Text Selection in the Senior English Curriculum

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&
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Context

- VCE English as Senior English Curriculum for majority of students
- Text lists represent compulsory lists since 1990, limiting what can be studied in the final years of schooling
- Text selection processes are dictated by government guidelines (law).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number of texts per year</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>36</td>
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<td>2012</td>
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<td>2014</td>
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<td>2015</td>
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<td>2016</td>
<td>36</td>
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<td>2017</td>
<td>37</td>
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<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>36</td>
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<tr>
<td>2019</td>
<td>36</td>
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</table>
Struggles for recognition are a fundamental dimension of social life and that what is at stake in them is the accumulation of a particular form of capital.” (Bourdieu, 1990, p.22)

“The specialized knowledge demands and more generic cultural demands laid up in study designs, syllabuses, examination papers, school tests and examiners’ reports are indeed socially discriminating.” (Teese, 2008, pg.12)

“The history and competing interest and values of modern society are expressed in the school curriculum” (Young, 1998, pg.9)

“...the best which has been thought and said” (Arnold, 1869, p. 6).
Research Questions

1. What are the trends in VCE English text selection lists (2010-2019)?
2. Which texts are selected by schools for study in the Senior English Curriculum?
3. What informs text-selection decisions made by teachers in the Senior English Curriculum?
Methodology

- VCE English texts lists from 2010-2019 collated.
- Approximately 35 texts per year, about 350 texts across 10 years.
- A framework is developed
- Coding team formed
- Every text was double-coded, with the assistance of coding guidelines.
- Discrepancies were resolved by lead investigators
- Statistical trends are generated.
### The Coding Frame

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year of publication</th>
<th>Author sex</th>
<th>Fiction/non-fiction</th>
<th>Story Setting - continent</th>
<th>Story setting - urban/rural</th>
<th>Story setting - time</th>
<th>Text type</th>
<th>Protagonist Sex, age, gender</th>
<th>Antagonist sex, gender</th>
<th>Indigeneity</th>
<th>Presence of minority groups</th>
<th>Themes explored</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Text List Year</td>
<td>Title</td>
<td>Author</td>
<td>Year of first publication</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>Fiction</td>
<td>Non-fiction</td>
<td>Australia [incl NZ &amp; Oceania]</td>
<td>Asia</td>
<td>Europe</td>
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<td>Michael M.</td>
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<td>2013</td>
<td>Death of a Salesman</td>
<td>Miller Arth</td>
<td>1949</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
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<td>1953</td>
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Novels are the most prevalent text
Film and plays receive the next most attention
Less than 10% of texts were classed as poetry
The ‘Other’ category is made up almost exclusively of memoirs, and 1 graphic novel
Findings - Text type over time

Text-types (%) over time

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Novel</th>
<th>Short Stories</th>
<th>Play</th>
<th>Film</th>
<th>Poetry</th>
<th>Other</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2019</td>
<td>40.5405</td>
<td>44.4444</td>
<td>16.2162</td>
<td>16.6667</td>
<td>16.667</td>
<td>8.1081</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Findings - Author Sex

- Almost two thirds of texts were authored or directed by males.
- Between 2010-2012, almost 8 in 10 texts were authored by males.
- The gap over the past 10 years has closed and there is now parity between the sexes.
The vast majority of the texts set in Europe were located in the British Isles.

Less than one third of texts were set in Australia

Only 17% of texts were set in Asia.

Of the texts set in Australia, 54% of these were of female authors/directors.
Almost 50% of texts are located in a post-1965 world.

One fifth of texts are situated in the same time period as that of our students.

Less than 18% of texts are from the 19th Century and earlier.

### Story setting time - percentages for each time period

- **Pre 1000**: 2.7726%
- **1000-1499**: 1.1091%
- **1500-1799**: 7.9482%
- **1800-1913**: 6.0998%
- **1914-1945**: 11.0906%
- **1946-1964**: 22.1811%
- **1965-1997**: 27.9113%
- **1998-**: 20.8872%
Findings - ‘Australian’ texts

○ While about one-third of texts are set in Australia, there is a small, but downward, trend in this area.

○ Texts set in Australia are distributed similar to all texts from the lists.

○ Almost 80% of texts are set in a post-WW2 era.
Most texts included a substantial portion of their stories set in urban/suburban contexts.

At least half of the texts included story elements located in rural contexts.

Over time, there is a slight trend towards fewer texts with rural settings.
Findings - Protagonist sex

- The majority of characters, 57%, are male.
- The gap between male and females protagonists reduces over time.
- A small number of characters, about 1%, were identified as non-aligned.
Findings - Protagonist gender

- The majority of characters, 79%, were identified as heterosexual.
- A small, but increasing over time, number of protagonists were identified as non-heterosexual (4%).
- Protagonists whose sexual preference was not identified represented 17% of the sample.
Most texts, 82%, contained a protagonist who was between 25 and 60 years of age.

About half of the texts contained a protagonist of similar age to the students studying that text.

Many stories tracked the life development of protagonists.
Findings - Protagonist Indigeneity

- Ten percent of texts contained an indigenous protagonist.

- There is an increase in the number of indigenous protagonists over time.

- While film represents 16% of all texts, 36% of indigenous antagonists were found in films.
Findings - Antagonist sex and gender

- Over two-thirds of all antagonists are male.
- This trend is consistent over time.
- Two-thirds of all antagonists are heterosexual.
- About 6% are identified as non-heterosexual.
Findings - Themes explored in texts

- Over two-thirds of texts explored issues associated with class and gender.
- Over half of texts addressed issues of religion and race.
- Indigenous issues were explored in less than one-third of texts.
Only a small number of novels that explored one of the identified themes, explored indigenous issues.

Despite 36% of all texts being novels, only 14% of these explore indigenous issues.

37% of films explore indigenous issues, even though only 16% of all texts are films.
Limitations of the findings

- The figures tell us what might have been studied, not the texts that were actually studied.

- Some aspects of the data are problematic
  - Fiction versus non-fiction
  - Indigeneity
  - The significance of antagonists
  - Data related to short stories and poetry.

- The trends do not address the complex manner in which these texts becomes known to the reader.

- We are no closer to understanding the myriad of socio-cultural factors that have contributed to these trends.
Outcomes

• Report
• Paper 1: Eng in Aus
• Paper 2: Findings
• Paper 3: Australiana (2019) ???
• Conference: AATE_ALEA Perth, July, 2018
What next?

- Look more closely at this data, including at individual and groups of texts, to understand these trends and what they says about:
  - The text-selection guidelines
  - The preferences of the text-selection panel

- Collect data about which texts teachers are selecting to study with their students and draw comparisons

- Speak with teachers about the text-selection decisions to understand the dispositions guiding them.
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