



RAISE YOUR HAND TO STEM

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“Raise your hand if you think these lines are equal?”

Two Year 12 students walk into my English class, sit at their seats and find themselves unwitting participants in a little social experiment. Unbeknownst to them, before their entry, I have prepped their classmates to raise their hands in a prescribed response to viewing a set of PowerPoint slides. Each slide displays two lines. The first couple of slides are optical illusions, and the lines are equal. The third is not an optical illusion, but the lines are clearly unequal.

The test is age-old: will the two late entries follow the mass?

As the slides pass, I ask my English class which line is longer. They shake their heads demurely, acting as though they have seen these images before. I play along, and defeatedly ask them to raise their hands if they think the lines are equal. Image after image all students (including the two unknowing guinea pigs) raise their hands cockily.

Yes, the images may be optical illusions, but the lines are equal.

Then comes the third slide. Two obviously *unequal* lines scream forth their difference. The prepped class follows the script, almost belittling me that I waste their time in this way. “Of course, they are equal,” some say, feigning boredom as they do so. I ask the class, “Raise your hand if you think these lines are equal?” The class raise their hands.

And the two latecomers reluctantly do likewise.

Why do we act with the masses? It’s not solipsism – Orwell contends through the 1984 character O’Brien – “*Collective solipsism, if you like.*” The difference between 1984 and real-life is my students were prepped to believe. Orwell, on the other hand, constructs his characters as true believers. The aim is to create a true believer out of the representative skeptic, Winston. When we apply such doctrine to education, I speculate

how much teachers are being asked to raise their collective solipsistic hands to the truths being placed before their eyes?

The push in education now is STEM. Whilst the notion underlying it revolves around collaboration and working in a hands-on way to solve real world problems, in the schooling context the equation seems to posit itself far more neatly: Maths. Science.

Namely: we need more of it.

And in this drive for a STEM-orientated education system, teachers of all disciplines are quickly being prepped to look at a series of disparate lines and say they are equal. As public discourse holds fast to this equality, it seems to me an implicit devaluing of English, a diminishing of Humanities, and a deriding of the Arts is emerging. Cynics will argue it is concerted, others pragmatic. In a long list of subjects, something has to give, even if they are all equal. But to quote Orwell again, “*Some are more equal than others.*” It’s easy to point fingers. In some respect, all educators are responsible for this collective solipsism. Though not coaxed upon threat of flesh-eating rats, teachers tacitly acquiesce when they accept guidance that points the supposedly ‘smart students’ down the scientific path without considering the multitude. So I say again, are we then not all believers? After all, Maths is the *hard* subject; Science is how to get a *better* OP; Specialist Mathematics and Physics will certainly be *scaled* higher in ATAR, right?

Whilst English’s compulsory status sees it largely safe from the fires of the ‘heaped obsolete’, it is difficult for your average English teacher to complain. But the reality that is presenting itself in classrooms across Queensland is a disenchanting youth body that sees English as something you must do, but really don’t need to value. And so, as English teachers we are faced with an increasingly obstinate and entitlement-

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hued line of questioning, “Why do we need to learn this?”

Why indeed?

What is often so damaging in popular commentary about the value of English is what is iterated in the oversimplification of its design. Simply, schools will answer English is important because it gets students to read and write. What is missing in this generality is that reading and writing are beyond syntax. *Reading* is not just reading. *Writing* is not just writing. Understanding the viscus between is the place English takes shape. Both the current and new ATAR English, Literature and even Essential syllabi are about reading beyond text. Yes, students are reading for comprehension and understanding of what is (*structures*); but the heart of English is how it is (*technique and aesthetics*), why it is (*purpose*), and how and why it is what it is to the reader (*positioning*).

Students are one Matrix-like Neo plug away from permanent connection to the world. Every time they glance down at their digital appendage, they are asked to read without being literate. Soon after, they are encouraged to communicate without knowing how to express 🍷.

An exercise in *doublethink*.

In essence, the “children” we teach are forced to make adult decisions. And the scary thing is they don’t even know they are making them. Students *Like* something because it feels good or – better yet – celebrity endorsed. Social change is the result. As educators, we are no more able to make sense of this conundrum nor explain its impact on thought and progression than those two unprepped students were before they entered my class. We don’t know how to respond, so we too put our hands up... because it’s easier.

The projection of Maths and Science into an increasingly complex world is not wrong. It is sensible. But our students are at risk of an education system that is incredulous about ... you know ... the other stuff. Each day students are bombarded with all manner of issues and ideas from comedians like Hannah Gadsby crying, “*We’ve had enough!*” to Trump supporters

crying, “*We’ve had enough!*” to asylum seekers crying, “*We’ve had enough!*”

Had enough?

Of what?

What are we having and who’s having it?

What does it mean “to have”?

As we bask in the technological glory that rains – or *reigns* – down on our society, lauding Maths for the equations that bind us together and praising Science for all its magical wonders, isn’t it ironic that there is a pause in developments like driverless cars because of ethical dilemmas that Maths and Science just can’t address. They can’t cross what Hume calls the “*Is/Ought*” divide.

Studying English is obviously no panacea. The subject cannot answer nor seek to tackle the myriad of critical or ethical quandaries that plague our society. English is simply a vehicle (perhaps a driverless vehicle in my lessons – and not in the technologically advanced way) to help students navigate their road into adulthood. It guides them through a malaise to facilitate reading beyond what is written, to train writing how to express.

So why did those two students *read* the unequal lines the way they did? They didn’t really think it mattered. In some ways it didn’t; in many ways it did. The discussion starts. English teaches students to use the mind in ways Maths and Science were never designed to do.

As educators let us not devalue that which makes education whole.

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About the author

Daniel Ridout is the Head of English at Immanuel Lutheran College. Located in the picturesque region of Buderim, he has been at Immanuel for three years teaching both English and Humanities. He has taught in both the private and public sector in Brisbane, North Queensland and now the Sunshine Coast for 17 years in academic and pastoral capacities.