Study for HSC English

From the start of Term 4 this year, more than 70,000 students across the state will embark on their study for the Higher School Certificate (HSC). The vast majority of those students will be studying one of the three 2 unit English courses: standard, advanced or English as a second language (ESL).
A new Area of Study
2014/5 is a significant year for the 2 unit English courses because it is the first year of implementation of English Stage 6: prescriptions: Area of Study, electives and texts: Higher School Certificate 2015-2020. This document prescribes the electives and texts available for HSC English study in any given year. Significant to all three courses is the launch of a new Area of Study, Discovery, replacing the previous Area of Study, Belonging. Stage 6 English teachers need to be prepared for the challenges of the new Area of Study before the HSC English courses commence in Term 4. Teacher librarians in secondary schools will want to support teachers and students working with this new Area of Study, and will therefore need to make preparations also.

Parameters for study
English teachers, students and teacher librarians should be aware that the parameters for the study of English are set broadly by the English: stage 6 syllabus and specifically by the English stage 6: prescriptions: Area of Study, electives and texts: Higher School Certificate 2015-2020. To prepare for Area of Study: Discovery, they will need to engage with both:
- The rubric broadly outlining the Area of Study in the syllabus:
  (Note the rubrics for Area of Study in standard English page 29, and advanced, page 46, are identical, as this is a common aspect of the two courses. The rubric for ESL, page 67, has some similarities, but particularly involves the study of language through the Area of Study).
- The rubric particularly defining the Area of Study: Discovery in English stage 6: prescriptions: Area of Study, electives and texts: Higher School Certificate 2015-2020:
  (Note that the prescriptions rubrics are again identical for standard and advanced courses, page 9, while similar, but also different, for ESL, page 22).

Discovery as a concept
The key statement in the prescriptions document rubric for Area of Study: Discovery is as follows:

This Area of Study requires students to explore the ways in which the concept of discovery is represented in and through texts.

Prescriptions, p.9

What do we mean by a concept? A concept is a big, often complex and dynamic idea. It can be considered from different perspectives. It is helpful to distinguish concept from similar notions, such as topic and theme.

Think of a text as like an iceberg. The tip of the iceberg is the topic, or what the text is obviously about. Beneath the surface of the text is the theme, or possibly several themes, which might only be discerned after careful investigation of the text.

But the concept sits outside the text. A wide range of texts taps into this big idea in a variety of ways. In our analogy, the concept is more like the ocean current that swirls about the iceberg, indeed many icebergs. Like an ocean current, a concept is dynamic, changing according to context and perspective. It is important that students develop an appreciation of the complex and dynamic nature of discovery as a concept and that they reflect this deep understanding in their HSC responses.
In a sense, the real English concept involved here is representation. The focus is not so much on discovery, per se, as on the ways in which discovery is represented in texts.

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This makes sense when you realise that the particular concept for study changes from one prescriptions document to the next. Over the years, we have seen Change, Journeys and Belonging before Discovery made an appearance. But what never changes, because it is enshrined in the syllabus, is the fact that students will always study the ways in which the concept is represented.

What texts have to say about discovery is of interest, but how they represent discovery is the true focus of study.

5 key aspects of Discovery
Beyond the first statement, Prescriptions seems to emphasise five key aspects of discovery which students are expected to explore through the Area of Study:

• the nature of discovery
• how experience of and attitude towards discovery is influenced by context
• the impact of discovery
• how we can discover through a text
• how discovery is represented in a text.

These five key aspects will be considered in turn.
The nature of discovery

The prescriptions document suggests that there can be different types of discovery. It can be:
- something discovered for the first time - or rediscovered
- sudden and unexpected - or deliberately planned
- a positive experience - or a negative experience
- meaningful in emotional, creative, intellectual, physical or spiritual ways.

There can also be different objects of discovery, for example:
- people
- relationships
- societies
- places
- events
- ideas.

Discovery can refer to the thing found, as well as the process of finding.

Context

The experience of and attitude towards discovery can be shaped by:
- personal context (and values)
- cultural context (and values)
- historical context (and values)
- social context (and values).

In exploring the meaning or meanings of a text about discovery, it may be useful to consider:
- the context of the composer and how this might influence ideas about discovery and how they are represented
- the contexts of responders and how these might influence different responses to and interpretations of discovery in a text.

The impact of discovery

Discoveries can:
- lead to new worlds and values
- stimulate new ideas or speculation about future possibilities
- offer new understandings and renewed perceptions of ourselves and others
- transform the lives of individuals or society in general.
Discovery through texts
We all discover when we respond to texts. Texts can affirm or challenge the assumptions and beliefs of responders about human experience and the world. Synthesising perspectives, by making links within and across texts, can deepen understanding of the concept of discovery.

Composers use a variety of ways to invite responders to experience discovery through their texts. While the prescriptions rubric focuses on responders discovering through texts, composers can also make discoveries about themselves or the world in which they live through their composing.

How discovery is represented
Composers shape their representations of discovery by their choice of language modes, forms, features and structures. Students are required to:
• analyse techniques and evaluate their effectiveness in others’ texts about discovery
• experiment with techniques in their own composing about discovery.

Back to the syllabus
Earlier it was mentioned that the syllabus, as well as Prescriptions, sets parameters for study of HSC English, including the Area of Study.

Some points made, or suggested, in the syllabus rubric, not made so strongly in the Prescriptions rubric, include:
• Perceptions and perspectives are both shaped by texts and shape the meaning of texts.
• The focus of study is more on how the concept is represented, rather than what the concept is about.
• Students should consider the connections between and among texts.
• Students are required to compose their own texts about the concept being studied.

Furthermore, the syllabus suggests that students are expected to engage in some higher order thinking to succeed in Area of Study. This is made clear by the range of task words used in the syllabus rubric: explore, analyse, question, articulate, examine, synthesise, assess, experiment and consider.

Textual study: core and related texts
English students of standard and advanced courses must study one text from the prescribed list for Area of Study: Discovery. See page 10 in the prescriptions document for a full list.

ESL students must study two texts from the prescribed list for Language Study in Area of Study: Discovery. See page 23-24 in the prescriptions document. For all three courses, students will explore texts of their own choosing relevant to the Area of Study. The syllabus requires that they draw their chosen texts from a variety of sources, in a range of genres and media.

English teachers and teacher librarians can guide students to choose appropriate texts of their own choosing and students will benefit from opportunities to spend time in lessons choosing their own texts and discussing the rationale for their choice with classmates.

Kinds of texts students could use are:
• prose fiction, including novels and short stories
• drama, including scripts and performances
• poetry, including verse and song lyrics
• nonfiction
• film, including narrative films and documentaries
• multimedia, including websites, picture books and graphic novels
• media, including radio or television.
programs, feature articles and interviews
• paintings and other works of art

In selecting texts of their own choosing, encourage students to consider:
• relevance to Area of Study: Discovery
• accessibility for the student
• interest for the student
• opportunities to focus on how discovery is represented
• possible connections to the prescribed text
• sophistication.
Choosing easy texts generally does the student no favours. Such texts provide limited opportunities to discuss the complex nature of discovery and the ways in which it is represented.

In general, each additional text studied should add something new to the discussion, not just echo ideas and approaches already evident in the prescribed text. By choosing texts that deal with discovery in different ways and from different perspectives, students will be more likely to reflect an understanding of the complex and dynamic nature of the concept of discovery. The importance of student engagement with related texts should not be underestimated. It is the choice and use of texts that is a critical factor determining how well students perform in HSC English exams.

References and further reading

Board of Studies, Teaching and Educational Standards (BOSTES) 2013, English: stage 6 syllabus, accessed 3 August 2014.


University of Sydney 2014, Children’s and Young adult literature: simple HSC research module: Area of Study: Discovery, accessed 3 August 2014.