspect many English teachers witnessing the annual gamble on the poetry section of the exam may have already reached that conclusion. I certainly have.



As busy teachers we spend much of our time preparing resources, reading, marking and, (the best bit), teaching. Throw in a zoom-filled pandemic and honestly, there was little time to consider the implications of this review for Leaving Certificate English. Yet, having always favoured

the introduction of a coursework component for Leaving Certificate English, the extraordinary events of these last few years have only increased my desire to offer our students an opportunity for assessment that is not 100% exam based. It is reassuring to see that the Senior Cycle review will facilitate change.

Over the years, I have oscillated on the merits of exams and alternative methods of assessment. Teaching in London in the 1990's I recall the claustrophobic feeling of being one of six exhausted GCSE English teachers huddled into a small office, moderating thousands of coursework essays that quite literally went from wall to ceiling around the room. Let's just say I didn't need to read the Senior Cycle Review document to know that the Leaving Cert, whilst far from perfect, is considered broadly 'fair and objective' by most. A common standard is maintained and expected and this is one aspect essential for equality in education. It would be a shame to lose that. Nevertheless, the disadvantages of the final exam are clear. How many excellent student-writers have we seen defeated by the time-trial that is Paper II English? Whilst gifted students can navigate the great feat of memory, precision, critical thought and speed writing that is the English LC exam, it does not provide others with the opportunity to demonstrate their abilities. We know it is not as inclusive as it could be, so change is necessary.

In History, the "Research Study Report" allows students to pursue an area of interest and research, draft and write a considered piece of work. Having taught I.B. English, I can attest that college and career skills are better developed by more critical, considered student writing. I would love to see our English students get the same opportunity, and go into the June exams with 20% of the exam completed. Curious as to what other teachers think, I am going to briefly indulge myself in the fantasy that I get to design that 20% of the course.

Students could be asked to write a 'Critical Review Essay' of approximately 1500 words on an author of their choice during their two-year course. This would meet many of the goals of the Senior Cycle Review. It might also go some way towards supporting soft skills like motivation, collaboration and independent learning. Students could peer-review work and learn editing and constructive critical skills. It might lead to interesting classroom discussion and keep us all engaged and learning. Discussing this with my current 6th Year, most jumped at the idea and were keen on including poets, directors, playwrights and novelists. They thought having a free choice was worthwhile. We agreed a process would be needed to support their choices. Perhaps a written proposal before the topic is accepted for critical review by the teacher might support student choice.

So, after a bit of discussion with students and colleagues, this is where my thinking currently sits on the subject:

## A Critical Review Project

### 20% Final Exam

- Proposal Rationale & Approach 300
- Essay 1000, with a small literature review included
- Reflection & Self-Evaluation 200

The project could be introduced in the summer term of 5th year and time could be allotted to planning and explicit teaching of the skills involved. This will necessitate a conversation about what aspects of the current course should be slimmed down or removed. I love teaching the comparative, but it is unwieldy for the weaker student, perhaps it could be reduced to two texts? Alternatively, the choice for poetry could be increased and the number of poets reduced. Change should promote more independent and collaborative work in Senior Cycle English, activating the student voice even more.

Change will always come but it should be constructive; it is an interesting conversation. It would be a shame to lose some of the benefits the current exam has afforded students in the process.

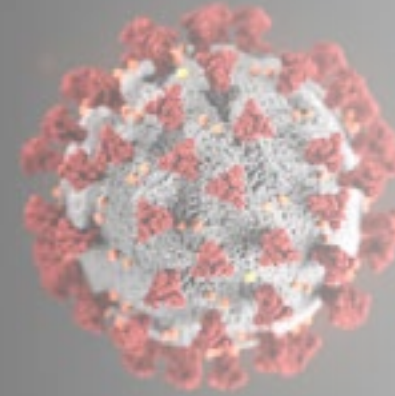


# Would it be better if?

## Changes worth contemplating.

by Alice Coman

1. We currently have 2 comprehensive exams, one on Language and one on Literature. What if we combined these into two separate exams? For example- Comprehension and Shakespeare at the end of 5th year. 3 hours and 20 minutes is a long period for even the most able student to consistently perform.
2. Teachers have engaged in continuous assessments for the past two years at LC level with our predictive grades. Could predictive grades continue in the future? How can we alleviate the Leaving Certificate burden for students? Post covid, how can we safeguard mental health?
3. What about if we had a research topic on a poet that was presubmitted? And what about if the poets appeared on the paper with an unseen poem on the poets we have studied, to compare prior learning to?
4. What about an oral- students could convey the depth of their engagement with their course materials. They could be probed on their learning, empathy and vision of the texts. If we have an oral focus at JC level in the languages, why not include English at Leaving Certificate?
5. Why not an aural? Couldn't all students work on listening skills? And what about if they could contextualise it in terms of their own learning at the end of their exam?
6. Would it be better if, we reviewed the comparative? When the questions lent themselves to two or more texts, it was certainly easier. Will the students focus on two texts, and go into breadth and depth on these? I believe so.
7. There has been a welcome development in the LC English exam questions, where all the questions on the single text are now very similar or not visibly more difficult. Could this parity be achieved for the poets?
8. Let us advocate for parity between subjects. 2.9% of students achieve the H1 at HL LC English, 5.7% in Irish, 6.2% in French, 58.1% in Russian, from 2019 statistics. Shouldn't all subjects have the same amount of H1s, H2s and so on? Why wouldn't students logically pick subjects with more H1s? And that doesn't consider the disparity between courses and papers.
9. It would be better also if all or no subjects had no bonus points. Otherwise homework is undermined. Perhaps it should be and we should all have one hour classes?
10. And fewer subjects studied for the LC? Should all subjects be optional? Would that not be the fairest option? And what would LC English uptake look like?



# Covid-19

## A Blessing in a Terrible Disguise

by Laura O'Brien

**H**OW MANY TIMES have you said: "he could have gotten a H2 but just didn't put the work in", or "orally, she's very good but never puts it down on paper"? Is this laziness, complacency or a simple acceptance that it's easier to be average. I think a lot of the time, it's an attitude of "I'll do that next week", "for the next assignment, I'll do all those things she said". And then other subjects, sports, 18th birthday parties, etc. all get in the way. Covid took all those distractions away, and created a different beast, 'Calculated Grades', and, in my experience forced students to address their complacency, their perceived limitations and push the boundaries. I had to do the same.

Back in the building in September 2020, relief and apprehension in abundance, anecdotes of people getting brilliant grades from their teachers flying about, 6th years are thinking: "we're so gonna be getting calculated grades too". Before we knew that to be (kind of) the case, it created a scenario where my words, feedback, guidance, and opinion mattered more than ever. The initial improvement could be seen when, in my class of 26 HL English students, all 26 assignments were handed in on time and fully done, where there would normally be at least 2 or 3 late arrivals or no-shows. Was it simply that now they had more time to get the stuff done? No parties, training, shopping, choir, etc? I think so, but what about the quality?

Marked improvement, especially from the lower end of the ladder. My few "will they end up sitting OL" were now producing quite solid and detailed H4 and H5 work. As a group of kids who often fall through the cracks as we focus on our top-notchers, those 'middle of the road' guys can lack the incentive to work hard, but Covid had created a crisis that everyone had to react to, and what a reaction from them!

So, what did I have to do to move along with this fast-moving tide? I had an opportunity to nurture learning in a place that was outside of my previous comfort

zone (or is that another way of illustrating my own complacency)! I couldn't take up their copies, they couldn't swap copies with each other, they couldn't move about and do group work activities. It was like having a tool kit full of blunt and rusty tools, they were there but couldn't be used. But things still have to be built and fixed, a new tool kit was needed.

Starting in the classroom, I turned to my old friends Mentimeter, Microsoft Forms, Studyclix etc. Friends that I had called on sporadically over the years now became a necessary bridge between teacher and student. Microsoft Teams was a new member of the group; and was quickly establishing itself as the boss! Mentimeter is a fantastic way get instant feedback/ reflection/opinions on the text or topic you are discussing. You can create instant word jumbles as to show prior knowledge. Open ended questions provide a safe space for students to ask questions. Especially for those students who would traditionally shy away from putting up their hand.

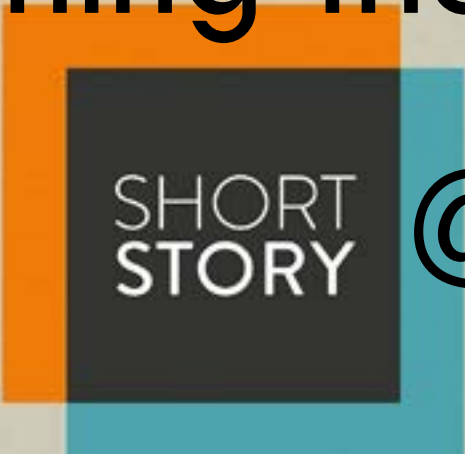
Microsoft Forms and Studyclix were great methods for Assessment of Learning. Quick quizzes can be easily generated for end of lessons wrap-ups. I still found there was a need for the old-fashioned pen and paper test, but these tools created a crutch or safety-net for all students. The screen, the evil screen, created a safe environment for ALL students, from every rung of the ladder, to engage. Thanks for that Covid!

In terms of feedback, I found myself doing more screen recording of individual pieces (time consuming but uber-effective). While the students loved this method, it's not something you could do for every piece and so I looked at amending it. Because assignments were now, for the most part, in the digital format, I was able to capture good examples of common errors (and common successes) and create one video giving general feedback because we all know the gnawing frustration we all feel when we are saying the same things on every essay! Why not, simply correct each essay, give a mark, and give one chunk of general feedback using specific exemplars. This has transformed my life, thanks again Covid.

While I will be thrilled to see the back of Covid, I am glad of what it has forced me to improve on, I will be taking away skills and ideas I may never have developed had it not been for these crazy times!



# Teaching the



# @ Senior Cycle

A Comprehensive Strategy by Sarah Kelly

“All you have to do to be a writer is to write”- Donal Ryan


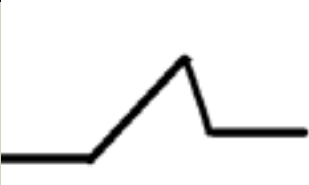
In recent years, I have changed how I approach teaching the short story at senior cycle. Rather than relying on students own innate capacity to write, I have applied a more meaningful direct instruction which supports and encourages all students in my class, even the more reluctant writers. It involves implementing a scheme that:

- Introduces new material in bitesize, manageable “chunks”
- Provides students with models and worked examples
- Encourages independent writing through guided practice

I have devised a scheme that, ultimately, slows students down and encourages them to make deliberate choices regarding words, syntax, and paragraphing, thus equipping them with the tools needed to make them more confident in their own capabilities as writers.

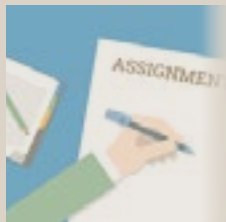
The scheme is designed to cover a period of 3 weeks, but if some of the techniques are new, then it is worth spending longer on it, as knowledge learned here can be used in other parts of the English course. This aspect of interleaving is one of the things I love most about teaching this module. What follows is a product of the work of many inspiring English teachers, and I have tried to credit them where possible.



 Unit on Teaching Short Story Writing at Senior Cycle			
1.	Assign <b>reading</b> a short story for homework. “The Lottery”- Shirley Jackson, “Smokers”- Tobias Wolff, “The Veldt”- Ray Bradbury, “The Story of an Hour”- Kate Chopin	<b>Read</b> short story aloud In class	Look at <b>Jacob Ross’s 5 story</b> structures and discuss how it might apply to this story (@ FunkyPedagogy)
2.	Explore key <b>elements</b> of a short story- hook, exposition, complication, climax, denouement, resolution	<b>Apply key elements</b> to the story we have just read in class- mark elements out on to a graphic organiser	
3.	Examine a selection of <b>openings</b> of short stories. Eg: “The Metamorphosis”- Franz Kafka	Students <b>identify common elements</b> of openings.	<b>Analyse</b> favourite opening and explain why.
4.	Students <b>write own opening</b> using 3 objects.	<b>Teacher models</b> a sample on board.	Students <b>write independently</b> - objects might include a phone, a cup, a plant, a book, a leather jacket, etc...
5.	<b>Personify an emotion</b> that a character might experience in a story- lust, fear, loathing, jealousy, greed, etc	<b>Read Donal Ryan’s</b> stunning extract from The Thing About December. <b>Teacher models a sample</b>	<b>Students independently write</b> their own short example of personifying an emotion
6.	Examine the effectiveness of using <b>allusions</b> in short story. (@DoWise) Eg- “The Visitor”- Ray Bradbury (Biblical)	<b>Analyse and discuss examples of allusions</b> - historical/ literary/ biblical...	<b>Students write own sentences independently</b> , using the allusions discussed.
7.	<b>Slow writing</b> (@DavidDidau) - Outline criteria for slow writing	<b>Teacher models an example</b> of slow writing	<b>Students write own paragraph independently</b> using slow writing techniques.
8.	Examine the <b>Zoom-In/ Zoom-Out</b> technique	Using a <b>picture as stimulus</b> , teacher models an example of the Zoom-In/ Zoom-Out technique	Students <b>write own short paragraph independently</b> using these techniques.
9.	Understanding <b>upgraded sentence structures</b>	<b>Read and analyse samples</b> of upgraded sentence structures. We will take some of these structures and teacher/ students model samples on board.	Students choose their favourite sentence structures from the list and <b>practise independently writing sentences of their own.</b>
10.	Write your own short story using success criteria outlined by teacher (based on all of the above!)		



# Implementing the Scheme- A Practical Approach



As the majority of students are more comfortable with the reading process rather than the writing process, I begin this module by assigning a short story to read for homework. No need to be stuck for ideas here! Jennifer Webb is currently collating "The Reading List Project", in which there are a number of diverse short story collections that have been recommended by other English teachers. Any of these stories would be a good starting point. These can be accessed via her website, [funkypedagogy.com](http://funkypedagogy.com). You could also use any of the suggestions in the scheme above, which have also been tried and tested in the classroom.



I then read a short story aloud in class, after which we examine Jacob Ross's 5 story structure. Ross's structure is taken from Jennifer Webb's excellent book, *Teach Like a Writer*. At this point, students identify elements of plot and structure, and I find plot graphic organisers an excellent tool for this. We then examine the author's presentation of character and the many and varied scenarios in which characters might find themselves. Students create their own characters under headings such as: name, age, occupation, family, interests, obstacles, etc. These characters can be further developed at a later stage when students set about writing their own stories.



Next up is the openings of stories. We spend some time scrutinising a variety of short story openings and we discuss the deliberate choices that were made by the various authors in these openings. Students then choose the opening of the story that they would most like to read in its entirety. Choices are usually made based on introduction to character, setting, word choice, sentence structure and hook (or lack thereof). Following on from this, we write our own openings to short stories, using random objects as stimulus. I model a sample opening on the board and once we have discussed the deliberate choices that were made here, I grab any three objects that I have to hand (a root through my handbag usually brings forth lip gloss or lipstick!), and students then write their own opening that includes these three objects. This technique slows down the writing process and encourages students to think more deeply about the choices that they make and once again, students might even use one of these openings when it comes to writing the full short story at the end of the module.



Donal Ryan is a genius. I am a major fan of all his work and as soon as I read the unforgettable passage in which he describes loneliness in his novel, *The Thing About December*, I knew that I would have to try and incorporate this technique into the teaching of writing. Firstly, we read the passage (which is taken from the chapter entitled "March") and we discuss Ryan's powerful use of personification as a device to present the crippling effect that grief, loneliness and loss has on the individual. Then I write a sample on the board, or we might write one collectively: the emotions that we personify range anywhere from jealousy to bitterness to lust to anger and so on. Students then write their own short piece in which they personify an emotion using Donal Ryan's technique. The emotion may or may not stem from the character that they had been profiling in previous lessons. It is always exciting to see students adapt and use these short but effective pieces when they finally encounter the task of writing their own short stories at the end of the module.



Allusions are another technique that I have found greatly beneficial in enhancing students' writing. In his website, [douglaswise.co.uk](http://douglaswise.co.uk), Wise has devised 10 biblical, 10 classic and 10 historical allusions. Inspired by this, I have created my own bank of allusions, and students can draw from these for any part of the English course, whether the task is Paper 1 or Paper 2. For example, stating that Hamlet's task is Sisyphean is equally as effective as stating that the main character in your story has just opened a Pandora's Box of secrets. This is just another example of how the English course lends itself to much interleaving of knowledge.

After this, I teach **David Didau's** (pictured right) principles of slow writing. These involve students following strict criteria when devising a paragraph. The paragraph must include:

- a sentence that begins with the present participle
- a sentence that has just three words
- a rhetorical question
- a sentence that begins with an adverb
- a sentence that contains an original simile
- a sentence that contains a semi colon

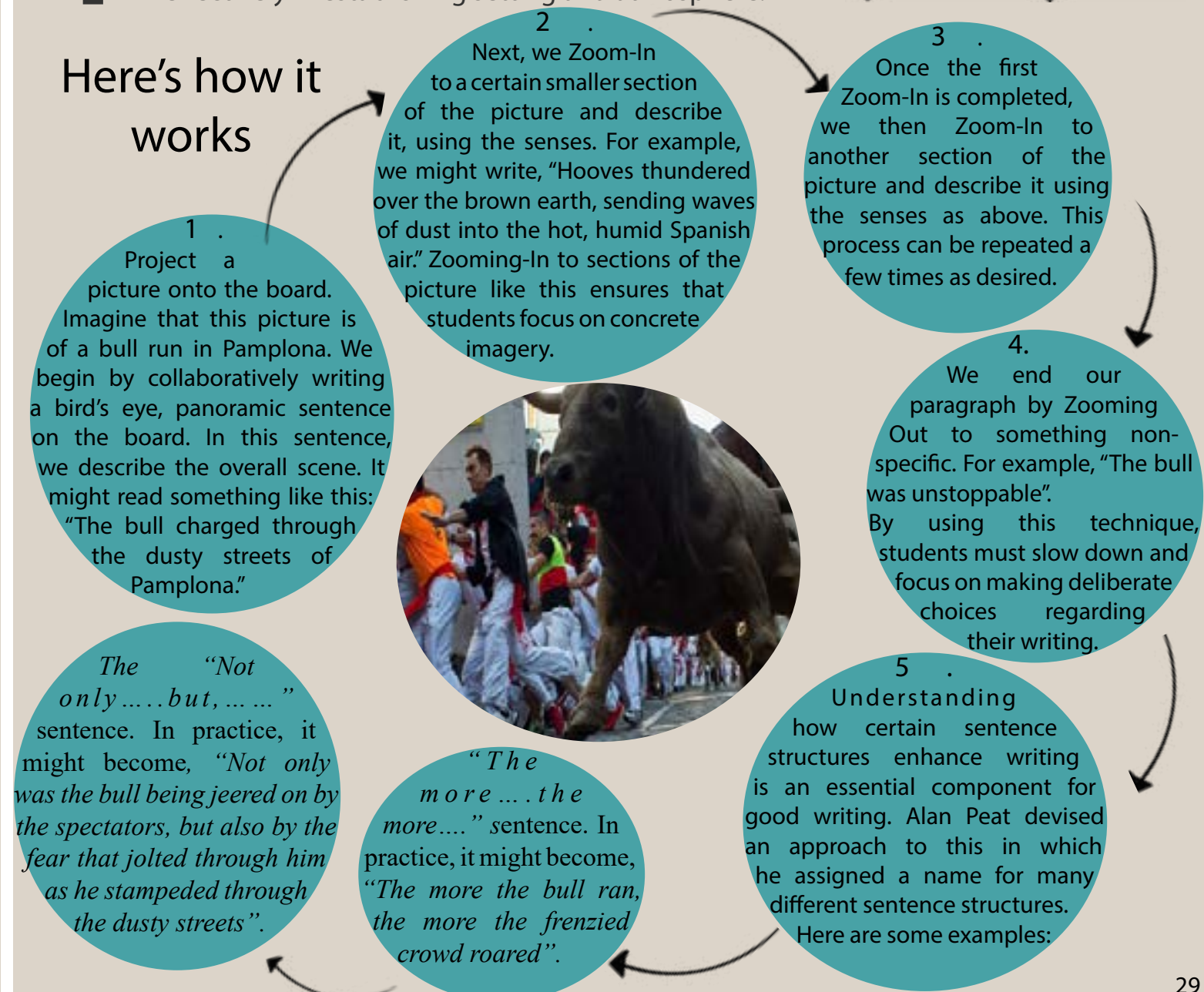


Firstly, we examine paragraphs in which this technique has been applied. We then write one together collaboratively on the board. Students are confident enough now to write their own paragraphs applying Didau's principles. I have found these principles to be remarkably effective in encouraging students to slow right down and to make deliberate choices when it comes to their writing.

**T**HE ZOOM-IN/ ZOOM-OUT technique is another stand-alone class. It is an excellent method of ensuring that our students slow down and make deliberate choices when it comes to their writing. It can be used most effectively in establishing setting and atmosphere.



## Here's how it works

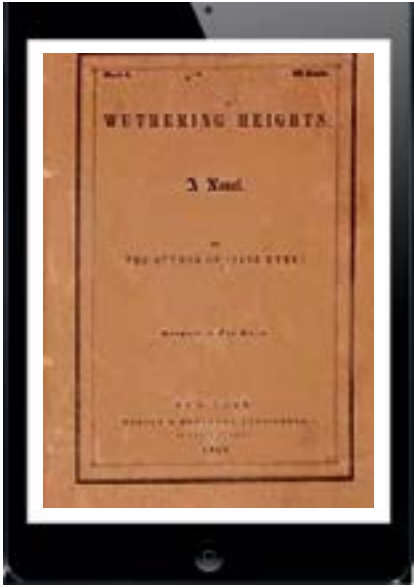




This is just a sample of the many sentence structures that students can use in their writing. When students begin to use these in earnest, their confidence in writing improves dramatically. What I also love about these sentence structures is that they can be effectively used in all parts of the English course. Some of the more simple ones can be introduced in 1st Year and built upon as the students move up to senior cycle. I have a list of 33 sentence structure types that I introduce in 5th Year!



Now, the time has come! We have approached writing narratives in bitesized, manageable chunks, and students are ready to write their own stories. Plotting and planning of their stories can take place at this point, but before students start writing their stories, I present them with a criteria for success. The criteria calls for students to use all of the techniques that we have examined throughout this module. When students focus on these criteria, it slows them down, forcing them to think twice about the choices that they make in their writing. Providing students with a structured framework like this ensures that every student in our classroom has the chance to succeed.



While I love to see contemporary novels appear (I am thrilled to see 'Where the Crawdads Sing' has made it on for 2023) I find myself returning to the nineteenth century novel. As we near the end of this, rather bizarre, school year, I am putting the finishing touches to our discussion on 'Silas Marner' by George Eliot (6th Yr) and I am working on 'Wuthering Heights' by Emily Brontë (5th Yr).

So why do I return to these novels? I return for two reasons. **Firstly**, if I don't give my students the opportunity to study these novels then they may never experience the richness of language and the superb craft of writing which a classroom study gives them of a novel of this calibre. Students are far more likely to pick up a copy of a contemporary novel (from the list) voluntarily and they will be able to enjoy it without classroom guidance. I want to show them that these novels are accessible to all. It is so rewarding to see students unlocking the layers in the writing ( e.g that Heathcliff's name is significant and was carefully chosen to reveal aspects of this personality – I love getting their reaction!)

**Secondly**, every time I have taught these novels, be it to a Higher or an Ordinary level class, the students have truly engaged and enjoyed them. They have also written well about them in exam situations.

So how do you keep the teaching of these novels fresh and exciting for students? Firstly, remember that they are engaging with them for the first time and secondly keep an open mind to new ideas and methodologies in the classroom.

This will test you and them!

This year, due to the array of webinars available online from Irish education centres and from the UK, I have discovered and implemented two strategies – dual coding and retrieval practice.

Dual coding is combining the use of images with text as a learning strategy.

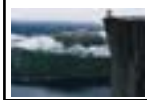
It is particularly useful in the English classroom as the subject is so text heavy. While there is no getting away from the fact that we require our students, at all levels,

# Extolling the virtues of the Nineteenth Century novel IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

by Juliet Corcoran

Even though I have been teaching Leaving Cert English for quite a few years, I still look forward to getting my hands on the new list of prescribed texts. However, as I glance through this list, I do have a moment of worry that perhaps the nineteenth century novel may be replaced by newer, shinier models! I am glad to say that this hasn't happened to date and hopefully by writing this article it won't happen in the future!

to present lengthy written texts for exam purposes, it is clear that dual coding is hugely beneficial for the study of novels. (It has to be acknowledged that the length of the nineteenth century novel could be one off-putting factor for teachers and students!) Let me give you an example: ask students to create a dual coding summary sheet for the characters in Wuthering Heights during the reading process.

	Character Traits	Quotes
	Heathcliff	

In the above example, students tease out, by means of classroom discussion, appropriate images/symbols that are associated with particular characters to put in the first column. Then they add character traits and include chapter numbers and references as they read. This strategy lifts the text from the page, it promotes critical thinking and deepens the students' appreciation of the richness of the text. In this way students create an excellent revision worksheet which will be an invaluable aid to producing a longer essay style answer without having to retrace their steps through the text. If the above technique is used when studying the text for Paper II, then it can also serve as a useful tool when working on short story writing for Paper I. For example, it shows students how writers carefully choose names for their characters and so students are encouraged to use dual coding at the planning stage of their short stories. This encourages creativity and originality.

The other technique that I became more aware of this year was retrieval practice. This is where educators concentrate on getting the information out of students' heads as much as putting it in there!

Two simple features that I used were; making greater use of short quizzes to establish knowledge (at the beginning/end of class) and the use of short writing tasks to reflect on recent learning. For example, in six words describe the relationship between Heathcliff and Catherine.

So, I hope I have awakened an interest in these 'older' texts and proved that with inventive learning strategies they can arrest the attention of our students.



# THE EXAMINATION ESSAY



by John & Jerome Devitt

Many years ago, my father John Devitt, a teacher of English teachers in Mater Dei Institute of Education (now a constituent college of DCU) distilled his accumulated wisdom on helping students to develop a reliable, rigorous, and repeatable method for approaching what we'd now call a 'discursive' Leaving Cert English essay. The original piece was drafted for the old ATE (Association of Teachers of English) publication. Now, almost fifteen years after he passed, I have updated its content and argument, adapting with a light touch some of the elements to reflect the different components of the current exam. What struck me when reading the original piece was how applicable its tenets remained. After all, good writing is good writing.

IT IS NEVER easy to write well. In the tense circumstances of an examination it can prove very difficult to write even a competent essay on any of the seven options indicated on the paper. The "Leaving Cert English Essay" is a particularly tense occasion because it is fraught with the consequences for the future lives of the candidates. It is examined on the very first morning of the exams, so there's no warm-up time. The stakes couldn't be higher because it's the single most valuable question you will answer during the fortnight or so of exams, worth a whopping 25% of the final result, or 25 CAO points if you want to calculate it in those terms. Chances are you didn't sleep too well the night before either. It is also a skill that is (bafflingly) no longer core to the Junior Cycle process.

The exams are conducted impersonally in a laudable attempt at impartiality. But how is a candidate to write an essay (by definition a personal attempt on a subject) when the examiner who reads and pronounces judgement knows the candidate only as a

number? Small wonder that in the anxious weeks and months before the exams so many students are haunted by the fear of "drying up" in the exam hall when instructed to "Write a composition on any one of the assignments below." That's a nightmare that persists well after the exam finishes, trust us on that! Too often, the attempt at engaging with the LC English 'Composition' results in the student's decomposition.

## Preparation

The English Exam Essay presents a challenge unlike most other subjects. To deal with this challenge, technique is the key. In the "trial-by-ordeal" which characterizes the Leaving Certificate as a whole, much of the material required takes the form of knowledge remembered, proofs to be furnished and vindicated, experiments to be described, problems to be solved - in short, ingested content to be regurgitated. Difficulties abound, but they are not essentially difficulties of expression. With the English Essay this situation is reversed and the difficulty of doing justice to oneself increases. Many students despair of doing anything purposeful about the essay until the inescapable moment arrives. But it is a mistake to trust

to the inspiration of the moment without making proper preparation. A student can hardly expect to write an intelligent essay without some simple, serviceable technique for generating and organising ideas in the inhospitable setting of the examination hall. Mastery of such a technique allows attention to be paid to style and expression. An engaging essay becomes possible.

The only technique a harassed student should trust is one which is simple, memorable and practical, that is one which respects the nature of the mind itself. It must also be one that is applicable to all the different modes of "language study" that are examined (viz. information, argument, persuasion, narration, and the aesthetic use of language). The mind is happiest when it is formulating questions and one question invariably begets another. Students are often too preoccupied with plausible answers to relish dynamic questions. But consciousness is a great adventure in questioning. We would urge students to respect the immense penetrating power of their own minds and to enlist those powers in all their intellectual work, and especially in the writing of the essay.

## Jotting Down

Take "Loneliness" and question it as comprehensively as you can; jot down the questions that come to mind. What is Loneliness? How does it differ from being alone? Is it curable? Is it only a negative experience? Are people lonelier now than in other periods? What is it like to be lonely? Is it an urban or a rural phenomenon? Do some people feel loneliness more acutely than others? No doubt, you'll be able to think of a dozen more questions more interesting and personally relevant to your own insights. You can even structure this exercise by following Rudyard Kipling's advice by engaging with each of the question below:

*"I Keep Six Honest Serving Men,  
(They taught me all I knew),  
Their names are **What** and **Why** and **When**,  
And **How** and **Where** and **Who**."*

Now review the jumble of questions. Eliminate questions which seem silly on reflection or which overlap with others. Number those that remain in the best order for attack. You have now the spinal column of an essay. Give one paragraph to each question, where your 'Thesis Statement' represents your direct response to that question, that you then explore in detail. If your ordering of your questions is intelligent, the sequence of paragraphs in your essay will result in a coherent structure emerging.

## Paragraphing

You will now have avoided the faults that particularly disfigure an essay. Very often, examiners are baffled by essays in which too many ideas compete for attention in a single paragraph. Candidates who trust to the inspiration of the moment and neglect even the minimum of preparation we are recommending here often contradict themselves from paragraph to paragraph. (Remember: A paragraph is ONE

idea fully and exclusively explored - a new idea = a new paragraph.) They lose their train of thought, primarily because they have no idea of the train's destination. The impact on an individual paragraph can be as destructive as the impact on the essay as a whole. Commoner still is the kind of desperate repetitiveness which makes the reading of examination essays as tedious a chore as its writing self-evidently was.

The candidate who thinks interrogatively and reviews the questions generated can expect to avoid the most crippling faults we have just mentioned. The essay will have direction; one paragraph will lead to another relatively fluently. But there are other advantages in this method of preparation. It is extremely efficient of valuable time - the most precious, but ephemeral of commodities in the exam economy. Further still, it can be practiced, and if not perfected exactly, can be brought to the point of near universal applicability and mastery. It can be relied upon. Try for yourself. Take the title "Unemployment". What causes it? Is it worse in Ireland than in other Western Countries? How does an unemployed person feel? Why does securing employment matter so much to young people? Again, think up more questions and review them as before. In this instance you might like to sketch the opening or closing paragraph of an essay on the subject. You will soon find yourself able to dextrously prepare an essay in 3-4 minutes and have that process result in almost as much benefit to you as spending 70-80 minutes on an actual essay.

## Variety

One fear can be extinguished. As long as you can ask questions you are in no danger of 'drying up'. On the contrary, you will find that you can afford to pay attention to details of style and expression. The pen will

not move in a mad career across the page, but in a more confident and controlled manner. You will see to it that every paragraph contains at least one very short sentence; variety of sentence length is an antidote to boredom for both the writer and their reader. It really works!

Accuracy of expression remains important. You can identify your own favourite errors quite easily by rereading past essays and your teachers' comments on them. Systematically eliminate errors one at a time. Your incremental progress will startle you when you look back with some objectivity. No one expects you to avoid all errors, but you should not give unnecessary offence to your reader. A senior student should be able to avoid notorious difficulties such as the confusion of "their" and "there", or "its" and "it's", and the like...

## Techniques

Writing an essay under examination conditions is certainly difficult but, if you have a technique you can trust, you need not find it daunting. If nothing else, removing that layer of anxiety, frees up what the psychologists call your "cognitive load" making creativity at least possible. The technique we are suggesting here is one you can practise for yourself for a few minutes every day. Take the title "The Third World War". How might it happen? How would it differ from previous wars? Who would survive? Would you even want to survive? But you will have grasped the idea by now and discovered your own ability to generate interesting and useful questions. This approach also has the added bonus that it works no matter what kind of 'marking scheme' is applied to it, and will divert even the most reticent examiner! Your examiners can look forward to reading the results! •



# Finding the Happy, Ever, After

by Teresa Gallagher

*“We read to get lost, to forget the hard times we’re living in and we read to remember those who came before us who lived through something harder.”*

Jacqueline Woodson, TedTalks

Once upon a time, we might never have imagined the twists and turns of the plot we are currently living. It has been a time unlike no other, this ‘living’ interrupted. In a year that has been framed by hopelessness, we have to dig deep to unearth hope here. But this is survival of the fittest and dig deep we must, as even from hopelessness, hope must always emerge. To quote a literary great, Pope, ‘Hope springs eternal in the human breast.’ As English teachers, we all know the therapy in a book. Reading allows us to engage and disengage, temporarily disconnect from our reality while connecting with an alternative one. Simply put, literature can offer us a pathway towards hope.

Poised as we are now between pre and post pandemic, we may turn inwards and reflect on where the path takes us next. It is fair to say that we are still mid cycle and the repercussions in terms of our students wellbeing remains to be measured. However, it is already well documented that anxiety levels are skyrocketing in our school going population. Young people have been tethered to uncertainty and isolation and their resilience has taken quite the battering. It now behoves us as teachers to consider how we might be the architects of hope and optimism for those within our classrooms.

By way of context, during this year I happened upon the theory of Positive Psychology, and the essence of this seemed to intersect with thoughts already forming in my mind around resilience and wellbe-

ing. In recent decades a new theory has evolved, known as the science of happiness. Described by its founding father, Martin Seligman, as the ‘scientific study of optimal human functioning’, it ‘aims to discover and promote the factors that allow individuals communities to thrive.’ Traditionally psychology has concerned itself with fixing or treating what is ‘wrong’ or deficit within an individual. Conversely, positive psychology looks at what is that causes human beings to flourish and thrive. The vocabulary of this narrative might include wellbeing, flow, optimism, gratitude, life satisfaction, creativity, self-esteem, resilience and of course, hope. This may provide a pathway to what Aristotle terms ‘the good life.’ Before the alarmist amongst us call this out as head in the sand, Pollyanna notions, let me clarify – as a practice it is not about continual optimism in the face of all negativity and failure. Rather, there can be positivity to negativity, that is if we have the mind-set to harness it as a learning opportunity. Using the lens of positive psychology, we might reframe how we perceive situations, which can in turn build resilience so that the next time we fall down, we pick ourselves back up again. Therefore, positive psychology is about the management of negative emotions rather than the obliteration of them. Wellbeing as a subject itself is certainly integral in our school curriculum; but awareness around mental health cannot be stand alone and should be woven into the fabric of everyday life. A broader focus within the curriculum might support wellbeing in all aspects of schooling. As English teachers who encourage our students in an examination of other worlds and lives through the medium of literature, we are perfectly primed to, at least theoretically, con-

sider positive psychology as an intervention, with the broader aim of enhancing student wellbeing.

So how might we use positive psychology framework to explore the world of our texts? I believe we can develop strategies that enable students to apply the lens of positivity to text analysis. We should consider the statement that all art is a metaphor. When we read literature, we imagine worlds in miniature and situational dilemmas play out before us. We examine patterns of human behaviour. We track the personal development of characters and their path towards self-actualisation, as well as the internal and external factors which may impinge upon that. As we work through various characters we critique their emotional response to events and situations; this metaphorical ‘working through’ and sense making might well be a bridge to a more literal understanding of our inner emotional workings. Dr. Susan David, author of Emotional Agility, highlights the importance of not trying to ‘impose happy thoughts’ but rather to ‘show up’ and face into what it is that makes us feel the way we do. That self-awareness is surely key to bolstering the resilience that is so necessary now. As our questions might evolve to consider how our characters live a more purposeful and meaningful life, we might hope that skills acquired during this process are transferrable from the metaphorical to the literal world.

For those within our classrooms, so much is uncertain and unwritten. There may not be a happy ever after. After all, that is not real life. But what we can aim for, and hope for, is that we seek out the happy in the ever after.

# Our School Book Club

by Lorraine McMahon

I BEGAN A LUNCH time book club in my school in September 2018 and it has been fantastic to witness the book club grow from strength to strength over the last few years. We meet once a week in our school library. We have on average 10 students every week, sometimes more than that and sometimes less. The book club comprises mostly of students from 1st year to TY, however on some occasions this year we had two sisters attending-one in sixth year and one in first. We have a block loan card from Cabra library which needs to be renewed yearly. Cabra Library gave us a list of class sets of books that were available in the library. The girls then ranked the books in order of preference, and we worked our way through that list quite quickly in our first year of the book club.

Some of the titles that we enjoyed were The Spirit of the Titanic, SOS Lusitania and The Diary of Anne Frank. Other books that we have read have come from recommendations from girls within the book club. The book club is mostly open discussion, and it’s very relaxed in nature. The students are usually way ahead of me in the book so the first five minutes is usually them filling me in on what’s about to happen next. We chat about interesting characters in the book, some of the students were particularly taken with the character of Felix in the novel Step Sister by Jennifer Donnelly or whether we’d like to read another title from that author. Another book which proved to be a firm favourite over the years was Girl Missing by Sophie McKenzie. It proved to be such a hit that we ended up reading all three books in the series!

Reading for pleasure was initially the primary goal of our book club however there have been so many more benefits associated with it. It has been lovely to witness all of the firm friendships that have evolved through the book club. We have a steady cohort of students who have been really committed to attending weekly for the last three years. However, the book club also gives them an opportunity to chat with friends from other years and offer book recommendations and tips to each other! The annual Christmas and Summer parties have become much anticipated events!

The biggest obstacle to our school book club so far has been Covid 19. Yet undeterred we formed a “Book club” Team on Microsoft Teams and carried on regardless! A lot of the students in the book club are readers of ‘Fan fiction’ and during the first lockdown a lot of members began writing their own short creative pieces and sharing them in our book club team. It was lovely to watch each student offer encouragement and praise to each other and support to continue writing.

In recent months when it has proved more difficult to procure books, we decided to register as Junior Jurors for the KPMG children’s book awards. This gave us both a specific and creative focus for the last few weeks of book club. Some weeks we were designing bookmarks or book covers and other weeks we were writing reviews. The JCSP digital library has also been a fantastic resource, it’s really user friendly and the students have enjoyed earning different achievements and scrolling through the 7,000 titles available to them.

The book club has been a great outlet for our students; however, it would have been impossible to have sustained it without the students continued support and encouragement. During a recent Deis inspection, I was proud to announce that we were currently in the throes of Pride and Prejudice. I was also delighted to see the book club getting a nod in the inspection report. The book club would also have been impossible to run with the support of Cabra library who have been so kind to supply us with books over the last few years. Our book club was mentioned in a recent Irish Times article “Libraries: Remarkable places we should cherish” as I said to the girls it’s onwards and upwards from here!



# Prescribed Texts Leaving Cert 2023

by Conor Murphy



New year, new text list.

The very idea of the text list divides teachers; some love it, some hate it.

I love it!

Every year I look forward to seeing what's on the list and buy whatever I haven't read/seen. It informs my summer reading/viewing.

There are many that don't appreciate the ever-changing nature of the list. Teachers often feel that they are only getting used to a text and it disappears. This is a valid complaint.

It is worth noting that a text will stay on the Leaving Cert list for a minimum of 3 years, and on the Junior Cycle for a minimum of 10 years (half the JC list is changed every five years).

It is also worth noting that INOTE have members on both committees and so we can pass on any issues you have, and any text suggestions.

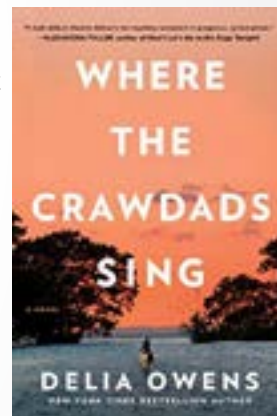
Back to this year's list.



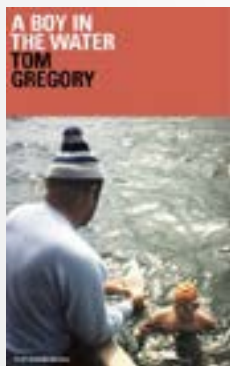
*Rebecca* by *Daphne Du Maurier* is a new addition (at least I can't remember it appearing before now). Another beautifully Gothic novel all about love and the past haunting the present. The length of the book, over 400 pages, might put some teachers off but, if you have the time, the content is ripe for classroom debate, discussion, and passionate writing.

Questions around gender roles should keep the whole class arguing!

*Delia Owens' Where the Crawdads Sing* will be another popular choice amongst teachers, many of whom will have read and loved the book (at least that's the impression I get whenever I mention it).



Set in North Carolina it tells the story of Kya, a young girl left to fend for herself in the swamp after she was abandoned by her family. The story lingers and allows us to feel our way through her landscapes, both inner and outer, before settling into a traditional thriller plot.



Then we have *Tom Gregory's A boy in the Water*, a memoir about how Gregory, at the age of eleven, swam the English Channel. A traditional memoir in style and substance this is a relatively easy read and one that many students will be able to relate to.

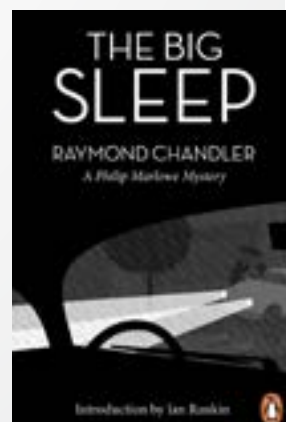
At last! One of my favourites! *Raymond Chandler's The Big Sleep*.

So many twists.

So many similes.

So much fun.

A genre book from a writer with literary aspirations. My students will be enjoying this



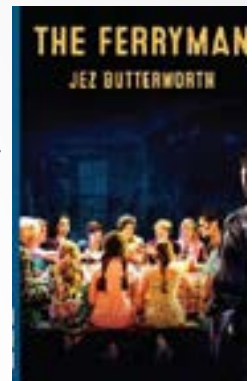
In terms of Drama we have two new plays;

*Jez Butterworth's The Ferryman* and *Lorraine Hansberry's A Raisin in the Sun*.



*Hansberry's* play is set in Chicago in the late 1950s and deals with a family trying to move up in the world and hitting a number of problems, not least of which is the colour of their skin.

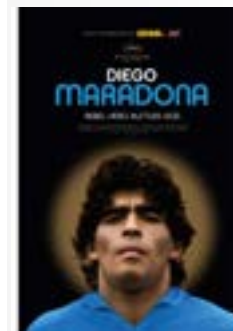
A play familiar to many and, for those that don't know it, one that is recognisable in its milieu if not its concerns around race.



*The Ferryman* is set in Armagh in 1981. A family celebrates the harvest only for their past, and The Troubles, to enter the kitchen. A play that starts with a big cast laughing its way through the dialogue before the tone shifts dramatically. But we knew this was coming thanks to an ominous prologue.

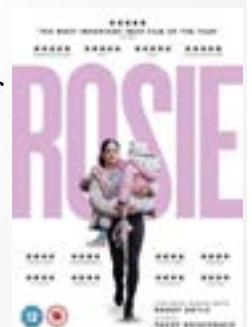


Finally, the films.



*Asif Kapadia's* gripping documentary, *Diego Maradona*, tells us about the footballer's controversial time playing for Naples. Drugs, the Mafia, and spectacular football this film will keep any student's attention whilst also supplying rich material to discuss.

*Rosie*, directed by *Paddy Breathnach* (and written by Roddy Doyle) tells the story of a homeless family in Dublin looking for somewhere to live. Taking place over about 32 hours the film is relentless as it highlights the various ways society blocks easy access to the basic needs of any family.



Breathnach utilises the hand held camera to great effect throughout the film but it is the central performance by Sarah Greene that reaches out and grabs you by the throat.

They are the new texts that have been added to the list. It is worth noting that older texts have returned, *Casablanca* and *Purple Hibiscus* being the two big ones.

The list may not be to everyone's liking but there should be enough there to satisfy most classes.





# COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE: ALWAYS EXPLORING

by Joe Rolson

"We shall not cease from exploration/And at the end of all our exploring/Will be to arrive where we started/And know the place for the first time."

T. S. Eliot – *'Little Gidding'*

One of the few upshots of the global pandemic, that we have been living through, has been access to high quality CPD in the online space. Instead of getting into a car, after a long day of teaching, to drive to your local Education Centre, the parameters for accessing CPD have shifted dramatically since March 2020: CPD is now coming to us in the comforts of our own living rooms, kitchens and home offices.

Our Education Centres, all over the country, deserve huge credit for the ways in which they have managed this shift in providing CPD, as do the many English teachers who have put themselves forward in delivering terrific webinars for colleagues on many differing areas within both Junior Cycle and Senior Cycle English. I have the great pleasure of coordinating the Community of Practice for English teachers, through the Co. Wexford Education Centre.

The Community of Practice is not just a place and space where English colleagues share good practice, on an area they are interested in, it represents much more than that. The Community of Practice builds collegiality amongst colleagues, it helps us to reflect upon and develop our own classroom practice (regardless of age or stage of career), it builds connections between teachers (and schools), as well as acting as a place where we learn

together, share resources and affirm what we do. Teacher agency can be achieved when we act as a community of learners; where we develop our own individual professional growth, as well as the growth of our colleagues.

I have been taken aback by the overwhelmingly positive response to these online Community of Practice sessions. It is very clear to me, from feedback that I have received from many colleagues at this stage, that there is a real hunger amongst English teachers for CPD that is professionally rewarding, energising and, above all, practical.

For our first session, back in January 2021, Deirdre Carroll, teacher in St Mary's CBS, Portlaoise, provided colleagues with wonderful insights into the language skills necessary for students to succeed in Leaving Certificate English Paper One. In March 2021, I did a webinar on the Leaving Certificate poetry of D. H. Lawrence and approaching Prescribed Poetry and then, in May 2021, Clare Madden, teacher in Glanmire Community College, gave an inspirational workshop on visual strategies and dual coding practice in the English classroom.

Going forward, the aim is to have at least one Community of Practice session every term. I hope to get a balance between sessions that are aimed at both Junior Cycle and Senior Cycle English, but also sessions that are grounded in sound pedagogical practice. I very much look forward to continuing to develop these Community of Practice sessions for the benefit of all who are part of our

community and to give colleagues a platform to share their own expertise. We have a blank canvas to work off and every English teacher can bring their own unique paintbrush/colours to it.

If you are interested in sharing your own insights/good practice on an area that you are interested in or passionate about, then please get in touch, via Direct Message on Twitter (@Joe\_Rolston) or through my email at jrolston@preswex.ie.

Sincere thanks to Lorraine O'Gorman, Director of the Co. Wexford Education Centre, for inviting me to lead this initiative, the hard working INOTE committee for the ongoing support shown towards this Community of Practice, as well as the hundreds of colleagues who have engaged with these sessions so far.

English teachers, in particular, never "cease from exploration" - we do it every day in our classrooms, when we expose our students to the marvels of language and literature but we are also very eager to professionally explore our own teaching and learning of this subject of ours, that we love so much. It is a true sentiment that "the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few" - it is great to see this Community of Practice as living proof of Mr Spock's profound words (yes, I love Star Trek).

For future updates on this English Community of Practice, see [www.ecwexford.ie](http://www.ecwexford.ie) or follow @WexfordEdCentre on Twitter.

To find out who we are, we must confront who we were

## JONE\$TOWN



### Robert McDermott

is an English teacher from Dublin that has twice won the INOTE Short Story Competition. *Jone\$town*, published by Riversong Books, is his debut novel.

Set in contemporary America, in an exclusive gated community, the novel tells the story of those wealthy enough to worry about how best to "keep up with the Joneses" and, at the same time, decide which "Joneses" they should jettison. At times it reminded me of both J.G. Ballard's *Cocaine Nights* and the T.V. programme *Desperate Housewives*.

McDermott has commented on how the book references the cult of Jim Jones, a notorious "preacher", manipulator and, ultimately, mass murderer. Although the novel doesn't veer too far into those elements (although some do appear to a greater or lesser extent) the power of a charismatic leader is at the centre of the plot.

Indeed, the shadow of Trump's America looms large over the setting and characters within the 380 pages.

Front and centre, though, is our

## A Book Review

by Conor Murphy

classic unreliable narrator, Matt.

Matt has a sly sense of humour and a tendency to leave plot points hanging at the end of chapters. But, for the first few chapters, he gives us the low down on the gated community he has become a part of.

We do get a huge amount of information over the first thirty or forty pages but it is delivered with such irreverence, and cleverly, through a num-

ber of genres (play, newspaper articles), that we end up simply enjoying our time with Matt, rather than wondering how we will be able to retain all of the names and circumstances of the inhabitants. In the end, though, it is the tone that has been created that is more important than remembering every detail.

We learn about Mr. Zimmerman usurping Mr. Tillman as head of the local Residential Community Association, in charge of such things as what families can live where, what pets are or aren't allowed, length of grass. The usual.

The plot kicks off with an article written by one of the residents that reveals the comical conservatism of the community.

There's a bit of bother with cats; one has gone missing and another, in the past, may, or may not, be the focal point of a burgeoning career in mass murder.

And our femme fatale arrives.

And we get a few flashbacks from Matt about his past.

All this leaves us with more questions and, more importantly, leaves us wondering exactly who (and indeed what) Matt is, and what he is capable of.

Once these threads are released the novel kicks into action and turns from being a look at capitalism and the state of America into a page turning thriller.

Plot and character elements build on each other. We get some classic cliff hangers insisting on making us turn to the next page or chapter.

The book is written in an elusive style; a gentle humour persists throughout but you can always sense the darkness just beneath. Pop culture references are balanced out with some nice literary references we, as English teachers, will recognise and enjoy. There is a knowingness to the novel. McDermott is aware of the tropes he is using but he is also aware that we are aware of the tropes he is using. The resultant dialogue between author and reader is all the more enjoyable because of this.

The book is a thrilling debut and one that promises a great future for McDermott. We, at INOTE, are proud to have been near the start of his career and wait, slightly impatiently, for his next book.



Tqdgvt'  
OeFgto qw



# THINGS WITH FEATHERS, RANDY NYMPHS AND THINGS THAT EXPLODE - NAVIGATING POETRY AT SENIOR CYCLE

**Jennifer McGrath** reflects on teaching poetry in and out of the classroom, and what she is looking forward to

NEAR THE END of online ‘learning’ I asked my groups if they wanted to do break out rooms. The answer was a resounding no. But how could I give them the chance to discuss and tentatively explore the poetry of Adrienne Rich without using a technological cloister or giving them the opportunity to unmute? Reflecting on this I realised that what I was doing was already working, that the thrill of deciphering a new poem alone, hearing their classmates’ ideas, getting the chance to write a bullet point into the chat and receive a smiley face, or watching videos of me talking to myself was actually preferable!

‘Trying to talk with a man’ presented several challenges. I couldn’t tell them what to think through a video, I needed them to make suggestions and try themselves. So, I split up the poem into sections and created a Microsoft form asking specific questions like : what do you think this underground river represents? A form is basically a quiz through Microsoft teams which is the software my school uses - here’s an example.

Trying to talk with a man - First reading ,  
First impressions

Read the poem multiple times before answering these questions - please attempt all, even if you aren't sure, I  
a guess.

Required

1

What impression do you get of Rich's husband - assuming he is the 'man' mentioned in the  
title. 2 sentences max. \*

Enter your answer

2



If you described a relationship as a barren desert used as a nuclear testing site, what would  
you be implying about that relationship? \*

☐ It's barren and dead

☐ No one wants to be in the relationship

☐ There are mines waiting to explode - arguments to be had

The main benefits are you can mark these quickly, include rubrics, and the correct/ suggested answers. You can also send the forms to colleagues and reuse them.

Once they had inputted their answers into the form I aired their great interpretations anonymously during our one live lesson per week or saved them as a pdf for them to read at their leisure. Now I could gauge their first impressions I created a PowerPoint with the poem narrated visually. We then annotated it in terms of poetic devices etc together and got to discuss what we thought.

When I asked if anyone wanted personalised feedback on their Othello essays, a small few stayed on the call and I got 5/10 minutes with each of them. I commented on how it was weird to teach over the phone or even speak with a student like this. One giggled back to reassure me that it felt clinical and too intimate at the same time for him too. Another was all business asking for specifics as to why she received a H3 instead of a H2. The last asked me how I was, and assumed I was snowed under with marking and that it must be very tough. This little kindness made me want to laugh and cry at the same time. I was snowed under, I was lonely in my room, talking to myself and sending videos out into the void. This question reminded me of what I missed most, the humanity and banter that comes when a class clearly loves language and learning, and are able to share that love without fear.

## School

Walls where words belong  
to jog memories, celebrate, inspire,  
Waiting bare, expectant.

I can reel off the scheme of work  
Like the lyrics to a song and  
my word  
counts  
for something.

I can pull smiles from inside  
show the magic the poet puts on the page and  
champion  
the little ones.

Back to the  
Hundreds of little loves  
I go  
with open arms.

The poem above is imbued with the enthusiasm and hope I have for Sept 2021, however misplaced it might turn out to be. It is also a reflection on what our strengths are as English teachers and how despite all the challenges, nothing could stop our passion for language getting through.



Back in the classroom and back to Adrienne Rich, my fifth years and I tackle ‘Our whole life.’ I give each person a different stanza, some get the feminist critique of language from my undergrad English bible ‘Beginning Theory’ by Peter Barry, some get a New Yorker Article on self immolation as a defiant act, some investigate metaphors, some try to work out who the ‘our’ is and the significance of the Algerian. They didn’t stumble, or falter, they read silently and annotated three lines as if they were precious gems. And they are. Using Aoife O’Driscoll and Deirdre Carroll as my lode-stars, I have realised it all boils down to: what the poet has to say and how they say it. Once that clicks, poetry becomes paradoxically both mechanical and magical.



How does Heaney create a magical experience for the reader following him into the darkness of the forge? My beleaguered sixth years spout back - the unicorn, the anvil like an altar. What do we think about him comparing his wife to a skunk? Do you think all of his allusions to nymphs and spilling virginal blood are alienating? Suggesting that one of the Irish poetry triad is a little pervy always gets a laugh, something this group desperately needs and deserves. Laughs.



Recently, they wrote blogs for me on Heaney - how much he shares his personal life with us, his allusions, why he deserves to be studied at all, and it struck me how English really is the most cross curricular subject. Love, relationships, power, oppression, gender roles, politics, history and are constantly discussed implicitly and explicitly. The students bare their souls to us in personal essays, get a chance to pontificate and provoke in speeches and debates using the tools the masters have provided (the poets - not us) proving that Senior Cycle English is much more of a Lifeskills class than regurgitation from dusty tomes.

We all fall in love with the language and hope to convey this to others. Dickinson was my first love so I'm saving her for September '21, I think we've all had enough funeral talk this year.

