Leading Secondary English

Unlock the secrets to building an exceptional English department

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Chapter 1
Building culture: Destination story and mental models

This chapter covers:

- capturing your English team's shared values and how this shapes culture
- setting a department vision
- the balance between enabling autonomy and ensuring consistency as a leader.

When you speak with any successful leader in education, they will credit building the 'right' culture as the single most important contributor to running a well-oiled and slick organisation. But before we even begin to contemplate what the 'right' culture might be, it is useful to define culture itself to avoid this becoming some buzzword with no depth of meaning.

Culture comes from the Latin word *cultura*, which means growing or cultivation. As a leader, this is what you must do. Your success as a team lives – or dies – by your ability (or inability) to enable each of the beliefs stated below to be the reality for the team that you lead. Here is how I will define culture for the purpose of this book and within the narrow confines of leading a department in a secondary school setting:

Culture is the beliefs held, evidenced by the habits and rituals enacted, leading to a set of behaviours within a secondary English department.

Let us break down the three aspects to building culture and examine them in depth. This is important. Everything that follows in this book springboards from developing an effective culture for a secondary English department.

The beliefs held

This is the foundation to building culture but it often becomes words and not actions, so it is vital to be a little cautious here.

For example, I have never spoken to a leader of an English department who did not say that they had high expectations of their students. This rhetoric, however, is not always matched to reality. Why? Often it is because the habits and rituals – a department's modus operandi – are not consistently applied across all members of a team, and therefore a culture of high expectations has not been realised.

So, whilst it is important to ensure that you can clearly communicate the culture that you are building in your team, always remember: this needs to be self-evident when one watches your team in action.

Before we get there, though, consider what culture you want to create for your department very carefully. For me, the highest-performing English teams that I have worked in, led or observed in action all had the following beliefs that underlined their department's culture:

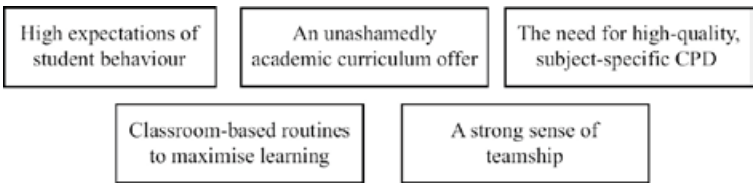

FIGURE 1: Department priorities

I have grouped these beliefs in this way, with no hierarchical ranking, but I would argue that unless student behaviour is excellent, you are

hampering your ability to lead an expert English department, even if all the other beliefs are realised.

As a leader of an English department, therefore, you are its cultural architect. You embody the beliefs held, but you also perfectly exemplify the habits and rituals enacted and you establish the behaviours of your team becoming normalised under your charge.

It is also important to remember that culture is more than individual teachers working in isolation. Culture is every teacher expecting the same and working together. Culture is consistency.

Destination story

One method of setting a clear vision for your department – and a very useful thought experiment – is using a *destination story*. In essence, this is the outcome – the external reality – of what you think of when you imagine your team working at its peak functioning capacity. The length of time to reach this 'destination' will vary, depending on a variety of factors, including the maturity of you as a leader and/or of the team that you are leading. Like approaching curriculum design (see Chapter 4), when approaching the beliefs held by your English department, it is useful to consider your endpoint first and work your way backwards.

Setting a realistic time-frame for this to be realised is important. It is unlikely to be achieved in a single academic year; rather, it may be a longer-term aim. This needs to be a minimum of three years to allow implementation to be realised and to see the impact of your leadership.

For example, I wrote the following destination story in May 2023, when working as curriculum leader for English at Trinity Academy Leeds, with a goal of September 2027 for this to be fully embedded as a normal working practice – our modus operandi. This must be ambitious, too. When you do this, you may feel a little awkward, particularly if you are prone to self-deprecation. This is not the time to be humble. This is *your* vision and it should be audacious. If not, how will you push yourself and your team to excellence?

Note: Some of the language may feel alien, but it is part of our shared professional language (and thus very context-specific, as it should be). Later in this chapter, we examine the role of communal

language as a means of reinforcing culture. Being able to unpick the destination story is important and necessary along the way.

Notice how the language below mirrors the five beliefs mentioned earlier. I have highlighted the parts in **bold** to show the connection.

Team English: Destination story

The English team are passionate subject experts. We delve into the minutiae – the nuts and bolts and intricacies of both language and literature. ***We draw from evidence-informed practice and the best bets from research to inform our pedagogy***.

We offer ***an unashamedly knowledge-rich, academic curriculum*** *that empowers all students to find their voice as great writers and as true literary scholars. Everything in our curriculum is intentional – we use a spiral model to revisit disciplinary knowledge and build students' schemas with concepts that underpin major literary themes. Every member of the team, without exception, knows both the how and the why of what we offer to our students.*

Teaching and learning are exceptional. We are the envy of others across the land. Our reputation precedes us on the national stage. ***Our relentless drive to sweat the small stuff in our habits and routines – but also our subject-specific pedagogy, consistently applied – means that every student gets a world-class English teacher****. This makes successful inevitable; this puts our results in line with the top-performing schools in the country.*

When you enter our corridor, Culture 20 sings to the highest heaven. ***Low-level disruption does not occur; student behaviour is exemplary. We are the mental model to others in the academy: visitors are often led to us first –*** *and are, rightly, blown away by what they witness.*

We support each other. Always. It is side before self, every time.

I can safely say that the above is the culture that I want to build in my department. When this manifests beyond any qualification, I know that we have instilled a culture of excellence. However, that is not to say that improvements – or course corrections – are not required at times too.

Reflection is key. For instance, the following questions are ones that I frequently ask myself to track how successfully we are making inroads to this ultimate destination.

- Is every member of the team able to articulate the 'how and why' of our curriculum offer?
- Is our 'subject-specific pedagogy consistently applied' by every member of the team?
- Are our results 'in line with the top-performing schools in the country'? If not, what needs to change?
- If I ask the principal, would they agree that 'we are the mental model to others in the academy'?

Each of the above needs a careful interrogation using a simple framework: *if* not, *why* not?

Our role as leaders of an English department is to provide the support and challenge where performance is not matching expectations, as established through the destination story.

Mental models

Put simply, a mental model is *an explanation of how something works.* We all have mental models for all we do in teaching and leadership, and they can vary wildly. The point, though, is this: as a leader, you establish the mental models within your department, and you and your team always need to hold yourselves accountable for these.

I use the phrase 'mental model' a lot. It might not be your preferred language. It might feel overtly corporate or dripping with pretension. You do not need to use the phrase if you prefer not to.

However, what it is and how you use this as leader of an English department is vital.

Mental models work best with scripting, or model examples, to support how you want something to be done. They can be used – and indeed are perhaps best used – for minutiae. I firmly believe that you need to sweat the small stuff to develop an expert English department.

How you choose to use mental models to support and develop your team will be based on a variety of factors, including the needs of staff and students, the maturity of your team and what you as a leader consider to require a high degree of consistency across your team.

Much of Chapter 2 is also focused on using mental models to ensure that your team implements department-wide routines and habits in your pursuit of developing an ethic of excellence.

But at this stage, I want to offer a more detailed explanation of how mental models help to shape the five beliefs that underpin an expert English department, as stated earlier in this chapter.

High expectations of student behaviour

As a leader, every student participating in an English lesson in your school should be learning in a classroom with excellent behaviour. Your job is to ensure that this happens for every single member of your team. If there is one weak link here, your culture will erode rapidly.

To clarify, though, the weak link is not a human. Behaviour management requires a clear and robust system that needs to be followed by teachers. Your school might already have a phenomenal behaviour system in place, or this may be absent in your context. Either way, the consistent application of a behaviour system by all members of your team is the goal here.

Most of you will operate a *VCR behaviour system*, which broadly works like this:

- Verbal warning
- Consequence (point on a management information system/ detention/move to different seat)
- Removal (with further consequences).

There are thousands of variations of the above across every school in the UK but, generally, behaviour systems work best if there is an opportunity for students to correct their behaviour independently and, failing this, the behaviour results in a sanction. Obviously, the degree of sanctions will also vary from school to school.

I am not going to advise you about what your behaviour management system *should* be. Many of you are subject to a whole-school system, which is absolutely fine. However, what I do want you to think about is your mental model of how each step in a VCR system works in your department and whether all members of your team want the same mental model too.

Verbal warning

With warnings, the pitfalls that I see most commonly are:

- staff being unaware of what behaviour constitutes a verbal warning
- staff issuing a warning (or pre-warning) before the official verbal warning
- staff lacking the knowledge and skill of how best to issue a verbal warning.

Your mental model for your team needs to ensure that these are avoided in order to make sure that any first step in behaviour management is consistently applied.

Staff's lack of awareness of what behaviour constitutes a verbal warning is often because schools and departments don't consider the range of scenarios that are likely to occur in the classroom to which the behaviour policy will be applied. For me, this is the best way to show staff how the behaviour system actually works in practice.

One way to tackle this is to ask all staff in your team to write down all the scenarios in which they have issued a verbal warning (or where they envisage that they would need to issue one) and explore this collectively as a team. Here, you can flush out where the inevitable inconsistencies lie within your team.

Examples of where there has been debate about verbal warning issues in my current department include:

- A student makes eye contact (non-verbal communication) with another student during teacher input.
- A student continues to write after the teacher asks for pens down.
- A student fails to speak when instructed to start a 'turn and talk' (a structured discussion in pairs).
- A student puts their hand up when you have instructed the class to keep hands down during independent practice.
- A student does not begin their 'do now' (or first task upon entering the classroom) promptly having entered the classroom.

I focused on less obvious examples of poor behaviour here to illustrate the need for consistency of behaviour management at a 'sweating the small stuff' level.

It is this approach to behaviour more generally that is likely to lead to a culture of high expectations.

Imagine, then, that you have one teacher in your department who does *not* issue a verbal warning when a student fails to speak during 'turn and talk' and the rest of the team does. You, as a leader, believe that you have high expectations for student behaviour, but the student who does not get a warning for failing to engage in 'turn and talk' suddenly has lower expectations of them than other students in that same school.

Whilst this seems rather small-scale, imagine if you have several teachers who do not give a verbal warning for *all* the scenarios mentioned above, even if they do in some of them. Inconsistency – this affects students' behaviour, as it will lead to a belief from them that they have different expectations from different English teachers. If you pick up the same student who was never sanctioned for refusing to engage in 'turn and talk' in later years at school, suddenly conflict arises because they can (rightly) claim that this was not an issue elsewhere.

As part of your leadership of the department, you ultimately decide whether a verbal warning is appropriate for any classroom scenario, and your team must act as you do. Your mental model must be their mental model to ensure a parity of experience from students in all classrooms of your corridor.

Similar to this, you need to ensure that all of your team only ever give one warning before escalation through the behaviour system. This

is a huge bugbear for me: the warning(s) that precede *the warning*. A warning is just that, but here is an example of a terrible enaction of high expectations and the use of verbal warning that I have overheard in a school:

> *Stop that NOW! If you continue to disrupt the lesson like this, that will be your C1!*

For context, C1 was the school's code for a verbal warning. The imperative to stop arose from a student throwing a pen at another student. Notice, though, how verbal warnings had clearly been issued prior to the official warning. This undermines the entire behaviour system because, essentially, the teacher is enacting the belief that 'I can offer warnings prior to a real warning'. Again, a warning is a warning. Any ambiguity here leads to an erosion of any culture that you are trying to build around student behaviour.

This example above also illustrates the importance of ensuring that your team has the knowledge and skill to issue a verbal warning effectively. My mental model for issuing a verbal warning is that it must be delivered firmly, and in a calm and professional tone.

Scripting examples and demonstrating them (either through lesson observations or in deliberate practice) will increase the likelihood of your mental model being lived out in the classrooms of your team.

Max, that is your C1. We do not make eye contact with others during my input, thank you.

Issy, I am going to give you a C1 as a reminder to put pens down when instructed first time.

Abdul, this is a C1, I want to hear your fantastic ideas in our 'turn and talk'.

Mina, C1. Hands remain down during independent practice. Thank you.

Sami, I know you get to work quicker than that to begin Recall 6. C1.

All of the above also narrate the 'why' of staff issuing a verbal warning, to make this clear to students and reduce any fight-back. Trust me – if you do this relentlessly for micro-behaviours, you are far less likely to have to deal with bigger issues.

Consequence

It would be wonderful if teenagers always heeded a teacher's warning and no escalation of a behaviour system was required, but this is not the reality of the job. In fact, as an English team, your staff are likely to see students three, four or maybe five times per week, so inevitably students will push the boundaries beyond the verbal warning.

When this happens, the principles as outlined with verbal warning strategies are the exact same. Consistency is key. However, at this stage, because managing the behaviour is perceived as higher stakes than a warning, staff often do wobble a little.

My approach is: if a student has not met a teacher's expectations for the *second* time in a lesson, there must a consequence or sanction for this. It is a numbers game, really. The first time a student does not behave, the warning is a final opportunity for them to modify their behaviour before escalation occurs.

As a leader, you need to make sure that this really does happen, in every interaction with every member of the English department in every lesson.

Imagine the two scenarios below. In the first scenario, one member of the English department (Mr Allen) fails to issue a consequence (C2) for a student calling out, having already issued a verbal warning (C1). In the second scenario, another member of the same department (Ms Davis) issues a consequence for the same behaviour from a student in her class.