Caught in a storm…

Presented at the Conference of English teachers

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Preamble

This presentation seeks to start a conversation, spark a debate, identify and address the *storm* in which English teachers find themselves, and suggest a possible way-forward. The presentation is intended to serve as a catalyst for the present and the future engagement with what the English curriculum should address.

The storm

The online Oxford dictionary defines a storm as a violent disturbance of the atmosphere with strong winds and usually rain, thunder, lightning, or snow. The raging storm often displaces items and things, causes destruction, and leaves the setting in disarray. For someone caught in the storm, there are three options available:

- You raise your arms helplessly and surrender, and wait for the death blow; or
- You run blindly, and hope to outrun the monster; or
- You keep walking, working your way through the debris, searching for the light beyond the storm.

The first two options are easier and provide no hope of seeing the end of the traveler's journey. The travelers in the two options abandon their journey in the face of adversity. As Charles Kettering states, 'No one would have crossed the ocean if he could have gotten off the ship in the storm.' The travelers cited have thus failed to cross the ocean for they have jumped ship.

The third option portrays a character who perseveres, who rides the storm until the storm is behind them. This is a character who lives up to Ho Chi Minh's teaching that 'the storm is a good opportunity for the pine and the cypress to show their strength and their stability.' Like reeds, they bend with the wind, but, in resilience, stand upright when the wind stops blowing. They do not allow anything to stand in their way, or if any, grit their teeth and wade through until they see the sun.

The question could be, what storms does the English teacher face, and which of the three characters should the English assume?

The storm in teaching English – surely not a storm in a tea cup ☺

South Africa, like many of the developing countries, is immersed and participates in various discourses which seek to design a curriculum that produces global citizens. Currently, most engagements seek to position the curriculum to be relevant, to speak to the current and future needs of the country. The engagements seek to go beyond the local needs, but to also produce learners who can make their mark and compete globally, thus making a contribution to global input and development. The current discourses in SA include the following, among others:

- The relevance of the English curriculum in the society
- The focus of the English curriculum
    - Assessment versus knowledge
- Repositioning the curriculum
    - The Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR)

- o Skills for the 21st Century
- o Decolonising the curriculum
- Which English do we teach?

The aspects cited create a storm for the English teacher in that the discourse, which appear urgent, precedes the reality in schools. When critics and studies conducted question the relevance of some aspects of the English curriculum, what is expected of the English teacher who has to teach the curriculum? The English teacher cannot deviate from the curriculum and teach what they (the teacher) deem relevant, or what the studies portray as a need. This quagmire leaves the teacher in limbo, caught in a storm. The solution, most of the time, is to plod on and follow instructions even though they (instructions) are deemed irrelevant.

Adding to the storm is the assessment/content dichotomy. Do we teach knowledge for use beyond the four walls of the classroom, or do we teach for assessment? For example, how many of the texts listed on page 28 of the CAPS do we teach or use in our classes? Are we not limiting the learners' exposure to the texts that are frequently assessed in the formal examinations? Of the texts taught, how many of them are relevant for use beyond the classroom? Can our learners identify those texts when they encounter them in their communities? If not, then the curriculum is truly irrelevant and is far from producing the envisaged learner articulated in Section 1 of the CAPS. Also, learners' inability to identify the texts while they did well in such during assessment is a further indictment on both the curriculum and ourselves, as we shall have taught our learners how to respond to the examination, and not how to employ the knowledge acquired to make a contribution to possible solutions as global citizens.

Further contributors to the storm, as cited above, are the advent of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, the Skills of the 21st Century, and, decolonising the curriculum, among others.

According to Avi Ganon, CEO and Director General, *World ORT,

> The fourth industrial revolution presents a set of challenges that educators need to address in order to continue delivering a relevant education to the today's students…

> In the current environment, the educational tools, techniques and curriculum that we have been using for decades may no longer be fit for purpose. Students need to understand the technologies and their potential disruptions to future job markets, recruitment and work.

What Ganon is calling for is a reflection. We need to look each other in the eye and honestly ask each other if what we are teaching, and how we are teaching such will enable our learners to meet the academic requirements or possess skills that will make them fit into the world of work. Ganon challenges us to look into our curriculum, critique and provide corrective measures ourselves. We can't wait for the outside world to tell us our curriculum is irrelevant. Or is it? If it is, we should be able to say so ourselves. If we fail, the world will harshly throw it in our face.

World ORT is the world's largest Jewish education and vocational training non-governmental organisation.

The advent of the 4IR is discussed in every nook and cranny. The question is, has the new dawn received attention, at least, in the English classroom? What are the implications for our practice and methodology? How should we redesign the English class such that it is 4IR-compliant? The worst case scenario is, will there be a need for English in the 4IR dispensation?

Of course, no one should expect these questions from me. Actually, I should be providing direction as to how we should *even greet to* demonstrate our compliance to the 4IR. Sadly, we have not started walking the talk. As noted by the ORT, "…in all but the highest-scoring countries, little has been done to prepare future workers through school curricula or, just as importantly, teacher training. At the same time, some experts warn that a focus on soft skills would be a distraction in countries where basic education is still not up to scratch." Sadly, we also fall in that category in which the concept is on the public space, but no infrastructure in place

This conference should provide a platform in which we sponsor suggestions on how we should bell this 4IR cat. According to the ORT, '…educators have a responsibility to prepare our students, providing them not only with the knowledge and understanding of the technologies, but also the skills to make the right career decisions and thrive at work.' For us to succeed in helping our learners, we need to be schooled, or school ourselves in the way of the 4IR. We should, as a PLC, use gatherings like this to build a position, take a stance and sponsor our position as a base, a starting bloc from which our race begins.

The next point under scrutiny is the Skills of the 21st Century. According to the Applied Educational Systems (AES), 21st Century skill is divided into one of three categories, namely**, learning skills, literacy skills and life-skills**. These skills are meant to assist learners to keep up with fast pace of the modern market. The following info-graphic provides an outline of the skills embedded in each of the categories:

As may be observed in the above info-graphic, the Learning skills comprise the four Cs, namely, critical thinking, creativity, collaboration and communication. These compare favourably to what Section 1 of the CAPS, English Home Language (1.3d, p5) states of the envisaged learner. According to the policy, the envisaged learner should be able to:

- identify and solve problems and make decisions using critical and creative thinking;
- work effectively as individuals and with others as members of a team;
- organise and manage themselves and their activities responsibly and effectively;
- collect, analyse, organise and critically evaluate information;
- communicate effectively using visual, symbolic and/or language skills in various modes;
- use science and technology effectively and critically showing responsibility towards the environment and the health of others; and
- demonstrate an understanding of the world as a set of related systems by recognising that problem solving contexts do not exist in isolation.

This comparison is brought up so that we all realise that the need to provide learners with the skills for the 21st Century Skills has always been there. Unfortunately, with the skewed balance between developing skills (and providing college knowledge) and assessment, we tend to focus on the latter, thus producing learners who can pass the examinations and all assessment activities but not able to consciously apply the skills and content acquired. Is that another thunderstorm we have identified?

The other point we may want to ponder on is for us to produce global citizens. One of the principles on which the CAPS is founded (1.3c, p5), **Credibility, quality and efficiency**, states that we should provide an education that is comparable in quality, breadth and depth to those of other countries. In other words, our education system should produce learners who not only function locally, but also take their place as global citizens and contributors of solutions for the global challenges.

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), whose mission is to promote policies that will improve the economic and social well-being of people around the world, identify the following as the key traits of globally competent learners:
- They investigate the world beyond their immediate environment by examining issues of local, global and cultural significance;
- They recognise, understand and appreciate the perspectives and world views of others'
- They communicate ideas effectively with diverse audiences by engaging in open, appropriate and effective interactions across cultures; and
- They take action for collective well-being and sustainable development both locally and globally

The visual presentation of global competence stands as follows:

The cited traits are similar to what the CAPS envisages of our learners. Our learners should be the citizens of the world, able to stamp their authority among their international peers. Rather than always bring the rear as with other international tests, e.g. Pirls, our learners should imitate and emulate the likes of Elon Musk, Trevor Noah and others. In pursuing global excellence, they must also be provided with a forum from which to flourish, in our classrooms, right here at home.

If we know the foregoing, and the world repeats what we have already documented, why are we not leading? Why are our learners only mentioned in jest, when citing an example of poor performance? *The fault dear Brutus, lies not in our stars, but in ourselves that we are underlings.* The many challenges that pervaded our resolve to do what is right veered us in the wrong direction. The challenges are so enormous that the easier option is just to keep to our comfort zone, the zone prescribed for us. In so doing, we go against the teachings of Vincent van Gogh, who states that '[T]the fishermen know that the sea is dangerous and the storm terrible, but they have never found these dangers sufficient reason for remaining ashore.' By not addressing the realities that we and our learners face, realities in which we refuse use of technology in the classroom when our learners are techno-savvy, is confirmation of how irrelevant we have grown to be in our classes. We do not even venture to talk about whether technology can and should be used (leaving the shore). Instead, we choose to do what we know best, teach for examinations.

So where to?

As indicated at the beginning, this presentation was intended to reflect our predicament (storm) as teachers. Furthermore, the presentation also dug us in the ribs, indicating how we look away at any sign of the storm. For example, how have we, as the PLC, engaged with the aspects cited? What suggestions do we put forward as contribution to the discourse?

The time to take the first step is not now but yesterday. We need to take the bull by its horns. When caught up in a storm, we must keep moving, ride the storm until we have crossed the sea.

A few suggestions to get us started:

- As a PLC, we need to start after the conference to identify the elements of the storm – SWOT analysis. We need to cite those issues that are valid and make suggestion. We need to discard those that rein us in, and learn anew how to realize what section 1 requires of us. We not only need to learn, but we must also be prepared to unlearn and relearn (Alvin Toffler)
- We need to compile our response to the elements cited. This response, our position, should provide a working document for future discussions. The issue here is for us to initiate the discussion (bottom up) rather than wait anxiously for the new set of instructions.
- Technology in language teaching. What is our view on the use of technology in the language classroom? Which gadgets can we use effectively in our language lessons?
- Reflection. Are we up to the task? What is, and what are the implications for the 4IR? Are we competent enough to mediate *the 4IR* in our classrooms? What are we doing about it? We need to draw a shopping list of our inadequacies with regards to the direction of the discourses and ask for help.
- Assessment versus knowledge acquisition and application. Do our assessment tasks reflect the world for which we are preparing our learners? If No, what are we doing about it? Are we drilling learners to *comment critically* only so that they can do well in the examinations? In line with removing the box, instead of thinking out of the box, we must 'break the walls of the classroom' and enable learners to use the language effectively beyond the walls of the classroom.
- Global citizens. If it is our responsibility to produce global learners, are we global citizens ourselves? You have to be one so that you can produce the other.

What has been presented here barely scratches the surface on how to learn to ride a storm. This presentation is a clarion call for English teachers to learn to ride the storm, to soldier on in an endeavour to conquer the storm. Whenever doubt creeps in because of conflicting expectations, we should take to the words of Charles Caleb Colton who posits that 'Times of great calamity and confusion have been productive for the greatest minds. The purest ore is produced from the hottest furnace. The brightest thunder-bolt is elicited from the darkest storm.'

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