

# Forty years on

## Alex Gray and Peter Stanley

*At the end of this year, Alex Gray is retiring after teaching English for more than forty years. For thirty of these years, he was HOD English at a large coeducational secondary school in the Bay of Plenty.*

*Alex was interviewed by Peter Stanley of the School of Education, University of Waikato, about the changes he has observed in his subject and in students over the course of his career.*



*Peter Stanley  
School of Education  
University of Waikato*



*Alex Gray*

*PS: What attracted you to teaching, Alex?*

*AG: The process was quite casual. I was offered a studentship. That was a way of getting to university. I also quite liked the idea of being in my own kingdom, my classroom, and the fact that the nature of the job involved personal relationships and communicating things I was enthusiastic about.*

*PS: Over your teaching career did you exclusively teach English, or did you have to teach other subjects as well?*

*AG: When I started teaching the idea seemed to be that if you were a teacher you could teach anything. In my first year or two I taught English and Social Studies, French, History, Commercial Practice, Mathematics, and Physical Education.*

*PS: This has changed now?*

*AG: The demands of the subject are so much greater and it is difficult to mix subjects and cope with the administrative pressures of more than one department.*

*PS: So that is a change that has occurred over time. What about other changes in the teaching of English – a fairly broad question.*

*AG: The guidance I received as a beginning teacher was negligible. I was given textbooks and classes, basically, and told to go to it. In terms of curriculum statements and schemes, I was given a couple of bits of paper and left to follow a textbook. Now, programmes are worked out in much more detail and the continuing professional development opportunities are*

*much greater, both within and beyond the school.*

*PS: Do you regard that trend as positive?*

*AG: Absolutely, because you get so many ideas from other people. The people I was teaching with in my early days were very competent people and, by the standards of the day, they were running good departments, but what was acceptable then certainly wouldn't be now. The standards and expectations have gone up hugely. English is a much more complex, demanding, worthwhile subject than it was when I started teaching. And the same could be said for the standards of teaching.*

*PS: Alex, what is the level of preparedness of people now entering the teaching profession?*

*AG: Maybe we're fortunate in being able to be fairly selective in who we appoint at my school, but it seems to me that the training of English teachers is infinitely superior to what I had. The range of skills, the ability to deal with various types of behaviour, to deal with administrative systems, and the range of delivery skills, the range of activities that they can call on, is so much greater. The teachers that I see today are considerably superior to those of the past.*

*PS: Thanks for that. Alex, earlier you said that English was a more worthwhile subject. Could you elaborate on that perhaps.*

*AG: What was English when I started? An incredibly limited subject, essentially writing, and very formal in its approach and isolated from life. The writing*

that we did was largely practical. Exciting topics like 'How to mend a puncture'. Endless textbook exercises on reading comprehension, grammar and usage, vocabulary development. When you got into the senior school there were a few literary essays and essays of the transactional type. There was a revolution in the subject when the National English Syllabus Committee introduced the so-called "New English" in the 70's.

PS: *The subject now is much richer, more comprehensive?*

AG: There is a much greater emphasis now on oral language. Incredibly, as a student I was only once required to speak in front of an audience. Growth in the use of drama in the classroom has also been very significant. There was nothing like that when I was at school. Shakespeare was totally text-based. We spent a lot of time learning the history of English literature. No New Zealand literature at all, either at school or university. We did quite a lot of poetry, particularly the Romantics, often learnt by rote. Much of it I can still remember. That process of the language becoming part of you and staying with you has to some extent been lost and I do regret that. We spent a lot of time teaching such things as the difference between 'who' and 'whom', 'uninterested' and 'disinterested', 'shall' and 'will', and the 'I' and 'me' distinction. Interestingly, some of those distinctions have largely gone from the language. I do think we could now do a little more to teach the finer points of language and its precise use. Overall, though, the subject is much more exciting now. It is much more activity based. It is much more student-centred. It is much more wide-ranging.

PS: *Alex, what do you see as the place of visual images and oracy in the syllabus?*

AG: Oracy is very important. As head of department I made sure that oral skills were a very important part of our programme. Most students are now much more confident and competent in a variety of oral situations. The visual language thing I would have more reservations about. It is easy to spend a disproportionate amount of time on visual language, or at least on the static image aspect of it. On the other hand, film, television, newspapers, magazines, the media in general are such an important part of communication now that any English programme has to deal with a discriminating and sensitive response to them. This is a huge change.

PS: *Alex, can you comment on the place of Shakespeare in the syllabus?*

AG: The teaching of Shakespeare has been transformed in recent years and the availability of very good films is part of that, as well as the strategies for actually presenting the plays. The approach is much more student centred and activity based.

Most students have a very positive attitude to Shakespeare now, and one reason is they see his work as some special classic territory that they have a right to have access to. Often they feel they are being culturally deprived if they don't have that contact. Some of the best work and greatest enthusiasm from our students, even at junior level, has come from appropriately presented units based on Shakespeare's plays.

PS: *Alex, there has obviously been a lot of gains in the teaching of English and in the broadening of the syllabus to include*

*activities and such-like. Apart from some aspects of poetry, have we had any losses?*

AG: It is hard to answer that question because the nature of the student population in the middle and senior school has changed. When I was at secondary school a large number of people left at the end of form four, as soon as they turned 15, and that included some very bright people. When I was in the upper sixth there were about six of us. So if you are making comparisons, at form five and form six, you aren't comparing like groups. My second reservation would be I don't have hard evidence to look back and compare the standards of writing or speaking of students in 1960 and now. I know there were a lot of students then who couldn't spell, whose writing skills were very limited, and so on.

The one thing I would like to see more emphasis on is an analytical approach to how language is used. That would involve some study of grammar and usage. I don't see how you can really teach the finer points of language without some sort of grammatical background. Students and many teachers don't have that grammatical background at the moment. The new National Curriculum does seem to encourage a little more emphasis on this aspect of the subject.

PS: *Alex, is the contemporary English syllabus equally relevant to all students, and to all levels of ability?*

AG: It seems to me that the syllabus is fine – it's challenging, it's exciting. But you have to have highly-skilled teachers to implement it effectively, and I think that more professional development in some areas is necessary.

You have to have the appropriate conditions of work – not too many classes to teach, and classes not too large. The classrooms themselves are often too small. The resources and facilities that you have are too limited.

Many of the students are not socialized to work co-operatively in a classroom. When you do get a class where the tone is good – and I am not talking about ability, I am talking about attitude, motivation, and socialisation – then it's a great experience.

However, the problems in the classroom from unmotivated and unsocialised students are so great that it is often a destructive experience that leaves you in despair, and hugely conscious of the gap between what you could be doing in delivering an interesting curriculum effectively and what is actually happening in front of you. That gap is one of the reasons why a lot of the teachers get very fed up.

I think a lot of parents would be appalled if they knew how their well-motivated and well-socialised children are being largely neglected in the classroom because of the demanding, time and energy consuming behaviour problems at the less motivated end of the class.

PS: *Alex, would you like to make some observations, from your experience, on what makes for successful practice in the classroom.*

AG: First, you have to really know your subject and be able to convey your enthusiasm for it. Then, you have to think of students as individuals. Probably the thinking was much more of 'the class' when I started. The ability to connect with students at the

personal level is very important, and they do respond to that. You have to deliver your lessons with pace and you have to have variety within the period, so that the students are swept along. A variety of approach and content is very important as well. You have to be geared to tolerate a noise level which I personally find very difficult, but it does seem to be increasingly how things are. You have to exercise careful judgement about what things you will make an issue of. Otherwise you are always finding faults with things, and for some individuals you could be on their backs all the time because they are constantly not meeting what you might regard as basic classroom expectations. You have to try and keep it positive and make positive comments as much as possible. A sense of humour, tolerance, patience, the ability to smile in the blackest moments – the personality of a saint!

PS: *Alex, do you see a place for instruction in the contemporary classroom?*

AG: Giving instruction to the whole group seems to me often to be the most efficient use of time and energy. But for this to be effective now, there has to be a major change in the attitudes that students bring into the classroom, and their ability to listen and focus for moderate periods of time.

PS: *Alex, I knew a teacher who changed his subject from English because of the marking teaching English entails. Does the marking get any easier over time?*

AG: Marking has always been a burden I suppose and it is getting more so. How effective marking is has always been a question mark in my mind. It is back to the problem of how to change language behaviour and how effective assessment

is in doing that. Some of the more recent changes in assessment have really positive aspects compared with when I started, when you often just entered marks impressionistically. Now there is much more emphasis on closely defined criteria which are explained and discussed with students in advance, and they have a clear picture of what they need to do. That's positive.

Inter-teacher moderation sessions are quite useful professional development, but they also take time. As we move into NCEA, that is going to become a bigger burden. I don't have major problems with many aspects of the NCEA process but I fear that the teacher will begin to feel increasingly like an assessing machine. I also resent, as a teacher, being a mechanism by which a set of labels or stamps is put on students three years in a row, presumably for employers. It will be a big burden on students as well.

PS: *You see NCEA as being dominated by employer expectation?*

AG: Presumably it is a significant factor. I would also worry a bit about the compartmentalizing of English, say in a series of independent units. The programme and its assessment criteria are set by teachers and students try to measure up to these pre-determined standards. In this sense it has moved a long way from what happened with the National English Syllabus Committee in the 70's, when a great freedom was brought into the subject which was liberating and revitalizing. That kind of freedom had its dangers but it also had its advantages. You could get a kind of vitality and I wonder if that is going to be there with a series of units and set criteria. We talk about the

knowledge economy and the need for independent, creative thinking, but potentially NCEA sounds much more to me like a system that is designed to produce conforming people trained to meet teachers' expectations, who will meet employers' needs in that limited sense. That would be a concern I have.

PS: *Alex, it seems to me that secondary schools today are much more adaptive, or accepting of adolescence, with all that brings. Is that your perception?*

AG: You have to react to and deal with what is in front of you. Adolescence and the sense of a teen culture such as we have now is a major thing. I think we've got to remember that we are dealing with teenagers who are often in a time of crisis. They are having to deal with issues which weren't a major problem a generation or two back. There is the whole party scene, the drugs scene, and the comparative sexual freedom. The whole relationships thing is much more intense now and develops much earlier. There are concerns about employment in the future. There are marital breakups which are quite common now and very disturbing to many students and so on. At the same time, they are trying to deal with school which they know is important to them. They know the importance of qualifications but school itself is becoming more complex and demanding as well. The assessment structure, with more internal assessment, is going to put increasing pressure on these students at the most critical point in their lives. As a teacher you have always got to keep these things in mind.

PS: *Alex, do you think we have*

*more youngsters who do not have attitudes conducive to schooling, and if so why?*

AG: I can't really be sure about whether there are more compared to the past because students stay on a lot longer now and the escape routes are not as readily available. For example, I feel quite a lot of sympathy for the boy who a generation back may have left at the end of form four to go into an apprenticeship and train in an area that he was actually interested in, outside the restrictions of a school and classroom environment. Such people are now in the system for a couple of years longer than they were before.

There does seem to be a general trend for more students to come to school unsocialised and with negative attitudes. Their listening skills, or willingness to listen to a teacher, seem to be increasingly limited. As a teacher, I find most students very friendly, open, and forgiving, but ultimately they have an attitude that the teacher is not an important person in their lives. They seek support from the teacher when they strike a problem but the real things in their lives are their peers. As a teacher you are outside that framework. I see situations where students with well-motivated and well-socialised friends will prosper. Then perhaps they change their friends to people of a different type and you can see significant changes in their behaviour, attitudes, and performance.

PS: *Do you think our best students are as good as the best in times past, and are our more challenging as difficult as the students in times past?*

AG: In terms of the range of skills and personal development the best, I believe, are much better. I think they deal with a range

of activities now and manage their time superbly, so that you get a quality student who is in a major drama production and some musical activity, who is active in one or two sporting groups as well, who is on the student executive or some other kind of activity like peer support, who has a part-time job which takes a significant amount of time, and is holding it all together, and in the narrow academic sense is performing at least as well as the equivalent person in the past.

I can think of plenty of serious problems when I started teaching, and the thing that I remember most is anger and hostility. Students who were hostile to teachers. Often the system suppressed that. The cane was there all the time. I was in a block with about six classrooms and there would be hardly any period where you didn't hear somebody getting caned in the corridor. I think that must have led to a lot of anger. I know some people who still carry that anger decades later. Now nearly all students are friendly and I don't detect, with a few exceptions, that same level of hostility.

Moreover, you might think of the students who are problems in your classroom as disasters and wonder what totally dysfunctional adults they are going to become. Often, when you meet them five or ten years later they are remarkably impressive people. You have got to remember that you are seeing these people, and dealing with them, in a very particular and difficult set of circumstances and it's not the ultimate picture.

PS: *What distinguishes the students who do well from those who do not?*

AG: Usually, where there's a successful student, there are parents who put a value on education. Most successful students seem to be able to compartmentalize their lives so that the social, the academic, the sporting, and the cultural, and the job and whatever, are properly contained, and that no one part takes over. For a lot of students it seems that the temptations of being in the vibrant social club, which is the contemporary school, are just too huge for them to deal with and it totally dominates their lives. Therefore they get very little out of school whereas the more successful ones know just how to get out of school what they need from it.

PS: *Let's talk a little about the knowledge economy, Alex, and what you see in front of you in the classroom.*

AG: Well, if we are talking about the efficient, high-level delivery of the curriculum to produce the sorts of people that the economy is looking for, and not just at the top level but through the middle strata and all the way down, then things are going to have to change in the classroom, and I am not sure how much the change can be directed by the school. I think there has to be a change in approach from students – and that goes back to homes, and motivation from there, with students coming to school socialized to function and take advantage of what schools can offer instead of talking about the ways that schools fail to meet student needs.

PS: *Alex, I was just wondering about some observations about teaching as a career, and whether it has been satisfying for you?*

AG: I think if you have a really motivated class in front of you then it's a very satisfying job.



*Peter Stanley and Alex Gray*

The reality is, often you don't. In a given week, for a teacher with a full English programme, it is almost certain that there will be a period, and possibly several, with a major problem. That can be an excruciating experience and can live with you for days. There are many very positive moments in teaching, and some very bleak ones. I think the rewards, in terms of job satisfaction are intense, but they are more than counterbalanced by the negative experiences. The financial rewards are also inadequate. The expectations of management unit holders are ludicrous given the meagre financial recognition. Everyone acknowledges the importance of education, but in fact, teaching does not have financial or social status. I would think of something else if I was starting out again.

PS: *Alex, would you have any advice for new entrants to the teaching profession?*

AG: Be very sure that you have the resilience, the energy, and the level of commitment necessary to cope with all the negatives.

PS: *Alex, do you regard teaching as a long term career?*

AG: I think the demands are so

great that a 43 year career such as mine is now hard to imagine. I think the corrosion of the job is such that it is hard to imagine someone being able to last that length of time in the future. What if you teach 10 or 20 years, and that is as much as you can handle? What are the alternatives going to be for you in terms of other work? That is an issue that anyone contemplating the job would need to think about.

PS: *Have there been other satisfactions in your job?*

AG: One of the things that strikes me is the quality of the people I have worked with over the years. Many friendly, enthusiastic, talented, responsive students. Dedicated, creative teachers, people with a real commitment to their teaching and to their department. People who were very constructive and positive in meetings, contributing ideas and working on units and a multitude of other things, and people who supported each other and worked together very well. Hardly a single colleague I feel other than positive about. I just wonder for how many other jobs, over a period of more than 40 years, someone could say that of the people they have worked with.