

VOICE OF THE ICONO CLASS ROOM

Back in the heady days of 1989, Francis Fukuyama – economist, writer and possessor of a name that should be pronounced very, very carefully, especially around anyone who is sensitive about his or her mother – famously declared ‘the end of history’ due to ‘the universalisation of Western liberal democracy.’

Clearly, I took some very strong acid back in my own heady days of 1989 and have spent the last 20 years on a bad trip. While Fukuyama and co were living in a homogenous world free from conflict, I’ve endured 9/11, the WMD scandal, climate change denial, world-wide recession, reality TV and Michael Gove. Drugs are bad, m’ok?

Now, had Fukuyama instead declared the end of literature in our classrooms, he’d have been spot on, because Gove’s latest announcement that he intends to make the literature GCSE tougher is likely to put the final nail into Shakespeare’s coffin.

English teachers up and down the country will tell you that literature has become a second class citizen since 5 A*-C including English and maths became the de facto measure of a school’s success, or lack thereof. Less able students have been removed from the course altogether in order to focus on their English GCSE, whilst the more able have had literature shoehorned into the last few months of year 11 provided they achieve three (soon to be four) levels of progress in the January English exams.

On top of this, literature is already tougher than English; for starters, there is no speaking and listening component, which, as any English teacher will tell you, is where most students achieve their highest grades. And then there’s the grade boundaries: students taking Edexcel GCSE literature can only drop 24 marks out of a possible 240 if they want to get an A* – that’s a tougher cut-off than many A-Levels. And Gove intends to make it even harder.

Defenders of government policy will no doubt point to the fact that, in

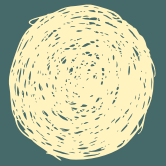
order to stop those pesky teachers playing the system, students must achieve ‘a grade’ in literature or any grade they get in English will be voided. Seems reasonable, until you realise that the grade they must achieve is a G...

The result of this is the unforgivable fact that some students will not read a single book, play or poem between the ages of 11 and 17. The Cambridge iGCSE in English has no fictional content whatsoever; yes, the accompanying literature paper is tough, but a local school has addressed that by developing an ingenious teaching and learning strategy: students will spend all of KS3 and KS4 preparing for their English iGCSE, and once that’s out the way they will watch two films – *The Great Gatsby* and *Wuthering Heights* – in order to get them that all-important G in literature.

So why, in this digital age, should we care about literature anyway? As an English teacher I could give you a thousand answers, but one will suffice: empathy. In an interview last August, the head of HSBC declared that empathy was the most important skill in today’s business world; the NHS has had to introduce empathy training for staff as more and more employees simply do not appear to possess it; leading educators have claimed that students with high levels of empathetic understanding outperform their peers. And literature remains one of the best ways of developing this vital human skill.

I have seen 16-year old boys – boys so hard they’d give Chuck Norris sleepless nights – in tears over Lennie’s death in *Of Mice and Men*; teenage girls who normally only care about TOWIE in a state of moral outrage when reading *To Kill a Mockingbird*; wannabe gangsters writing reams and reams of fantastic, raw, emotive poetry after studying Saul Williams...the list goes on and on. But the way education is going at the moment, my fear is that no-one is ever going to get to read it – or anything else – ever again.

Forget the end of history; it’s the death of literature in the classroom that’s the real tragedy, argues one teacher who’s been reading ahead...



WHAT DO YOU THINK?

We know that teachers, on the whole, tend to be shy, retiring types with no strong opinions whatsoever on matters of general educational policy... but if you happen to buck this trend, and have something you’d like to get off your chest (anonymously, of course), send an email to editor@teachsecondary.com outlining your argument, and we’ll consider you as our next Voice of the Iconoclassroom...