HSC English: Marginalising Masculinities

Wendy Michaels
School of Humanities, Faculty of Education and Arts
The University of Newcastle

Public concern for the differential performances of boys and girls in the New South Wales (Australia) Higher School Certificate English examinations, coupled with concerns about the feminisation of the teaching profession have been circulating for some time. Various explanations (and solutions) are offered in the media, in populist publications and in the academic literature for this perceived problem. This paper makes a contribution to the field by documenting some of the ways in which the NSW HSC English syllabuses, from their inception in 1965, have progressively marginalised hegemonic masculinities through the differentiated curriculum structures, the conception of the subject English and its pedagogical technology inscribed in the documents, and the subjectivities constructed for both teacher and learner in the documents themselves. It also looks to the new HSC English syllabus and poses the question – will this new syllabus perpetuate the previous problems?

THE PROBLEM WITH BOYS

Following the release of the Higher School Certificate examination results at the end of each year media outlets construct their sensationalised stories of successes and failures. Over the past decade the media beat-up has featured prominent stories about the differential performances of private and public schools and males and females. Males’ underperformance in the one compulsory HSC subject, English, has been the subject of much media attention. Media reports of the 2001 HSC results highlight the positioning of females at the top of all English courses and assert that overall “[g]irls performed better than boys” (Pryor 2001, 5). By the middle of the 1990s this theme of boys lagging behind girls was not simply trumpeted in the post HSC results period but had become a mantra chanted throughout the year. BOYS BURN OUT screams a headline in The Australian on 27 July 1995. By the end of the decade some media commentators (Devine 2000) were beginning to suggest that despite the awareness of the problem for many years little had yet been done to remedy it.

The mantra of boys falling behind girls has also echoed in the populist literature. For instance, Simon and Rudman (both practicing teachers) assert...
that “[e]mpirical and anecdotal evidence suggests that there exists a problem with boys and literacy in schools” and their solution to this problem is to have boys read fiction books that “deal with the teenage male’s quest to define their [sic] identity in post sexual revolution society” (Simon & Rudman 2001, 22). Hawkes—also a teacher—in his book subtitled “how to raise and educate boys” asserts that “[t]he evidence is unambiguous—boys in general are not performing nearly as well as girls in the area of literacy” (Hawkes 2001, 102). He cites the burial of the findings of the 1994 O’Doherty report and the silencing of a report by Cuttance as evidence of this parlous state of affairs. The O’Doherty report had identified boys’ achievement of “notably lower grades in English at both the School Certificate and Higher School Certificate” examinations (O’Doherty 1994, 32). Cuttance’s report, according to Hawkes, “showed just how well girls were doing relative to boys and feminists feared that releasing this report might lead to a moving of the focus from girls to boys” (Hawkes 2001, 13).

A significant feature of populist discussions of boys’ declining academic performance in literacy and English is a concern to establish causes, often construed in terms of assigning blame, and to propose solutions, often constructed as a counter to the “culprit” identified as the cause of blame. Moloney, for instance, suggests that the “widely reported reluctance to read” (Moloney 2000, 10) amongst Australian boys is not a natural but a learned phenomenon which he attributes to the dominance of women in the areas where reading behaviours are learned. He asserts that the teaching of literacy “has largely fallen to women—primary school teachers, teacher librarians . . . public librarians . . . mothers and secondary English teachers” (Moloney 2000, 174) and these people can therefore be seen as the culprits in the case. Biddulph has a pseudo logical argument that asserts both biological determinism and environment as contributing to the problem for boys. On the one hand, he locates the essential differences between boys and girls in biology and differential brain development, arguing that the cause of boys’ boisterousness is the hormone, “testosterone, [that] affects the psychology of males” (Biddulph 1997, 39). On the other hand, he lays the blame for the present plight of males firmly at the feet of feminists, arguing that it is feminism that has produced the disadvantage that boys now suffer. In his own words:

Feminism asks men to change, but it isn’t for men. If you are a man, you can admire and support strong women, you can fight the abuse and oppression of vulnerable women, but you can’t be a feminist because it isn’t a club for you. You’re still a lion with the vegetarians, and everyone knows it (Biddulph 1994, 22).

Biddulph suggests the solution to the problem of boys and schooling lies in “get[ting] more men into primary school teaching” and particularly into positions of power such as “principal or senior teacher” where they will be “[s]omething between a father-substitute and a god-substitute” (Biddulph
Hawkes also flirts with assigning blame for boys’ lack of success to both “the success of feminists in demanding that the needs of girls be met,” and the “growing dominance of the teaching profession by females” (Hawkes 2001, 28–29). He further nominates the “feminisation of the curriculum” as one of the “major suspects” in boys’ declining academic performance although his emphasis is on the ways in which (what he sees as) the “traditional” male subjects such as physics have been “feminised.” His trivialising argument is:

When a physics test loses its distinctive content and merely requires students to write an essay on the life and times of Sir Isaac Newton, one can be forgiven for wondering whether all subjects [my emphasis] are slowly evolving into an English exam. (Hawkes 2001, 28).

Apart from the spurious non-sequitur in this statement, there is a further false logic in attempting to construct the content of a school subject from a single isolated instance of a test question whose source is not identified.

While such interest in the “boy problem” is also evident in the scholarly literature, there tends to be a more measured approach to its examination there. Some researchers do argue a somewhat essentialist approach, as for instance, Lewis and Edmunds who assert that “in today’s schooling there are significant problems exclusive only to boys” who are the “new disadvantaged” (Lewis and Edmunds 1999, 1). Other researchers urge a more critical stance towards generalising males and their performance as a single entity. In their critical examination of the “boys at risk” claims, Kenway et al suggest that there is a need for “a more nuanced understanding of gender and risk in the context of widespread social change” (Kenway et al 1997, 1). Teese et al take a similar viewpoint. In their study of the “gender-segmented curriculum” (Teese et al 1995, 45) they note the “consistent under-performance of boys” in English, but suggest that factors such as “family origins and geographical location” (Teese et al 1995, v) are implicated in boys’ lower academic achievement. A recent study undertaken by Gibbs et al of male and female Higher School Certificate English examination performances suggests that girls do not, in fact, uniformly outperform boys in all areas of the subject English at the examination, but rather that girls do better in those examination questions that require the synthesis of information and ideas (Gibbs et al 2000).

Gilbert and Gilbert in their comprehensive examination of gender differences in school academic performance point to the difficulty of drawing simple conclusions from the research data, but “argue that English and mathematics still provide evidence that gender disadvantage works against both boys and girls—in different ways.” They conclude that gender disadvantage: is experienced differently, depending upon geographical location and social and cultural family resources. Some groups of boys are at serious risk of failure in English—as they are of failure in mathematics. (Gilbert and Gilbert 1998, 11).

Unlike the approach adopted by some of the populist writers, Gilbert
and Gilbert argue that solutions to the boy problem can be found, not by re-dressing the supposed imbalance created by feminism, but rather through an examination of the ways in which feminist approaches have informed the strategies for girls. In analysing the three staged approach adopted for girls education—“equity and access,” “the valuation of women’s knowledges and experiences” and “more broadly based understanding of gender and gender relations” education—they argue that, while males in general have had access to a curriculum constructed “predominantly from a narrow range of ways of defining and describing masculinity,” the problem for curriculum reform to benefit males now needs to be focused on how “gender and gender relations are constructed” not only in schools, and on how this construction leads to a “devaluation of English as a prestige subject for university entrance” and predisposes males “to reject and resist literacy and humanities subjects” (Gilbert and Gilbert 1998, 21, 23, 24).

“SORTING THE SHEEP FROM THE GOATS”

The Higher School Certificate (HSC) examination in New South Wales is the final measure of school academic achievement and provides a score that is used by universities as a measure for determining entrance to particular courses. The HSC examination, which replaced the Leaving Certificate examination, was instituted in the 1961 Education Act. This Act followed an extensive review of secondary education (see Wyndham 1957) and legislated a significant restructuring of NSW secondary schools, curricula, examinations and the educational bureaucracy.

A key feature of the restructured curricula was the introduction of differentiated curriculum structures. Prior to the 1961 Education Act, the subject English, like other subjects, was constructed with minimal curriculum differentiation. All students taking the Leaving Certificate examination studied the same English course at “Pass” level, with some students undertaking further additional study at “Honours” level. Differentiation of students was achieved not through different course levels but through examination results. Thus, the students who took the additional Honours section of the examination were graded as either Honours—First Class, or Honours—Second Class, while the students who took only the Pass section of the examination were graded either Pass—A, Pass—B, or Fail.

The English syllabuses produced after the Education Act 1961 introduced curriculum differentiation in the form of an hierarchical course structure: three levels of courses established within each subject syllabus. The curriculum differentiation, although not specified in the Act itself, was instituted by the newly formed Board of Senior School Studies which issued a specific instruction to its syllabus committees that all subject syllabuses be written in three levels based on the supposed results students might have achieved in the previous Leaving Certificate examination and the supposed post-school desti-
nations of the three groups of students: the First Level course was linked to a Leaving Certificate Honours grade and tertiary study in the subject itself; the Second Level course was linked to a Leaving Certificate A grade pass and possible tertiary study but not necessarily in that subject; and the Third Level course was linked to a Leaving Certificate B grade pass with no tertiary study. While repackaging of this three tiered structure occurred in subsequent years, with the levels being renamed as units (3 unit, 2 unit and 2 unit A) it was essentially a case of plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose (for further discussion of issues relating to curriculum differentiation in English syllabuses see, for instance, Michaels 2001; Brock 1984, 1987, 1996; McGaw 1996).

This basic three-tiered structure remained in situ for the duration of this HSC (1967–1999) although during the following three decades further (de facto) levels were also added to the hierarchy. Following the introduction of school based curriculum development in the 1970s additional courses in English were introduced as non-examinable HSC courses and these courses were generally considered as outside the mainstream of the subject English. They included the Other Approved Studies (OAS) courses—Mass Media Studies (1987) and Practical Writing Skills (1990)—and the two Supplementary English courses (1978 and 1994) which were largely introduced as remediation courses for those having difficulty with the mainstream English courses. These were all positioned at the bottom of the curriculum hierarchy. In 1988 an additional examinable course (2 unit Contemporary English) was inserted into the curriculum hierarchy being placed between the non-examinable and the other examinable courses, effectively constructing a five tiered curriculum hierarchy.

While the public rationale for these different course levels was to provide for the needs of different students, the ideology supporting such a curriculum structure that controls the differential distribution of knowledge to differently constituted groups of students is, as Crump points out, essentially conservative (Crump 1990). Young rightly argues that it ensures the “restriction of knowledge to particular groups” (Young 1971, 32). Connell argues that a differentiated curriculum constructs categories of students “broadly along social class lines” (Connell 2000, 160)—an issue highlighted by Willis’ study of working class “lads” (Willis 1977). While Saunders’ perspective is that “[i]f you sort the sheep from the goats, you are obliged to devise different kinds of curricula to accommodate the separated species” (Saunders 1976, 24), others point to the ideological work that is being carried out in such structures. In his study of English curriculum in Victoria, Reynolds demonstrates that through the differential distribution of discourse forms and the provision of differential access to the “markers of class” to differently constituted groups of students, the subject English “comes to mediate ideologically and socially the processes of class formation” (Reynolds 1996, 91).
While the differentiated English curriculum in NSW is similarly implicated in class formation, it is also arguably implicated in gender construction. McGaw highlights the “marked gender differentiation” in English course participation that has developed during the period of HSC implementation with the ratio of females to males in the top level course reaching “70:30,” and in the bottom level course “40:60” (McGaw 1996, 136). McGaw asserts that “males avoid the more difficult English courses to a much greater extent than do females” and he suggests that this avoidance is “influenced more by the impact of assessment and scaling practices than curriculum content” (McGaw 1996, 136, 134), although he does not indicate how he arrived at this conclusion from the data. One of the difficulties with McGaw’s assertion lies in the problematic question as to whether the content of the hierarchically constructed courses is divided simply on the basis of degrees of difficulty or on some other undisclosed principle. McGaw does not examine the curriculum content for evidence of degrees of difficulty or for gendered practices. This paper seeks to explore this area, not by examining claims for degrees of difficulty nor by exploring reasons that males give for their avoidance of the supposedly more difficult English courses, but rather by examining the ways in which the different levels of courses construct particular practices in relation to what might be understood as gendered practices in our society.

SPORT VERSUS LITERACY

The pop psychology notions of gender cited earlier are essentialising constructions of what Connell labels “a fantasy of the universal ‘deep masculine,’ which is as stereotyped as anything in Hollywood” (Connell 2000, 5). Connell argues the fallacy of such explanations that rely upon either a notion of biological determinism or sex role socialisation. He points to the notion of sex role as being underpinned by the idea of “patterns of social expectation, norms for the behaviour of men and women, which were transmitted to youth in a process of socialisation” (Connell 2000, 7). Connell conceptualises gender as a “way in which social practice is ordered” (Connell 1995, 71). In drawing on “the new social research” Connell suggests that “[d]ifferent cultures, and different periods of history, construct gender differently” and, moreover, that masculinities “are actively produced, using the resources and strategies available in a given setting” (Connell 2000, 10, 12).

This notion of gender as actively constructed in a given setting allows us to examine resources and strategies in particular settings, as for instance, particular fields of educational endeavour such as sport and English. Connell points to the cultural significance of “men’s sport” (Connell 2000, i) and Fitzclarence and Hickey note that sport is the “traditional guardian of masculinity” (Fitzclarence and Hickey 2000, 2). Wright argues that “for a boy to resist the values associated with team sports ... is not only to identify himself as a poor or problem student but brings into question his masculinity” (Wright
The subject English, by contrast, is culturally positioned as feminine. Connell cites Martino’s study where English classes were found to be “distanced by ... the lack of a set of rules and unique answers, and the contrast with activities defined as properly masculine, such as sport” (Connell 2000, 158). Martino’s report on interviews with secondary school students reveals the boys’ perceptions of the subject English as feminised since it is “not the way guys think” (Martino 1995, 354). Gilbert and Gilbert argue that “[c]lashes between literacy and masculinity” are exacerbated in later years of schooling when “discourses about literacy become more closely connected with those of literature” and that this complication arises from the technologies of the literature classroom that imbue the reading of literary texts with a “moral imperative” (Gilbert and Gilbert 1998, 210, 212). In Martino’s study the boys justify avoidance of English by claiming “most guys who like English are faggots” (Martino 1995, 354). Gilbert and Gilbert suggest that literary study is perceived as “unmasculine” since it is “in marked contrast to the discourses supported by and endorsed through male youth culture and boys’ sport and leisure practices” (Gilbert and Gilbert 1998, 213).

GENDERED CURRICULUM

Kenway points to the “gender lessons” learned in schools and notes that “boys learn that there are different ways of being male, some more valued and powerful than others, and that some subjects and situations are more suitable for ‘real boys’ than are others” (Kenway 2000, 160).

Connell’s pioneering work in masculinities, which identifies four ways of “being masculine” (“hegemony,” “subordination,” “complicity” and “marginalisation”), is particularly relevant to a critical examination of school curriculum documents. Connell’s point is not simply to categorise different types of masculinity, but to “recognise the relations between the different kinds of masculinity” (Connell 1995, 37). In this paper I have drawn upon two of these ways of “being masculine”—“hegemony” and “subordination” (Connell 1995, 76–81)—which Connell characterises as being in oppositional relations, in examining the relations between the top level HSC English course and the bottom level HSC English course(s). Connell defines hegemonic masculinity as “the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women” and describes subordinated masculinity as being both connected with “gay masculinity” and “blurred[ed] with femininity” (Connell 1995, 77, 79).

Kenway and Fitzclarences (1997) identify characteristics of hegemonic masculinity as including inter alia, “physical strength, . . . certainty, control, . . . self-reliance, individuality, competitiveness, instrumental skills, pub-
lic knowledge, discipline, reason, objectivity and rationality. The obverse of hegemonic masculinity—“compliance, service, subservience, self sacrifice and constant accommodating to the needs and desires of men”—they constitute as feminine (Kenway and Fitzclarence 1997, 121, 120). These gender constructions are particularly relevant to the constructions of subjectivity in the top and bottom levels of the HSC English syllabus documents.

NSW HSC ENGLISH CURRICULUM

Davies points out that gender is constructed through language and the language of curriculum documents provides a rich field for the exploration of gendered practices (Davies 1997). Ball suggests that educational sites such as curriculum documents are both subject to discourse and “centrally involved in the propagation and selective dissemination of discourses” (Ball 1990, 3), a point made earlier by Foucault who asserts that the discourses of documents “systematically form the objects of which they speak” and in the process “conceal their own invention” (Foucault 1981, 49). English curriculum (syllabus) documents constitute the players—the teacher, the student, the subject English, and the pedagogy—in discursive relations with one another. Such discursive relations can be uncovered using the method of content analysis that is based on systematic analysis of the documents using coding categories and data reduction processes.

In this paper, I draw on data from the content analysis of NSW HSC English syllabus documents that informed my PhD research. That project involved a content analysis of all senior English syllabus documents from 1953 to 1994 using three broad coding categories—“epistemology,” “pedagogy” and “ontologies.” The first two categories enabled a systematic examination of the ways in which the subject English was constituted in each of the documents, and the approach to teaching and learning advocated in each constitution of the subject. The third category allowed for an examination of the ways in which a subjectivity was constituted for the teacher and the learner, as well as for examining the way the legitimacy and authority of each syllabus document itself was constructed within the discourse of the document.

I also draw upon data for each of these coding categories from courses at either ends of the differentiated curriculum hierarchy in order to make comparisons about the ways in which the subject and its pedagogy construct particular subjectivities for the students in those courses. To do so I examine the top level mainstream course (1965, 1974, 1976, 1982) that was examined at the HSC and the bottom level mainstream course(s) (1965, 1974, 1976, 1982, 1988) also examined at the HSC, as well as the non-mainstream Other Approved Studies (OAS) courses (1987 and 1990) which were not examined and which were positioned further below the mainstream courses on the curriculum ladder in order to explore gendered practices embedded in the discourses of the documents.
TOP LEVEL ENGLISH COURSE

The top level course between 1965 and 1999, variously titled “First Level” and “3 Unit English” defines the subject English as the study of English literature (the study of language was included only from 1965 to 1976) with a particularly narrow definition of literature that places a high value on canonical and imaginative works in the three written genres of poetry, novel and drama. The syllabus documents identify the caliber of author who might be studied—Chaucer, Shakespeare, Austen and Hardy.

In this study of English literature the emphasis is placed upon the reified individual text which is conceived of as having “qualities” that contribute to the totality of the text’s meaning, expressed in phrases such as “evidence of the text itself” and “what the text actually says.” The study of the individual text is undertaken in isolation from context. The syllabus stresses that the text is to be taken as “a meaningful whole” without reference to author, to conventions of genre or to the reader’s subjective response. The syllabus documents specifically warn against student responses that are “too subjective or too ingenious, too superficial or too rhapsodical.”

The emphasis on English literature allows for some study of “general prose” (media or non-fictional texts) which is constituted as Other (“non-fiction,” “non-literary” or “other material”). Significantly it is identified as “material outside the literary texts” and its study is justified in terms of a need to critically examine the way in which language is “deployed” in such material, by comparison with the way in which language is “employed” in literary texts and is, therefore, able to be “appreciated.” In other words, the syllabus makes clear its valuing of English canonical literature and literary language over the communication of ideas and information in forms other than the literary.

A single pedagogical technology—“the discussion method”—involving the individual private reading of the text, classroom discussion, followed by the writing of the essay, is stipulated. Classroom discussion is constructed as an adversarial activity in which the teacher poses questions using the model questions provided in the syllabus documents and students justify and defend their answers against the authority of the “text itself.” The discussion method is highly valorised as having the capacity to “correct and develop” inaccurate or inappropriate responses.

The teacher is largely invisible in the discursive practices constructed in the syllabus. The word “teacher” seldom appears, and rarely as actor or agent in sentences that describe classroom activities. For instance, The student should be encouraged to see how vacuous is an approach that prevents him from experiencing a work of art and trying to define what he makes of it, and that offers him no way of distinguishing between a trivial work, however ‘effective,’ however successful in do-
ing what the author ‘intended’ and one meaningful in its capacity to enlarge and vivify his experience.

The learners in this conception of English (literature) are constructed as readers of fiction of “substance and quality” who have “a sense of English literature in its historical perspective” with “a particular interest in modern poetry or the eighteenth century novel.” These learners have personal and moral qualities that can be shaped into “perceptive” and “thoughtful” responses to literature. They are malleable and morally upright and able to resist a raft of temptations, as for instance,

. . . students may be tempted to substitute ‘information’ for thoughtful, individual response. They may be tempted to collect information about poets and their ‘periods,’ about the characteristics of genres (eg satire, dramatic monologue) or about the general nature of (say) the metaphysical conceit. Or they may be tempted simply to catalogue the devices that a poem may employ—its rhyme scheme or stanza form, its use of alliteration or enjambment. Students may be tempted, finally, to go to the ‘critics’ in order to learn, and then repeat, what they take ‘the accepted view’ of a poem or poet to be. Biographical, descriptive, and critical information is often, of course, illuminating and valuable, and it may guide or support a personal response: but such information is not acceptable as a substitute for personal response.

BOTTOM LEVEL ENGLISH COURSE(S)

In examining the construction of subjectivity in courses at the lower end of the curriculum hierarchy it is necessary to distinguish the bottom level mainstream examinable courses and the bottom level non-mainstream non-examinable courses that were introduced from 1978 onwards. In both cases there is a different conception of the subject English from the top level course and a differently constituted subjectivity for students in this course.

In the bottom level mainstream examinable course (1965–1976), variously titled “Third Level” and “2 unit A English,” the construction of the subject English is based on a tripartite division of components—“Expression,” “Comprehension” and “Reading” (literature). The conception of literature is broader than in the top level course and includes contemporary works with “ready appeal” for students. Australian works are particularly mentioned as appropriate for study. The kind of close reading stipulated for the top level course is not required in this course—simply “thoughtful general interpretation” of the texts is suggested.

The Comprehension and Expression sections of this syllabus allow some emphasis to be given to the teaching of language (both spoken and written) although more emphasis is to be given to written than spoken language. The syllabus makes provision for the explicit instruction in aspects of language such as “sentence structure, punctuation, paragraphing” and “vocabulary-building” to improve skills in written expression. Ultimately,
however, the purpose of studying spoken or written language in this section of the course is related to ensuring the more effective study of literature. The syllabus makes this clear in statements such as “awareness of the qualities of spoken English is also necessary for the appreciation of poetry and drama, and of the dialogue of novels and short stories.”

The revised version of this bottom level course in 1982—titled “2 unit General English”—foregrounds the study of literature, although it continues and extends the emphasis on contemporary literature, Australian works and literature translated into English, while also giving some place to non-literary material. Oral language and instruction in aspects of language is identified as necessary, although grammar is only to be taught at the point of need. Writing is constituted as involving a process (from drafting to publication) with personal and imaginative writing encouraged.

The pedagogical technology is broader than in the upper level course and makes provision for practical activities and direct instruction, although the main approach remains the discussion method—albeit transformed into “free discussion” of issues in the texts rather than the emphasis on the close study of the text required in the top level course. The teacher is entreated to plan a course designed to appeal to the students’ “natural interests.” Teacher intervention is permitted when it is clear that students have “failed to perceive something important about the work.” The students are constituted as unlikely to read beyond the set works and more likely to be interested in “non-fictional” works. They are represented as lacking the capacity to read “good literature” “attentively” since their “natural interests” are focused on contemporary non-literary contexts. They lack (perhaps inherently) language competence and essay writing skills, and there is almost a sense in which this will not be able to be completely remedied—with a hint of something akin to biological determinism.

In 1988 the 2 unit Contemporary English syllabus was inserted into the curriculum ladder below the 2 unit General English course creating a fourth level in the hierarchy. This syllabus introduced a different conception of the subject English based on a broad concept of language as enhancing personal development, social participation, access to contemporary culture, and learning. The study of literature (simply one of a number of language contexts) is imbued with a social and cultural purpose—rather than a moral one. A participatory pedagogy constructs the teacher as guide and coach. Emphasis is placed on a variety of experiential activities and interactive approaches involving group or team collaborations. Although the students are constructed as deficient in language they are seen as active participants in the learning situation.

The two OAS courses Mass Media Studies (1987) and Practical Writing Skills (1990) were developed outside the examinable curriculum structure and were, therefore, positioned below the fourth rung of the curriculum ladder. Despite their titles not containing the word English, they are positioned
within the confines of the English Key Learning Area and their content includes aspects that are unarguably concerned with the study of the subject English in a broader communications context.

These syllabuses position their version of English both within a communications framework and with a vocational perspective. Both emphasise the expressive mode, the creative process, breadth of fictional and non-fictional forms, non-print and non-verbal signifying systems, and communications technologies. Both suggest that students learn not only about the products or texts that are constructed and deconstructed, but also about related industry contexts (eg publishing, broadcasting) and their relationships with societies and cultures. A broad approach to pedagogy is encouraged. Practical activities—individual and group collaborations, in simulated and real-world situations—are emphasised. The teacher/learner relationship is constituted as coach and team-player.

DISCUSSION

This data reveals different constructions of the subject English in the two course levels. These differences are manifested in the construction of content and pedagogy and in the constitution of teacher and learner. One way of conceptualising this difference is along class lines. Thus, for instance, the top level course features the markers of “high culture” in its emphasis on canonical literature, discussion method focused on moral and aesthetic considerations, and the production of a literate response shaped by the prevailing ideology. By contrast, the bottom level courses (particularly the OAS courses) feature “mass or popular culture” products and technologies and an active, participatory engagement with their construction and deconstruction. It can be argued that they do indeed separate the “sheep” from the “goats.”

That is not, however, the end of the story. Inscribed in these two different course levels are differently gendered subject positions for both teacher and learner. The top level course, with its discussion method pedagogy constitutes the teacher in an almost invisible subservient role that serves the canonical text (interestingly, itself a marker of patriarchy). The learner is not only expected to be compliant with the meaning of the text as a whole, but is asked to be self-sacrificing of non-conforming personal reactions, and accommodating to the needs and desires of the text’s authority. The top level course, therefore, constitutes a subjectivity for teacher and learner that is essentially feminine, or in Connell’s terms, a subordinated masculinity. This constitution of a subordinated masculinity that is associated with homosexuality and femininity goes some way to explaining perceptions of boys who do succeed in English as “faggots.”

The contrast with the bottom level course(s) could not be more vivid. Here, the pedagogy resonates with practical and instrumental activity that focuses on public knowledge, gives control to the learners, and encourages self-
reliance, rationality and objectivity. The teacher is not only visible, but establishes a collaborative relationship with the students, which resembles the coach of a sports team. There is active encouragement for group or team work that steers students into “real world” contexts. These elements are particularly pronounced in the documents from 1987 to 1994—in other words in those documents which represent the very lowest rungs (four and five) of the curriculum hierarchy. The constitution of the subject position for teacher and learner in the bottom level course is not as clear cut as the top level course. This is, in part, a result of the changes in subsequent revisions of the mainstream document and the complication of the additional non-mainstream courses that were inserted into the curriculum hierarchy between 1978 and 1994. Nevertheless, taken as a whole, it is possible to argue that the constitution of teacher and student shares significant features of hegemonic masculinity as identified by Kenway and Fitzclarence, in particular, such aspects as public knowledge, control, self-reliance, discipline, and rationality.

This situation presents something of a conundrum. The differentiated curriculum structure is a patriarchal tool that establishes a hierarchy to allow the most highly valued knowledges to be positioned at the peak and the least valued at the base. The legitimating of patriarchy requires, as Connell suggests, a guaranteeing of the dominant position of men and the subordination of women. In this case, however, the particular discourse of the subject English in the top level and bottom level courses intersects with the hegemonic construction of curriculum. The top level course inscribes a feminine or subordinated masculinity and the bottom level course inscribes a hegemonic masculinity. This paradoxical inversion might go some way to explaining the differentiated gender patterns in the top and bottom courses as identified by McGaw, the feminising of English teaching, and any concomitant expulsion of boys taking the top course from the “circle of legitimacy” (Connell 1995, 79).

The progressive movement by males away from the top level course over the period of HSC implementation can also be accounted for in the present data. The inscription of a hegemonic masculinity in the bottom level mainstream course became more entrenched in each of the revisions from 1965 to 1988 with a particular strengthening in the 1988 syllabus which was positioned on the fourth rung of the ladder, and in the non-mainstream OAS courses which were positioned on the fifth rung of the ladder. On the other hand, there was a tightening of the feminised constitution of the subject in the top level course, with the removal of the study of language in 1976 and the progressive Othering of non-canonical and non-fictional texts. This progressive movement in the syllabus constructions of the subject English mirrors, but in reverse, the changed participation pattern along gender lines. That is to say, as the top level course narrowed and became more closely allied with submissive, feminine gender practices, and the bottom level course(s) broadened and became more closely linked with hegemonic masculinity practices,
the gendered patterns of enrolment in the mainstream courses altered, with more boys opting for what McGaw insists on calling the “less demanding course.”

This study suggests, that it is not so much the level of “demandingness” of the course that may be a significant factor in the different gender participation ratios of the courses, but rather that the social and educational practices inscribed in the upper level course are feminised, while the social and educational practices inscribed in the bottom level course are more closely aligned with hegemonic masculinity, and therefore more closely aligned with the gendered practices boys encounter in other areas of education, particularly sport. Boys’ willing participation in the lower level course may indeed be influenced by the hegemonic masculinity that is constituted in its educational practices. On the other hand, girls’ more willing participation in the upper level course may also be influenced by its feminised educational practices.

CONCLUSIONS

An obvious question follows from this analysis and discussion: does it matter that the top level course is so constructed that it allows girls to outperform boys in the subject English taken as a whole? An easy answer might applaud the opportunity for girls to dominate in some aspect of schooling. However, this does not take into account some more problematic consequences. It is, in the first place, of questionable value that girls might be able to dominate in an area that is devalued in terms of masculine perceptions of scholastic achievement. Since the scope of the top level course is narrowly focused on the private experience of English canonical literature, those taking it are effectively denied access to other broader areas of public knowledge. On the other hand the bottom level courses, while providing students with access to a broad range of communications opportunities effectively excludes English canonical literature from the repertoire. Thus, the knowledges that males and females acquire in the differentiated English courses are separated by a high culture/mass culture divide, complicated by different gendered practices.

A further complication arises from the fact that English is the only subject in the school curriculum that is compulsory at all levels. It is, effectively, the subject in which students acquire the oracy and literacy skills that are essential to success in other areas of the curriculum. The centrality of English to success in education is, therefore, readily established, although it might be possible to argue, as Gilbert and Gilbert do, that success in life depends upon more than effective literacy levels.

A consequence of girls’ dominance in the subject that also needs to be taken into account is the ways in which media and populist commentators have begun to use this situation to argue a case (albeit unreasonable, yet popularly persuasive) against feminism itself. Should this case gather mo-
mentum in the wider arena, the gains that have been made in girls’ education could be whittled away without the opportunity to establish similar gains for boys in education. While this in itself should not be a case for altering the curriculum, taken in conjunction with the other considerations outlined above, it fuels the case for change.

A SPECULATIVE GLANCE TO THE FUTURE

English curriculum change has, in fact, occurred with the introduction of the new HSC in 1999 following the McGaw Review. Since part of the concern identified by McGaw in his review was males’ avoidance of the more difficult English courses, it is instructive to glance briefly in that direction by way of conclusion to this paper. In the newly constituted HSC, English not only remains the only mandatory subject for study in the HSC but the mark gained for 2 units of study in English is included in the University Admission Index (previously only the mark for 1 unit “counted”) giving the subject a different kind of extrinsic value for students seeking a university education. This change appears to be a solution to the problem as identified by McGaw, viz, that if boys avoid the upper level course for scaling reasons, the solution lies in changing the scaling requirements.

The 1999 English stage 6 syllabus introduces significant changes to aspects of the subject English while maintaining the five tiered structure of the previous differentiated curriculum. In all levels there has been a reconceptualisation of the subject English itself, positioning the subject in a semiotic/cultural studies framework. This introduces into the subject many of the conceptual areas that were previously situated in the lower level courses—as, for instance, the notion of context and film, media and multimedia texts. There is a need for close analysis of the ways in which this reconceptualisation of the subject has been distributed in the different courses. An initial glance suggests that while the same view of English informs all courses, the differentiation of material in courses in terms of level of difficulty still incorporates some of the notions of the high culture/popular culture divide of the previous syllabuses. This means that knowledge is differentially distributed to the differently constituted groups of students. Thus, for instance, in the Advanced course there is a requirement to study Shakespearean drama but this is not required in the lower courses. Detailed analysis of the syllabuses will reveal the patterns of distribution of knowledge and its significance both in terms of class and gender.

The syllabus explicitly describes the intended candidatures for each of the courses and implicitly constitutes the subjectivity of these students. The lower level courses, for instance, identify aspects such as “personal, social and vocational” uses of English, with the lowest level explicitly identifying students as needing assistance with literacy, while the upper level course identifies students as “engaging with complex levels of conceptualization”
and working in “independent ways.” Further analysis is needed to examine the constitution of subjectivities for teachers and students in the various course levels.

WORKS CITED

Board of Secondary Education NSW. 1988. English 2 unit contemporary years 11–12 syllabus.
Board of Senior School Studies NSW. 1965. English syllabus forms V and VI.
———. 1974. English syllabus forms V and VI.
Board of Studies NSW. 1990. Practical writing skills OAS course.


Press.
