

Making every English lesson count



*Six principles to support
great reading and writing*

Andy Tharby



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Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	<i>i</i>
Introduction	1
1 Challenging Reading	9
2 Explaining and Questioning Reading	27
3 Modelling Reading	45
4 Practising Reading	59
5 Challenging Writing	79
6 Explaining Writing	93
7 Modelling Writing	105
8 Practising Writing	119
9 Feedback	135
Final Thoughts	155
<i>Bibliography</i>	<i>157</i>

Introduction

Husband and wife John and Sue Wolstenholme were exemplary English teachers whose knowledge and skill transformed the lives of many young people. On retirement, they had clocked up over seventy years of classroom practice between them. Thankfully, their expertise and wisdom have inspired many new teachers to follow in their footsteps. I am fortunate enough to be one of them.

John and Sue had incredibly high expectations of student conduct and behaviour. They were masters of the craft of reading out loud. They were enthusiastic endorsers of reading for pleasure. And they taught with great sensitivity, empathy and attention to detail.

They had their differences too. Sue was very theatrical. You never quite knew what you would find when you walked into her room! She might be roaring from a desktop, transformed into a fervourous and vitriolic Lady Macbeth. Equally, she might be quietly encouraging her students to tease the meaning from an intricate metaphor. On the other hand, John's room was always a sea of calm. Young people would be working hard and working noiselessly. You would often find John stationed behind his beloved overhead projector, conducting a discussion with wonderful deftness and ease.

Two things that I have learnt from John and Sue inform this book.¹ The first is that no two English teachers are completely alike. We each have to carve out our own teaching identity. The second is that great English teachers must live and breathe their subject. If we teach every moment, every lesson and every topic as if it is the most fascinating thing in the world, then our students are more likely to come to believe this too. As John points out, teaching is an act, the classroom our stage.

¹ John and Sue were kind enough to allow me to interview them before I started writing.

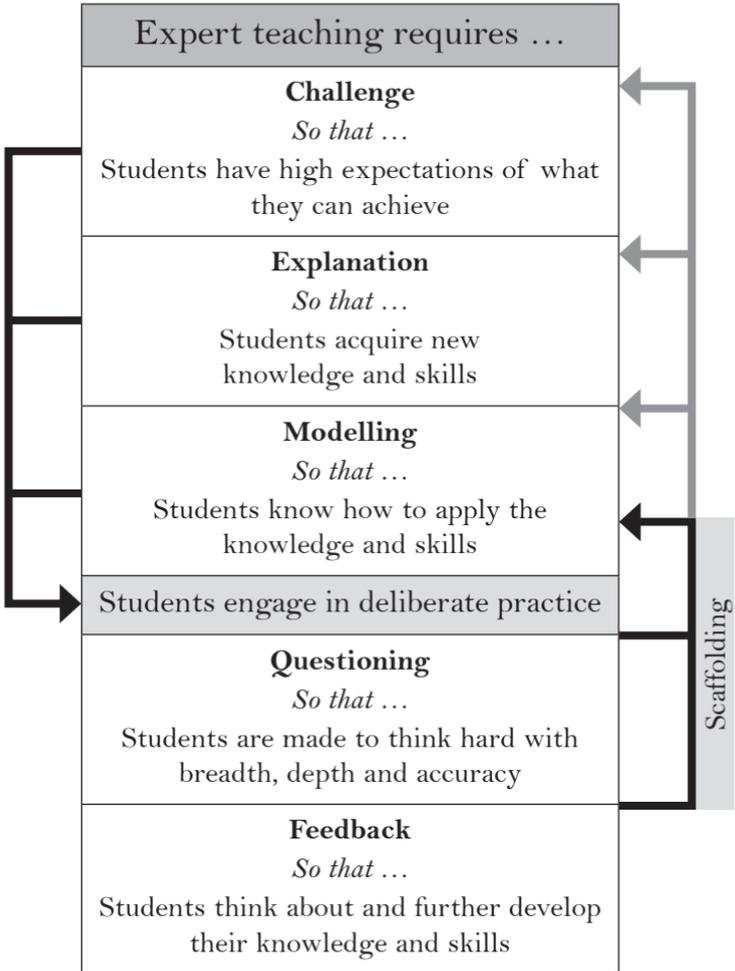
Nevertheless, individuality and passion are paper thin without methods to bolster them. Research suggests that great teaching requires a theory about what learning is and how it happens.² That is to say, we must work from a well-rounded conception of how students improve their reading and writing skills, and how our teaching methods support this. The aim of this book is to provide this evidence.

This is a book for new and experienced English teachers alike. It does not pretend to be a magic bullet. It does not claim to have all the answers. However, the ethos, principles and strategies that will be shared are a mixture of the best research evidence available and the timeworn wisdom of expert English teachers, like John and Sue, from across the globe.

We will also return to the six teaching and learning principles that Shaun Allison and I shared in *Making Every Lesson Count*: challenge, explanation, modelling, practice, feedback and questioning.³

2 Robert Coe, Cesare Aloisi, Steve Higgins and Lee Elliott Major, *What Makes Great Teaching? Review of the Underpinning Research*. Project Report (London: Sutton Trust, 2014). Available at: <http://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/What-makes-great-teaching-FINAL-4.11.14.pdf>, p. 3.

3 Shaun Allison and Andy Tharby, *Making Every Lesson Count: Six Principles to Support Great Teaching and Learning* (Carmarthen: Crown House Publishing, 2015).



In English lessons, a child learns best when he is *challenged* just outside his comfort zone. The texts he reads should be culturally, linguistically and conceptually rich. He should be immersed in imaginative and academic language, and he should be encouraged to write with ambition and accuracy. However, it is unlikely that he will become an excellent reader or writer by magic. He needs his teacher to *explain* and *model* these highly complex processes with clarity and precision.

Even with great teaching, he will only become a better reader and writer through regular and purposeful *practice*, and he will require *feedback* that will help him to learn from his mistakes and encourage him to think hard and to think critically. Finally, great *questions* will help him to form alternative interpretations and make connections within and between texts.

Now, imagine you were to teach a Year 9 class how to write an analytical essay entitled, ‘How does Shakespeare present the character of Romeo to the audience?’ You could take the easy option: read one scene, watch the film and hand out an essay plan that tells the class how to write every sentence. This could even produce some sparkingly beautiful essays. Students might appear to show insight and erudition, but sadly this would only be a veneer. It is unlikely that they will have absorbed the play’s finer points or learnt how to persevere with an intricate and difficult text.

Real English teaching requires you to take the harder route. The challenge would come from expecting all students – irrespective of ability – to study the entire play. To breathe life into Shakespeare’s archaic language, you would need to explain the play’s language and themes precisely and memorably. Your class would need to see you model your love for the play and how to grapple with its difficulties, and they would also need practice time to cement comprehension and develop tentative interpretations. Feedback and questioning would then allow you to check understanding and provoke even more thinking.

And that’s only the half of it. Once they know the play and have a grasp of Romeo’s impulsive character, your students would need to learn how to write an academic essay. Again, high academic challenge would encourage the students to adopt a formal, discursive writing style. Models and examples would make this concrete and achievable. Your feedback and questioning would help them to correct their mistakes and deepen their understanding of how to write in this way.

These six principles should not be considered a lesson plan or a tick-list; in reality, they are members of one body. They sustain each other. Not only do they help you to plan English lessons and schemes of work, but they also help you to respond with spontaneity to the ever-changing and ever-complex needs of your students within lessons.

In recent years, the education establishment has lionised the individual lesson. Indeed, the quality of teaching has been assessed in terms of how successful or unsuccessful a single lesson has been. This has been a mistake. Language learning, for example, is not speedy, linear or logical. It is slow, erratic, associative and cumulative; it does not readily conform to hour-long, bite-size chunks. Research into vocabulary learning, for instance, suggests that young people absorb new words incrementally through multiple exposures to the word in slightly different contexts over time.⁴ This is a gradual process that cannot happen in an hour.

Our students, therefore, need teachers who recognise that learning results from artful repetition and consolidation. We must appreciate the interplay and tension between short-term understanding and long-term memory. We must recognise the conceptual and iterative nature of learning. And we must seek to understand the supporting roles of reading, writing, speaking, listening and thinking in this process.

This book argues that English teachers should make use of three pathways to learning: direction, immersion and habit. These interwoven pathways inform each chapter and strategy in this book.

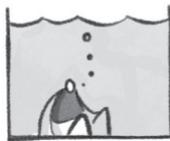
The *direction* pathway covers the huge spectrum of knowledge and concepts that need to be taught and learnt – for example, the spelling of onomatopoeia, the order of events in chapter 1 of *Animal Farm*, the concept of imagery. At

⁴ E. D. Hirsch, *Why Knowledge Matters: Rescuing Our Children from Failed Educational Theories* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2016), pp. 99–100.

times, these items will be specific to one text or context; at other times, they will be the underpinning concepts that lie at the heart of grammar or literature.



If direction covers the depth and strength of learning, then the *immersion* pathway covers its breadth and diversity. English classrooms should immerse students in language and ideas so that they have every chance of developing new vocabulary and thoughts implicitly and indirectly – through osmosis, if you like. For this to happen, texts and tasks should be chosen with great care. English teaching can have a transformational effect, but only when young people are challenged to read and think beyond the confines of their world. If you choose texts and activities for their entertainment value alone, you are likely to be doing your students – especially those from underprivileged backgrounds – a great disservice.



The last pathway is *habit*. Students will only improve their reading and writing skills if they establish and maintain good working behaviours. This calls for a coherent

long-term strategy. First we must decide on the habits we want to inculcate: to independently edit and improve written work? To read each day for pleasure? To elaborate on ideas in full and well-reasoned sentences? To consider alternative viewpoints? Once chosen, we must plan how we will encourage these habits to take root over time until they become automatic in our students.



In each chapter, you will find a number of practical teaching strategies designed to help you to bring the six principles and the three pathways to life. Nevertheless, all schools and classes are different, so it is up to you to refine the strategies to suit the group and topic. After all, you are the expert in your classroom.

Even though this will not be a polemical or theoretical book, it will challenge some prevalent myths in English teaching – such as the belief that English is a ‘skills only’ subject and the notion that sharing written success criteria is always an effective teaching strategy. The aim of the book is not only to provide practical solutions to perennial problems, but also to inspire reflective thought.

The first four chapters will look at ways to improve reading and the study of literature. In the next four we will turn our attention to teaching writing. Finally, there will be a chapter on how we can improve and speed up the way we give feedback. Each chapter will finish with a series of reflective questions to help you relate the content of the chapter to your classroom practice.

John and Sue Wolstenholme were incredible teachers. If this book proves half as successful in inspiring you as they were in inspiring me, it will be a success.

Let's get going.

Chapter 1

Challenging Reading



Evie and the vicious cycle

Evie is in Year 9 and she does not read books. Neither do her siblings or her parents. Most of Evie's reading – if you can call it that – comes through the social media sites she trawls every evening. Evie's knowledge of the world is shallow and piecemeal: she cannot point to London on a map of the UK; she cannot name the prime minister. Evie feels that she does not need to know these things and that they are irrelevant to her life. If you ask Evie whether she likes reading, her answer is always a resounding "No!"

For many young people, reading comes easily. But for others – like Evie – nature and nurture have been less kind. Sadly, when a child decides that reading is not for her, it becomes very hard to convince her of its joys and virtues. A vicious cycle is unleashed: the less she reads, the further behind she gets, and the further behind she gets, the less accessible her English lessons become.

A possible teaching solution is to choose more appealing texts to read and to plan fun, activity-packed tasks. The theory goes that if Evie becomes engaged by her lessons, she will be more willing to learn. Naturally, there is some truth in this idea – the magical moments of your schooldays most likely inspired you to become a teacher yourself. But even though we hope that Evie will come to love English, teaching her to read with accuracy and confidence must remain the primary goal.

It is also Evie's entitlement to read literature that challenges her to imagine a world beyond the limited confines of her own. It should provoke her to consider times, places, people and ideas that she would not encounter in everyday life. It should open doors to new and fascinating experiences. These doors will not be open at home, only at school. If we deny Evie the opportunity to read challenging literature, we become complicit in a kind of elitism that deems only a certain calibre of child worthy of reading a certain quality of text. This can, unwittingly, perpetuate the social and cultural divides in our country.

Another thorny issue we will address is the 'skills first' approach to reading that has become common in recent years. We often hope that generic skills such as 'language analysis' and 'reading between the lines' will transfer smoothly from one text to the next. Sadly, this is rarely the case. In their excellent book, *Reading Reconsidered*, Doug Lemov, Colleen Driggs and Erica Woolway argue that the skills of reading are not "universally applicable". Instead, they are "applied in a setting, and the details of the setting ... matter immensely".¹

In other words, you might have taught your students how to analyse the themes of *The Merchant of Venice*, but this does not mean that your students will know how to apply these analytical skills to another text – Emily Brontë's *Wuthering*

1 Doug Lemov, Colleen Driggs and Erica Woolway, *Reading Reconsidered: A Practical Guide to Rigorous Literacy Instruction* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2016), p. 17.

Writing in the practical, engaging style of the award-winning *Making Every Lesson Count*, Andy Tharby returns with an offering of gimmick-free advice that combines the time-honoured wisdom of excellent English teachers with the most useful evidence from cognitive science.

Making Every English Lesson Count is underpinned by six pedagogical principles – challenge, explanation, modelling, practice, feedback and questioning – and provides simple, realistic classroom strategies to bring the teaching of conceptual knowledge, vocabulary and challenging literature to the foreground.

In an age of educational quick fixes, GCSE reform and ever-moving goalposts, this precise and timely book provides practical solutions to perennial problems and inspires a rich, challenging and evidence-informed approach to English teaching.

Suitable for English teachers of students aged 11–16 years

The best book on English teaching that I have read.

David Didau, author of *What If Everything You Knew About Education Was Wrong?*

A manifesto for great teaching of English, informed by research evidence, experience and pragmatism.

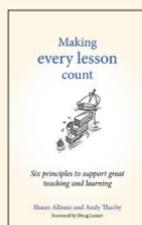
Hélène Galdin-O'Shea, English and media teacher, research advocate

Great teaching is about making the unfamiliar familiar and making the complex simple. This book does just that – I really wish I had had it as an NQT.

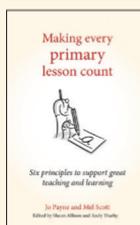
Chris Curtis, Head of English, Saint John Houghton Catholic Voluntary Academy

An indispensable guide for English teachers that combines important research with practical advice on how to implement it in the classroom.

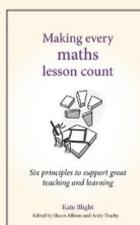
Carl Hendrick, Head of Learning and Research, Wellington College



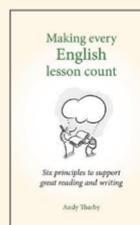
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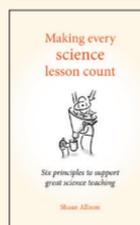
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