

The essential English lesson for today

HoD English Chris Waugh opens the classroom door on the student experience.

Shakespeare had it right when the young Hamlet reminded us all that our world is full of surprise, wonder, and possibility. The College Department of English and Media Studies has held this sentiment close to its heart in its innovative programme redesign.

A quick survey of the classrooms of the top floor of the Miles Warren Building – the home of English and Media Studies – reveals a striking array of learning experiences. One class might be analysing Alfred Hitchcock’s cinematographic rules in preparation for the making of its own short film while another is interrogating the use of adjectival phrases to propel more vivid description in travel writing. Boys are reckoning with the nature of time in the postmodernist classic *Slaughterhouse-Five* yet simultaneously others are putting the finishing touches on their investigative journalism audio packages ready for their live-stream air date.

The sheer breadth of the College boys’ learning experiences would

make your head spin if it were not for one thing. Underpinning everything, the teaching team has established a solid foundation of essential learning. Informed by robust educational evidence, every English programme is driven by explicit instruction of grammar in writing, structured reading practices, and an insistence on classrooms that promote social construction in learning.

Such is the department’s reputation for its commitment to these research-informed practices that more than 100 teachers of English from around New Zealand attended the conference it held to share, test, and explore its way of working last May.

Grammar, even the word, has been known to strike fear into the hearts of many a hardy soul. College boys are not daunted by this at all. In fact, when delivered in a rich context, and when the teaching is confident and structured, College boys are learning to recruit their knowledge of the structure of our language to drive outstanding writing in a wide variety of contexts. Year 9 boys are learning how to craft sentences in the imperative voice in order to issue exhortations in their epistolary

writing. College Diploma students are examining the subtle value of the appositive phrase in their descriptive writing or identifying how using enjambment in their dramatic monologues helps to bring nuance to their rhyme. NCEA students are learning to write in a stunning array of genres and forms for their writing portfolios – every new piece allows them to exercise their fluency in grammar and structure to embody the conventions of each text – even to the extent that the students are taught how to express their own vernacular in correct grammatical forms. The boys defy all expectations on the subject of grammar. To them, grammar is fun – and they love the power this knowledge gives them.

Christ’s College boys write and Christ’s College boys read. Our outstanding librarian can match even the most reluctant boy with a book, and the Department of English discusses independent reading one-to-one with every boy. Where the boys’ independent reading choices are largely left to their discretion, classroom reading is a very different story.

The written texts we read in class are all selected to challenge and



quality. Some very impressive investigative pieces have come about after a boy has secured an interview with a credulous international sportsperson, CEO or national politician only to show up with the same interviewing skill set and technical kit that mainstream journalists employ.

This authenticity is a key principle of the College Department

inspire. Reading is guided by teachers and the processes of reading are made explicit. There is a close match built between the genres of text the students read, and the texts they write, making their reading a powerful source of knowledge and inspiration for all their writing.

The picture that forms in the boys' minds is that everything in English is inter-related. Every skill learnt, every piece of knowledge acquired will be recruited to further use in the future. The wisdom of the department sits behind this, ensuring that each convention of language and literature leads on to the next, creating a seamless progression.

Such a structure and precise approach to the core learning has created a real freedom of context. Again informed by established knowledge in effective learning, the College journalism programme is woven into English through the newsroom and Media

Studies courses. All students are exposed to the culture and conventions of journalism and through engaging in their own investigative journalism projects can enact the ethos, precision, and rigour of a journalistic professional. Boys visit the Christchurch District Court and report on the cases they observe there. They interrogate local and national issues, and all their work is published via the department live-stream. The quality of their work is so strong that much of what they produce is then selected for broadcast on local radio station Plains FM.

With the support of a substantial grant from the Acland Foundation, boys involved in any year of the five-year journalism programme have access to state-of-the-art audio production equipment to ensure the work they produce meets professional standards – not just in the sophistication of the content, but in production

of English's work. If a student is to write a biography, then it will be a biography of an important person in their life. Their creative writing is drawn from their personal experience and explores themes of importance to them. Boys choose their own journalism inquiries, their own documentary subjects, and they speak their own minds.

This vivid attention to the present moment, the real-world context that the boys' learning is situated in and the unrelenting focus on the advanced skills of reading and writing are bringing success to College English scholars and equipping them to enter the world with the assurance and imagination to embrace everything of this magnificent world that Shakespeare so powerfully evokes.