

# ENGLISH IN AUSTRALIA

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# English in Australia

# 2016

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We welcome high quality teacher oriented and scholarly submissions in any relevant field of English, language and literacy education.

Your submission should reflect dilemmas, debates and concerns facing current contemporary English educators in Australia and elsewhere. Your submission may report on empirical research conducted with or by English teachers and students in classrooms, it may discuss the effects of policy on English teaching or it may elaborate on changes in the practices of teachers. It should be explicitly linked to issues of English teaching, pedagogy or curriculum and should demonstrate familiarity with current and pertinent scholarly literature.

The name of the journal is in no way parochial. Articles will be considered from anywhere which professes English as mother tongue or second language. However, if your article relates closely to a specific national context please ensure that it is appropriately pitched to readers in other national contexts.

Contributors are encouraged to read previous issues of *English in Australia* to get a sense of what is required in terms of structure and style.

1. All manuscripts should be submitted to the editor as an email attachment.
2. The email text should contain your name, address, telephone number(s) and fax number(s), current position and information relevant to a 2 or 3 line biographical entry.
3. The article should begin with an abstract of 100–150 words.
4. All references should conform to the American Psychological Association (APA) style. Please consult the *APA Publication Manual*, 6th edition, or any guide to APA referencing available through university library websites.
5. Please ensure that you have carefully edited and proofread your manuscript. Accepted articles that have style problems or inaccurate/missing references will be returned to the author for revision.

6. Please avoid footnotes. Usually it is possible to incorporate them into the text. Where they cannot be avoided they should be numbered with a superscript and listed at the end of the article (endnotes).
7. All manuscripts should be typed with double spacing on A4 paper with a 2.5 cm margin on all sides.
8. It is your responsibility to seek copyright clearance for any materials quoted.
9. All manuscripts are subject to double blind peer review by at least two reviewers. This means that the identity of the author is not divulged to the reviewers, nor are the reviewers' names revealed to the author.
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You can expect feedback from the reviewers and editor to help you shape your work effectively. Please feel free to contact the Editor or members of the Editorial Board to discuss any contribution which you may be considering.

Although *English in Australia* is predominantly a curriculum research and practice journal, occasionally poems and short texts of other genres relevant to the themes and readership of the journal are also published. Please send submissions to the editor.

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*English in Australia aims to publish a diverse range of opinions on issues of concern to English teachers and literacy educators.*

*We welcome contributions from all people with an interest in English, language and literacy education.*

*All contributions will be blind peer reviewed to determine their suitability for publication.*



# English in Australia

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# Editorial

ANITA JETNIKOFF

I wish to dedicate this issue to the late Professor Annette Patterson. Annette's amazing calm, clarity of mind and sharp scholarship enabled her to produce a significant body of work in the fields of literature, reading and the English curriculum. I recall fondly using her early text book *Reading Stories*, (Mellor, O'Neill & Patterson, 1988) which applied complex literary theory to challenging, critical literacy classroom activities and which I used when I first started teaching secondary English. Her work on reading reached into the digital age (Rennie & Patterson, 2008) and her later work presented a historical examination of reading practices (Patterson, 2014). I will always remember her with great affection for her humour and her dedication to the field of English. Annette was also very dear to me on a personal level as my PhD supervisor and my Head of School at QUT. Annette Patterson will be missed by English educators everywhere.

Like Annette's range of research, this issue offers an eclectic mix united by the underpinning conceptual thread of 'spaces': ethical spaces, 'affinity spaces' in digital gaming, ambivalence in the 'third space', subject spaces and positions and textual spaces involving text selection for reading and teachers as writers. The National Perspectives column in this issue reports on the exciting professional learning and other activities of English teachers in the states.

As two of the general capabilities of the Australian Curriculum are: 'ethical understanding', and 'critical and creative thinking', Ray Misson's opening article, offers both a provocation and a set of strategies for English educators. 'This above all ... The place of ethics in English teaching' examines through a Lacanian lens the ways in which particular beliefs are made part of one's identity/subjectivity. It considers in what 'critical' ways subject English might intervene in, or support, this process. The article then looks at the basis of ethics in some strategies for English teaching. Misson makes an argument for the importance of a conscious (if flexible) ethical position underpinning our work in English classrooms, since we are all language teachers. As Ray Misson reminds us, the attitudes and values we

bring to the teaching of texts and language, 'shape our perception of the world'.

The next article in this issue by Daniel Xerri from the University of Malta, "Poetry does really educate": An interview with spoken word poet Luka Lesson' like Misson's article, addresses a way to 'speak up' the world. Australian poet Luka Lesson argues that performance poetry is not being taken seriously enough in the curriculum. It is, however, growing in this country. We do have a lively and growing slam poetry culture occurring in schools with the SlammEd competition and various poetry slams all around the country at state libraries and festivals in communities and schools are increasingly participating in these creative events.

The third article from the University of Tasmania's English program tells the story of two projects designed to investigate and improve the pathway from pre-tertiary to tertiary English studies in the state. Through Communities of Practice the authors sought to develop and maintain productive links between English educators in the senior secondary and tertiary sectors in Tasmania and the authors suggest that this approach has national potential.

The next three articles focus on textual spaces for reading and writing. The first of these, by Georgina Barton and Loraine McKay, is titled 'Conceptualising a literacy education model for Junior Secondary students: The spatial and reflective practices of an Australian school.' The paper examines one school's collaborative approach to improving reading practices, for its Years 8 and 9 students, in order to increase positive pathways after school. The researchers argue that when ongoing reflective practice occurs, potential transformative or 'third space', practices result; ensuring positive literacy learning outcomes for all students. Professor Patterson would approve of the second paper on reading by Sarah McDonald which critiques the prescribed text choice in terms of gender equality in South Australia. The author reflexively comments on her own choices of texts, which also supports Ray Misson's article on the need for teachers to make ethical choices in terms of subject positions. The third paper in this textual

spaces group asks, 'How does the act of writing impact on discursively mediated professional identities?' The authors, Muriel Wells, Damien Lyons and Glenn Auld examine the identities teachers take on when they are both writers who teach and teachers who write.

Spaces are also examined in terms of gender in Nerissa Marcon and Julie Faulkner's examination of 'affinity spaces,' afforded by digital games. Their paper examines the use of *Minecraft* as a pedagogical tool to motivate girls' literacy practices within the secondary English classroom. The data suggest that girls find *Minecraft* an appealing text for literacy learning. The authors argue that using digital games in English classrooms can productively assist teachers to bridge students' outside and inside-school literacy practices, while validating and drawing from youth culture to enhance learning processes.

The next group of two papers show how the states interpret curriculum frameworks differently. The first of these three, 'Teachers' perceptions of the influence of assessment on their teaching of Year 9 English', by Leanne Portelli and Kerry-Ann O'Sullivan, investigates the early implementation of the NSW English K-10 Syllabus in Year 9, with a focus on teachers' perceptions of the various forms and purposes of assessment and the role these play in the classroom. They argue that systemic policy and an external national testing agenda constrain both classroom and assessment practices which narrow teachers' assessment literacy. They argue that the challenge ahead for educators is to balance the demands of external testing with professional agency to develop meaningful assessment strategies that capture the learning occurring in the classroom. The second article in this group is Daniel Anson's paper, 'Creating Subjects: The Language of the Stage 6 English Syllabus'. Anson offers a Systemic Functional Linguistic analysis to show how personal development and moral regulation influence both subject English and its students in the current New South Wales senior syllabus. In line with Ray Misson's imperative that teachers take an ethical position Anson argues teachers of English need to be cognisant of the values and aims of the subject. This is poignant in the light of the current redevelopment of the senior syllabus frameworks for the Australian curriculum across the states.

When we examine the myriad of issues outlined above surrounding the complex terrain we navigate as English teachers Jackie Manuel and Don Carter's thought provoking research examines early-career

secondary English teachers' values and expectations of teaching. The researchers ask how and to what extent has the early-career experience affirmed or challenged new teachers' initial career choice? The implications of this are discussed in terms of the new teacher's sense of professional agency, resilience and career plans and, in turn, for teacher recruitment and retention policies and practice.

The issue ends with the wonderful Deb McPherson's reading and viewing section to inspire our text choices in classrooms.

Following this issue there will be two themed issues, both emerging from conferences. An advertisement calling for papers for the second of these issues appears on p. 62. I will gladly accept articles and papers for the rest of the year outside of the remit of these themed issues, to be reviewed and ready for an issue early next year. I am particularly keen to dedicate a special issue in 2017 to celebrate the significant contributions to English teaching and research work made by the late Paul Brock and the late Annette Patterson (see call for papers on page 52 of this issue. So much excellent teaching and research occurs unspoken and invisibly and your ideas may very well be worth sharing; so please keep valuing your work with the profession and keep sending me your work for consideration in the journal.

This issue will be out to you all following the annual AATE conference in Adelaide. I hope that if you presented your work at the conference that you will consider submitting it for review and potential publication. Also please send me an email if you think someone else's inspiring conference presentation could become a worthy topic for a journal article in *English in Australia*.

Anita Jetnikoff

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# NATIONAL PERSPECTIVES

## Tasmania

### Success for TATE

In an awards ceremony in Sydney on 4 June 2016, the Tasmanian Association for the Teaching of English (TATE) was awarded with the Innovative Profession APTA Award for work conducted in 2015. The Australian Professional Teachers Association's awards (APTAs) acknowledge the exemplary innovation and leadership carried out by individuals and associations who have made outstanding contributions as volunteers to the work undertaken by professional teaching associations.

The APTA board recognised the strong partnerships that TATE has forged with other Tasmanian associations and organisations. In 2015 TATE partnered with the Tasmanian History Teacher's Association (THTA) to bring a highly renowned Holocaust educator from the Sydney Jewish Museum to Tasmania.

TATE partnered teamed up with ALEA Tas South to hold the highly successful 'Quest for Truth in Texts' conference. Over 300 teachers attended this conference.

TATE continues to work closely with the University of Tasmania to hold forums connecting pre-service with practising teachers and also awards an annual prize for the UTAS student with the best result in first year English.

TATE has partnered with 40South Publishing to co-ordinate the Young Tasmanian Writing Prize. This highly prestigious short fiction competition sees winners in the Grades 7-9 and 10-12 categories awarded with a \$300 prize and publication of their work in *40South Magazine*; runners up receiving gift vouchers and their works published in TATE's English journal, *EduTATE*.

Each year TATE produces three highly practical English journals for its members. The journal, *EduTATE*, is an opportunity for teachers to share best practice, for establishing and strengthening connections between theory and best practice, for students to have work published and for the Association to promote professional learning and resources in Tasmania. This state journal is one of the pre-eminent English professional practice journals in Australia.

APTA also recognised the contributions of TATE council members whose contributions have had a national impact. Erika Boas has co-edited a soon to

be released national English publication produced by the Australian Association for the Teaching of English (AATE) entitled, *The Artful English Teacher*. Phil Page and Daniel Howard have also written chapters for this publication. Cameron Hindrum and Ellen Rees have written units for the highly acclaimed Copyright Agency's *Reading Australia* project; producing teaching units on Australian literature for classroom teachers to access freely online.

In 2016 TATE celebrates 50 years of unstinting voluntary service to the English teaching community in Tasmania. The Association's outstanding reputation, together with its innovative leadership, planning and professional practice has enabled such vibrant longevity to flourish and thrive.

In July 2017 TATE will co-convene (with ALEA Tasmania) the highly anticipated *Cutting Edge: Margin to Mainstream* national English and literacy conference; an event that has been in the planning for more than two years already. Six international speakers have been locked in, together with a number of highly regarded national experts on English teaching and literacy practices. Exciting times ahead for English teaching and learning in Tasmania.

Erika Boas  
TATE President

## New South Wales

2106 has seen a great increase in the number and variety of events being offered by the ETA NSW, providing professional development to support teachers at the Proficient, Highly Accomplished and Lead Teacher levels of accreditation, extending our reach to primary and even to other subjects.

### Textual Concepts Program

The Textual Concepts Program – a collaboration with the Department of Education NSW – is being workshopped across the regions to primary and secondary teachers and even in the United Kingdom at the National Association for the Teaching of English (NATE) conference. We have been very pleased to see the interest from primary schools acknowledging that subject English as greater than general literacy and offers vital critical thinking skills. This will facilitate the transition from primary to secondary schools. This course is also going to be offered online via webinar.

### Senior English syllabus

A new senior English syllabus is being developed and ETA will be running consultation sessions with our members. We will be designing resources once this syllabus is decided.

### Across the Curriculum Literacy workshops and webinars

The need for practical grammar, reading and writing literacy has become an issue in many secondary schools; the new 'Leading Literacy Across the Curriculum' workshops have been received very positively, building on the ETANSW consultancy undertaken in schools so examples are drawn from all secondary subjects. The grammar workshops available online via webinar offer ways of integrating grammar into lessons.

### Free resource nationally available

ETANSW has completed teaching notes using texts from Western Sydney writers – a resource commissioned by Westwords. Over ten texts have been used to explore the representation of place and people. Look out for links to this on the ETANSW website.

### Publications: creative writing

The first book in a series of books on Creative writing (*Creative Writing Horizons*) has been completed and will soon be on sale. The first book deals with programming for creative writing and linking reading and writing; the second book is filled with one-off classroom ideas and some more complete units that can be readily adapted for any classroom. The third book will be about writing in different creative genres: digital, poetry, letter, multi-genre and many others.

Mel Dixon

Resources Officer, ETA NSW

## Queensland

ETAQ is having a busy time in 2016 with enormous change in the wind in all directions.

The year began with great energy, in February, as the management committee engaged in a process of strategic planning for the next three years. A series of exciting projects emanated from this process based on our four priorities of membership, awareness and advocacy, PD and building capacity. One of the exciting projects which is currently being pursued includes the 'I ♥ English' campaign wherein 50 members are profiled on the website and through social media each week, from the 2016 Annual State Conference until the 2017 conference. This fits in neatly with our preparations for our 50th anniversary year of 2017.

One of the other major changes is to investigate the development of a more up-to-date management structure including a smaller management committee and a series of larger sub-committees. The sub-committees have already begun work on a range of exciting projects – off and running.

Another major change in Queensland involves the redevelopment of the suite of English syllabuses by the Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority (QCAA). With the shift to a quite different system in 2018, including new externally devised and marked assessment for every subject, all syllabuses are being rewritten, requiring a great deal of quick work on behalf of ETAQ members to inform the process. Timelines have certainly been very tight. Members of ETAQ were surveyed to gather opinion on the makeup of the future syllabuses resulting in a submission, based on survey results, being provided. This process of gathering opinion will continue for the rest of 2016. A very important development has been the inclusion of ETAQ as part of the consultation processes in 2015–2016, by being included on the consultative committees along the way. ETAQ is also keen to learn from states with vast experience of providing teacher (and maybe student) support for external exams as we head to our new world of assessment.

2016 has also brought with it some excellent PD events. Firstly Seminar 1 welcomed Bianca Hewes to investigate the concept of curiosity in English teaching. This was followed by Beginning Teachers Day which provided support for our early career English teachers. Following on, May and June saw 3 more events including, Seminar 2, focusing on film and theatre in the English classroom, Differentiating for EALD Learners, a new offering for 2016, and Grammar Day, presented by Garry Collins. The huge month of PD events has provided choice for members and high levels of engagement by participants.

ETAQ's early career teachers are happily carrying around their marking in their new 'I ♥ English' teaching bags. We are keen to share their infectious energy with many more members at our upcoming state conference. They are a powerful symbol of the growth and potential of ETAQ in our year of such great change.

## South Australia

It has been an extraordinarily busy year for SAETA so far with organisation for the **National Conference** (7–10 July) reaching the pointy end. I feel confident that the over 1000 conferees will have found *Weaving*

*Worlds with Words and Wonder* a professionally inspiring experience and am grateful to have had the opportunity to work with my ALEA colleagues, Rosey Kadow and Julia Johnson, who have been a delight and shared the organisational load so graciously.

We started the year with a sell-out Refresher Course for Year 11 and 12 English Teachers – the first time we have ever had to close the books on this popular conference held at the end of Week 2 of Term 1. I am sure the fact that 2016 is the first year of the new SACE Stage 1 courses was a significant factor in teachers' interest in attending, and my co-convenor Rosie Egan and I expect even more next year when the Year 12 Stage 2 courses start. The chance to look once more at our senior courses in the light of the Australian Curriculum has been a breath of fresh air and most teachers seem to be embracing the changes, if also feeling a little challenged. Having this half-day conference at the beginning of the year is a great opportunity to share resources, strategies and ideas, as well as network with fellow teachers and establish informal mentoring opportunities.

We have also had our judging for the annual *Young Writers Award* take place, and this year demanded that all entries were submitted on-line, resulting in less waste of paper and easier publication of the winners' entries. However, the distribution and labelling of entries into folders was time-consuming for the organiser Mel Mansfield and we will be looking at streamlining this further. We look forward to the winners being announced by our chief judge in a ceremony in early August.

Finally, we have also just held our twenty-third *Meet the Writers Festival* at the Adelaide Convention Centre, with 1000 eager students and their teachers turning up in the morning of 21 June to listen to our inspiring keynote authors Claire Zorn and Jack Heath, as well as attend workshops with a range of other fabulous authors. Then over lunch we said farewell to them and greeted another 1000 students to repeat the experience for the afternoon session – an amazing process enabled by the great team led by Michael Kulusza and Aurora Read.

With plenty of things in the pipeline for the rest of 2016, now is the time to take a breath and enjoy our holidays and an inspiring conference.

Alison Robertson  
SAETA President

## Victoria

VATE has been abuzz with activity surrounding the newly implemented VCE English Study Designs, and this work will only continue and be busier as we move into 2017. Our implementation briefings have seen attendances at capacity, and we know that these briefings have informed and empowered our members across the state in curriculum that is indeed very new and exciting. Of particular importance to VATE has been the spread of our professional development (PD), with many regional workshops and presentations being made available to cater to our regional and rural members. Our Middle Years Conference with ALEA has been organised for Ballarat, and we are looking forward to connecting with our members in that region.

2016 has also been an exciting year of partnerships, offering our members an array of opportunities for learning and networking with other teaching professionals across the state. In particular, VATE continues to support the Melbourne International Film Festival's Next Gen Program, and we are also privileged to be involved in the upcoming Melbourne Writers Festival, Schools' Program again. VATE's special partnership with the Melbourne Theatre Company has seen members enjoying discounted rates at the MTC, but it is a special members' event for *Jasper Jones* in August that has everyone talking. Our friendship with the Australian Teachers of Media is also something that is bringing disciplines together, with a special ALEA/VATE strand at the upcoming ATOM Conference, and VATE members presenting workshops and running discussions.

These are interesting times in Victoria in education. With a newly elected government on the horizon and a newly devised Victorian Curriculum in our classrooms. VATE is poised more than ever to advocate and educate in our dynamic, exciting, and ever-changing world.

Tim Nolan  
Victorian State Delegate



# VALE

PAUL BROCK AM, PHD, FACE, FACEL

Good Friday 2016 saw the passing of one of Australia's great educators, Paul Brock. We in English education were especially privileged that Paul's career-long devotion to the importance of education was especially focused in our field. Paul was an Honorary Life Member of both the NSW English Teachers Association and the Primary English Teachers Association Australia, and he served for many years on the Years 11–12 and Years 7–10 English Syllabus Committees in NSW. Among his very many publications on English teaching, he produced the first major mapping of English curricula in the senior years in Australia in his *Who's doing what?: The senior English curriculum in Australian schools*, for the national association, AATE.

At the time of his death, he was Director of Learning and Development Research in the NSW Department of Education. He had previously been an accomplished teacher, a Senior Lecturer in English Education at the University of New England, consultant adviser to Commonwealth Minister for Education, John Dawkins, and Special Adviser to the Australian Language and Literacy Council. In Canberra, he contributed strongly to the White Paper: *Australia's Language: The Australian Language and Literacy Policy*, as well as a number of major reports. He later returned to NSW to take up senior policy positions, particularly focused on research, with the NSW Department of Education – from which positions he led a number of important enquiries and reviews. He was the author of the national discussion paper, *Standards of Professional Practice for Accomplished Teaching in Australian Classrooms*.

Paul was a Visiting Fellow at a number of universities in the UK and the US. He also held a number of Honorary positions, including Honorary Research Fellow at UNE, and at Sydney University as Adjunct Professor in the Faculty of Education and Social Work, and Honorary Associate in the Centre for Values, Ethics and Law in Medicine. His numerous high level awards are part of the testament to his influence in a number of fields, with education always being prominent. Paul was the inaugural Honorary Life Member of the NSW Secondary Principals Council and a Fellow of both the Australian College of Educators (ACE, 1998) and the Australian Council of Educational Leaders. (ACEL,

2008). ACE also awarded Paul the *Sir Harold Wyndham Medal* in 2002 for his career-long contribution to education, their NSW Branch Award in 2012 and the College Medal in 2015. ACEL also awarded him both the Patrick Duignan Award and the Hedley Beare Award for Educational Writing in 2012, as well as their Gold Medal in 2013.

Other high level awards included:

- an Honorary Doctorate in Educational Studies from James Cook University in 2004 for 'exceptional contributions to the advancement of human well-being'.
- the *Meritorious Service Award and Medal for Service to Public Education in NSW* from the NSW Minister for Education and Training in 2006- the highest award in NSW public education
- the *Exceptional Service Award* from the Professional Teachers' Council of NSW in 2006
- the *Dorothy Hoddinott Medal for Outstanding Lifetime Achievement* from the Australian Professional Teachers Association in 2010.

In 2009 the *Sydney Morning Herald* selected Paul as one of the five most influential people in NSW education. He was also the Vice Patron of Motor Neurone Disease NSW, an Australia Day Ambassador, and in 2006 was inducted as a General Member into the Order of Australia 'for service to public education, particularly as an adviser and author in the areas of strategic policy development, to maintaining high standards of teaching and professionalism, and to people with Motor Neurone Disease'.

All who knew Paul also knew how much more than the sum of his achievements he was. He had the ability to inspire, to be a thought leader and, indeed a leader of values. I'd heard Paul speak a few times before we actually met and it was true that there was always a buzz in the air after those talks. Paul was a member of the NSW Years 11–12 Syllabus committee for some time, but we worked together for the first time on the Years 7–10 Committee. We were designing a new Syllabus and those meetings brought genuine intellectual excitement and satisfaction. One member of the committee a few meetings into work on the new Syllabus said to me that he had joined as a sceptic about

the 'new English' and about this Syllabus's predecessor, but that Paul Brock would insist on bringing research findings into the conversation. He (the sceptic) now felt that the strongest intellectual underpinnings favoured the Syllabus's claims and its recommended practices.

This highlights key aspects of Paul's contribution to English in particular and to education in general. One was his pleasure in debunking myths, especially around literacy and literacy standards and the avenue this gave for presenting what research had actually shown in relation to the latest manifestation of a literacy crisis. In turn, this was also part of his broader sense of reminding society that teaching is not just about instrumentalist performance, but that it is a profession, and a profession involved in research and intellectual work.

Paul was an important historian of subject English (and later of education in NSW generally with his book, co-authored with John Hughes, *Reform and resistance in NSW public education*). His PhD was a study of curriculum change in NSW throughout much of the 20th century – a study in which he meticulously mapped key ideas and key administrative decisions that eventually manifested themselves in Syllabus documents. The administrative decisions were just as important as the key ideas. He valued strongly the idea of 'public service' and the possibilities for reform that public service can achieve. The way he writes about the work of Harold Wyndham, for example, shows this, and of course he himself represented strongly what committed public service can mean.

I was reminded by a colleague that Paul's style in advocating some important position or reform was to connect the professional with the personal. Paul would often complete talks on a variety of educational issues by coming back to a declaration of what he wanted education to achieve for his children. That's why 'passion' was such a common epithet used about him by those who spoke of him at his memorial service. When he wanted to make a point about pedagogy and curriculum, it could often come back to a call for educators to 'nurture and challenge my daughters' intellectual and imaginative capacities way out to horizons unsullied by self-fulfillingly minimalist expectations' (from Paul's *A passion for life*).

I worked with Paul on two long-term projects in recent years. One was a research study of groups of teachers who were achieving exceptional outcomes in Years 7–10 in NSW Department of Education schools. He was co-leader of the project with Professor John Pegg from UNE and, despite by then being wheelchair-bound, undertook the case study work in schools that other researchers undertook, as well as co-leading all other phases and aspects of the project. I also worked on an edited collection of essays on English co-edited by Paul, his wife Jackie, Don Carter and myself. Paul's own chapter reflects many of the themes presented above: its discussion of language and literature is subtitled 'a personal perspective'; it focuses on the history of the subject and draws on past and recent research in speaking back to aspects of the contemporary scene.

His chapter also moves freely back and forth between using Yeats, Chaucer, Wordsworth, Hopkins and *King Lear* to drive its argument. His love of literature was one of the defining elements of Paul's life. The role of the English teacher in opening imaginative worlds to students was perhaps in Paul's eyes their most central work. In one of life's occasional odd juxtapositions, on the way to Paul's memorial service I was in a train carriage and couldn't help overhearing a conversation between two young women who were obviously university students (and I thought, for no particular reason, probably teacher education students) discussing *Romeo and Juliet* and wrestling with aspects of the play which they clearly wanted to make sense of, in particular the positioning of the families in the play. Paul would have loved that. He'd have imagined a teacher in these young women's pasts, and clearly a teacher in their present, who had made Shakespeare important enough not to leave behind in the classroom, not to be confined to the writing of an essay, but to throw around between them, and to care about making sense of in a Sydney train carriage.

Paul never stopped his working life or using it to drive ideas. More than one speaker at his service made the very important point that twenty years ago, Motor Neurone Disease had taken Paul's future, and that he reached out and promptly snatched it back. He will be greatly missed.

Wayne Sawyer

'This above all ...'

# 'This above all ...'

## The Place of Ethics in English Teaching

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**Abstract:** Much of English teaching, whether it be mounting an argument on a social issue, analysing media, or developing a critical reading of a novel or film, implies an ethical stance. This article considers the relationship between ethics, belief and ideology. After looking, within a Lacanian framework, at the ways in which particular beliefs are made part of one's identity/subjectivity in such phenomena as Islamic radicalisation, it considers in what ways subject English might intervene in (or support) this process. It then looks at the basis of ethics in the strategies of English teaching. An argument is made for the importance of a conscious (if flexible) ethical position underpinning the work in English classrooms.

In the first act of *Hamlet*, Polonius caps his rather sententious advice to Laertes as he leaves for Paris, by concluding:

This above all – to thine own self be true,  
And it must follow, as the night the day,  
Thou canst not then be false to any man.

1.3, 78–80

If only it were that easy!

Polonius's words point to (in the hope of negating) a basic tension, although probably not a contradiction, in the nature of ethics. In one view, ethics is about being true to oneself, whatever the consequences might be. In another view, ethics is about not being 'false' to other people, taking personal responsibility for not causing others harm. Polonius claims that the two are inextricably linked, a connection as natural as night following day, but it is not difficult to imagine many situations in which being 'true to oneself' might cause considerable damage to others. The complicating factor comes, of course, in the concept of the 'own self'. There are three problems: can one really know one's 'own self' so as to be true to it; what happens if the 'own self' is not benevolently socialised, as Polonius seems to assume; and is there such a thing as the 'own self' anyway? English teaching, since the nineties at least, has either implicitly or explicitly been grappling with these issues of identity, and indeed with the matter of what provides the ethical basis of English teaching, since ethics in the sense of valuing particular kinds of behaviour and ways of thinking underpins much of English teaching.

Ethics is a huge subject, with many areas of contention and multitudinous positions taken on all of them. One of the problems to contend with is the matter of ideology and its relation to belief systems that provide the basis of ethical decision-making. If all ethical thinking, and certainly ethical decision-making, arises from belief (which may or may not be rational belief), it is arguable that all beliefs are fundamentally a matter of ideology (taking a broad and neutral definition of ideology that doesn't limit it to classic Marxist false consciousness – but then, who decides what's false?). We tend to think of ethics as a matter of private commitment, whereas ideology seems to be the product of social imposition. However, while

ethical thinking might seem to be a more flexible and deeper thing than ideology, one can never be sure that the intense belief out of which we are so passionately acting is not purely the product of socially imposed ideological commitments into which we have been interpellated (to use the Althusserian term we'll come back to later). In fact, it is probably true that any passionately held belief is not individually forged *ex nihilo*, but is made out of the ideological materials that constitute the world in which we are constantly creating and evolving our selves.

The uncertainty and contention around this has become a major issue given the phenomenon of Islamic radicalisation. One might take the case of Jake Bilardi, the 18-year-old Melbourne boy who went to fight for Islamic State, and who, it appears, ended his life as one of a chain of suicide bombers in Iraq. From all accounts, he was a rather quiet, intelligent, probably disturbed boy.

The standard newspaper account is that he was radicalised by accessing internet sources from Islamic State. This is undoubtedly true, but it begs many questions about what made him vulnerable, and how much that vulnerability was the answer to a need in his 'own self'. Most of us would agree that the Islamic State messages purveyed over the internet are propaganda, and therefore trying to impose a particular ideology on people. But such ideology can soon become profoundly held belief if it answers a need in the self, or if it's the basis of a pleasing self-image, or if it helps to make sense of a difficult and complex world. It becomes a belief that forms the personal ethics and informs the ethical system that can produce deadly action. While we deplore this, we might also note that Jake Bilardi and his associates in Islamic State would have seen him as being profoundly true to his 'own self' in driving and detonating a truck full of explosives, whereas we are shocked at the ease with which he was able to overcome any scruples about the need to be 'true to other men' and to a common humanity, rather than just true to his Islamic State colleagues. If extremists did not hold such strong beliefs, and did not have such unswerving faith in their own ethical rightness, fundamentalism wouldn't be so scary or so difficult to counter.

I have argued elsewhere that ethics and belief (not in a religious sense but as a kind of existential commitment) are important domains in the construction of subject English, as is ideology, since much of the critical work done in English classes is directed at uncovering and evaluating the ideology of texts

(Misson, 2012). This raises painfully difficult questions about what English classes might have to offer to a Jake Bilardi, who is going along his own dangerous and disastrous way of ideology, ethics and belief. I have also argued that a central concern – perhaps even *the* central concern – of English classes should be to give students agency, preparing them for taking an active role in responding to and shaping their world (Misson, 2013). In this context, the questions relating to a Jake Bilardi become even more excruciatingly difficult. Did Jake Bilardi have agency? He certainly engaged in action; he certainly did things that shaped his world. However, it might be argued that the kind of agency to be developed through English classes implies taking a responsible, ethical decision to act, and most of us would be inclined to say that he did not meet this criterion. He was blinded by his belief, probably coerced by his Islamic State superiors, and was not able to make a responsible judgment on what he was about to do.

What might we hope that a Jake Bilardi would get from his English classes that could possibly lead him away from making such a disastrous sacrifice of his life and operate his agency in a more productive way? As a way into answering this question, it will be helpful to develop some kind of account of the processes whereby such radicalisation might happen. I want to do this using Lacan's theory of the three registers of the psyche, because, however difficult and shifting his concepts are, Lacan does seem to me to offer a framework that acknowledges the multiplicity of human identity – how the 'own self' is constituted – and so can give us some insight into the complexity of the processes whereby such radicalisation might happen (see Misson, 2013). He acknowledges the importance of the social, while also recognising that the fantasy image we have of ourselves is vital, as is the whole realm of affect and the deeper drives that are less openly displayed. Ironically, since I am drawing on Lacan for his complexity, the account here will inevitably have to be radically simplified (but hopefully not falsified) for reasons of space, but I hope the points will resonate, and be sufficiently established for us then to go on to see how they relate to the practices of English teaching. (See the Appendix for a brief introduction to Lacan's theorisation of the three registers of the psyche.)

Before continuing, I should offer two disclaimers. The first is that I am in no way implying that a knowledge of Lacan is necessary for teaching English, although a sense of the complexity of human beings and how the subject addresses that complexity most

certainly is. That sense of complexity, however, can be achieved through many different frameworks. The second is that, while I will keep on referring to Jake Bilardi, I am not trying to give anything other than a highly speculative account of what might have been happening for him. I continue to use the name 'Jake Bilardi' because his case is a convenient and striking way to focus the issues involved. My argument would be that, at a different level and with less disastrous outcomes, many of our commitments are developed and structured similarly, and put similar pressure on our ethical impulses.

Perhaps the most straightforward element to explain why a person becomes committed to a certain belief is Althusserian interpellation. Althusser in his very influential, indeed foundational article, 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses' (1970/1984) used Lacan's conception of the 'mirror stage', along with Gramsci's conception of hegemony, as the basis of his account of how ideology works. His central contentions are (a) that 'ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence' (1970/1984, p. 36), the term 'imaginary' here having behind it its full Lacanian force, and (b) that 'Ideology interpellates individuals as subjects' (1970/1984, p. 44). His argument is that ideology works by presenting us an image of the world which we take as an image (as in a mirror) of ourselves, because we find it pleasingly coherent, and so we (mis)identify with it. We are thus called (hailed, interpellated) into subject positions, believing that the world is as it has been represented ideologically, and we act accordingly. Thus we become subjects of ideology.

In many ways, this is a convincing account of what might be happening in cases of Islamic radicalisation. While IS online videos may not be representing the 'real conditions of existence' that someone like Jake Bilardi is actually living out in the suburbs of Melbourne, they are providing something rather more powerful: they are representing a way of seeing and responding to the banal everyday Melbourne 'real conditions of existence' by providing a more interestingly committed, active and powerful sense of what a person might be and a more powerfully purposeful world they might inhabit in contrast. They are calling out to the viewer, interpellating him (or her), into a different narrative, in which he (or she) might break out of the banality of their existence, and perform dangerous and heroic acts for a profound religious and political cause.

But, of course, there is much more going on. The

implicit determinism of this model – the discourse relentlessly imprinting itself on the recipient and thus determining his/her subjectivity – is much too simplistic to account fully for what is happening. Such a view tends to deny people both agency and ethical responsibility, which is precisely what I am concerned to avoid. Apart from anything else, the Islamic State discourse representing the world in its particular way, is only one of the multitudinous discourses that a Jake Bilardi has been and is being subjected to. The crucial question is what makes him submit to that one and allow it in a sense to fill and define his subjectivity, rather than submitting to one of the others.

First we need to tease out some of the Lacanian elements in the Althusserian account. Althusser's theorisation in a sense bridges two of Lacan's three registers of the psyche: the Imaginary and the Symbolic. The Imaginary is the persistence in the psyche of the 'Mirror Stage', the time when the infant identifies with the image of itself, the 'jubilant assumption of his [sic] specular image' precipitating the ego, the 'I-ideal' before 'language restores to it ... its function as subject' in the dialectic of 'identification with the other'. The form of the individual that is produced in the mirror stage 'situates the agency known as the ego, prior to its social determination, in a fictional direction that will forever remain irreducible for any single individual' (2006, p. 76) Thus the Imaginary is the realm where we feel freest, most like 'ourselves', what we would like to be. As Mari Ruti suggests, it is the realm of 'personality', as opposed to the Symbolic, where the individual is seen most relevantly as the 'subject' (2012, p. 1).

The Symbolic is the realm of language and the Law. The 'social determination' of the self referred to in the last quotation from Lacan occurs with the move to the Symbolic, with the move to identification with the other rather than with the idealised self-image, and to an awareness of the peremptory demands of language and social life. Whereas the Imaginary provides a dream of self-identification, however 'fictional', the Symbolic is a site of alienation from the ideal self and acceptance of the power of other people and society, and acceptance of the inherent emptiness of language.

So Althusser's theorisation of ideology, as has been pointed out a number of times, is in fact not entirely consonant with Lacanian theory in that Lacan does not normally see the Symbolic as addressing the Imaginary to create subjectivity. The subject is created in the Symbolic, whereas it is the ego-ideal that is created in the Imaginary. Whether you think that

Althusser had a brilliant leap of intuition and developed something that was implicit in Lacan's theory, or that he misunderstood it and his theorisation is therefore flawed, will probably depend on how useful you find Althusser's conception of ideology, and on how faithful you want to be to the letter of Lacan. I am very much in the former camp, and not particularly concerned with the often rather opaque and sibylline letter of Lacan. I would not be willing to give up Althusser's conceptualisation of ideology, since it does explain the attraction to us of so much of culture, both popular and traditional, and of so much of ideological (including religious) belief. It seems to me incontrovertible that one of the things that is happening when we are addressed by representations of our world (or our possible worlds) that we find attractive is that we (mis)recognise ourselves in them, and so are hooked into that mindset. On the other hand, Lacan does show us that rather more is going on as well.

Part of that rather more is the 'identification with the other' that happens in the Symbolic register. Language implies dialogue, and so the presence of an 'other': we would not need language if there were no need to communicate with other people. The induction into language inevitably makes us aware of the otherness of those we talk with, and we (often) identify with those others and their view of the world that language communicates. This is not because we see it as an attractive version of ourselves, as in Althusser's view based on the Lacanian Imaginary, but rather because of the authority of language and the authority this confers on those wielding it. We learn about the world through language, and language shapes our perception of the world. We learn and establish our place in society, communicating with people through language, and the pattern of our identifications with others is a significant part of determining who we are and how we act. We recognise the power and authority of a particular discourse, as Jake Bilardi seems to have recognised the power and authority of the Islamic State discourse, and we subscribe to it, identify with it, make it central to the way we view and interact with the world.

Even so, that leaves the question open of what it is that leads a person to commit to particular discourses as the crucial ones around which they want to live their lives. It is not just the ones that are spoken most often or spoken loudest. The answer that Lacan might give would probably be in terms of desire and/or the drive.

With the move into the Symbolic, we lose the sense of Imaginary fullness (and indeed, we may all along

have realised at some level that the pleasingly coherent image of ourselves the Mirror-Stage gave does not correspond to the messy reality of what we feel we are). This loss of completeness creates an emptiness, a lack at the core of our being, and this creates desire. We are constantly searching for what we feel we once had so that we can return to a feeling of wholeness and completeness. There are two (related) elements that are the focus of this relentless quest: *l'objet petit a* – 'the little a object', 'a' standing for *'autre'* 'other' – which is the object of desire, and which we continually search for and think we have found in various manifestations, none of which can, in the end, assuage the lack at the core of our being; and *Das Ding* (the Thing), which is the central object of the Drive. *L'objet petit a*, to simplify wildly, is the manifestation of *Das Ding* in our ordinary lives that we live largely in the realm of the Symbolic, whereas *Das Ding* is operating largely in the register of the Real, that realm beyond language and what is expressible, and that is very bound up with emotion and affect. This is why, for Lacan, the object of desire and the object of the Drive is the same: they are both aiming for that which we feel we have lost with our entry into the Symbolic.

So, when a Jake Bilardi is attracted to the Islamic State ideology and way of life, there is undoubtedly an element of seeing that culture as *l'objet petit a* for him, that which will fill the lack in his being. More profoundly, it promises to be *Das Ding*, the ultimate object of the central Drive governing his existence. The fact that Lacan, following late Freud, sees the Drive as always ultimately being, to some degree, the Death-Drive only adds resonance to this account.

We can thus see that our deepest commitments bind themselves into our psychological being at multiple levels in multiple ways. The process can involve our fantasies about who we would like to think we are, our submission to authority and our desire to be part of a social community, and our deepest desires and unconscious drives. The complexity is only exacerbated by the fact that there are multiple calls on us to commit to different things in different areas of our lives, some of which may be in contradiction with each other. Besides, we do not become what we are and remain unchanging, but are constantly shifting in ourselves, constantly in a state of becoming, even if the persistence of our drive for *das Ding* might also mean that there are patterns of repetition within the fluidity.

I want to turn now to sketch in briefly how English teaching might help shape a person, so that they

develop resources to act ethically, and not be locked into disastrous commitments. Again I'm massively simplifying, and certainly giving a rather idealised picture of English teaching.<sup>1</sup>

I need to make it very clear at the outset that I am not for a moment suggesting that all that Jake Bilardi needed was a good English teacher. English classes are only a small part of schooling, and a very, very much smaller part of a young person's whole life. It's only in rather bad Young Adult fiction that disturbed and alienated young people are saved by their English teacher. There is no call on English teachers to be psychologists or counsellors, and certainly no call on them to be heroes. However, because English teaching is so bound up with identity, there is a kind of congruence, a fit between the processes of English teaching and the ways in which the human self is created, including how belief is folded into identity. English teaching can thus develop students in ways that might be helpful in making decisions that would lead them to have agency in a positive way when they are confronted with a call on their commitment, rather than in a way that is destructive of both themselves and others.

Perhaps the most obvious element is the critical function of English teaching. Some of the best work in Critical Literacy was predicated on Althusser's theorisation of ideology, and so it is standard practice in a lot of English teaching to develop in students the capacity to analyse how representations are positioning them and to ask the question what it is that a text wants its reader to believe. The hope is that the ability to analyse the strategies by which the text is working on us will undermine its power, although it has often been noted that this is not necessarily the case. Sometimes the text can just seem more clever and interesting because of the analysis, and its attractiveness increased.

This kind of work often enfoldes the notion of discourse, discourse being seen as the basis of the Imaginary representation that produces the compliant subject. Students, at least in some curriculum jurisdictions, are trained into seeing how discourses shape their understanding of what is being talked about, and how they are always 'partial' – i.e. they are not objective but have particular commitments ('partialities'), and only give a view of part of reality – there always being alternative perspectives that the discourses suppress.

While the notion of discourses is, as I say, often linked to an Althusserian concern with Imaginary representation, it can also be treated, perhaps more directly, as occurring specifically within the Symbolic,

as the basis by which the 'other' speaks to us. It is our identification with the other and subjection to the authority of their discourse that produces our socialisation and subjectivity. Critical analysis of the discourse and its partiality can thus become an important element in resisting discourses that might socialise us in dangerous ways, or create negative elements in our subjectivity.

Beyond this, even without bringing in the concept of discourses, there is a great deal of work on critical thinking done in English classes. This is often within a straightforward rational/logical framework, looking for the flaws in argument, the false premises (the false promises!), the illogical slides in reasoning, seeing the strategies – argumentative and rhetorical – that the text is using to convince us of its authority.

The aspects of English teaching mentioned so far have all been critical, and therefore concerned with showing the inadequacy of the texts that might be persuading someone to commit to a particular ideology. The problem with such strategies is that they tend to be negative, asking people to reject what's being proposed, without actually creating any positive vision of what might replace it. Human beings, like Nature, abhor a vacuum, and if such beliefs that are constitutive of the personality and subjectivity of the individual are taken away, then there must be something else to replace them. They will never be given up easily, and will only come rushing back in to fill the emptiness if more positive alternatives aren't given.

There are more creative and emotionally positive elements in English teaching that might counter a tendency to radicalisation in someone like Jake Bilardi. In some ways, one could see what happened to Jake Bilardi as a failure not of his critical faculties, succumbing to the emotional pull of the propaganda, but rather as a failure of imagination. At a very simple level, blinded by the vision of power and agency promised by Islamic State, one could argue that he failed to imagine what it might actually be like being part of this group in Iraq, the deadly daily reality of putting one's life in danger and killing others. Maybe the reality for him was consonant with his dream, but one suspects not, even if he remained committed to the beliefs that led him into the conflict, and continued to believe that he was doing important work to establish a divinely decreed world order. One can't help wondering whether the reality of driving a truck full of explosives to the point where he would have to detonate it was the heroic martyrdom that he imagined, or could a richer imagination have

warned him that there was a dark underside of entrapment and weakness in such an act.

There was also of course a dehumanising failure to imagine the impact on his victims, who were presumably not other fighters, but ordinary people going about their business. This is a failure of empathy, which much text work in English is concerned to develop. It is hoped that all the work on reading and discussing texts leads students to develop the capacity to understand what others are feeling and make decisions on their own actions in the light of that. We hope that they will be able to project themselves imaginatively into other people and different ways of being, in both their reading and their writing, and so develop a repertoire of deep understanding of other people, and their ways of being. Ideally, it is out of such empathy and imaginative projection (not just with texts, but in all aspects of their relationships with other people), allied with critical understanding, that students continue to form themselves, and so produce the continuous becoming that shapes their evolving self.

These empathetic and imaginative aspects of English teaching also have the advantage, at least sometimes, of providing a vision of alternative ways of being that might fill the emptiness that the critical strategies can create. They can open up the prospect of alternative possibilities that might be felt to have the status of *l'objet petit a* and perhaps be a less dangerous, more fulfilling thing to focus desire on.

So, English teaching has the potential to provide critical and imaginative strategies for students that might counter many of the processes by which radicalisation (or any kind of commitment to negative beliefs and actions) arises. However, there is one major problem: although we may hate to think so, *none of these strategies, none of the elements of English teaching I have been sketching in here, actually imply, let alone lock people into a particular ethical position.* They could equally well work to support the Islamic State ideology as to support a counter-terrorist, humanist or post-humanist, Western ethical position. Western democratic Christian texts can just as easily be shown to be positioning their readers in certain ways, creating an 'imaginary' relationship with reality, as Islamic State texts. Given the premises from which they work, IS texts can appear as relentlessly logical as any Western text, and indeed Western texts can appear totally irrational if one does not allow their premises. It would be as possible to imagine realistically an IS way of being as fulfilling, and the dreary emptiness of particular kinds

of life being lived in suburban Melbourne as appalling, as it would be to imagine the fulfilment of life possible in a Western democratic, capitalist society.

I am, of course, not suggesting for a moment that the IS way of thinking is anything other than abhorrent, or that that kind of life is in any way comparable to, or as worthwhile as life lived in a Western democracy. The point that I am making is this: English teaching inevitably is built on ethics. Whether doing text work, creative writing, critical thinking or media analysis, you are constantly making ethical judgments about what is being represented or how you want people to perceive what you are saying. There is no way to be ethically neutral in teaching or learning in English classes: your ethics may shift, be pragmatic, be unconscious or even be confused, – for students, particularly, their judgments may well be what they think their teachers want to hear and not what they believe – but both teachers and students are continually being called on to think ethically. However, what needs to be recognised is that the ethics are not formed by the kind of work being done, but rather that the ethical framework being activated in any class pre-exists and shapes the work, rather than the other way around. It is not a dilemma, but it is the unavoidable truth of English teaching that (a) you can't get out of taking ethical positions, and (b) the positions you take are not inherent to the subject but ones that you bring.

What allows us to forget that English teaching practices don't naturally import particular beliefs is that we are social and socialised beings. Accepted general social beliefs – and indeed, often, our particular personal beliefs – are very naturalised, and thus we think that the beliefs are inherent in the practices of English teaching rather than the practices themselves being neutral. The beliefs fill out the practices so naturally and convincingly that they feel as if they belong.

I have made the point about the ethical emptiness of the teaching practices quite starkly, but there are of course tempering considerations, one of the most obvious of which is this social grounding of much of our belief. We believe, on the whole, the kinds of things that people in our society believe, even if there may be perhaps nuances and varying degrees of strength in our commitment to different aspects of ethical life (the environment, domestic violence, asylum seekers, economic inequality, etc.) that produce an individual constellation of attitudes. If we have views that don't accord with acceptable social norms (albeit perhaps contested, minority ones), then we would be wise to

keep quiet about them in our work as a teacher for fear of having our students or their parents complain and losing our job.

Then there is inevitably a multiplicity of ethical positions within a classroom because it is not just the teacher who brings their own (socialised) ethical framework to bear, but the students also bring theirs, which interact with each other's and those of the teacher. In general, alternative views are accommodated or at worst mildly ignored. Classrooms are usually quite pluralist, and seriously contested ethical debate, particularly between teachers and students, is comparatively rare. There can of course be ethnic and religious tensions where one framework clashes violently with another, particularly among students, but, in the end, a truce is generally called and the value of a 'live and let live' attitude promoted, which, in itself, of course, is a strongly ideological position.

In spite of (or because of) all this, I want to argue for a greater bringing to consciousness of the ethical frameworks informing one's teaching, and perhaps bringing to bear a range of deeper and more stringent ethical thinking. It is a missed opportunity not to lead students to see more clearly what is ethically at stake in the texts they read and write, and to realise that there may be different ways of thinking ethically than simply going along with the frameworks they have been socialised into. At the very least, putting some of those frameworks to the test by bringing them up against other frameworks can be valuable. There can be instituted a tough, intelligent pluralism, rather than the *laissez-faire* pluralism of the 'live and let live' variety.

I obviously cannot develop an ethical program for English teaching within the bounds of this article, but what I want to do is to suggest some of the considerations that must be taken into account, drawing on work I have done elsewhere outlining a framework for English teaching (Misson, 2012, 2013).

Fundamental is a conception of the 'own self' far more flexible than that espoused by Polonius. I would argue that English teaching (indeed all education) needs to be based on a fluid conception of identity, an understanding that human beings never reach a point of stasis where they are their final 'true selves', but rather are in a constant state of becoming, each point on their trajectory being potentially a true (but not permanent) self. (William Connolly (2011, 2014), with Deleuze behind him, is a useful (non-Education) inspiration and reference point here. ) This notion of constant becoming is not an emphasis in Lacan, but I

don't think it incompatible with his theorisation of the human psyche. Indeed, the split between the different registers in Lacan's model inevitably produces instability within, as well as a radical unknowability about the self, which fits in well with the idea of the fluidity of one's being and never reaching the stasis of a 'true self'.

But basic to ethics is also the conception of the world the self is operating in. Connolly writes of the speed at which the world is changing, and the radical uncertainty this brings. It is a world of huge and various potential (as well as dangers), but exactly what of that potential will be realised at any point is becoming increasingly difficult to predict, particularly since the economic, political, social, environmental and other worlds are not only speeding along on their own trajectories of change, but interacting in unpredictable ways on each other. Zygmunt Bauman (2000, 2008, 2011a, 2011b), Mark Fisher (2009), David Harvey (2010, 2014) and Richard Seymour (2014) all, from their different philosophical, theoretical or political perspectives, speak to the same sense of fluidity and crisis in the world.

So, we have human beings, multiplicitous in themselves, in a constant state of becoming, operating in a world that itself is changing at an increasingly rapid rate, so perhaps it is no wonder that some people, like Jake Bilardi, latch onto fundamentalist and conservative beliefs. It seems that many people want rules, i.e. they want an external power telling them what is the way to behave. An example of this in relation to education was given recently in the letters page of the Melbourne *Sunday Age* (26/7/15). There were a number of letters in response to an article published the week before, which had suggested that the money spent on private schools wasn't worth it. What was interesting was that several of the indignant parents writing gave as their reason for sending their children to independent schools that 'private schools teach values'. I will pass over the extraordinary implication that somehow public schools don't teach values (and also the economic metaphor lurking behind 'values'), but rather point to the conception these people seem to have of 'values' as a monolithic set of rules that the student will be taught and that will then stand them in good stead in all situations at all times throughout their lives. (Polonius is alive and well and living in Melbourne!) Instilling such a set of rules does not seem to me to be what education should be doing, even if it could. It certainly doesn't promote what I would see as a healthy agency.

Ethical agency is surely about responsiveness to the complexity of the demands of the particular situation we find ourselves in. What the fluidity and multiplicity of the self and the world implies is that our ethical thinking must be equally fluid and multiplicitous if it is to remain relevant and responsive. This is not to deny the weight of history behind us, nor is it to say that there are not things that should persistently be valued through time. However, while not forgetting the past and what we have learnt from it, we should never easily fall back on stock, sedimented responses. Indeed, the multiplicity and fluidity of being, rather than being a problem is vitally important for us ethically, since it means that we are able to shift our perspectives, recognise the validity of opposing demands, and keep a fundamentalist determination at bay.

The importance of this for English classes is that it suggests the work done should be about developing ethical understanding that is nimble and flexible enough to cope with change, while at the same time firmly grounded enough to be defensible. There should be an openness and exploratory quality in it, a drive to see the complexity of situations and positions, rather than settling on simple responses. This means that inevitably it does look two ways – to the multiple and various self, which is being modified by the work, and to the others out there in a complex world whom one's decisions and actions will affect. Polonius is right in that one must be both true to one's self and not false to others, but wrong in suggesting that this is an easy balance to achieve. (Mari Ruti (2015) suggests the complexity involved.) It's not acceptable to be true to yourself if that causes avoidable damage to other people: it's not acceptable to do things for others if it involves damaging self-abnegation.

None of this is simple, nothing at all like night following day, but becoming conscious of how one is filling those empty practices of English teaching ethically is a start.

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## Notes

- 1 I have not given references in this section, since I am working with such a broad, generalised picture of English teaching that any references given would be arbitrary. I hope that everyone will recognise the elements I point to as present in much of, if not all English teaching.

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## *Appendix*

### **Lacan's three registers of the Psyche**

It will undoubtedly be helpful to some readers to give a brief introduction to (or reminder of) Lacan's theory of the three registers of the psyche. Lacan gives a radical rereading of Freud. It is both a narrative of the development of the human psyche, and a topography of it, and I suspect that some of the difficulties in understanding Lacan and Lacanians come from the fact that it is so easy to confuse the narrative with the topography.

The narrative is that a baby is born and its psyche is undifferentiated. It then passes through the mirror-stage, where the world reflects back to it a pleasing image of its own wholeness, and it feels as if it is at the centre of the world. Then it discovers that the world doesn't think that that's the way it is, society makes demands on it to behave in certain ways, and at the same time as discovering the possibility of that emptiness, it also is discovering language, and the fact

that language is predicated on absence – you don't need to talk about things if they are present – only compounds the problem. Thus the child is ushered into the symbolic realm, but language and society does not compensate it for what it has lost. The pleasing self-image can persist at times, but there is a whole realm of being that is not contained within either the fantasmatic self-image or in social and linguistic necessity – the realm of the Real.

Thus – and we move now to the topography – there are three domains or registers of the psyche. First of all there is the Imaginary, the realm of the mostly pleasing self-image we have of ourselves. Then there is the Symbolic, which is the realm of language and the Law, the realm of social constraint. Finally there is the Real, the turbulent movements of the psyche that cannot be contained either within the Imaginary or the Symbolic.

# 'Poetry does really educate':

## *An Interview with Spoken Word Poet Luka Lesson*

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**Abstract:** Spoken word poetry is a means of engaging young people with a genre that has often been much maligned in classrooms all over the world. This interview with the Australian spoken word poet Luka Lesson explores issues that are of pressing concern to poetry education. These include the idea that engagement with poetry in schools can be enhanced by putting spoken word poetry on the curriculum, the suggestion to provide teachers with professional development opportunities in order to equip them with the confidence to create poetry, and the need to surmount some of the societal, institutional and pedagogical challenges that hinder the promotion of poetry in education.

In June 2014 I visited Australia in order to conduct research on poetry education. One of the organisations that I visited on my trip was The Red Room Company, a nonprofit organisation based in Sydney devoted to promoting poetry as broadly as possible. One of its programs consists of poets taking up a residency at schools. Some of the figures for the poet-in-residence initiative are impressive. Employing 18 poets to run 63 workshops for 4,507 students and 185 teachers at 43 schools in all six Australian states, the program resulted in 16,247 contact hours in 2014 alone (The Red Room Company, 2015, p. 14). The Red Room Company employs these poets to engage young people with poetry, especially in socially disadvantaged contexts that sometimes consist of immigrant, non-English-speaking communities. Spoken word poetry is given a lot of importance. Hirsch (2014) explains that the term is a catchall that incorporates different kinds of recited poetry, including slam poetry, in which poets perform their work and are judged by an audience, and performance poetry, which refers 'to a type of contemporary poetry composed either for or during performance before an audience' (p. 453). Despite mentioning students' creation of performances and poetry among other texts, the absence of an explicit reference to spoken word poetry in the Australian Curriculum English (ACARA, n.d.) is conspicuous. This is especially so given the importance it is given in the current poetry education literature (Gordon, 2009; Williams, 2015).

One of the poets employed by The Red Room Company is spoken word and hip-hop artist Luka Lesson, this being the stage name for Luke Haralampou. His choice of stage name is especially appropriate given his work with students. In a way he teaches young people to perceive poetry in a different manner from how it is traditionally depicted in class. Lesson is of Greek heritage and a firm believer in the value of multiculturalism. A graduate in Indigenous Studies, he has taught the subject at Monash University. He is reported as having 'helped many marginalised young people find their own voice, to speak up about racism and all things unjust' (Xing, 2012). Moreover, he is described as being 'committed to standing with communities of all backgrounds to establish a connection between social issues, poetry and self-empowerment' (The Red Room Company, 2015b). It is probably for these

reasons that Lesson co-founded the Centre for Poetics and Justice, a Melbourne-based community organisation dedicated to the integration of poetics and social transformation. The organisation runs spoken word workshops within a variety of youth venues, including schools and juvenile detention centres. Its workshops use performance poetry as a vehicle for young people's expression and social engagement.

Lesson has been active in the spoken word poetry scene since 2009 and currently works as a full-time poet, frequently collaborating with musicians and visual artists. In 2011, he won the Australian Poetry Slam final and the fame that ensued as a result of this has allowed him to tour the world performing his poetry, particularly in the USA, Asia, South Africa and Oceania. *Please Resist Me* was Lesson's first spoken word poetry album and it challenges the exploitation conducted by colonial and social powers:

Please resist me  
Colonise me, compromise me and conflict me  
Please don't risk me  
Please call me stupid  
Because your resistance  
Brings my evolution

It is because of the expression of such sentiments that Lesson's 'poetry not only resonates with audiences, it dares them, teases and coaxes them into something infinitely brighter' (Sometimes, 2013). Despite the somewhat ephemeral nature of spoken word poetry, Lesson published *The Future Ancients* in 2013. The book acts a poetry collection and an interactive means by which the reader can engage with the text, either by jotting down their own lines or else by linking to audio and video recordings of Lesson's performances through QR codes.

Besides being a spoken word performer, Lesson (as cited in Saeed, 2015) sees it as his job to engage young people with poetry:

I get employed to make poetry be something more than dusty books and old irrelevant quotes by dead authors. Schools teach poetry but kids generally aren't that keen, so my job is to help facilitate writing and the performance of students' own work, some of which are as young as 13 years old. It is actually much easier than people think. Young people of all backgrounds are yearning to be heard, and stamp their authority and name on this era.

Lesson (as cited in Saeed, 2015) is aware that in order to engage young people it is necessary to change

their perception of poetry by means of such forms as spoken word:

People envision boredom more than anything when they hear that word ... Although taken as 'classic' and 'proper English' now, Shakespeare was doing then what spoken word and rap do now, fully owning his language and using it in whatever way he felt fit, capturing the slang of lay people from the streets, not the bourgeoisie who have since claimed him as their own. The stigma is falling though, thanks to the work of great and powerful poets practicing their art form and talking about current issues worldwide.

It is with the intention of exploring Lesson's commitment to engaging young people with poetry that I asked to interview him after observing one of his workshops at a high school in the southwest of Sydney. Some of the issues that Lesson touches upon in the interview are highly significant within poetry education. These include the importance of broadening the curriculum's conception of poetry by enabling young people to watch and perform spoken word poetry, the benefits of providing teachers with professional development opportunities that encourage them to position themselves as creators of poetry rather than merely consumers of the genre, the significance of selecting pedagogical approaches that engage young people with poetry, and the challenges to and means of promoting poetry even more powerfully in education. While giving credit to those teachers who invite spoken words poets such as himself to the classroom as a means of heightening students' engagement with poetry, Lesson also questions the effectiveness of pre- and in-service training in preparing teachers for the job of teaching poetry. This seems to be in line with Ewing's (2010) idea that a 'paucity in pre-service training is compounded by the widespread lack of sufficient or appropriate in-service teacher professional learning in the Arts' (p. 35)

Lesson's interview, presented verbatim, is one of a series of interviews on poetry education I have conducted with poets in the UK, Australia and the USA over the past few years. A number of interview-based articles such as this one have been published in refereed journals (e.g. Xerri, 2012, 2014a, 2014b) or are in the process of being published. One of the aims of these articles is to provide poets with a means of weighing in on the poetry education debate and thus enrich the existent literature, from which their voices are usually absent. Another aim is to provide teachers with access to poets' thoughts on poetry education and

thus broaden their understanding of ways of engaging young people with the genre and the rationale for such engagement.

### The Interview

XERRI: Some people have voiced concern about the status of poetry in contemporary culture. They maintain that poetry is experiencing a crisis and that its readership is in decline. From your experience of working with young people, do you consider such sentiments to be valid?

LESSON: I think that poetry hit rock bottom but is now on its way back up. I think the entry point for that journey back up is spoken word or performance poetry or slam poetry. I don't think it's the best form of poetry; I don't think that there's such a thing as best or better poetry. But I'm a fan of the oral tradition of poetry, that kind of way of writing and experiencing poetry.

XERRI: When you say poetry hit rock bottom, what do you think are the factors that led to its decline?

LESSON: Not being able to move forward from what people call 'the classics' and not being able to connect with current poetic forms as well as being too dusty, traditional, and Anglo-centric when it comes to poetic forms.

XERRI: Did you see that in your own education?

LESSON: Absolutely! My education on poetry was so boring and so disconnected from the poetry in my culture and from the poetry that every single person in my classroom already had in their cultures. If someone had told me this Greek poet was a really good poet I would have totally ate it up but instead I was being taught to sound like eighteenth or nineteenth century Englishmen. Poetry is only as good as its poets, only as interesting as its characters. My education was basically teaching me to imitate someone that was so ethnically and historically disconnected from who I was that I had no entry point into the reasoning for why I would find that interesting.

XERRI: When you chose to become a performance poet or else poetry discovered you, did you feel that you were trying to position yourself as a rebel against the education you had received?

LESSON: Not necessarily. I don't really think that was a primary function of why I was becoming a poet. It's just that I was doing workshops for as long as I was writing. So I was in schools a lot and a lot of my work ended up being providing teachers with a relief because they also wanted their students to get excited and have an entry point into poetry. At the start I was like, 'Oh yeah, this might be a bit rebellious' or 'They're not going to like me because I'm

a hip-hop guy.' But actually I found the opposite. Teachers were craving to have a hip-hop artist or a poet interested in their classrooms so that their students could fall in love with words. I think that's all that teachers should be doing initially. They should forget about the word 'poetry' or what form it takes and instead help students to fall in love with words in as many ways as that can be done.

XERRI: When you work with young people in schools – schools being a very formal and artificial setting – do you feel that you're trying to distance yourself from your own poetry education?

LESSON: Totally! My poetry education at school has nothing to do with me as a poet. It never really affected me. When I was young my mum gave me a copy of Lao Tzu's Tao Te Ching and although it might not be called a poetry text it was very poetic and it made me fall in love with words. It wasn't the main thing that made me want to be a poet but I realise now that that was something I loved. I was also into music when I was young. Hip-hop was really my poetry education, I think. Now I'm going full circle and discovering page poetry because I can appreciate it and understand it better.

XERRI: But at the same time you seem to want to inspire the young people you work with to become spoken word poets.

LESSON: Any poets! I don't think there's a page versus stage poetry thing. I'm in love with all forms of it but what I want is for a generation of young people to know that they can just sound like themselves and express themselves in a way that's contemporary for them. By definition, teachers won't necessarily know what that means; they won't necessarily be on the same level as young people. Young people make new words and play with language so much in the classroom and anywhere else all the time.

XERRI: How solid is poetry's status within the Australian educational system?

LESSON: How solid? I'd say it's not going anywhere. Poetry is definitely going to be part of the English curriculum and has been part of it for a long time. The way in which it's going to be taught is the most important issue though.

XERRI: Is there sufficient support for the promotion of poetry in education here in Australia?

LESSON: I'm going to say no because I know what poetry can do, how far it can be taken, how strong it can be, and how it can feed into other art forms. Poetry can form the basis of lyrics writing, the basis of script writing, the basis of a lot of experiences with words. I mean that's my opinion as a poet. I think that if young people are taught

to be poets or to express themselves freely and perform their work, even if they don't become poets later on in life, poetry does help human beings become more whole. It's good to be able to put words down on paper, to be able to be unafraid of all the things that are in your head, or the fears that you might have, or the memories you're trying to avoid. Poetry is really an art therapy of sorts.

XERRI: What are the challenges here in Australia when it comes to promoting poetry in education?

LESSON: There aren't enough poets; there aren't enough good quality performance poets that can run a good workshop and that can really get the most out of young people. I think there are actually holes in the market that allow more young people to be full-time professional poets. I think it's important that we're able to train or help poets become workshop artists that are high quality when doing their thing. Another hole is that even though there are schools that are definitely interested in poetry, there are also plenty of schools that don't know what it is at all. Once people discover what it is, they like it. For example, I'm lucky because once people come to one of my gigs they're like, 'I've never heard of performance poetry but I love you. I hated rap before but I love this. I don't know what it is, I don't know why, but I love it.' And that's why I say that poetry hit rock bottom but it's coming back. Once people go to a slam or a good event or they see a good poet, they're fans for life. A lot of the people who attend such events are teachers or are involved in education in some way; they can see the value in that. In the States there's a whole tour that you can do that's just made up of colleges. There's a market. There's actually an event that all the college heads of English departments go to. You perform either by yourself or in your group and they book you for the year. That's an event that happens once a year in the States. So there's a real gap in terms of the forward thinking of the organisation of the whole poetry thing here in Australia. However, having said that, we don't have that many poets of high quality.

XERRI: Why not?

LESSON: Australia is an interesting case because we have a small population with a huge landmass. So we're finding it hard to influence each other and to grow as artists if we don't live in the city centres where there's a lot of poetry going on. Even then I wouldn't say that the best poetry I've seen has been in Australia. It's hard to grow as an artist in Australia because of the distance, time and money that it takes to travel around and experience great poetry and to go to as many gigs as possible. A lot of us aren't discovering spoken word until later because we didn't do it at school.

But the next generation will be stronger and better for sure.

XERRI: What should be done to promote poetry in education even more broadly?

LESSON: I would suggest that YouTube be treated like a library, that there be videos on the curriculum that every student in Australia needs to see, that is, spoken word videos from Australian and overseas artists. I would then implement programs where poetry slams were part of the poetry curriculum. For instance, I sometimes spend a month at Xavier College [Melbourne's premier private secondary institution] and poetry slams are embedded in the English curriculum. Every student has to write a poem about justice, every class has a poetry slam, the top two from every class go into a final poetry slam and then Year 10 has a poetry slam champion every year. It means that every single person is writing and performing something and facing a lot of fears and learning a lot of things in the process.

XERRI: Do you have any suggestions with regards to teacher education?

LESSON: I think teachers are really busy. I think teachers have a really tough job. Those that are thinking outside the box really need support. Many of the things I do when I do teacher training consist of basic workshop outlines, showing resources available online, and giving them class sets of my book so that they can use it in their lessons. I also encourage them to write their own poetry and perform it and be strong in that so that students can see that it's a two way street.

XERRI: What are the benefits of teaching creative writing to young people?

LESSON: I think a lot of people when they get older and they haven't learnt creative writing feel very frustrated with their lives. I think the more words that we have in our heads the more successfully we can express exactly what we're feeling. Without that we get very frustrated and with that frustration comes acting out or self-loathing or anger or just frustration with situations. I think creative writing is essential, whether it's a diary or a poem or an anecdote or whatever. To be able to say what we feel and put it out into the world is to exist. So I think it's essential.

XERRI: What do you hope to achieve by means of a poetry workshop with young people?

LESSON: At the very least I want them to have fun with words and to have a laugh and enjoy the value of making a joke or creating a line that makes sense. At the most I've had students who have gone from cutting themselves

and being 100% on the edge of suicide to becoming great poets and writing a poem everyday. I keep in contact with them and then they grow and change and become beautiful artists. I've been doing this for a number of years and I've seen that the students who have been close to a negative edge or suffering a lot in their lives might not have made poetry their career but it became a catalyst for change. I also try to work with the people whose role is to educate, those that listen to what's going on in the hearts and minds of young people so that we can all raise our consciousness as a society. That's really what I'm all about.

XERRI: How do young people usually respond to your workshops?

LESSON: They love it. I've never really had a negative situation with a student disliking something to that end. There might be a grumpy kid or two but usually even the kids that are super angry and upset about something they're also sometimes the best poets because they've got a poem in them. That frustration is exactly what I had at school. I was always talking a lot or hating class or being bored. Sometimes they're the best poets. I'm lucky that I'm happy to be in a classroom, that I love being in a classroom, that I'm still young enough for students to see that it's a young person's thing that they can jump into. I've had incredible things happen in a classroom that I can't begin to explain.

XERRI: Do you feel they respond better to performance poetry rather than page poetry, or the opposite?

LESSON: In my experience it's performance poetry that they respond to better. You wouldn't call me a page poet even though I have a book, but it's always the embodiment of the poem, it's always the passion that I bring in presenting the poem that initially grabs their attention and makes them understand what it is I'm getting at. So it's always performance poetry.

XERRI: You've already mentioned that you have experience of working with teachers. What are your views on their approach to poetry teaching?

LESSON: I live in a bubble because my experience of teachers is of those who have asked me to come into a school or they're at an event and they see me perform. I see a lot of teachers that are using YouTube, grasping at anything they can to be able to give students something interesting for them to enter the world of poetry, anything to make poetry come alive for them. So I see a lot of teachers being really creative and being inclusive and culturally aware. Poetry does really educate. If you use YouTube for half an hour you can see poets of twenty different nationalities speaking about something important. That's

what a rapper I'm influenced by calls 'edutainment', which is educating through entertaining means. That is why I got into what I do. It can be entertaining but still educational. Entertainment draws people in to be educated. That's how spoken word poetry can go much further than a book.

XERRI: How dependent is the success of performance poetry in schools on the passion of these specific teachers that you've mentioned?

LESSON: Very dependent! If it weren't for the passion of those teachers spoken word wouldn't be in schools because it's not on the curriculum.

XERRI: Should it be part of the curriculum?

LESSON: Yes, because as soon as young people have this experience they are motivated to do spoken word poetry or engage in it. I think that the curriculum needs to be half what adults feel young people need to learn and half what young people are really hungry for. If they're already listening to spoken word poetry or they're already into a Luka Lesson or an Omar Musa or a Taylor Mali or whoever it is, then that should definitely be part of the curriculum so that they can grow and be influenced by and become poets. Spoken word poetry is now a career so there's no reason why it shouldn't be part of the curriculum.

XERRI: Students who find themselves at a school where there is a teacher who is passionate about spoken word poetry are lucky in a way. How can we reach the other teachers? What kind of support can they be provided with at pre- and in-service levels?

LESSON: A lot of the English teachers that I meet, even if they've never heard of me before, they do get to love what it is that I do and what other poets do. They can appreciate what it involves. To be able to give them access to spoken word in teacher training or through the curriculum, whether it's through a book or a video clip or an event or anything at all, that will make spoken word explode; it would make it quite powerful in this country. I think this is shown by how many teachers are getting into it on their own. Once they hear of it then they really understand that young people will engage with it.

XERRI: Is there the willpower to really allow teachers to come into contact with performance poetry, to provide them with training on how they could actually cultivate this particular set of skills in their students?

LESSON: In my experience there isn't really any willpower on the part of the authorities to put spoken word poetry on the curriculum. I don't think so. At the moment I'm in talks with a guy who sits on a board that decides on which texts feature in the English curriculum in Victoria. I gave

him my book and I'm trying to make that happen. But it's difficult, especially if it's a book of a spoken word artist or a CD of a spoken word artist who refuses to put things in books because they're all about the oral tradition. There are plenty of ways in which it can be done but I don't think any poet has had the balls or the guts to talk to these people. I think often the problem is that these two worlds aren't talking to each other. We just sit back and say, 'Oh they hate us. They hate our poetry.' But it's possible that these people just live in circles where they have no idea who I am and what kind of work I do. I really hope there are a hundred full-time poets by the time my day is done. It looks promising. There are at least two poetry slams in Australia that get at least 200 people plus every month and all those people are falling in love with it again and again. I think it's on the rise.

XERRI: You might agree with the idea that teachers are the agents of change in a way. How important is it for them to position themselves as readers and writers of poetry when they're teaching young people?

LESSON: I would say it's very important. However, not if it's insincere or if it's just for the sake of it; that would cause more damage than good. But whenever I've been in a class where I've helped students to write something and the teacher has written as well and has shared what they've written and it might be something vulnerable or personal, the respect between teacher and students becomes so equal and solid. Vulnerability is a tool that is sometimes undervalued by teachers. It's not just about teaching but it's about sharing and learning and being able to express everything. So yes, I think it's important. I think teachers should definitely be connoisseurs of poetry, they should definitely have read some of the greats or at least know how to YouTube for a couple of hours so that they can show students some cool stuff. But if they do it only because it's on the curriculum then it becomes just like any other subject. A good teacher is what makes a good subject. My best subjects at school were the ones my best teachers were into.

XERRI: Can teachers step into your shoes and do what you do?

LESSON: Yes and no. I'd say no because I've spent as many hours learning what I do as they've spent learning what they do. So obviously it's my profession. But vulnerability, personal strength, and self-expression can be found in anyone. Sometimes the best poets are the poets that are performing their very first poem on stage; sometimes that experience is the greatest thing you can witness. I'm not going to say that it's some kind of academic or prophetic

skill that I've gained, but I do think that teachers should try it. If they're that way inclined they should really get into it. I've done workshops with CEOs of businesses who cry afterwards because they remember something about their children that they might have forgotten because they work so hard. There are so many beautiful poems that can be written by anybody at all. I did a workshop with about 400 teachers over four weeks and every time I did it I got them to write a poem. All did the exact same thing as students. When they were writing the poem and I was walking around the room they all started leaning over it so that no one could see it. I asked them to perform and they were really quiet. And then one or two confident ones got up and they always have super long poems because they're great writers. And then I'd pick a couple of people who thought that they were terrible, but their poems were excellent, the best poems of the day. Usually they're the artists who are perfectionists. It's exactly the same thing in the classroom. I think the problem is that teachers are teaching something that they can't actually do themselves, that they're too scared to do themselves. That ice needs to be broken so that they can really understand the benefits of poetry.

XERRI: The curriculum emphasises the importance of teaching creative writing but some teachers do not write poetry despite the fact that they might like to be given the opportunity of being trained in how to do so. Do you find it an anomaly for the curriculum to stress the importance of creative writing but at the same time the people who are reaching students might not be practising creative writing?

LESSON: Let me be a bit cheeky and say that it's a tad too easy to become a teacher. I think that teachers are probably not paid as much as they should be and that the profession is not respected as much as it should be. However, teachers are probably the most influential persons in young people's lives, in our lives. I think it's quite dangerous, shallow and ignorant for teachers to teach creative writing and yet are too scared to express themselves, or talk about a secret that once happened, or a fear that they once had, or write something beautiful about a place they've been to, or they haven't travelled outside Australia, or they haven't been able to experience different cultures while teaching a class full of different cultures. It's not to say that it's the teachers' fault, because this is the way the system is set up today. But it's still dangerous, especially for Indigenous and country communities where teachers are meant to go out for their first few years of teaching to do country service. They're the worst teachers

that they will ever be in their first two years. They can only get better from there and yet we're sending them to really impoverished areas where young people need to be most influenced. So I think it is difficult to be able to teach poetry if you're not writing and reading it, if you're not trying it. I think teachers should have access to being able to learn to read and write poetry within the process of becoming teachers or developing as teachers. This would help them to drop the fear. At what point do you call yourself a poet? You write one poem and you can call yourself a poet. You can just be a loudmouth and call yourself a poet if you're good at talking shit. Where's the point when you can call yourself a poet? It's not like you get a degree and you say, 'I'm now a poet.' It's more of a philosophy for me. To live and write poetically is something that is healthy as a human being. So I hope that that becomes more a part of Australian society. I think we've got such a great opportunity. Every classroom that I've been in in all the countries that I've toured – Indonesia, China, the States, New Zealand, Greece, South Africa, England – wherever I've been there's this huge history of poetry, massive histories of poetry. From Mao Tse-tung's poetry to my friend in Indonesia who is a well-known poet. Because there are 220 million people in Indonesia whenever he releases a book he sells 200,000 copies. He's a normal dude but there's such an ancient tradition of poetry there and he's tapped into that. And yet here in class we're still looking at just Shakespeare or just Keats or whatever it is. I just think Australia needs to become more open-minded in many ways.

XERRI: Thanks so much for this interview.

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# The Teaching of English in Tasmania:

## Building Links Between Senior Secondary and Tertiary Teachers

*Lisa Fletcher, Robert Clarke, Ralph Crane, Rosemary Gaby, Naomi Milthorpe and Hannah Stark, University of Tasmania*

**Abstract:** This article tells the story of two projects initiated by the University of Tasmania's English program, which were designed to investigate and improve the pathway from pre-tertiary to tertiary English studies in the state: the First Year English Survey (2012–2014) and the Teaching of English in Tasmania Community of Practice (TETCoP). The authors draw on the findings from the survey to show that students in Tasmania who enrol in tertiary English believe that they are progressing their studies in a discipline with which they are already familiar; it seems reasonable to assume that is also the case nationally. The article, then, presents TETCoP as an example of one approach to developing and maintaining productive links between English educators in the senior secondary and tertiary sectors – as a means to encourage others to build on or learn from the work we have done in Tasmania.

### Introduction

In his book *The Global Future of English Studies*, James F. English (2012) insists that English is a 'discipline with a future' and as such entails 'choices and responsibilities' (p. 268) for academics as they acknowledge and reflect critically on their role as tertiary teachers. As the only provider of university English within the state, the English program at the University of Tasmania recognises an obligation to meet the needs of a diverse student body whilst maintaining high standards of scholarship and breadth of coverage. As the program defines it, 'English' does not describe a single-stranded academic discipline with a clear and agreed upon knowledge base, theoretical framework, or scholarly methodology. Scholarship on the teaching and learning of the English major in undergraduate degrees emphasises its 'mercurial nature' (Salvatori & Donahue, 2002, p. 83) and insists that a 'serious conversation about what ... English majors should learn' (Linkon, 2011, location 63.) is both crucially important and incredibly difficult. English is best thought of as a 'polyglot field' (Salvatori & Donahue, 2002, p. 69) with a range of intersecting study areas (see Linkon, 2011; English, 2012). Nevertheless, as the current move to establish Threshold Learning Outcomes – spearheaded by the nascent 'peak body,' the Australian University Heads of English (AUHE) – indicates, there is a strong sense across the tertiary sector that English needs to be more clearly and carefully defined. The curriculum of the English major at the University of Tasmania therefore aims both to offer its students a breadth of pathways (literary studies, screen studies, theatre studies, creative writing, cultural studies), and to provide clear, flexible, and robust learning outcomes which staff and students can recognise as specific to the discipline.

Teaching an English major in the twenty-first century involves making decisions about the *content knowledge* that the program must offer, with an awareness that such decisions are always contingent on institutional and broader cultural contexts. It involves determining

also how best to equip students with what Sherry Lee Linkon (2011) calls the *strategic knowledge* of English: the 'ways of thinking' that distinguish the work of English academics and students from other cohorts. Whilst the key pathway of the English major at the University of Tasmania is literary studies – and this is consistent with majors across the country – the content knowledge that is expected from English programs around the world cannot be properly taught without engagement with the related pathways listed above.

This article discusses two related projects initiated by the program: the First Year English Survey (2012–2014) and the Teaching of English in Tasmania Community of Practice (TETCoP). The Survey was conducted using Lime Survey software via the University's Desire2 Learn Learning Management System, MyLO. The survey comprised nine multiple choice questions designed to help us gain knowledge about the backgrounds and experiences of first-year English students, and one open response question to gather qualitative data about the factors that motivate them to enrol in tertiary English studies ('What do you hope to learn as a university English student?'). Survey reports were generated at the end of the first and second semesters of each year of the project, and discussed and analysed by the first-year teaching team. Our aim was to treat the survey results as 'live' data that would inform the content and design of the curriculum for current and future students.

TETCoP was launched formally in 2013 with the support of a University of Tasmania Teaching Development Grant. The primary aim of establishing a Community of Practice was straightforward: we wanted to create opportunities for English academics and pre-tertiary English teachers in the state to get to know each other and to share knowledge about the courses they teach. From the outset, we knew that this aim was ambitious: before the introduction of TETCoP, there had been virtually no coordinated dialogue about the teaching of the English discipline between the secondary and tertiary sectors in Tasmania. The historically weak links between English teachers in school and English lecturers in universities is not peculiar to Tasmania: as this project has grown and attracted national interest, we have learned that there is a striking lack of coordinated links between the sectors in our discipline. This is a concern for a number of reasons, not least because – as the survey of first-year students reported here shows – students who enrol in English at university reasonably believe that they are

*progressing their studies in a discipline with which they are already familiar.* This evidence is reinforced every year anecdotally, at Open Days and through conversations with new first-year students who assume a much closer relationship between the two sectors than exists in practice.

### The First-Year English Survey

In 2009 and 2010, the English program conducted simple informal surveys of first-year students during the first lecture of each year. These surveys were conducted on paper and asked students to provide details of their prior experience with English studies and to explain their main reason for enrolling in first-year English. Pre-tertiary (Year 12) English is not a prerequisite to enrol in English units at the University of Tasmania. Nevertheless, in both years the vast majority of students who responded to the survey had successfully completed at least one of the three pre-tertiary courses then on offer to students undertaking the Tasmanian Certificate of Education (TCE): English Communications; English Studies; or English Writing. A significant number of students had completed two of these courses, and some were graduates of all three.

In 2012, in order to gain more detailed information about our student cohort in a form which might be more usefully analysed and reported, we introduced the First Year English Survey, devised by English lecturers Lisa Fletcher and Robert Clarke, with assistance from University of Tasmania Educational Developer Nigel McKinlay. This survey, approved by the University's Human Research Ethics Committee, was conducted over three years (2012–2014).

The survey's aim was to gather formal information about our students' prior experiences of studying English and their motivations for enrolling in English at university. It asks 10 broad-ranging questions. Four of these questions request demographic information (age, gender, nationality, and non-English-speaking background status) whilst the remaining questions address the students' individual prior experience of English studies at secondary school and university.

In terms of broad demographics, the majority of the 426 respondents in the sample, surveyed over three years, were aged 25 years or younger (71.6%), with women over represented (F=73.2%, M=25.8%); a few respondents chose not to answer this question. Most of the respondents were born in Australia (91.1%) and most speak English as a first language (89.9%). The majority of respondents completed the TCE (56.8%),

with most other students indicating that they had received an equivalent award from an Australian jurisdiction. And, not surprisingly, most respondents completed their secondary school education in Tasmania (69.5%). This sample of respondents reflects an even mix of experiences across the three major strands of English studies offered in the Tasmanian college curriculum, although more students indicate having had experience in the subject English Writing: English Communications (35.8%), English Studies (42.1%), and English Writing (44.2%). This data, while unsurprising, provided the basis for conversations with senior secondary English teachers in the Community of Practice and strengthened members' sense of a shared student body.

In response to the question of why they enrolled in first-year English at the University of Tasmania, students chose from 10 set answers, and could provide free-form responses as well. Respondents were also able to select more than one set answer. Across the results from surveys for all three years, three responses stand out in terms of their popularity. The most frequently cited reason selected for enrolling in first-year English is, 'I enjoy reading, so English is an obvious choice for me' (49.7%). The next most popular response is, 'I enjoyed English at secondary school' (44.4%) – this response, as well as 'I was successful at English at secondary school' (39.7%), lays down a challenge for us, in terms of retaining these successful students and building on their disciplinary loyalty at the same time as we meet the needs of less confident students. The survey respondents also indicate a preference for the response, 'English will give me skills that will be important for my future career' (43.9%). Importantly, the survey results make it abundantly clear that students enrol in English with the belief that the University's units are the logical next step from TCE English courses. These results chime with the findings of a national survey, *The First Year Experience in Australian Universities*, which identified 'studying in a field that really interests me' as the most prominent reason for enrolling in tertiary study (Krause, Hartley, James, & McInnis, 2005, p. 12). This ten-year survey, conducted in 1994, 1999, and 2004, identified 'increasingly positive views of the role of school in preparing students for university study' and speculated that this trend may be the result of enhanced efforts to 'bridge the gap between school and university' (Krause et al., 2005, p. iv). The report presents strong evidence that increasing collaboration between schools and universities is one of the

most effective ways to enhance the transition process for students. TETCoP – discussed in detail below – is premised on the view that such collaboration should take place at the disciplinary level.

Survey responses consistently suggested that students enrol in English because they like the subject (reading works of literature), because they have had a pleasurable experience with the discipline (undertaking English at secondary school), and because they believe it will help them in the future (improve their career skills). Interestingly, only 17.8% of the sample indicated that they had enrolled in English specifically for the purposes of becoming a teacher, at either primary (7.4%) or secondary level (10.5%). However, about a third of respondents indicated that they wanted to be writers and wished to proceed to upper-level undergraduate units in creative writing (30%). Most students indicated that they intended to proceed in a major in English (60%).

The open-ended responses for question 10 – 'What do you hope to learn as a university English student?' – reflect a number of other motivations for enrolling in first-year English. These include the perceived 'attraction of the set course and its methods of teaching and assessment'; 'the need to complete prerequisites for certain courses' [ (for example, towards a qualification in Education); 'an attraction to particular kinds of literature'; and 'for the sheer pleasure of reading and writing'. In a brief report on the 2012 survey Fletcher and Clarke (2012) identify four main themes to emerge from students' responses to this question. The themes are: to improve reading and writing; to broaden knowledge of literature and the world; to develop critical thinking and analytical skills; and to enhance career prospects. A fifth theme also emerged, and became obvious in the larger sample, viz. the pleasure of reading. These themes are consistent across the three-years of the study, and are reflected in statements like the following:

*To improve reading and writing*

- 'I hope to, by the end of my degree, be able to read and review texts in a critical manner and to be able to see the underlying themes and techniques, rather than just reading a book (as an example) purely for enjoyment and taking the story at face value.'
- 'I want to be exposed to a range of different types of literature, as well as study the skills and techniques of different types of writers, so that I can

develop my own writing skills and style.'

- 'I hope to enhance my writing skills by interpreting texts on a deeper level than I did at college.'
- To broaden knowledge of literature and the world
- 'I hope to broaden my knowledge of literature and to understand it. I hope to study classic texts and the opportunity to express my own interpretations and opinions on texts.'
- 'I hope to expand my mind, to learn new things and to improve myself.'
- 'I would love to [...] enhance the knowledge that I already have from my previous studies of English at pre-tertiary level. I enjoy reading and I love exploring the themes in books along with hearing other people's opinions on [...] various text[s].'

#### *To develop critical thinking and analytical skills*

- 'I hope to learn how to critically engage in texts, finding deeper meaning within texts and understanding the implications of texts, as this is something I find interesting and will also broaden my knowledge and extend my understanding of the use of literature in society, in the contexts of entertainment, culture and political commentary.'
- 'Critical analysis skills specific to the deconstruction of literary and cultural texts.'
- 'I hope to not only read a vast array of texts, but also to improve my abilities when it comes to analysing and critiquing texts, and forming my own opinions on the way English can and should be taught to future generations.'

#### *To enhance career prospects*

- 'I hope to learn the basic and essential skills of writing in English in the hope that one day I will be able to teach as a Secondary teacher.'
- 'Critical thinking and more advanced reading comprehension [...] could be applicable for a variety of career options.'
- '[To] improve my communication skills in English as this will give me skills that will be important in my future career.'

#### *The pleasure of reading*

- 'I am not aiming for an outcome other than enjoying the process of participation and communication and delving deeply into text[s].'
- 'My biggest hope is really just to grow, expand my mind, sharpen my skills and learn new ways of looking at different works. I'm not after any

specific career, but as an older student attempting University for the first time as a change from sitting at home on a disability pension, I wanted to do something for me. I love reading, I love writing, English was an obvious choice.'

The desire to improve reading and writing skills is the most frequently cited theme by respondents. A number of sub-themes are apparent in this regard: namely, a desire to improve general English communication and literacy skills (for example, 'I hope to learn more about the structure of the English language, as well as better ways to write'); a desire to develop the skills necessary to be a creative writer; and a desire to develop professional English skills (for example, those necessary for a profession like journalism). Overwhelmingly, students indicated that they were undertaking the subject to learn how to better express themselves in written English.

As Paul Ramsden (2003, p. 6) explains, 'to teach well implies learning about students learning.' As soon as we began evaluating the responses to the initial phase of the survey in semester 1, 2012, we realised that we needed to spend more time talking with our colleagues working in schools and colleges. The results of the First English Survey helped us to find a set of common themes to guide those conversations with the aim of better meeting the needs and aspirations of our students.

#### **TETCoP: Establishing the Community of Practice**

In 2012 staff in the English program decided to establish a teaching-focused Community of Practice which would provide a bridge between the secondary and tertiary sectors, and which would have the 'potential to support wider shifts in disciplinary pedagogy' (Green & Ruutz, 2008, n.p.) in Tasmania, which we believed would be of benefit to both the members and our students. We were motivated by a shared belief that no educational institution is 'a self-contained, closed world in which students acquire knowledge to be applied outside, but part of a broader learning system' (Wenger, 2006, p. 5); or, to borrow from Keats, we acknowledged that while Tasmania is an island state, it is also 'a piece of the continent.' We were conscious, too, of the advantage that came with our state's small size: the ability to include *all* teachers, from the state and independent sectors, as well as all the English staff from the only university in the state. This is something that may not have been achievable in any other state or

territory, but the findings in Tasmania can certainly be carried across the Bass Strait.

The University of Tasmania's Learning and Teaching Strategic Plan 2012–2014, describes the University as 'an organisation that learns from best practices, commits to continual improvement and where staff are supported to engage in communities of practice and empowered to promote innovation' (University of Tasmania, 2011, p. 5). This principle underpinned the formation of TETCoP. Etienne Wenger's (2006) definition of a CoP articulates exactly the relationships and practices we envisioned: 'Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly' (p. 5). And as Marnie Hughes-Warrington (2011) argued in her keynote address at the UTAS First-Year Teaching Forum in 2011, the best curriculum design and delivery at the introductory level has a clear disciplinary focus.

Research conducted in the United Kingdom suggests that the transition from secondary English to university English is often not a smooth one. Only 22% of British students surveyed in 2004 reported that they felt suitably prepared for the amount and variety of reading they were expected to do in English at university. Students who had studied English at A-Level were only slightly more likely to say that they felt well prepared (Childs, 2008, p. 62). The authors of a more focused study conducted at Sheffield Hallam University concluded that there is a 'mismatch between student expectations and the realities of university study' of English (Smith & Hopkins, 2005, p. 304). In Australia, student experience of the transition to University English has received less attention to date, however comments in scholarly articles and the press signal that educators have been aware of a need to consider the issue of transition for some time. Claire Woods and David Homer (2005) pointed to 'a need to open a discussion about the transition between high school and higher education for students who are moving into studies in Communication, Literature [or] English' (p. 36), and Liam Semler (2007) wrote a piece for the *Australian*, 'The Culture Shock of Campus Life,' which argued that students entering University experience 'a fundamental shift in the ideological and pedagogical expectations placed upon them as literature students.' Formal student evaluations of teaching at the University of Tasmania confirm that many students do not understand what is expected of them in first-year English. In the evaluation of first-year English in Semester 1, 2012,

for example, only 15% of students strongly agreed with the statement 'I completed all required reading on time,' whereas 84% agreed or strongly agreed that the 'unit was well taught'. This mismatch on indicators of student engagement suggests that we have important work to do to improve the way we tell the story of our discipline. Semler's (2007) article calls for

widespread joining of educators' hands to benefit Australian teenagers ... whether it be via participation in the national curriculum debate, or innovative partnerships between schools and universities, or enhanced dialogue and knowledge transmission between academics and school teachers in order to improve learning.

Our Community of Practice was formed with similar aims in view. Telling our story effectively must be based on a solid understanding of the disciplinary values and assumptions students bring with them to university English.

The process of opening communication channels between the sectors began in 2011, when, conscious of a need to learn more about pre-tertiary English, we invited Year 11 and 12 English teachers from Southern Tasmania to a 'Building Links' afternoon tea on the Sandy Bay campus. The event included formal presentations from teachers and academics as well as opportunity for informal conversations. It facilitated a lively sharing of information about the curricula and teaching practices of English at pre-tertiary and tertiary levels and drew very positive feedback from the teachers who attended. The mood of the group was summed up by one teacher who wrote, '[t]hank you so much for organising the forum [... i]t was extremely worthwhile and has raised some important issues as well as forging a connection for the future.' The event demonstrated that teachers in both sectors recognised the benefits of establishing stronger channels of communication, and to build on this momentum we developed a project team and submitted a Teaching Development Grant application to the University of Tasmania in 2012<sup>1</sup>:

The TETCoP grant application articulated five guiding questions:

- What is the place of literary studies (the core of UTAS English) in the pre-tertiary classroom?
- How will developments in the secondary sector impact on the development of the discipline at the tertiary level?
- Do we have the same pedagogical priorities as pre-tertiary teachers, or do we conceive of the discipline of English differently?

- Do teachers in both sectors use the same key terms and concepts or do UTAS English students have the sense that they are starting over?
- Do the assessment tasks in first-year English build logically on the skills and knowledge most of our students would have gained during TCE?

The Tasmanian Association for the Teaching of English (TATE) was seen as a key participant in the CoP. Ralph Crane, Professor and Head of English, and Lisa Fletcher, then the Coordinator of First-Year English, both joined TATE and were keen to foster stronger ties between this peak body and the University. In turn, the TATE executive was keen to support the proposed project, which they believed advanced the association's aim to 'encourage and promote research and projects on matters related to the teaching of English' (*TATE Constitution and Rules*). The design and implementation of the project benefited from the support of TATE from the outset, and it was immediately clear that TETCoP had opened up clearer channels of communication between TATE and UTAS English about the state of our discipline in Tasmania today, which in turn led to other mutual benefits including regular articles by UTAS staff in the TATE magazine, *EduTATE*, and the establishment of an annual prize for the best student in first-year English funded by TATE.

TETCoP was structured around two clear phases:

- Phase 1: February-June 2013: Informal visits to schools by University of Tasmania first-year English lecturers for one-on-one and/or roundtable discussions with teachers (Lisa Fletcher and Ralph Crane in the south; Robert Clarke in the north of the state).
- Phase 2: July-November 2013: Planning and conducting of two workshops (Launceston and Hobart) about the relationship between TCE English and University English.

The simplicity of this design acknowledged the demanding workplace context of school teachers: involvement in the CoP needed to be seen as a benefit, rather than an additional burden on members with full and demanding workloads.

The membership of TETCoP was determined by its shared domain of interest: the learning and teaching of pre-tertiary and first-year English in Tasmania and the student pathways between our classrooms. The participants listed on the application indicated the strength of the existing community in Southern Tasmania. The

first phase of activities – the school visits – focused on expanding the current membership and on forging equivalent connections in Northern Tasmania. The involvement of the President and Executive Officer of TATE in the founding core group – Erika Boas and Phil Page – was invaluable during Phase 1, during which we mapped our shared practice and made informed decisions about the focus of the workshops that were planned for December 2013.

Simply put, our aim was to foster a model of 'participation as reciprocity and exchange' (Green & Ruutz, 2008). And the success of this was evident in the workshops held in 2013, discussed below, and in the ongoing sharing of resources and input from UTAS staff in the state's professional development days for teachers of English in late 2014, with Robbie Moore conducting a session on the teaching of poetry.

#### **TETCoP: The 2013 Workshops**

The TETCoP workshops took place against a backdrop of continuing change in the secondary school environment and the higher education sector. Notably, the National Curriculum was (sinking) on the horizon for core subjects in Year 11 and 12 and the accreditations of the three pre-tertiary English courses were expiring at the end of 2013. Senior secondary teachers in Tasmania were thus anticipating major curriculum changes to the courses that they teach. In this challenging time for the teaching of TCE English in Tasmania, it was imperative that University of Tasmania staff were aware of these changes and involved in discussions about the potential impact on the future of the discipline. These workshops also occurred during a time of curriculum renewal and rationalisation for the University of Tasmania's English major. The changing face of English education in this state – and nationally – meant that cross-sector conversations were both overdue and more pressing than ever. The TETCoP workshops, designed to bring together senior secondary and university teachers of English, were held in Launceston on 5 December and in Hobart on 10 December 2013.

The workshops were divided into three sessions: 'Teaching English in Tasmania: From TCE to First-Year English,' 'The Work of An English Student,' and 'The Future of TETCoP.' All sessions were designed to facilitate discussion of two key big-picture questions: 'What are the biggest challenges of teaching English in Tasmania today?' and 'How is the discipline likely to change in the next decade?' The workshops took place

in flexible teaching spaces, which were set up with tables for group work. The groupings were dynamic and all of them involved teachers from a range of schools and colleges and university staff.

Session one was optimistically framed with a pertinent quotation from James F. English (2012, location 267):

We need to move beyond our habitual posture of hand-wringing self-defence and self-justification toward genuine disciplinary reflexivity; beyond the normative thinking of a *discipline in crisis* toward a realistic appraisal of our choices and responsibilities as a *discipline with a future*.

Participants were asked to reflect in small groups on the core business of English teachers at both secondary and tertiary levels through developing lists of skills that an English teacher has a responsibility to impart to students. Common responses included: engagement with literature; critical reading and analytic skills; communication skills (including written and oral, and the production of critical and creative texts); and understanding of literary forms and contexts. In general, both senior secondary and university teachers considered core literacy skills to be at the heart of the discipline. However, opinions did diverge on the question of the moral purpose of the study of literature; future TETCoP discussions are likely to explore this question more deeply.

During the first session, groups were given a selection of secondary and tertiary curriculum documents and asked to consider whether these documents addressed the skill sets that had been identified. While, in general, it was concluded that all course documents matched with the skill set identified, key differences between secondary and tertiary curricula were noted. Foremost amongst these differences was the emphasis placed on cultivating a 'personal response' to literature in the senior secondary curriculum. In the Tasmanian context the capacity of students to 'clarify and articulate their own ideas, attitudes and values through reflection and critical engagement with texts' (Tasmanian Qualifications Authority, 2010, p. 13), is externally assessed.<sup>2</sup> Anecdotally, there was disagreement amongst secondary teachers regarding the value of this criterion with some teachers suggesting that it was almost impossible to assess while others claimed that it was central to the practice of teaching English. Some secondary teachers articulated that in order to foster student engagement with literature, and,

concomitantly, to facilitate their 'personal response' to a text, students, whom they characterised as 'modern readers,' needed to read texts to which they could relate. However, staff working in the tertiary context emphasised the importance of the practice of critically informed (rather than personal) responses and of reading texts drawn from a range of national and historical contexts. Another key difference was the inclusion of creative responses in senior secondary English (including in English Studies) as a requirement for all students. At the University of Tasmania, students study creative writing in specifically designated courses rather than creative writing being integrated into all courses. This is not consistent with other universities in Australia. For example, Woods and Homer (2005) discuss the use of integrated creative writing activities in university English (Communications) at the University of South Australia (p. 36).

The second session turned to how student work is assessed in pre-tertiary and tertiary contexts. This session required participants to think about how assessment takes place, the kind of work that is subject to assessment and why this work is assessed, through looking comparatively at senior secondary and first-year university assessment tasks and student work samples. It was unsurprising that assessment tasks in first-year English at the University of Tasmania most closely resembled the approach to English in 'English Studies' (re-named 'English Literature' in 2014, and corresponding to the Australian Curriculum units Literature 3 and 4) rather than 'English Communications' (Australian Curriculum English 3 and 4) or 'English Writing,' a course unique to Tasmania (Tasmania Department of Education, 2016, pp. 3–5). Commonalities between tertiary English and all pre-tertiary English courses included the level of documentation required of teachers in their assessment practices and the use of criteria-based assessment and detailed rubrics. It was, however, observed that there are fewer assessment criteria stipulated for university assessment tasks. Differences included the use of personal and creative responses in pre-tertiary English, as encouraged in the Australian Curriculum General Capabilities of Critical and Creative Thinking, Personal and Social Capability, and Ethical Understanding (ACARA, 2015, p. 11), and the use of assessed short responses as a tool for class preparation at the tertiary level. Workshop participants from both senior secondary and tertiary sectors felt that first-year university builds logically on the skill base developed in pre-tertiary English, with university

study offering students significant extension on their prior studies. For example, University of Tasmania English units interweave engagement with each of the English curriculum strands (Literacy, Language, and Literature), in a way that corresponds to the 'practical integration' and balance outlined in *Shape of the Australian Curriculum: English* (National Curriculum Board, 2009, p. 6); these strands are approached within the context of the discipline of literary studies as it has developed in the tertiary sector. However, in first-year English students also have greater reading requirements, are expected to undertake independent research, to develop a critically informed perspective about a range of texts and literary traditions, and to use their skills to respond independently to texts that they have not necessarily studied in class via lectures or tutorials.

In session three participants were invited to consider the potential for TETCoP in 2014 and beyond and to reflect on the issues shared by both educational sectors in the State. The decreasing student numbers in tertiary English prompted a discussion of why English is not a more attractive prospect for students. However, it was acknowledged that broader trends and pressures might have prompted many students to undertake study in more vocationally oriented areas. Other jurisdictions as well as Tasmania have noted declining enrolments in pre-tertiary Literature courses in favour of the more general English pathway (Tasmania Department of Education, 2016, p. 4; NSW Board of Studies, 2014, p. 9). A significant challenge for tertiary English in Tasmania is that historically, English has not been a compulsory subject to complete the TCE. It was agreed that fostering links between senior secondary and university teachers was extremely beneficial for teachers at all levels, and their students, as we confront the challenges and opportunities of the educational context in this state.

### Conclusion: Where to from here?

The second Discussion Paper produced by AUHE, 'Secondary-Tertiary Nexus,' explains that '[w]hilst there have been studies of secondary education and tertiary education, there is little research on the transition of students between these zones' (2014, p. 15). The paper identifies TETCoP as an exception and suggests 'that the relative geographical and institutional containment of Tasmania make this an easier site to research' (p. 15):

Given the range, volatility and complexity of

curriculum documents and testing regimes, and the inevitable gaps between such documents and actual classroom practice, the mapping of secondary English on a national scale, in order to better understand how academics might prepare for incoming students and build on capacities developed during school study, offers a significant challenge (p. 15).

The First-Year English Survey and the establishment of TETCoP are promising first steps towards building strong and lasting networks between senior secondary and tertiary English educators in the state. The challenge now is to continue these initiatives into the future and to identify new opportunities for working across sectors to develop and strengthen our discipline.

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## Notes

- 1 The lead applicant for the TETCoP grant was Lisa Fletcher. The founding project team included: six UTAS English academics (Robert Clarke, Ralph Crane, Rosemary Gaby, Hannah Stark, and Danielle Wood); two lecturers from the UTAS Faculty of Education (Yoshi Budd and Cameron Hindrum); four senior secondary English teachers (Sarah Cupit – The Friends School, Susan Hawkins – Claremont College, Judith Ranson – Claremont College, and Rosalind Walker – Hobart College); and two representatives from the Executive of the Tasmanian Association for the Teaching of English (Erika Boas and Phil Page).
- 2 This document outlined the 'English Studies' curriculum for the period of 2010–2013.

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# Water

Rory Harris

Over the remains of illness  
& a bag of antibiotics  
I draw the threads of the last  
cigarette down to my flip flops  
in these old familiar haunts  
the beer girl pours her drink into a coffee cup  
& her boyfriend's glass stays full  
a breath of cigarette  
& she returns to our table  
in the drinking gaps of her rounds  
love on the wait  
& the aircon rustles our lives  
in the just after 3am dance party  
unstuck from around the electric hum  
Orchard Road in the taxi wait  
Grand Prix snoring  
the Plaza's knock them down drag them out  
*Tiger Beer* dreaming  
Old Manila  
a grace in the damp morning  
the green din of birds old school charm  
white tiles & the hostel's door swings both ways  
*Angel Choice* now closes for five hours in the twenty  
four seven pulse of humidity  
Malls of cheap haircuts & shaves  
lost in the fabric of prayer  
scotch on the Mission's stairwell  
& the students sleep  
fly wire crickets orchestra  
the flutter of cotton sheets & then the rain  
settling rhythm of tropical drinking  
a haze of tobacco in the three in one coffee  
back in the damp  
the wet over us like a hymn the morning croaks  
In the cock crow dawn  
the rattle of insects

the dark sky  
last night's rain puddles around the path  
to the shower bucket fluster of ritual  
a wedge of light breaks open  
here the moon hangs like a prayer  
time, task & the slow tropic waking  
Waiting out the stars  
dust over our feet  
footprints through the sky  
Chest rattle the first twist of smoke from the first  
cigarette  
Mangrove planting low tide dance  
picking the litter from our lives  
before the first rum of the day  
& somehow I should be too old  
for these tears  
but for this old school collective memory of a child who  
welcomes  
a smile of freckles & pearls  
& the morning walk sugar cane horizon  
to horizon, rum in the ground  
we take tricycles through the countryside walk along rice  
terraces  
& plant the staple  
later over bamboo floors  
we eat spaghetti in sweet ketchup sauce  
At the alternative medical clinic  
the students are treated to acupuncture  
horizontal with pain they are too frightened to move  
I slip outside & a baby is placed in my arms  
& the mother takes a dozen photographs on her phone  
The perfumed dawn drips into buckets  
We run through the storm  
through veils of wet, curtains of grace  
for the long slow laundry of the day  
the dirt soaked out in the protocol of buckets & order  
& soap & rinsing & fabric softener  
cotton trees grow around us

The Boy Scout was tortured & finally killed for being in  
khaki  
the occupying force didn't ask for student ID  
& the reprisals were swift & effective  
In the rum headed thunder downpour the rain doesn't let  
up  
Dolores' gentle hands over our limbs  
moments of grace in a flood of goodwill  
her eyes shine in the one bulb light  
My dead father a month ago was so alive  
a ritual of longing  
In the slow unfolding morning  
the kitchen floor alive with lizards  
the dance rattle of rain, insect music  
& after three days the oval refuses to drain  
& the wade through dance from classroom to classroom  
The sun sets on all of us  
in the touch fumble ballet language of the deaf  
& silence explodes  
Where we pray, shop & drink our way into hearts  
6am mass after eggs & rice  
& then a gathering of students who have offered them-  
selves into these acts of grace  
In this small beginning as hands have held up palms to  
the sky of the church  
& on the dreams of fathers for their sons  
& on the dreams of sons for their fathers  
they slip like hymns around us  
through this eulogy, this song  
& in the early afternoon heat the hand with life  
& the beer down our throats like thunder  
& the mid-afternoon sleep rain watching the garden  
grow  
& in the warming early morning we return to our silences  
a bucket, a dipper & a crucifix in most rooms  
we wait in ourselves for the day to open & spread a road  
before us  
& dance a song on our lips

A metaphor stuck that promise  
We have run the race in the hour before dawn dark  
farewell  
A rattle of rain & cats jumps through the open window  
We take the unexplained on our lips as we stare into the  
rain  
*Lost* graffiti on a wall in Manila  
A bicycle sculpture of garbage bags  
& a man & a woman & a child  
& a sheet of cardboard  
& the ballet of the street  
deciding who & how to rest  
in the late evening opera  
Smoking Kretek Gudang Garan breathe in the moist grey  
morning mist

October 2015

**Rory Harris** teaches at CBC Wakefield Street, SA

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# Conceptualising a Literacy Education Model for Junior Secondary Students: *The Spatial and Reflective Practices of an Australian School*

*Georgina Barton and Loraine McKay, Griffith University*

**Abstract:** Evidence suggests that increasingly young adolescents are finishing school with poor literacy skills limiting their access to further education, training and employment. This has lifelong effects in terms of their economic participation and health and wellbeing. This paper examines the spatial practices of one school's approach to improving literacy outcomes for its Years 8 and 9 students, in order to increase positive pathways after school. It shows how staff at this school have begun to work collaboratively with each other and community members in trying to address the reading needs of their students. Using the conceptual frameworks of spatial theory and reflection the paper will share the conceived and perceived spatial practices of staff identified in interview data. We argue that when ongoing reflective practice occurs potential transformative or 'third space', practices result; ensuring positive literacy learning outcomes for all students.

## Introduction

*Language, literacy, and learning are about being in the world. They do not have to be about a rush to teaching.* (McDermott, 2005, p. 123)

Evidence in the literature suggests that increasingly, young adolescents (aged 12–14 years) are ill-prepared for the literacy demands of the 21st century, resulting in limited opportunities beyond schooling (Kamil, Borman, Dole, Kral, Salinger & Torgesen, 2008). In Australia, an annual assessment program has identified approximately 12% and 6% of students in Years 7 and 9 respectively are below the national minimum standard for reading (NAPLAN, 2015), for those who complete the test however there may be many more. Without effective reading skills students may have difficulty participating in society (McGeown, Duncan, Griffiths & Stothard, 2015). For some time, researchers have noted how educators are in need of effective and appropriate strategies to best address adolescent literacy concerns (Alvermann, 2001; Moje, 2002) but further evidence suggests that a 'rush to teaching' (McDermott, 2005, p. 123) or reactive approaches to improving literacy outcomes occurs (Comber & Cormack, 2011; Freebody, Barton & Chan, 2013). Additionally, these 'one size fits all' approaches tend to be impacted on by the fact that schools are mandated to raise achievement levels on the above mentioned standardised tests; rather than take a collaborative approach that acknowledges students' learning strengths.

This paper shares one school's multi-pronged approach in their attempt to improve literacy learning, and in particular reading, for its students in Years 8 and 9. We apply the conceptual frameworks of spatial theory and reflection to report on data collected during interviews with administration, teaching and support staff at the school. We also share some of the students'

suggestions on what works best for them in their own learning.

## Spatial theory and reflection

### *Spatial theory*

Spatial theory explores space and place and the social relationships between these. Work by Foucault (1977, 1980), Lefebvre (1991) and Soja (1996) explains how socio-spatial practices are highly influenced by politicised ideologies. These ideologies impact on the physical, social, cultural, political spaces in which teachers work. For some time, socio-cultural theorists have illustrated these spatial practices in education such as in curriculum development (Barton, Garvis & Ryan, 2014; Ewing, 2010); institutional and systemic approaches to improvement in student learning outcomes (Comber, 2012; Moje, 2000); as well as teachers' pedagogic strategies enacted in the classroom (Barton & McKay, in press/2016; Comber, 2015; Mills, 2015). These practices are shaped by the context of spaces within which they are situated – both actual and rhetorical.

Real or first space practices are often referred to as *perceived* spaces. This is where everyday objects and practices are 'perceived' as normal and therefore offer a sense of cohesion and continuity (Ryan & Barton, 2014; Lefebvre, Soja, 1996). First space practices are signified by what we do in established practices and routines. Ideal or second space practices relate to *conceived* spaces or spaces of power and ideology. These are often the 'representations of space' dominant in society and therefore influence what we do or the first space practices. Third or *lived* space practices are where potentially transformative change can happen. Third space requires people to subvert or re-imagine real and imagined spaces (Soja, 1996). Spatial practices can therefore be made and re-made for new possibilities that may not have been considered before. Sheehy (2009) however, contends that it is critical to understand what constitutes both first and second space practices in order for change to occur. A full understanding of these spatial habits requires reflection on the part of teachers and administrators for growth and change to occur (Brookfield, 2005; Larrivee, 2000).

While teachers can often identify ways in which they can improve their pedagogical practice they may not always be able to enact them if institutional or systemic pressures require other mandated approaches (Comber, 2012). Challenging these spaces can be difficult due to lack of time; expectations related to

curriculum; and/or personal awareness or reflective capacities (Fullan, 1993; Howard, 2003). When teachers are able to reflect on both the first and second space practices in their work, and consider how these practices impact on student learning, then the potential for third space practices or spaces of possibility will be increased. These spaces can be where 'the competing knowledges and [d]iscourses of different spaces are brought into 'conversation' to challenge and reshape both academic content literacy practices and the knowledge and discourse of youths' everyday lives' (Moje, Ciechanowski, Kramer, Ellis, Carrillo and Collazo, 2004, p. 44). Third space practices enable teachers to not only reflect *on* their current experience but *in* their practice by considering ways in which they could take risks not previously deliberated.

### *The importance of reflection for teachers*

Reflection is important for professional growth, particularly as a teacher (Calderhead & Gates, 1993; Loughran, 2002). In fact, Russell (1993) believes that reflecting *in* and *on* practice enables teachers to step back from their everyday work and make more effective decisions about improving learning and teaching.

Working through a number of levels in order to reach deep and critical thinking is central for potentially transformative learning and teaching (Luttenberg & Bergen, 2008; Pollard & Collins, 2005; Zeichner & Liston, 1996). Ryan and Ryan's (2013) 4Rs model of reflection (based on Bain et al.'s, 2002 work) shows how when working through the levels of reporting and responding, relating, reasoning and reconstructing, critical reflection occurs. Reporting and responding often are foundational reflective skills where people can describe critical incidents that may occur. Relating is where one may refer back to previous experiences or occurrences where similar phenomena have happened. Reasoning requires one to consider why things happen the way they do which leads to reconstructive practice – findings ways in which to improve and move forward. Reconstructive practice involves an analysis of power in the context in which learning occurs. This may uncover hegemonic assumptions that normalise the acceptance of decisions that serve those in power and ideologies embedded in decision making and practice.

In order for positive change to occur, particularly in relation to improving literacy learning for young adolescents, administrative and teaching staff need to work collaboratively. It is also important to view

students from a strengths-based rather than a deficit lens. Moje (2002) notes that research on adolescence is often from a problematic view, in that adolescence is seen as a ‘troubled hormonal time’ and that issues associated with learning need to be fixed. An alternative view would recognise or reframe this perspective of adolescents by focusing on the potential value and power of young people’s local and global skills and attributes. This includes, according to Moje (2002), the way in which ‘adolescents are sophisticated meaning-makers who use various texts to represent or construct identities and subject position in the world’ (p. 215). Meaning-making, boundary crossing and agency would be the focus rather than how best to manage dilemmas (Moje, 2002). This would require thoughtful and well considered approaches to supporting adolescent students who may need support in the area of literacy.

If a reframing of current practice is to occur, then ongoing reflection and investigation of spatial practices is necessary on the educator’s (including leadership teams, teachers and support staff) part. This paper therefore explores the spatial practices of teachers working in one school, via a lens of reflection, in relation to their approaches to improving literacy for their young adolescent students.

**Background to the study**

*Merry State High School* had for some time recognised the need for a multi-pronged approach in improving literacy learning, in particular reading, for their students entering high school. Working in collaboration with a community partner from a charity, its feeder schools, and a strong volunteer-base the school had implemented a range of strategies to support its students in class and through additional programs. Extra learning support classes, that included phonics and comprehension programs, as well as support in regular classes with volunteers assisting all students, contributed to a collaborative approach to improvement. This paper focuses on the findings of a qualitative study undertaken at the request of the school. The school was interested in knowing how the approaches they had chosen to improve literacy learning for their students were working. The participants in the study were the leadership team, teachers and support staff responsible for working with the students who needed reading support, and the students involved in the additional support classes.

**Data methods and analysis**

As the school had some quantitative measures of the students’ achievements (including NAPLAN and PAT-R testing [ACER, N.D.]) they were seeking some qualitative information about the impact of their literacy support programs. We therefore carried out both interviews and focus groups at the beginning of the school year and again, six months into the year with school staff and students.

Interviews/focus groups at the beginning of school year	Interviews/focus groups after six months
1. Principal 2. Deputy Principal 3. Head of Department – Humanities 4. Community partner 5. Volunteer coordinator 6. Focus group with students – 3 groups	1. Deputy Principal, Head of Department 2. Learning Support teacher, Teacher aides, Volunteers, volunteer coordinator 3. Focus group with students – 2 groups

In order to investigate the spatial and reflective practices of the school’s program for the year we utilised a case study approach. Case studies allowed ‘an in-depth exploration from multiple perspectives of the complexity and uniqueness of a particular project, policy, institution, program or system in a ‘real life’ context’ (Simons, 2009, p. 21). We had each of the above interview and/or focus group audio files transcribed which then underwent an analytical coding process. The data were analysed through the lens of both spatial theory (that is identifying the first, second and third spaces of practice) and reflection (that is whether the participants were reporting, relating, reasoning or reconstructing on this practice).

Each of the authors read through the transcripts and made notes according to the above fields. We then cross-checked to see where the similarities and/or differences lay between each of our coding practices in the first phase. Transcripts were then read together confirming the identification of the above coding elements. The following section describes the findings of this analysis.

**Findings**

*First space or perceived practices*

The real or perceived practices of this school at the beginning of the year resonated a top-down leadership model. Data indicate the leadership team felt their role was to support both the learning support and

general teaching staff in the development of literacy improvement strategies. Throughout his interview, the Principal *reported* on the importance of his leadership role in supporting staff in their everyday work. This perceived influence included that of other schools and colleagues within the geographical locale:

*So I find that whole thing enormously interesting more than anything. [M]y sphere of influence is over the people who are here and the people who are in the primary school down the road. (Principal)*

The Principal *reported* on how, as a result of his leadership, the school had improved in morale as well as its reputation within the community.

*This was not a particularly nice place to be when I came here four and a half years ago. We had poor staff morale ... a high degree of misbehaviour, a bad reputation in the community ... We have moved from a conversation of low morale to what we're proud of what we do. We work together and we like what we do and I love coming to work. (Principal)*

The data from the Principal *reasoned* that a strong sense of pride in the school existed amongst the leadership team and staff; something they attempted to develop in the students:

*So everything we do is about respecting each other and trying to instil that value of pride in all of our kids, so its form both ends ... we did very well in our audit and we are proud of that. I think there's a little bit of a bubbling of hey, we're not so bad. We're actually doing quite well of ourselves and we're doing the right thing by our kids ... so there's ... pride in what you're doing and its purposeful teaching in a way. (Learning Support Teacher – LST)*

Despite the desire to make *Merry State High* a great place of learning a very real challenge for the staff was the perceived increase in the numbers of students entering the school with low literacy skills, particularly in terms of reading:

*There are so many referrals this year as well, like it just seems to increase, the referrals [of students] from teachers who aren't reading or misbehaving. Therefore, they think it might be a literacy issue so you get referrals in. (LST)*

An acknowledgement of the increasingly large number of students who were not developing adequate literacy skills in their primary school years provided impetus to seek change. The staff made this decision based on information provided to the school by the primary school colleagues as well as other data such as NAPLAN and PAT-R testing. These basic skills needed to be addressed before curriculum literacies, necessary

to succeed in the secondary setting, were attempted:

*These are the kids whose phonemic awareness says that they're just going to bang up against the ceiling, have never been able to move any further. We've got to fix that problem before we can do high school literacy problems. (Head of Department – Humanities (HOD))*

Two particular individuals – the Head of Department – Humanities and Learning Support Teacher – were the drivers in leading the school to a charity's community-based program. The federally-funded program, which involved a community partner, provided the school an outsider's vision that perhaps challenged the school's first space practices.

*My role is probably more about communication and the ability to think strategically ... most organisational see what's wrong with their world, rather than being able to look over as a broad picture. So our role is very much trying to look at the broader picture, bringing the partners that would assist that to happen ... and then building that structure to enable that. (Community Partner)*

The program implemented included more learning support classes with two learning support teachers and two teacher aides, outside the regular classes, that focused on improvement in phonics and comprehension for the students. The overall program also began to utilise volunteers from the community to support the students when they were attending their regular curriculum classes. Despite this program having the potential to support the first space practices of the school, several staff still noted the limitations on what is perceived to be possible (in relation to responding to adolescent literacy). These systemic constraints impacted on who was employed; on how staff roles were allocated; on how lessons and support mechanisms were timetabled; and the links between the learning support team and 'mainstream' teachers. Staff accepted these limitations as the normal challenges faced by schools.

*They wouldn't commit to a contract for her (part-time support teacher) until day eight numbers. So we didn't even know we were going to get learning support ... so learning support was farmed out ... it was only after the second week that we knew we could get her back and then we had to restructure the timetable. People's enthusiasm and work ethic is amazing and all that but it is the constraints of the system. (LST)*

The first space practices at this school, particularly evident in the first round of interviews, were generally accepted by the leadership and teaching staff including aspects of education that they felt could not be

changed even though they wanted to change them. *Relating* and *reasoning* comments about raising standards on the NAPLAN tests; having to cover set curriculum in a set amount of time; departmental mandates; as well as financial constraints were commonly cited as constraints by the staff. These perceived practices contributed to the school's sense of success in relation to student learning outcomes.

*I picked the teachers and the classes based on need, around their NAPLAN Scores or they were identified as a modified program ... So we had a literacy plan in action that was having results, ... NAPLAN data shows that. (HOD)*

After six months, however, when we returned to re-interview the staff an indication of change to the program was evident. The school were beginning to realise that the increased number of learning support classes and the volunteer support was plateauing progress. A volunteer coordinator was employed on a part-time basis to seek out more people to assist in the regular classrooms. In addition, an English program was developed as a bridge between the phonics and comprehension programs and the regular classes for those students who still required additional support. These changes allowed staff to be more aware of the approaches they were taking (or the first and second space practices) and were able to take risks by considering further options for the students' who were improving; providing opportunities for third space possibilities.

### ***Second space or conceived practices***

Second space or conceived practices were highly influenced by the political ideologies that were part of this school despite the staff generally wanting to improve student learning outcomes. Students who were identified as needing support participated in the Learning Support Program – which involved commercial programs for improving phonics and comprehension skills. The data revealed that the main underpinnings of the literacy support program at this school were initially driven by the desire to improve student results in high-stakes testing such as the NAPLAN tests. In fact, data were drawn from these tests to identify the students to be included in the program as well as to distinguish in which skills the students had deficits

*Children who are in [the program] have been identified because they're learning support children or their NAPLAN scores aren't quite there, or more importantly the reality is these two things happen. They're tested, they're picked up, and*

*tested again because the year eights do ACER testing and that can be just an absolute highlighting, a stop signal for kids and go oh well this kid clearly is not cutting any – their score is like one out of five or whatever. (HOD)*

Controlling practices were evident in this school where pressures from the system, that is the department of education, in which the school is a member, highly influenced the ways in which they went about their everyday work.

*There's so many agendas that the [Education Department's] running that you've got to keep your eye on the ball with the agendas and keep those things moving along and that. (Deputy Principal)*

Despite the staff's ideal vision for their students, including improvement in individual reading results, increasing self-worth and esteem, and working towards positive post-school pathways, the political agendas still had power over the approaches selected. The Principal for example, indicated his disdain of pressures from the broader education department but he still carried out his role with systemic directives in mind.

*Because of the political pressure around the NAPLAN stuff which makes me angry ... it is immeasurable and our system is a bit cranky about the fact that we're third last in the nation. Of course everyone badly wants to be first. So they pour money and pressure into schools around improving literacy and numeracy results for kids. I actually don't have an issue with that. (Principal)*

The Principal is *reasoning* about the political pressure of the systemic approaches to improving NAPLAN results saying it *makes him angry* but he also states that *he doesn't have an issue with that*. This provides evidence that conceived spatial practices, while aiming to improve student outcomes, are still heavily influenced by first space practices.

Second space is where power, implicit and explicit, sustains the cohesion of first space. At this school it was evident that second space practices heavily impacted on first space practices. Certain ideologies about what was important in developing the school's identity were sustained in the representations of what should be done to support the students. These decisions were largely made by the support staff but the directives came from the administration team, who were in many ways disconnected with what was happening on the ground. Unfortunately, those in control often sustain the ideological and hegemonic conceptions of what is best for the students and this is often

driven by processes such as school improvement plans and audits, professional standards, and accountability measures such as high-stakes testing and the subsequent use of the data produced.

In fact, at this school the Head of Department – Humanities reported that participants in the program were selected according to the results on NAPLAN rather than asking the students themselves.

*I picked the teachers and the classes based on need, around their NAPLAN Scores or they were identified as a modified program ... So we had a literacy plan in action that was having results, and our NAPLAN data shows that, but the point with the NAPLAN data is and the problem with NAPLAN data is, with the kids we know cannot we always ask them to be withdrawn. So the data's skewed from the beginning. (HOD)*

The Head of Department reasons that the data by which they organised participation is skewed yet continued to make decisions based on these results. Therefore, conceived practices had an extensive influence on the everyday organisation and conceptualisation of the support program in this school. This 'top-down' approach was recognised by the staff but not necessarily questioned:

*There's a top-down ... so if your principal and leaders are strong then that usually filters down to the student population. But on the other side too it also is a grassroots [approach] as it comes from the students themselves. I think we all, particularly in the special education department, we foster a real collaborative community, 'we are family' kind of approach – or try to. So everything we do is about respecting each other and trying to instil that value of pride in all of our kids, so it's from both ends. (LST)*

Barton & McKay (in press/2016) identified this school initially working from this 'top-down' model (Figure 1).

This model shows how first space practices involve the learning support teachers, teacher aides and volunteers being responsible for, and having direct contact with the students needing support. It highlights the disconnection between the leadership team, as the managers of the school, and the students. It also shows how the school initially viewed the regular or other curriculum classroom teachers as a component separate to the learning support area. However, even after six months, when we conducted the second round of interviews and focus groups there were some third space practices emerging.

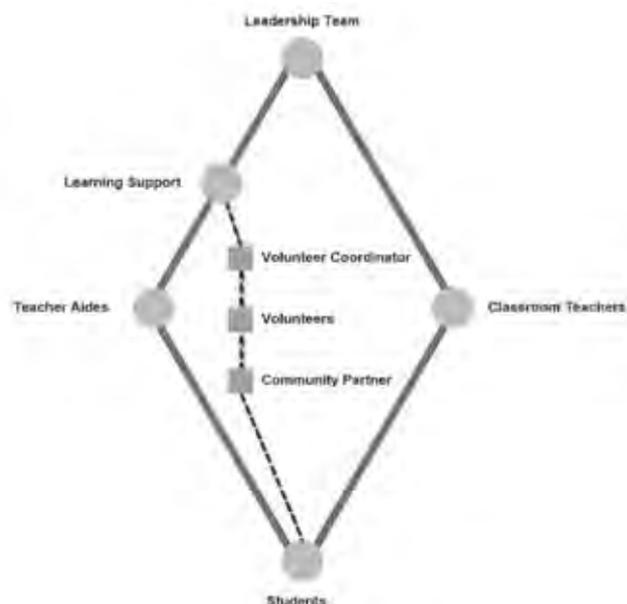


Figure 1: A 'top-down' approach to improving literacy for adolescents (Barton & McKay, (in press/2016))

### Emerging spaces of possibility: The third space

Upon our return we learnt that the students in the learning support program had 'come a long way', as indicated by the learning support teacher in the post focus group. An emerging multi-pronged approach that included a wider range of strategies in the learning support lessons, an English bridging class once the students had reached a certain level in the learning support classes, and an expanded volunteer-base in the regular classes, reconstructed the school's practices in supporting the students. The school employed a part-time co-ordinator for the volunteer program who recruited and managed up to 40 community volunteers to work with the students both in their learning support lessons and regular classes. Comments from both school staff and volunteers showed positive results:

*It's consolidated in our current school environment. You can see that with the breadth of teachers accessing the resource of volunteers ... these children are getting supported with their reading then they're getting supported in their classroom environment. (HOD)*

*Well, from my perspective, I think it's morphed a lot. It's really been quite transformational. (Volunteer Coordinator)*

*All of a sudden, they're kind of like, yeah. They're just starting to beam. So in terms of resilience, they're trying a little bit harder, whereas before they might have given up. (Volunteer)*

Another addition to the program was an English-bridging program. The staff felt that although the students had improved in their reading capacity they

were still not ready to enter the general curriculum classes. They decided to take a risk and *reconstruct* learning and teaching by developing an English bridging program, pushing back at the pressure to cover the set curriculum, knowing this would benefit the students even more.

*The problem with plans is they're only as good as they're actioned. The other issue is we're high school teachers, not primary school teachers, so we're seeing an intake of children who don't know how to read at all. That problems growing and it's going to become insurmountable in a few years unless we do a fundamental shift in the way we organise ourselves.* (HOD)

The Head of Department – Humanities' comment shows their acceptance for the need to *reconstruct* their practice. The HOD *reasons* and *relates* this in response to the growing need to support students entering their school.

The students' views also changed from seeing themselves as unintelligent to having potential:

*When I was in primary I couldn't read or spell at all, so when I came here it was just like a big jump saying I can do this now and ... come to school every day and learn everything and like they helped me.* (Student A)

*Yeah because I used to be really dumb, but now [I'm] bright.* (Student B)

The students however, were still able to provide some feedback on how the program could be improved saying that many of the lessons were repetitive and often did not focus on areas of interest.

*Too slow, because every lesson it's like déjà vu.* (Student C)

*They say the same thing and you think oh I've already learned about this, can you take a level up ... But it feels you've done three lessons, but it's exactly the same. So you know it off by heart now, which is good but you can go up a level now.* (Student B)

*You want a variety of stuff, have different stuff, it goes easy then if you've done that for two days or a week and then you go harder another week and then harder.* (Student D)

*Maybe you can pick your own topic and read it. Because I like sport, I could read about sport, if someone likes games computer games and that they can read about that .... they would get more into it and maybe learn new stuff about that.* (Student E)

Even though this school had begun to show spaces of possibility our study indicated that the student voice was missing. We therefore recommended that all staff continued to include the students in the decision-making related to the support programs as well as

provide them more opportunities to show leadership such as teaching each other.

Barton & McKay (in press/2016) recommended how this school could shift from a top-down model to a more collaborative and community-based model (as shown in Figure 2) with the students at the centre; but at the same time recognised the strong need for this to be sustained through ongoing reflection and awareness of the spatial practices surrounding literacy learning.

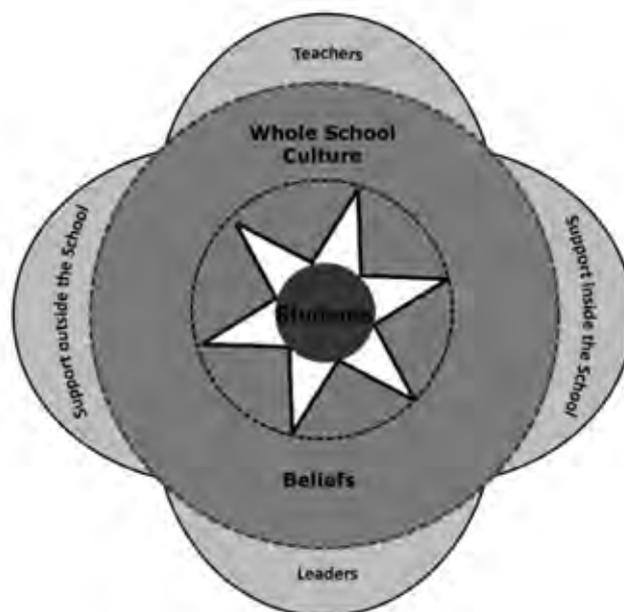


Figure 2: An effective model of teaching reading for adolescent learners: A collaborative, community approach (Barton & McKay, in press/2016).

## Conclusion

In an age of accountability, particularly in education, there is a risk that schools do not recognise their own power and professionalism in sustaining change. If schools are to appreciate young adolescents as competent and creative individuals (Moje, 2002) despite their learning needs, then third space practices need to occur. Our research findings indicate that although the teaching staff's underlying principles at *Merry High School* were well intentioned towards improving the students' learning outcomes, they were ultimately hindered by the continuing constraints imposed through first and second space practices. Indeed, the organisational structures of the school such as everyday routines and staffing; the selection and allocation of resources; and pedagogical approaches were prioritised over their intended audience and most importantly what their students themselves had to offer. There was also

evidence that staff were not aware of these 'competing discourses' (Moje et al., 2004).

Unless these well intentioned principles are supported by ongoing reflection in identifying the opposing ideals, then spaces of possibility remain limited. Top-down approaches will continue to drive the practices of staff and limit the contributions of students rather than have the students' interests, strengths and weaknesses at the centre driving the decisions about the learning process (Barton & McKay, in press/2016). Reflection therefore is essential for teachers to identify, address, challenge and uncover hegemonic assumptions and ideologies embedded in decision making and practice. As Brookfield (1998) notes contesting hegemony allows transformational practice. The students and the teachers at this one school – *Merry High School* – were beginning to respond to their students' needs by uncovering these spaces.

All schools experience pressure to improve student results particularly in the area of literacy. The push for improvement often occurs without asking the students themselves what they need; what approaches to learning they would prefer; as well as finding out their own personal strengths or interests. It is therefore recommended that when schools begin to develop literacy support programs, regardless of school context, that the position of the student at the centre is considered in their own learning journey. This would ensure that information about, and assessment of, students is not done before even meeting them. Third space, reflective and reconstructive practices must therefore take into account the funds of knowledge (Moje, 2002) students already bring with them into the learning space as well as their own and the school's community practices.

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## On *not* turning 'back to the car': A Critical Discourse Analysis of the SACE English Studies' *list of prescribed texts*

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**Abstract:** Historically, the position of girls as marginalised users of the education system has been acknowledged, particularly during the the 1970s and 1980s. However, reflection upon the current *list of prescribed texts*, which makes up part of the South Australian Certificate of Education Board's English Studies outline, as well as the author's practice as a user of this list, suggests ongoing conversation and progress remains necessary. A brief review of various government inquiries into girls in education will provide a backdrop to a further examination of the way dominant ideologies in classrooms continue to marginalise female students and reinforce socially constructed definitions of femininity and masculinity. Hiller and Johnson (2007) assert that the first step to fostering equitable classrooms is for teachers to examine and reflect upon their own pedagogy and practice. In light of this, the personal epistemology of the author, particularly relating to hierarchies of privilege, will be introduced. This will provide a background for a critique of the author's use of the *list of prescribed texts* in her own English Studies classroom, leading to a call for change in the way English teachers choose texts for their senior classrooms in order to disrupt the reproduction of social inequality.

### Gender inequalities

Gender inequalities faced by girls in the classroom were exposed in the 1970s, with a resulting push across Western education to see schools adopt practices that avoid gender bias. The 1975 national committee of inquiry into girls and inequality in Australia report, *Girls, School and Society*, characterised the lack of opportunities presented to girls in the education system as undermining through an 'absence of women in the curriculum' (Yates, 2005, p. 44). In reference to this, the report recommended changes to the curriculum that would 'represent women equally with men' (Yates, 2005, p. 44). The ensuing 1984 report, *Girls and Tomorrow: The Challenge for Schools*, criticised a lack of change, suggesting 'initiatives for change had been very patchy' (Yates, 2005, p. 44). There does not appear to have been further government inquiries into the schooling of girls since the publication of the *Framework for Action on Gender Equity in Schooling*, which was released in 1995, and looked at the gendered schooling experience of both girls and boys. Gilbert (1996) argued that 'access to men's ways of knowing and being in the world ignored 'women's ways of knowing and being', and devalued much of the knowledge and experience that many girls and women had acquired' (pp. 12–13). Work into constructions of masculinity was undertaken in order to understand how girls were being disadvantaged (Rowan, Knobel, Bigum & Lankshear, 2002). Rowan et al. (2002) argued that a deconstruction of the 'ways in which particular versions of masculinity [...] as well as fundamentally patriarchal perspectives were privileged within school structures, curriculum pedagogical and assessment practices' (p. 12), was important if there was to be any form of cultural revolution for women and girls.

While historical concerns regarding the underachievement of girls resulting from a gendered education system have shifted focus to boys and *their* underachievement in the face of an apparently more 'feminised' education system (Ringrose, 2007), research suggests

that, in fact, girls remain marginalised users of an education system where subjects persist along socially constructed gender lines and classrooms remain a male dominated environment (Warrington and Younger, 2000; Pomerantz & Raby, 2011; Pomerantz, Raby & Stefanik, 2013). Through a neoliberal promotion of sexism as outdated, narratives of the 'successful girl,' 'posits that girls are now academically superior to boys and are, therefore, beyond the need for feminist intervention in schools' (Pomerantz, Raby & Stefanik, 2013, p. 187). Pomerantz & Raby (2011) and Pomerantz, Raby & Stefanik (2013) found through interviews with young women that they experienced frustration at the attention boys garnered over girls in the classroom, particularly pointing to boys as acting like 'class clowns', distracting the teacher and wasting class time for the girls, who felt they were more likely to be overlooked because they were quiet. Ringrose (2007) argues that feminist research increasingly illustrates the 'other side of the [so-called] gender gap in achievement is that most girls are still experiencing male dominated classrooms cultures, leaving girls to simply make the best of things' (p. 481). These common female experiences in the classroom 'support the idea that girls are not past the need for feminism' (Pomerantz, Raby, Stefanik, 2013, p. 203).

Hiller & Johnson (2007) suggest the resulting effect of a classroom discourse based around hegemonic masculinity is girls learning to 'position themselves as passive learners in the English/Literacy classroom' (p. 79). Golby-Smith's (2009) research points to a connection between the classroom dynamic and 'what students learn from reading and writing and conversing about reading' (p. 40), while Snyder criticises the fact that a far greater number of texts were created by males (2008), with Sadker and Sadker suggesting that '[e]ach time a girl opens a book and reads a womanless history, she learns she is worthless' (as cited in Slack, 1999, p. 93). A lack of female voices represented in English texts perhaps goes some way to signalling an expectation of silence on the part of female voices in the classroom. And yet, despite a rhetoric that suggests girls now achieve to the detriment of boys, the 'wage gap', slower career advancement, child-care, housework, domestic violence and sexual assault continue to be associated with *women's* lived experiences (Baker, 2010; Pomerantz, Raby, Stefanik, 2013).

### Analytical positioning

Critical Discourse Analysis, using the three-tiered

approach as outlined by Fairclough (2015), of the *list of prescribed texts* takes place through a feminist theoretical lens using reflexivity where, as analyst, I have actively sought to become conscious of the cultural, political and ideological assumptions I have carried with me (Brisolara, 2014; Fairclough, 2015) as a user of the list. In using a Critical Discourse Analysis approach, I will describe, interpret and explain how discourse – in this case, the list – both represents, and becomes represented by, the social world (Rogers, Malancharuvil-Berkes, Mosley, Hui, & Joseph, 2005).

Analysis begins with a description of the *list of prescribed texts* as a social construct. At this level, the texts presented on the list are not analysed, but rather I am presenting *the list itself* as a discourse to be critiqued, with an ensuing positioning of the discourse within the context of intended use. Fairclough (2015) highlights the importance of the analyst positioning themselves in the analysis, where interpretation is 'generated through a combination of what is in the text and what is 'in' the interpreter' (p. 155). I use Maher and Thompson Tetreault's questioning of their whiteness in relation to their previous ethnographic research into women of colour in the US (2001) as a guide in reflexivity – they acknowledge that framing themselves as allies because they are women is not enough because they hold white privilege:

While we sought to acknowledge and understand our own positions as white researchers, we did not fully interrogate our social position of white privilege that made us [...] oppressors as well as feminist allies. (p. 8)

Similarly, I need to acknowledge my position in a hierarchy of power in the way I have used the *list of prescribed texts*. While I may have previously assumed that my status as woman and feminist meant I was doing enough in my classroom to discuss the construction of social inequality, I can see how I have disadvantaged my female students through the texts I have chosen for study, particularly through a lack of presenting them with a wide range of female writers (writers in this case refers to all *creators* of texts, including film), highlighting how 'teachers can unintentionally reproduce stereotypical gender positions, even when the aim was to break down the masculine/feminine gender binary' (Hiller & Johnson, 2007, p. 80). I have also held a high degree of agency in my English Studies classes. My class sizes have been small enough that I have been able to purchase new texts without concern for costs, and while there has been some degree of consultation

with my head of faculty, I have never been told I could not teach a certain text.

Pillow (2002) states that 'f]eminist theory has been vocal about the need to acknowledge, reflect on, and critically engage the politics of the gaze in our research' (p. 546). My philosophical assumptions are anchored in post-structural feminism with beliefs that begin 'with an acknowledgement and examination of the structural nature of inequities beginning with gender as a point of departure' (Brisolara, 2014, pp. 22–23), while also accepting that intersectionality contributes to marginalisation. While I am immovable in my beliefs about gender equality, I know that my own understandings are 'partial and governed by the discourse of my time and place' (Britzman, 2000, p. 32). This suggests the importance of acknowledging my privilege in the way I have been able to position my students to view the ideas and texts I present through my own particular lens. In light of this, explanation takes place through a positioning of the discourse in my own social practice, acknowledging the way reproduction of social inequalities is 'a generally unintended and unconscious side-effect [...] of production and interpretation' (Fairclough, 2015, p. 172).

### Voices and voicelessness as ideology

Prescribed text lists play a part in suggesting a dominant ideology regarding who is given a voice and who is rendered voiceless, particularly when read for race and gender. When we analyse the construction and content of these lists, we reveal the way they both present and preserve dominant ideologies and hierarchies of power, where 'all discourses are social and thus ideological, and that some discourses are more valued than others' (Rogers et al., 2005, p. 370). Each year, the SACE Board of South Australia issues a subject outline to be used for the teaching of English Studies at Stage 2 level, and part of this outline includes the *list of prescribed texts* (SACE Board, 2015). Through a discourse analysis of the SACE English Studies' *list of prescribed texts* (SACE, 2015, p. 8), we can see that the ideas of white men are normalised, while those of women are marginalised. Snyder suggests that many educators continue to take a cultural heritage approach to the classroom, ascribing 'great value to the literature of the Western canon' (Snyder, 2008, p. 74).

Foucault suggests 'knowledge has always been intertwined with the interests of the knowledge producers' (Snyder, 2008, p. 76). Carter's (2007) analysis of classroom interaction in a US high school literature

classroom reveals the way underrepresented students, in this case, two black females, are marginalised by the curriculum when they are continually positioned as 'other'. Carter's study specifically looks at student negotiation of 'whiteness', however, it speaks to the issue of a lack of representation, where there is a 'focus on what counts as English and whose literature counts' (Carter, 2007, p. 42). Carter discusses the need to examine how female students respond to descriptions of femaleness in any texts studied, while not specifically suggesting a need for female students to have access to more texts created by women (2007).

Manuel (2012) also focuses on reading as both a social practice and way of making meaning, stating:

Every act of reading, writing, talking, listening, viewing and representing, however subtle or apparently insignificant, is an act of participation in communicating, receiving, interpretation and making sense of our own and others' stories of what it means to be human. (2012, p. 2)

In looking at literature as meaning-making, this highlights the importance of girls seeing themselves represented, not only as characters, but as writers and creators. In her study on the role of gender in making meaning of texts, Slack (2009) points to the way literature becomes a 'transaction between the text and the reader that produces meaning' (p. 15), denoting how female students position themselves within the texts they consume. Similarly, Gleeson (2012) discusses the way that, even as an adult, she 'measure[s] [her]self against the characters and action' (p. 6) in texts, pointing to a need for females to *see* themselves represented in the texts they read. Hiller & Johnson's research (2007) into the masculine English classroom denotes the way 'both boys and girls [experience] detrimental outcomes, especially in the dominance and resistance by the boys and the silencing of the girls' where the 'pressure to conform to stereotypical gender positions has negative effects for many students' (p. 81). Slack (1999) also reflects on the way changes to curriculum to include more female writers is derided – particularly by males – through an account of her attempt to introduce a women's literature class in the high school she was working in. When the class is not approved with no explanation, she talks of experiencing a rage, both on the part of boys, who she feels are done a disservice when we allow 'male dominant texts and ideas to pervade our classrooms' (Slack, 1999, p. 92), but particularly on the part of girls who are already 'bombarded with the message that they are second

class citizens – a message reinforced in the workplace by lower salaries, fewer promotions, unheard voices, and little respect’ (p. 94).

### Disparity in representation

The *list of prescribed texts* (SACE, 2015) makes up part of the larger curriculum document, *English Studies Subject Outline (for teaching in 2015)* (SACE, 2015), and is made up of a list of suitable texts from which teachers must choose for study in their classes. It is reviewed annually by the Curriculum Leaders Group, which is comprised of suitably qualified people within the education community and consist[s] of up to 10 experts in the area of study (SACE Board, 2015). It is open-published on the SACE Board website, and yet even for the seasoned teacher, is difficult to locate, suggesting exclusivity. The *list of prescribed texts* (SACE, 2015) appears at the end of descriptions of the various studies in which the texts will be used, and while there is no formal title for the list, it is referred to throughout the rest of the larger curriculum document as ‘the list of prescribed texts’. Its list form reinforces a sense of authority, and is indicative of the way particular discourses are constructed as ‘normal and therefore unchallengeable’ (Snyder, 2008, p. 76). The language used, such as the word *prescribed* to describe the text list, is authoritative in nature, and this is further cemented in the authoritative way teachers are directed to use the list: they must choose four texts, and 1000 lines of poetry and, of the four texts, one must be a play, one a film and one a novel. If this suggests limited scope for autonomy for teachers in their reading and choosing texts from the list, students are certainly rendered almost powerless.

When we examine ‘how discourse produces some ideas as natural or inevitable’ (Cormack, 1996, p. 1) we can see how a list of prescribed texts plays a part in creating and preserving a dominant ideology through the inclusion of some texts at the expense, or deliberate exclusion, of others. In the case of the SACE Board’s *list of prescribed texts*, white men have created sixty seven percent of the texts included while only twenty five percent of the texts are created by women. There are eighty-four texts presented in the list, and of those texts, only twenty one have been created by women, highlighting the way female students ‘have fewer opportunities to focus on women’s writing’ (Davis, 2014). It is disappointing to uncover the obvious disparity in the representation of men and women in the *list of prescribed texts*. Cormack (1996) suggests that ‘[a]ny construction represents a selective view, an ideal

against which people are read and, in being used, serve some interests over others’ (p. 1) – if we are to read the *list of prescribed texts* as a construction of culture based on whose interests are served (Berlin, 1996), it is obvious that the ideas of white men are normalised, while those of women or people of colour are marginalised. There is also a degree of intersectionality, where women of colour make up only eight percent of the creators of texts included in the list. The function of any document is not only as intended by the author, but also as it is read, understood and used by its reader (Prior, 2008). Allowing for the number of texts teachers are allowed to choose from the list, and taking into account that female writers are only represented at a rate of 25%, we can see that the under-representation of female voices means it becomes highly likely that a class will study texts written *only* by white, male, Western writers, where dominant ideologies ‘always privilege particular points of view’ (Snyder, 2008, p. 76), particularly of race and gender. This is problematic in that *because* voices from the margins are underrepresented, it becomes more likely that a class will study texts presenting socially accepted dominant ideals. Slack (2009) speaks of a silence on the part of female students who are more likely to listen ‘as a way of knowing when females halt their own voices in order to hear the truth that comes from others’ (Slack, 2009, p. 20) – a lack of female voices must certainly position females to *know* themselves as listeners rather than as speakers and in possession of knowledge.

### Unconscious restriction of voices

In actively seeking reflexivity, it is important to critique my own use of the *list of prescribed texts* in my years as a senior English teacher. In the main document, the texts appear in alphabetical order, and it is interesting to note how each text type is organised in relation to the rest of the document. The order of text types begins with plays, then films, poets and finally novels. In past couple of years, my choices from the list has been as follows:

Play: *When the Rain Stops Falling* – Andrew Bovell

Film: *V for Vendetta* – James McTeigue

Poets: Emily Dickinson, Wilfred Owen, T.S Eliot, Sylvia Plath, Robert Lowell, Oodgeroo Noonuccal, Bobbi Sykes, Adrienne Rich.

Novels: *1984* – George Orwell and *Never Let Me Go* – Kazuo Ishiguro

As suggested previously, even as a woman

identifying as feminist, there is a glaring lack of female writers presented in my own choices from the *list of prescribed texts*. In fact, the majority of texts I have presented to my students are written by white men, and it is only through my choice of poets that women are represented. Within the *list of prescribed texts* the names of poets are single spaced and presented in four columns, while the plays and novels are double-spaced and presented in single columns, giving them more visual space over the page and perhaps subtly suggesting more importance. And in fact, in my own teaching of these texts, I allocate seven weeks to the study of poetry, meaning a maximum of five weeks is spent studying the works of female poets, accounting for only fifteen percent of the curriculum, while I allocate seven weeks each to Andrew Bovell and Kazuo Ishiguro, and nine weeks to a paired study of James McTeigue and George Orwell. Gilligan suggests that by 'restricting their voices, many women are wittingly or unwittingly perpetrating a male voiced civilisation and an order of living that is founded on disconnection from women' (as cited in Slack, 1999, p. 94). In viewing my own text choices, I can't deny that in my classroom, I have restricted women's voices.

Not including poetry, all of the texts I have chosen from the *list of prescribed texts* include strong, brave and articulate female characters. In particular, McTeigue's character, Evie (2005) and Orwell's character, Julia (1949), are presented as brave women willing to subvert the rules in terrifying dystopian societies. And yet, both women are presented only in *opposition* to the male protagonists, and while neither character fits within an idealised stereotype of what society says women are *supposed* to be, they are both positioned as love interests, suggesting the way film and literature plays 'a powerful role in constructing notions of appropriate male and female behaviour' (Davis, 2014). However, in Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* (2005), the narrator is female, and only one main character is male. The novel is written in first person from the perspective of Kathy, who is positioned as strong, kind, brave and articulate. She has a strong sense of her own sexuality, although at times feels ashamed of it, and is dominant in her relationship with Tommy. A strong theme in the text is the way we accept a life that is socially constructed. In the early chapters, Ishiguro details the way the characters are positioned to accept their lives, detailing a situation where Kathy is caught dancing. She sees her mistress crying, and is confused and angry:

When I think about this now, it seems to me, even if she wasn't a guardian, she was the adult, and she should have said or done something, even if it was just to tell me off. Then I would have known how to behave. (2005, p. 71)

The characters in the text cannot conceive of a different outcome to the life they have been positioned to accept, despite knowing it exists for other people, and a gendered reading may see this as representing the way women are also constructed to accept a life of inequality. A feminist reading could not fail to notice that the only character who rages against, and struggles to accept their fate is Tommy, the only main male character in the text. And while Kathy is the dominant participant in her relationship with Tommy, their relationship begins only after she has become his carer. It could be argued that the reader is able to accept her position in the relationship because the male is disabled – he is literally missing parts of his body. This suggests the way texts are 'places where power and weakness become visible and discussable, where learning and ignorance manifest themselves, where the structures that enable and constrain our thoughts become palpable' (Manuel, 2012, p. 12).

### Conclusion

In many ways, moving toward a *list of prescribed texts* that includes an equal amount of texts created by women seems a battleground, and yet if female students are to be allowed to have a voice, they must see that *women* have a voice and that the ideas of women are *as important* as the ideas of men. They must be allowed to see themselves and their lived experiences reflected in the writings of women. And while I accept that there are constraints to updating the list and it would be unrealistic to expect the SACE Board to change 25% at once. I believe it is right and fair to suggest that until parity it reached between the genders represented, no female writers are removed from the curriculum document without being replaced by another female writer, while any male writers removed are replaced with female writers. Slack (2009) asserts that 'gender bias cannot be resolved solely in a specific context, but it must be a place to start' (p. 24). And so the obvious place to start is in our own classrooms. I would suggest that until the *list of prescribed texts* prescribes the texts of female and male writers equally, we can at the very least still work toward parity in the individual texts we present to our students.

Jessica Fields (2013) suggests that 'even pained

recollections of conflict suggest hope for something else, an insistent sense that things should and could be different' (p. 492). In *Never Let Me Go* (2005), Ishiguro presents a moment where Kathy fantasises that things could be different. And it is described as exactly that – a fantasy. Kathy is ultimately rendered incapable of imagining a life in which she is *not* marginalised and eventually destroyed, by the society that literally created her for their own purposes. But maybe in this, we can feel that 'insistent sense' that things *can* be different.

The fantasy never got beyond that – I didn't let it – and though the tears rolled down my face, I wasn't sobbing or out of control. I just waited a bit, then turned back to the car, to drive off to wherever it was I was supposed to be next. (Ishiguro, 2005, p. 282)

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## Vol 52 No 2

### CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS

Call for papers for special issue of *English in Australia*, Vol. 52, No. 1, 2017, dedicated to two luminaries in the field of English Education: the late Professor Annette Patterson and the late Paul Brock.

This current issue pays tribute to both these outstanding educators, through the valedictory article dedicated to Paul Brock and the editorial tribute to Annette Patterson. To truly celebrate these educators it would be fitting to dedicate an entire issue to themes and issues emerging from and focused in their work. The call for papers goes out to all teachers and researchers in the field of Secondary English curriculum. Their respective bodies of work cover a vast array of topics relating to the following:

*For Annette Patterson* English and Literacy Curriculum and Pedagogy, Literacy, Literature teaching, Professional development of English teachers, Reading in the secondary classroom, Secondary English curriculum, Sociology of reading, Teacher education, Teaching Reading in Australia: An Historical Investigation of Early Ready Pedagogy, the Figure of the Teacher and Literacy Education.

*and*

*For Paul Brock* syllabus critique, literacy and standards, teacher professional standards, curriculum change and literature studies relating to secondary English curriculum and policy matters relating to literacy and language.

*The date for final submissions is 31 October, 2016*

# How Does the Act of Writing Impact on Discursively Mediated Professional Identities? A Case Study of Three Teachers

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**Abstract:** This paper explores the effects participation as writers has on the identities teachers take on when they are both writers who teach and teachers who write. This paper focuses on three interview participants and explores their encounters as writers as they engaged in the 'risky' business of being writers, within and beyond school. A narrative inquiry methodology is used to interrogate the data about the teachers' lived experience of being writers while also being teachers of writing. 'Participant narratives' are used to present the data and to explore the impact being a writer has on participants' discursively mediated identities.

## Introduction

Historically, teachers have been contributors beyond their classrooms, what Darder (2002) calls 'an act of love'. The profession has tended to be socially constructed within communities and perceived as having a sense of wisdom (Craft, Gardner, & Claxton, 2008). Teachers have often been seen as pillars of community, valued for their moral values and academic insights, particularly those associated with children and how they learn but in more recent times that perception has been challenged particularly by politicians and the media. This article explores ways in which teachers contribute to communities beyond their immediate classrooms by considering ways in which teachers make professional contributions beyond their classrooms through acts of writing.

This article is framed by both authors' interest in teachers as writers. One author's interest grew out of the feedback provided by pre-service teachers and their observations of the teaching of writing in primary schools. The second author's interest is explained in the following short vignette that captures the essence of a conversation that took place in a staffroom at a primary school.

The staffroom conversation flows around the 'extra' work teachers are required to do. One teacher shares her narrative of how she spent the weekend writing an application for funding for a program for her class. Another teacher chimes in sharing that her Sunday was spent responding to a backlog of parent emails that she was unable to get to during the week as well as writing her contribution to the weekly school newsletter. The final teacher who was part of the conversation commented on just how much 'extra' work teachers are required to do beyond the role of classroom teacher.

This article explores teachers' discursive lives looking specifically at the acts of writing of three teachers who engage in writing beyond their work as classroom teachers. Through a qualitative paradigm, we consider teacher identities (Bell, Washington, Weinstein, & Love, 2003), particularly 'discursively mediated identities' (Cremin & Baker, 2014; Watts, 2009), and consider examples of acts of writing carried out by our three teachers.

While considerable research attention has been paid to the exploration of the discursive construction of students' literacy practices and identities, Cremin & Baker (2014) argue that insufficient attention has been paid to the 'discursively mediated identities of literacy teachers' (Cremin & Baker, 2014 p. 30). Building on Cremin and Baker's (2014) work this particular article explores the effects participation as a writer has on the discursively mediated identities of our three teachers who consciously seek to position themselves as writers.

The term 'discursively mediated identities' refers to the manner in which positioning oneself as a 'teacher who writes' or a 'writer who teaches' (Cremin & Baker, 2010, p. 127) situates teachers in sites of struggle and can contribute to tensions experienced by practitioners as they perform and enact their identities as both teachers and writers. Cremin and Myhill's (2012) state that, 'Our identities are context-dependent and fluid, maintained and developed through our literacy and interaction with our multiple identities' (Cremin & Myhill, 2012, p. 127). These are complex processes 'as we position ourselves and are positioned as writers in different contexts and with different people' (Cremin & Myhill, 2012, p. 127). The concept of identity itself is not a fixed and coherent set of traits, but rather it is something more complex, often contradictory, and subject to change across time and place. Thinking of 'identity' in this way renders visible how the experiences of identity both shape and are shaped by the processes of life, work and the cultural and work institutions in which we function. Both professional and personal identities co-develop as instantiations of discourses and systems of power (Foucault, 1980) that regulate and ascribe social values to all forms of human activity. These include oral and written texts, gestures, images, and the spaces within. We use the term 'identities' to highlight the complex and multiple forms that are experienced as we interact with our professional and private worlds and the overlaps that occur as our participants move in and out of being and a 'teacher' and a 'writer'.

In the following section we review some of the literature associated with teachers who write, specifically how writing can influence teachers' identities.

### Teachers who write

This article works from the general notion that teachers of writing need to be writers themselves (Cremin, 2006; Grainger, 2005; Watts, 2009) and draws on aspects of Cremin and Myhill's work to explore the idea

of 'Writing Teachers – teachers who write and writers who teach' (2012, p. 121). It has been argued that participating as a writer brings a greater level of overall awareness to the teaching of writing (Harwayne, 2001) working from the assumption that teachers who write, regardless of the form or genre, are likely to be more powerful teachers of writing.

We draw on the work of Parr and Doecke (2012a) as we attempt to define the meaning we attribute to, and the use we make of, the term 'writing'. Parr and Doecke (2012) explain how:

As language educators, we believe language is an inescapable condition for all our work, and for our engagement with the world ... Writing and the kind of struggle with words and meaning that writing involves ... is a crucial means by which to inquire into the way language mediates our understanding of our work as educators, our professional identity and our relationships with each other. (Parr and Doecke, 2012, p. 160)

This explanation also assumes that writing in all of its forms ranging from formal to informal, traditional to digital, for a range of purposes, depending on context makes valued contributions to meaning, identities and relationships. We consider meaning making from a sociocultural perspective (Buckingham, 2007) in that text is created for real purposes and for real audiences. In the context of this study, we are attempting to better understand how the writing teachers do creates meaning for 'real' audiences, and the impact this writing and how these experiences influence their identities. Some scholars argue that if teachers see themselves as writers this will impact positively on their practice (Andrews, 2008; Commeyras, Bisplinhoff, & Olson, 2003). This article does not attempt to critique how the writing teachers do outside school has an impact on their classroom practices (Cremin, 2006; Watts, 2009) rather, it is focused on the writing teachers do beyond the teaching of writing within their classroom and how this influences their professional identities.

### A sense of self: teachers who write

Beijaard et al. (2004) alert us to the complexity of the concept of self and professional identity and we take from their work the importance of acknowledging the personal and the professional aspects of teachers' life histories in professional identity formation (Beijaard et al., 2004). Parr and Doecke (2012a) see writing as a 'kind of struggle with words and meaning' and that 'language [including writing] mediates our understanding of our

work as educators, our professional identity and our relationships with each other' (p. 160). Teachers' sense of self or identity stands at the core of their work as professional educators. This sense of self provides a framework for teachers to construct their own idea of 'how to be', 'how to act' and how to understand' their work as teachers and their place in society. This sense of self or identity is not something that is fixed nor is it imposed; rather it is negotiated through experience and the sense that is made of that experience (Sachs, 2005). Some teachers have written about the process and reflected on their experiences as a way to deal with, and respond to, these complexities and challenges.

### **Writing is risky business – but potentially beneficial to students**

Compared to reading, writing can be considered risky business. Teachers who write are willing take risks, especially if they publish their writing in any form, including through online social media sites such as blogs, and if they share their attempts at writing with the students they teach (Baker, 2010). We consider this to be 'risky business' because it is one way that a teacher can reveal aspects of their identity that may be 'hidden' or less apparent in the communities they live and work in. Writing can make their identities more public and more open to scrutiny. However, we also acknowledge the important role teacher contributions make to the public discussion around education. In an era of knowledge production where many groups feel they have the right to make very public comment about all matters associated with education, teachers more than ever need to find ways to express their professional voices in order to be 'heard' and to be seen to be as 'experts' in the field.

### **Valuing writing as part of teacher practice – the consideration of time, thought and reflective creativity**

There is much evidence that writing is a creative process which requires time for what Pat Thompson had called 'thoughtful creativity' and that teachers in the performative environment of schools struggle to find time for thoughtful creativity (Lyons, 2013). Cremin (2006) also identified 'time' as a critical factor for writing. She described this as 'Time to change and adapt their work, time to incubate and revisit ideas and to take supported risks as writers ... time for collaboration' (Cremin, 2006 p. 428). Grainger (2005) argues that 'if teachers of writing don't actually

write – or even consciously talk creatively – in the way they expect children to do, then' ... they will neither maximise their own creative potential nor fully understand the challenge of being a writer (Grainger, 2005, p. 76). We see this as the crucial point in relation to the value of teachers' participation as writers. In the work conducted by Lyons (2014) evidence suggested that teachers commonly feel compelled to complete busy work, often associated with bureaucratic hurdle jumping (Lyons, 2015, p. 178). This work often comes at the expense of time to reflect on the craft of teaching or the profession more generally (Lyons, 2015, p. 179). There is also evidence of teachers working long hours outside of their paid work to engage in activities which they consider professional practice activities (Zyngier, 2013). This leads us to wonder how the system as a whole values teachers' reflective practice, the publication of their reflective practice, and the feedback and growth that can be generated through such reflective practice.

The literature that we have considered appears to suggest that writing, regardless of form or genre, is beneficial for teachers as it is a way to express themselves, and share their voices. Further, there is a suggestion that students benefit when their teachers participate as writers because they gain an insider's knowledge of the writing process that benefits teachers' knowledge of writing pedagogy. However, this is balanced with a concern that writing is 'risky business' which can reveal or make public parts of teachers' identity in ways that are difficult to control or mediate. On top of this, there is the challenge of time as the teaching profession becomes busier and busier and increasingly more focused on responding to demands to meet national benchmarks and to ensure their students perform well in high stakes testing protocols across the curriculum. There are signs that teachers do write and publish their work (as will be shown by the participants in this study). The advent of high stakes testing and standards-based reforms, however, and teachers' participation in professional development (PD) at local school and statewide levels show little evidence that writing is recognised as important work of teachers. This PD also takes up available time. This means that, although standards-based reforms still require teachers to write, the nature of that writing has changed considerably, taking the form of reports, analyses of standardised testing data, as well as completing a variety of pro formas, such as performance appraisal forms and report writing and planning documentation. The

tradition of 'reflective practice' through writing arguably embodied in the National Writing Project (<http://www.nwp.org>) (Lieberman & Wood, 2002; Lieberman & Wood, 2003) and the ideas about writing as a process developed during the 1980s (Graves, 1983, 1986), seem to have been displaced by writing for accountability and auditing purposes (Parr & Doecke, 2012b).

### Methodology

Data for this article was drawn from a wider research study, which was then analysed to pick apart the experiences of teachers who write and see themselves as writers in one form or another. Narrative inquiry was used to analyse, interpret and present the data.

Narrative inquiry, as suggested by Webster and Mertova (2007), allows us to capture 'human stories of experiences ...[that] provide researchers with a rich framework through which they can investigate the ways humans experience the world depicted through their stories' (Webster & Mertova, 2007 p. 23). Marvasti (2004) argues that 'narrative inquiry aims to fully understand how various experiences relate to one another under the demands of the setting in which they are articulated' (Marvasti, 2004 p. 101). In the context of this paper, narrative inquiry allowed us to hear the stories from the participants about not only what and how they wrote, but how what they wrote, influenced their perceptions of themselves within their professional worlds. In this paper we have used narrative inquiry to gain insights into the twists and turns of individuals' as they write and to consider how their writing influences their sense of identities. Using an insider's perspective, the intention is to make a contribution to a developing narrative of teachers as professionals.

### Data collection for the research project

'Purposeful sampling' was used to identify participants for this study. According to Patton (1990) 'The logic and power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting information-rich cases for study in depth. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research, thus the term *purposeful sampling*' (Patton, p. 169).

### Working with the data for this paper

The objective of this paper is to explore how writing influences the way teachers see themselves and how they construct and present their identities. In order to do this, we started with what Clandinin and Connelly

(1996) refer to as 'field texts'; specifically, the semi-structured interview data and our field notes that were taken during the data collection phase.

This paper seeks to consider how teachers perceive themselves and how they believe others perceive them as a consequence of their participation as writers and how their identities are discursively mediated. Narrative inquiry as a methodology allowed us to explore lived experiences and perceptions of lived experiences. From an ontological perspective we seek not to present one truth, rather we seek to present versions of truths constructed by our participants.

### Presenting the participant narratives

In this section we will introduce the participants, share their stories and discuss their narratives.

### Introducing Louise – *the public writer*

Louise is an experienced teacher who has worked in a range of educational settings. Louise has predominantly worked in the Early Years of school sector, as well as a Program for Students with Disabilities (PSD) Coordinator and has experience teaching in a Reading Recovery program.

### *Louise's Story*

*In terms of writing, I guess in my job as a teacher, there's obviously a lot of writing. Being the PSD Coordinator there's a lot of cover letter writing in supporting documents for applications that I have to write and that's a specific type of writing that you need to do in a specific format that the Department likes you to write. So there's no flexibility whatsoever. So that's that type of writing that I do.*

*In the past I've also written for Practically Primary and things like that, doing book reviews and articles about Literacy and Drama in the classroom. I also write once a month for a blog, which is like a parenting blog. They send me the topics and I write for other parents on topics such as homework, or starting school, or toilet training or whatever they ask me to write on.*

*I make notes when I get the topic and I sit and write it. I can usually do it in one or two sessions and I enjoy that because having four children, with quite a variety of ages, I feel like I've got a bit of experience, a bit of knowledge and if I can help someone out by giving them any advice or tips that I've learnt the hard way then why not. I do like to do that and it's something for myself, writing for myself is a bit of timeout, so I enjoy doing that.*

*I write workshops for parents and teachers. I specifically focus on what is needed; for example running records*

or survey data collection, whatever the need is, so that's a specific type of writing for those workshops. The way I would write for teachers and present for the teachers would be very different to the parents, the type of language that I would use and the types of examples. I guess that's probably most of the school writing that I do.

*I definitely think all teachers are writers ... I am a passionate literacy person ... I would probably do far more literacy things in my classroom in my spare time than numeracy because that's where I feel my expertise and my passion is and I would hope that would rub off on the children but I would make sure I'd cover the other content as well.*

*In regards to the question of whether teachers need to be writers, yes I think they probably do ... they don't have to publish and they don't have to do it in their spare time, but they do have to show the kids they are writers.*

### **Discussion of Louise's story**

Louise's professional identities are negotiated and presented through a range of writing activities. For example, as part of Louise's role as a PSD coordinator, she is required to write formal applications for funding for extra support for student learning. Alongside Louise's writing for PSDs, she is also active within the professional community, having written a number of articles for professional journals as well as blogging. Louise has written a number of workshops for a range of audiences

The three examples of writing that Louise offered demonstrate how writing influences her professional identities beyond her classroom. Louise appears to move seamlessly from an administrator who is submitting documentation to the Department of Education, to an academic writer contributing to professional journals, to an educator writing for both formal and informal parent and teacher audiences. Louise presents as a passionate teacher who locates her writing as a central part of her work, seeing it not as an 'add on' but as a normal piece of her work which allows her to make contributions to the various communities of which she is a part.

Louise uses writing to engage with multiple groups associated with her profession. For Louise, writing is both a professional and enjoyable activity.

For Louise, the transformative component comes in the form of combining her enjoyment of writing, with her lived experiences beyond the classroom, and her professional responsibilities to craft teacher identities that let her consider and create content which gives her validity across multiple stakeholders (parents, teachers,

students, and the wider community). There may be some evidence that teachers' do this for reasons around promotion or positioning themselves as experts but as we repeatedly reviewed Louise's transcript and our own notes and observations, we formed the view that this was not Louise's intent. Rather, she had an interest in making a contribution to her community, and she was using her learning and experience to make this contribution.

Louise is a writer of blogs, professional learning workshops, administrative documents, and academic articles and reviews for professional association journals. The question of how Louise considers the impact of her writing on how she sees herself, and how she perceives how others see her is worth considering. Louise has shaped her identities as a writer as much more than 'classroom teacher'. She is an author, teacher, mentor, advisor, and publisher. Most importantly she sees herself as a confident writer. She takes on the identities of a writer and adds these to her other identities. However, what was striking in her data was how Louise constructed this work. Louise did not see this work as an 'add-on'. Rather she described it as 'enjoyable work', which was more about making a contribution, or 'helping' than work she 'had to do'. Further we were struck by the notion that Louise did not position herself as an 'expert'. Rather she described her writing work beyond the classroom as a way of helping by drawing on her knowledge and experience and sharing it with others.

### **Introducing Kerry – The teacher of writing who finds writing difficult**

Kerry is a classroom teacher, educational coach, tertiary educator and PhD candidate.

### **Kerry's story**

I work in a school where I often go in and model to teachers about writing and I sort of teach grammar through writing.

*I do a lot of PD for teachers and for parents so again I have to write those sorts of things and I do have to monitor my language. I work in a school out in the north [suburbs of Melbourne]. My language is extremely different when I talk to parents about writing or I talk to parents about how to help their children with reading for example; that would be very different to the way I would talk to staff about the same topic.*

*I am also studying. I'm doing some tertiary study for my PhD so there is a particular genre around writing for that*

*and that's quite a precise skill ... there's a specific way to do that.*

*I have worked at a university previously for about four-and-a-half years and I work there one day a week at the moment. I'm working with the Master's students to teach them how to write but that's again a specific genre when they're constructing assignments, so how you would establish an argument, how you'd use topic sentences, what sort of text connectives you would use, so it's all that sort of language.*

*Writing was never easy for me. Writing has always been hard, so for me to unlock the puzzle of writing I had to actually learn how writing was constructed. So I found that that was very useful then for me to teach because I could pass on those sorts of things.*

*I've worked as a coach for many years and I've gone into a lot of schools and I don't think teachers can teach writing very well at all.*

*I guess I've used all of that knowledge because I needed to do that to improve my writing and so I'm able to now take that and it's kind of like a puzzle, I find writing's a bit like a puzzle. You probably find it's easy for you but for me it wasn't – so I needed to work at it. Once you have the formula you can change it all so if you're doing narratives for example you don't have to do just the plan on narrative you can start with the resolution at the end, you can muck around with stuff – I think that the students need to have that structure so they can then play around with it.*

*Children have to be creative and you provide lots of opportunities for writing but I also believe in teaching explicitly as well.*

*I think it needs a skilled practitioner to then be able to look at students – as you were saying look at each student individually and say, 'Well I can see here that Sara is including dialogue in her writing. She wants to have some of that and she's constantly making the same error so I'm going to focus on that' or 'I can see this child hasn't put any character description in I'm going to do some work on that'. So I think teachers all do writing but at a superficial level and I think it takes quite a skilled person to be able to look and to do some [analysis of a student's] writing.*

### **Discussion of Kerry's story**

Through Kerry's varied contexts for writing, she presented complex professional identities. Her identities are modified through deliberate language choices and uses. For example, Kerry points out that her language choices with parents are different from when she is speaking with a teacher group. Kerry offers insights into her professional identities that are influenced by the audiences for whom she writes. Kerry

allows us to glean an understanding of the complexities associated with communicating with different audiences for different purposes, a landscape which many teachers navigate within their profession.

As an outsider looking in on Kerry it is plausible to assume that writing came relatively easy to her. After all, she writes professional learning programs and professional articles, she coaches teachers about teaching writing and she is completing a PhD. However, Kerry highlights how writing is a challenge for her. We think this is significant because it demonstrates a skill or competence we assume all teachers have; yet we wonder how much attention is given to professional learning around writing for audiences beyond the classroom.

Kerry offers something quite different from the assumption that teachers who write find writing easy. Had Kerry not 'unlocked the puzzle of writing' it is unlikely that she would be making her current contributions to her profession. The transformation came about for Kerry, through what she describes as her development of a deeper understanding of 'the rules' of writing – and applying those rules to the 'game of writing' (Bourdieu, 1990). Kerry suggests that, based on her experiences, other teachers may have similar experiences.

Kerry's transformational experiences around understanding the rules of writing have had an impact on her professional identities. As we consider Kerry's story, she seems to demonstrate a fragile sense of self around being a writer. In some ways this is a good example of the array of discursive identities that teachers take up. It is possible that peers and colleagues may view Kerry as a competent writer based on the work she does; some may even view her as an expert. However, based on the narrative data we do not see evidence of Kerry seeing herself in this way. Rather, we see evidence of a teacher who is passionate about writing, and passionate about her profession, and consequently works very hard to be a good writer, and to use her skills as a writer to make contributions beyond her classroom but writing is still challenging work for Kerry.

### **Introducing Melanie – *The published author who wasn't sure she would be an author***

Melanie has worked as a classroom teacher in both the junior and senior primary school years. At the time of interview Melanie had taken leave from her teaching position and had just published a book of advice for beginning teachers. Melanie also publishes her own

blog on teaching issues, and is intending to write more books for beginning teachers.

### Melanie's story

*I have wanted to write this book [advice for beginning teachers] for quite a while and working full time as a teacher it's impossible to do anything extra really and be a parent as well. So I took twelve months leave without pay last year to write and I took it **not** knowing if I could write. I hadn't done a lot of writing before that apart from lesson planning and letters and all that sort of stuff. I knew that I was okay at it and my grammar was great et cetera, but whether I could write in a way that was appealing and easily understood, I didn't really know. After I got the first chapter done I realised that I was on the right track.*

*I've also started work on Book 2 and I've got plans for a couple more after that. I've also started to write a PD program around the topics in the book for new graduates and I guess I'm sort of setting up a little bit of a business on the side of teaching so that I've got something else to do so I don't have to work full time as a teacher. So I've been writing; I guess it's like a subscription self-help type thing so if new Grads or Unit students sign up, they'll get a regular newsletter with hints and tips on relevant topics.*

*I think I always enjoyed writing. I was conscious of trying to make it enjoyable for children. So I think within the teams that I've been in, one of my strong focuses has been to teach writing in a good way. So I think I was already researching and experimenting. That's kind of my nature as well, so I'll probably just continue to do that, but I'm probably a little bit more conscious of not trying to push kids to produce a particular genre or a particular number of words, so that you don't push them away from it.*

### Discussion of Melanie's story

Melanie had wanted to write her book for quite a while, but working full time as a teacher she found it impossible to do anything 'extra', and be a parent as well. Melanie decided to take twelve months leave without pay to write, not knowing if she could in fact write. She explained that she hadn't done a lot of writing before that apart from lesson planning and personal communications.

Melanie has demonstrated a very strong example of writing as a transformational professional activity. Melanie clearly felt there was a need for a book of advice for beginning teachers, and through her lived experience and competence as a writer she produced a

published text. What is interesting to consider here is just how did the transformation occur?

Melanie began her writing journey as an author unsure of her capacity or abilities to create a text for publication and sale to the community. But through the process of writing she was able to transform her professional identities to include 'published author'. This transformation is continuing.

What was most striking for us in Melanie's narrative was her commitment to writing. To make a decision to take twelve months leave without pay to write a book for early-career teachers demonstrates a commitment to the profession that is beyond classroom practice, and suggests complex discursive identities; identities that are concerned with being a competent classroom teacher, but also a member of a professional community capable of making contributions to the learning of others. In Melanie's case, she chose to make these contributions through writing. Melanie, differing from the other two participants, is probably positioning herself as 'expert'. Melanie is now in the process of writing professional learning resource books with the hope of setting up a business focused on providing professional learning for early career teachers. This is just another example of how identities are negotiated and woven into the social fabric of the teaching profession, and demonstrates ways writing can, not only make a contribution to the profession, but can also position teachers' identities in particular ways.

### Analysis of the narratives

#### *Considering how writing influences teacher identities*

The three research participants all used writing to make contributions to their profession and community beyond their immediate classrooms. Further, there is evidence to suggest that writing influences how the participants constructed themselves (and their roles) as teachers. As explained earlier in this article we see identities as complex, often contradictory, and subject to change across time and context rendering visible how identities both shape and are shaped by the processes of life, work and the cultural and work institutions in which we function.

The three participants showcased in this paper share common activities as both teachers and as writers. Writing shapes, and is shaped by, their identities. Writing allows them to make professional contributions beyond their classrooms, and influences the way they see themselves as writers who teach, and as teachers who write.

### **Writing as a way of making a contribution to knowledge – *the unintended expert***

Our three teacher participants use writing to position themselves as 'experts' within specific contexts. Their initial intent was not to become 'experts', rather it was to make a contribution to the teaching profession in areas that interest them. For example Louise writes a blog and presents professional learning programs; Kerry is a doctoral candidate immersed in the preparation of research and writing for her PhD thesis and associated publications and Melanie is a published, commercial author. Their identities have been reshaped as a consequence of their participation as writers.

### **Identity shaping and reshaping through blurred boundaries**

Interestingly, what these participants demonstrated was the blurring of boundaries between their professional and personal identities. Louise wrote a blog, which was read by a range of people (not just teachers) on a host of issues to do with child development. She drew on her experience as a teacher and a mother to offer expert opinion. The boundaries of identity formation were unclear. Louise was not just writing as a teacher or just as a parent, nor was she writing for a closed audience. She was aware that the way she is perceived online is influenced by her work as a teacher, and arguably the way she is perceived within her workplace is influenced by her online presence as a writer. The blurring of boundaries influenced by where her writing is published and who engages with her writing provides an example of how teacher identities can be shaped and reshaped through writing.

### **Consideration of how writing influences teacher voice within an environment of 'mega voices'**

The 'grand narrative' as described by Schultz and Ravitch (2012), suggests that histories and discourses have often been written without sufficient questioning or critical interpretation. Often grand narratives are constructed by a social discourse that is disconnected from the people they influence most. People can become entrenched in the grand narratives of education, with a side effect being the loss of individual teacher voices. One such example is when curriculum policies are produced by State and National policy makers without sufficient consultation with practising teachers, leaving them feeling compelled to enact the curriculum without any feeling of ownership or personal investment.

Participants in this article were able to demonstrate that each one, in their own way, was interrogating the grand narrative of their profession through writing. For example Melanie clearly saw a need for the grand narrative of early career teachers to be challenged, and she challenged it through writing a book to support beginning teachers. She also challenges what is often an accepted orthodoxy that suggests the academics that live and work within the university sector are best placed to give such advice to beginning teachers. Melanie demonstrates her belief that practising teachers are quite capable of making contributions to the wider educational community outside their classrooms and schools. Kerry is challenging the grand narrative through writing a PhD which is an original contribution to knowledge in her educational field. Louise challenges the grand narrative by combining her experiences as a teacher and parent to write a blog which considers issues that are pertinent to, and supportive of, parents and the community members who read her blog. In these ways Melanie, Kerry and Louise contribute to the disruption of the grand narrative of education by contributing their own minor narratives to the conversation. Challenging the grand narrative is about personal empowerment and having strategies to make a contribution to the powerful discourses that run through our social worlds. Within this article, each of the participants interrogates, challenges and makes a contribution to the grand narrative drawing on their lived experiences. Writing is the vehicle that allows them to do this. Their identities, through their writing become much more visible, informed by their experiences, shape and shaped by, the process of writing.

### **Conclusion**

Teachers' work, like most social phenomena in the 21st century, is undergoing rapid change, largely fuelled by sociocultural uses of technology. Considering how teachers write, what they write, when they write, whom they write for, and how they share their writing, allowed us to explore the contributions teachers are making to communities beyond their classrooms.

Writing appeared to have an impact on our teachers' discursively mediated identities in generally positive ways. In an era where teachers are subjected to mandated policies and directives, writing appears to be one way in which teachers can maintain their voices and make meaningful contributions to the directions of their profession. Further, it appears that writing has a positive influence on their feelings about their

competence as both teachers and writers. The three participants in this study offered insights into how writing can be transformational and empowering. Generally speaking, the participants demonstrated how their writing, which they appeared to enjoy, influenced their professional communities, and their professional identities. Given that this is occurring in an era when professional voices are struggling to find traction over the mega voices and grand narrative of the political and media world these are positive insights. Teachers live out multiple identities in roles and teaching is a complex and multifaceted profession. This article demonstrates how teachers engage in writing for professional activities beyond that of classroom teacher and provides insights into how this mediates their professional identities and sense of self.

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**Australian  
Association** for the  
**Teaching of  
English**

Post AATE conference issue of  
*English in Australia:*  
Re-reading Dartmouth

*Call for Contributions*

Special Issue (Volume 51, No. 3)

THIS YEAR'S PRE-AATE CONFERENCE event 're-reads' the 1966 Dartmouth Seminar where English specialists from the United States of America, the United Kingdom and Canada met at Dartmouth College to address the question, 'What is English?'

The Dartmouth Seminar produced a new emphasis on student-centred and collaborative learning through the mediation of oral language. It argued the importance of encouraging students to write about their own experiences and re-oriented reading practices away from reverence towards a literary canon to personal engagement with literary works. With the publication of John Dixon's famous report on the Seminar, *Growth Through English*, the Seminar became indelibly associated with the emergence of 'Growth' pedagogy or the 'New English'.

The Dartmouth Seminar fostered global collegiality, co-operation and exchange in the field of language and literary education. In this spirit of collaboration, *English in Australia* will run a special issue that follows the AATE pre-conference symposium in July to engender fruitful discussion and encourage robust debate about the significance of Dartmouth in the history of English teaching. This is an opportunity to consider the extent to which aspects of 'Growth Pedagogy', as enunciated by John Dixon in 1967, still shape what we do as English educators, to consider how we should view the 'persistent pedagogy of "Growth"' (to borrow the title of an essay that Ian Reid published in 2003), and why it might still be important for us to engage with this legacy.

We welcome submissions contributing to a dialogue that 're-reads' Dartmouth and evaluates how it has shaped and continues to shape English teaching in Australia and around the world. We are not necessarily looking for full-length academic papers, but papers of up to 4000 words in length that provide perspectives on 'Growth Pedagogy' from a range of standpoints. In this way, the issue will present a wide range of voices contributing to a conversation that re-evaluates 'Growth Pedagogy' and how it was taken up and applied in various local settings.

This special issue will be edited by

**Trish Dowsett** (St Hilda's Anglican School for Girls, Western Australia) with  
**Brenton Doecke** (Deakin University) and Bill Green (Charles Sturt University).

**For further information please see the guideline for authors or send enquires to  
Trish Dowsett: [trish.dowsett@sthildas.wa.edu.au](mailto:trish.dowsett@sthildas.wa.edu.au).**

Guidelines for contributors to *English in Australia*  
can be found on the inside front cover of this issue.

***Submissions due by 29 August 2016***

# Exploring *Minecraft* as a Pedagogy to Motivate Girls' Literacy Practices in the Secondary English Classroom

*Nerissa Marcon, St Helena Secondary College and Julie Faulkner, Monash University*

**Abstract:** Digital games are positioned in literacy research as integral to contemporary youth culture and their potential as a learning resource continues to be explored in current literature. This paper examines the use of *Minecraft* as a pedagogical tool to motivate girls' literacy practices within the secondary English classroom. The data suggest that girls find *Minecraft* an appealing text for literacy learning. Girls chose to work collaboratively and strategically as they designed and immersed themselves in the game. Problem-solving approaches and distributed learning initiatives were evident in the girls' negotiations. This article argues that using digital games in English classrooms can productively assist teachers to bridge students' outside- and inside-school literacy practices, while validating and drawing from youth culture to enhance learning processes.

It is now evident that many girls choose to play digital games during their leisure time outside school, both alone and in collaboration with others. Girls now form roughly 50% of the playing population (Lenhart, Kahne, Middaugh, Macgil, Evans & Vitak, 2008). The 'long-standing stereotype of the computer gamer as a solitary teenage boy is fading' (Robertson, 2012, p. 387), although recent research by Vermeulen, Nunez Castellar and Van Looy (2014) suggests that gaming remains a predominantly a male activity. Moreover, recent discussion highlights the 'dark side' of female engagement with digital games, pointing to the more extreme misogynist elements of the female representations and male responses. One example of this situation is the abuse directed at feminist media critic Anita Sarkeesian for her campaign against video game representations of violence against women (Kinzel, 2014). More recently, Rose McGowan has criticised advertisements for *X-Men: Apocalypse* which show Jennifer Lawrence's character in a chokehold accompanied with the tagline: 'Only the strong will survive' (Hunt, 2016).

However, while female engagement in digital gaming raises complex issues, playful digital spaces can offer rich and motivated learning, particularly for 21st-century meaning making. The use of digital games for literacy learning is well established (Apperley & Beavis, 2011; Apperley & Walsh, 2012; Beavis, Apperley, Bradford, O'Mara, & Walsh, 2009; Buckingham & Burn, 2007; Gee, 2003; Steinkuehler, 2007; Zimmerman, 2009), including the use of *Minecraft* (Dezuanni, O'Mara & Beavis, 2015; Richardson, 2012). Against some of these background issues around girls and gaming, this research project focused on girls as *Minecraft* players in a co-educational classroom.

The use of digital technologies as part of critical literacy skills is identified in the *Australian Curriculum: English*, and even though digital games are not explicitly named as a literacy text, acceptance of their value in the educational context can be supported by their legitimacy as a textual form (Beavis et al., 2009; Gee, 2003; Steinkuehler, 2010). *Minecraft* enables students the opportunity to shape and interact within a virtual landscape and, in doing so, engage in a

robust range of literacy practices, such as hypothesising and drawing conclusions, reading and writing across a range of different text types and modalities.

Acknowledging gaming as integral to youth culture gives credence to the importance of integrating digital gaming into the educational context; in effect bridging out-of-school and inside-school literacy practices (Beavis et al., 2009; Dezuanni et al., 2015; Willet, Richards & Marsh, 2013). Paratext, or auxiliary text associated with digital gaming, allows students to develop cognitively sophisticated literacy skills (Alvermann, 2011; Apperley & Walsh, 2012) and an opportunity for students to use their previous experience with paratext within the formal learning context. As English educators, we wanted to understand more deeply the range of ways girls engaged with an open-ended digital game such as *Minecraft*, given the opportunity to do so within the English classroom.

### The study

This small-scale study enabled the teacher-researcher to leverage teaching to investigate *Minecraft's* learning potential in the classroom. The study was conducted in a co-educational Victorian secondary school located in Melbourne's North, involving one class of Year 7 English students, consisting of 14 girls and 12 boys. The study took place over two weeks, incorporating nine 72 minute periods. While the unit on *Minecraft* was integral to semester planning, the work was not connected to any formal English assessment. The curriculum plan for the first week was to allow students to build a structure within the game, while the second week was designed for students to play and elaborate this play through forms of social media used by them in the out-of-school context. This element was added to provide students with an opportunity to draw on their outside-of-school literacy practices, bridging formal and informal learning.

This qualitative approach facilitated the collection of rich data. At commencement of the study, participants were asked to complete a survey, designed to elicit previous gaming experience. Throughout the two-week period, we gathered observational notes which recorded students' dialogue pertaining to *Minecraft* game play and girls' interactions with the game. Students were asked to take screen shots from every session and these were gathered as artefacts. Videos of semi-structured interviews with two girls as they explained their *Minecraft* constructions to the teacher-researcher were also collected. Students'

Instagram and Facebook posts of *Minecraft* play were gathered as further evidence of player practice, along with the associated comments from viewer posts. Teacher reflections were also collected as data. We chose Apperley and Beavis's (2013) 'Model for Critical Games Literacy' to frame the data analysis because it offered a curriculum framework in which to analyse literacies associated with gaming actions and draw on outside-school meaning-making practices. The authors explain that the model has been designed:

for exploring digital literacies and games in the classroom context ... providing a map for observing and analysing games and game play, and a template for curriculum planning and pedagogy concerned with critical games literacy, digital games and multimodal twenty-first-century literacies.  
(Apperley & Beavis, (2013), p. 1)

The curriculum model 'illustrates the connections between in-game actions and youth gaming culture' (Apperley & Beavis, 2013, p. 1), thus fitting well with exploration of links between outside school digital literacy practices and more formal literacy practices in the secondary school setting. The model includes 'Games as Action', and 'Games as Text', two parts which are 'permeable and overlapping' so that the model operates holistically (Apperley & Beavis, 2013, p. 2).

### *Minecraft*

*Minecraft* is a digital game that presents as a virtual world, or space, where users can create structures using the tools and objects of construction provided to shape the geography of the space. The game can be played in survival mode, where players need to navigate the game in order to survive, as well as enjoying the creative aspects, or in creative mode, which allows players to focus on the design aspects without the threat of extinction. There is also an educational version of the game, although this was not used in this study. The game consists of square digital blocks which can be altered and manipulated to build and create landscapes. Players use a variety of different cyber resources, such as timber or iron, with the capacity for multiple players to collaborate within the same spaces at the same time. Dezuanni et al. (2015, p. 149) claim that participation in 'virtual worlds requires complex transactions involving the children's skills, textual practices, performance and identity work. *Minecraft* offers a world shaped by students, allowing for them to express their creativity and resourcefulness in ways they find immersive and pleasurable.'

### Cultural identities, affinity groups and learning

According to survey data, the majority of girls had played *Minecraft* prior to the study, indicating that it was a popular game of choice in outside school gaming practices. More specifically, nine of the girls had played *Minecraft* prior to using it in class for this study, with five girls having played *Minecraft* more than 20 times. The other four had had minimal exposure to the game – all fewer than ten times – with three of them indicating that they did not enjoy playing *Minecraft*. Five girls – Natalie, Paige, Kate, Lola and Danielle – had never played it before. Of all the girls who had experience in some way playing *Minecraft* before, only one, Kate, identified herself as being an expert *Minecraft* gamer.

Girls' enthusiasm for playing *Minecraft* during English class was not confined to girls who had prior knowledge and experience with the game. While Kate was the only girl in class to identify herself in the survey data as being an 'expert' *Minecraft* gamer who enthusiastically embraced the game's use in class, Melanie was a novice player with no previous experience who quickly learnt to navigate the game and adopt a mentor role with her peers. While data did not capture Melanie learning how to use these moves, the initial survey data identified her as a participant who had never played the game before, and then later, as a person to whom other girls looked to for help within the game.

A strong feature of girls' play emerged as that of cultural identities and their relationship to motivated learning. *Minecraft* offers a virtual space for expanded forms of literacy practice, more specifically opening up what Gee (2005) terms an 'affinity space'. This is conceptualised by Gee as a particular kind of social semiotic space involving people engaging with others around content, or sets of signs. 'Affinity' here connects to a common desire to successfully negotiate the ludology, or logic, actions and resources of the *Minecraft* world. Gee identifies the ability for participants to generate new signs and relationships among signs as characteristic of these spaces, strengthening players' status as insiders. The players share endeavours and practices (as opposed to ethnicity, nation and culture). They are required, as are most actors in virtual worlds, to make sense of what they find, even when puzzling, and interact in purposeful ways. This process encourages 'intensive and extensive knowledge', which Gee claims might be 'individual and distributed' (p. 226). To successfully negotiate the design of a

complex space such as *Minecraft*, players need to work hard to familiarise themselves with the semiotic cues. Both broad and specialised knowledge is therefore demanded to play.

To this end, the 'networking' of skills and understanding is encouraged. Exchanging knowledge is vital for learners to take on, then 'routinise' (Gee 2003, p. 21) their understandings in the multimodal environment. While playing *Minecraft*, girls worked collaboratively in a number of ways. First, they used expressive language to seek help from each other, with one novice player mentoring another as her competency grew. This mentoring supports research by Dezuanni et al. (2015) who found through 'social displays of *Minecraft* knowledge', girls can be positioned as expert gamers within affinity groups (p. 154).

Girls' choice to learn collaboratively while playing *Minecraft* as part of this study is indicative of their motivation and engagement with the game. Data found girls drew on understanding of both virtual and real-world contexts to communicate meaning amongst themselves, explaining their actions within the game without specific contextual references as they collaborated to create shared *Minecraft* videos. Secondly, they used oral interaction to discuss the concept of digitally killing animate objects in *Minecraft* and verbalised thoughts on actions and risks, including 'killing' actions, within the game. Thirdly, the girls also created videos together and used actions within the game of *Minecraft* as a basis to blend videos and screen shots of their play with use of Instagram.

These shared social affiliations around the challenges of teaching encourage what Gee (2005) viewed as 'a good effective and modern way to organise [...] deep learning' (p. 232). Positioning the game as an affinity space in Gee's terms enabled us to critically reflect on not only how players were negotiating the design grammar of the site, but also how we might continue to expand the learning potential of the technologies.

Gee (2005), in discussing online environments as social semiotic spaces, noted the reflexive relationship between the design grammar of the interactive site and the individual practices and social interactions people bring to site content. It is the 'external grammar' of the social semiotic space, or the ways in which people think about, value and act on the content and within the space which help shape identities – in this case, cultural identities, linked to game playing. Through engaging in role play, players became members of two

different worlds simultaneously where they can be both themselves and someone other than themselves. This further encourages individual, distributed and dispersed knowledge, characteristic of Gee's affinity spaces (p. 225). Meaning and knowledge are distributed across 'the learner, objects tools, symbols, technologies and the environment' (Gee, 2003, p. 211) as well as being shared, or dispersed, with others outside the game.

Such knowledge, in turn, forges new learner identities and power relationships within the classroom. In the girls' cases, this knowledge fed enthusiasm and agency among the class group. Melanie and Meg's growing confidence playing *Minecraft* gave rise to articulating their motivation to play as taking control. Meg commented, 'I want to be a fast *Minecraft* builder' and Melanie expressed a desire to build a 'weird' room, saying, 'I'm going to make this the weirdest room ever. I'm just going all out'.

Bergin (1999), Brophy (2008) and Faircloth (2012), among others, argued that when an experience or subject resonates with a person's identity, individuals are more likely to be engaged and motivated. The conversations among friends as they played the game captured three girls forging connections between their personal identities and *Minecraft*. The data captured five girls referring to their characters' actions as their own, linking the character to themselves. Specific comments included: 'I'm going to jump in the water' (Haylee), 'They're [pigs] all staring at me' (Kate), 'It's going to kill me' (Natalie), 'I'm going to fly up' (Meg). Active identifications within the game have an influence on the players' characters, often drawing emotional responses and personal connections, reflective of the 'Me as Game Player' dimension of the Apperley and Beavis (2013) model.

Using *Minecraft* in class allowed students with prior experience the opportunity of showcasing their skills and knowledge in the formal school environment. Otherwise socially awkward student Chris engaged in more conversation than usual in class, and uncharacteristically, with popular and assertive girls, Melanie and Meg. Chris attempted to assert himself as an expert gamer, positioning his skill levels as higher than theirs. Schott and Horrell (2000, p. 44) indicated that girls are aware of gaming as being a male realm, believing 'gaming is strongly biased in favour of males'. The same research 'exemplified the pseudo-communication found between girl gamers and male counterparts, as well as actions that subvert female

progress and maintain male status as the "expert"' (p. 48). Conversations among Melanie, Meg and Chris captured Chris asking the girls four separate rhetorical questions. The girls were seated incidentally near often-isolated Chris in this instance. The first question, 'Do you know what the rarest ore is?' was ignored by the girls and he did not provide the answer. In the second, he asked 'Do you even know how to set the time?' inferring that it was unlikely, yet Meg answered in the affirmative. Then he asked, 'Do you know what the compass is for?' and when Meg answered 'No,' he again did not provide the answer. He did not offer an explanation to further her understanding of the game, simply saying 'okay.' Schott and Horrell (2000, p. 41) also asserted that there is a 'common perception [amongst gamers] ... that males are "the experts" when it comes to knowing what is required and how it is achieved' in gaming. In instances where the girls' lack of knowledge about the game was highlighted by a male player, the girls' confidence and motivation to play, however, did not diminish. In this case, the girls maintained agency, and even power in the exchange, not responding to or deflecting his comments.

While the girls were less able gamers than the boys at the outset of the study, this perception did not influence girls' willingness to play *Minecraft* in English class – a surprising, yet pleasing finding, and one which adds weight to gender equity arguments in relation to digital games. Gee and Hayes (2010) observed that girls play such games with persistence and passion. Our findings, limited though they were in this small study, suggest that masculine perceptions of gaming did not hinder girls' enthusiasm for playing *Minecraft*.

### **Design, strategy and problem solving**

Also strongly evident in the study were the social and cognitive affordances provided by *Minecraft* for young female participants to create and strategise whilst playing. The Year 7 girls demonstrated an awareness of the design principles associated with playing *Minecraft* and were observed speaking about the aesthetic and visual elements of the game in particular ways. Data captured four girls demonstrating competence in navigating the *Minecraft* software to shape their virtual landscapes through use of the toolbox and choice of items and resources – often for visual appeal as well as pragmatic and narrative choice. The girls' developing aptitude with design features in the game and their use of related discourse, helped establish their position within their classroom affinity group – a finding

also evidenced in research by Dezuanni et al. (2015). Outside the game, girls used language conventions with text structures and language features through their Instagram design. Students filmed each other on their phones as they played *Minecraft*, then shared their game play action with an authentic audience – Instagram users – in a strongly multimodal way, using paratext for headings of their posts, the inclusion of videos, and with written comments at the bottom of the posts.

Voluntarily, these girls used paratext and online language conventions in posting their multimedia content based on their *Minecraft* play outside of school – evidence of combining forms of *Minecraft* digital gaming with Instagram in a way not traditionally part of an English learning.

There was no expectation that students had prior knowledge or experience playing *Minecraft* in this study. Any students who did not have prior experience with the game learnt how to read and navigate the game as they played during the first few lessons, with help from their peers and teacher. Students used their virtual world designs as a stimulus to develop different multimodal literacy artefacts, which reflected a blend of traditional and digital literacies, such as using Instagram or Facebook, or written extensions of text associated with digital gaming. Doing this, students engaged in the creation of written, digital textual forms relating to *Minecraft*, taking audience and purpose into account. Melanie, for example, chose to create a house and furnish it with items that appealed to her. Proud of her shift from novice to mentor *Minecraft* gamer, Melanie asked to show us the house she had built. Demonstrating her understanding of the power of light, Melanie explained her choice of particular blocks:

They're like special lights, like crystals, and they just light up the room ... Well, all of the monsters and stuff are drawn to the torches and that. If it's dark, all the creatures come in so you've got to put in a lot of light.

Students continually decoded and encoded information to create intricate and purposeful structures. Aesthetics also played a part in Melanie's design choices:

I think it's just how they look and stuff ... I've put some pipes and stuff just to make it look cool. It's for decoration ... it 'looks cool' and it looks better.

Problem-solving included working out how to open trunks (Meg) to see whether items were inside, and find

doors that would fit into floors (Melanie), so trap doors might be included in building to create and link access. Melanie explained that she searched the toolbox for a door to go in her floor, and finding none, settled on a trap door, since it was the only door that could be inserted into the floor and subsequently opened. This allowed access the tunnel beneath.

Three girls (Melanie, Meg and Kate) all referenced killing spiders, witches and creepers within their gaming as a gaming survival strategy. Another student (Kate) drew on her previous *Minecraft* gaming experience to understand the situation of play at any given time by decoding and encoding information. This skill is evidenced in her 'How to Kill a Lamb' Instagram post, where she explained via video as she played to share her knowledge with other players who might not have known, 'So this is how you make more lambs. And this is how you kill a lamb. You just keep hitting it until it dies.' Lambs cannot kill in the game, so this killing is not motivated by a desire to survive in the game, but rather to collect wool, for building, such as beds, or for decoration.

Further examples of distributed learning were evidenced in the oral conversations among the girls as they were playing *Minecraft*. Five girls (Jemma, Melanie, Meg, Lola and Haylee) asked each other how to proceed in certain circumstances. Questions and comments included, 'Can you make a house out of melon?' (Jemma), 'This is frustrating me, so how do I save it?' (Meg), 'How do you spell 'clear'?' (Melanie), 'Can you make pigs fall in love?' (Lola) and 'Is that a zombie? It's going to kill me. I need to run' (Haylee).

Data revealed girls using further individual and collaborative problem-solving gaming strategies while playing *Minecraft* in English class. Gee (2008, p. 259) pointed out 'in a game, the virtual character's powers and limitations mesh with the way in which the virtual world is designed in quite specific ways'. In this study, girls demonstrated an understanding of the powers and limitations of the game to develop successful gaming strategies of play. Examples included navigating obstacles in the game, selecting appropriate language consistent with actions used within the game and understanding the situation of play at any given time by processing information.

Thompson (2014) argues for literacy practices which are built through powerful situated learning in digital gaming. This situated learning is driven by players' motivation to gain the knowledge they require to enact desired actions within the game. She explained

that when young people engage in digital gaming, there are often words that they do not know, but they persevere because they invest in their gaming actions and they 'figure it out'. In one instance, Meg asked Melanie 'What's that?' to which Melanie replied 'It's a spider'. She similarly asked 'Is that the moon?' to which Melanie replied 'Yep'. By persevering in asking her friend what objects are within the game, Meg built her knowledge of *Minecraft* metalanguage, such as 'killing' and 'spawning,' learning inductively how the game worked.

### ***Minecraft*, literacy and the Australian Curriculum: English**

Using evidence from this study, links can be facilitated to all three strands of the Australian Curriculum: English. ACELY1724 involves students' combining language features with other visual features to influence audiences, such as *Minecraft* sign writing in order to remember where something had been positioned within the structure, since it appeared camouflaged.

Contemporary learners are constant producers of media content for online audiences (Gee & Hayes, 2010), Five out of 14 girls chose to post screen shots or videos of their *Minecraft* play on Instagram, along with associated explanatory text underneath and written comments interacting with other Instagram users. The skills of creating content for Instagram posts were evident – composing, editing and then publishing written and multimodal text.

Data captured girls using specific *Minecraft* language, such as 'zombie' and 'spawning' to inform the Instagram post audience about the zombies making their own houses, relating directly to Australian Curriculum descriptors calling for deliberate choice of vocabulary, including digital metalanguage, in the creation of an informative text. At the same time, they used language that connects them to their female peer group, with teenage interjections becoming adjectival phrases, such as 'It's oh my god!' (Melanie).

By actively constructing content and sharing with an authentic online audience, the girls developed their understanding of audience and purpose, mobilising audio elements for additional effect (ACELY1811). Selecting and editing video images, incorporating voice and titles, the girls developed skills relating to selection of voice qualities, sound, music and other elements to add interest and meaning to a multimodal text.

Bridging the divide between outside and inside school literacy practices

The study recognised the need for English to reflect the changing learning needs of students in the 21st century to ensure that literacy studies reflect literacy practices outside of school, as called for by Apperley and Walsh (2012). Asking students to think of ways they can blend *Minecraft* play in school to their outside school literacy practices resulted in students communicating with online audiences via social media platforms. The study illustrated how *Minecraft* play can be blended with social media applications, such as Instagram and Facebook, to create multimodal communications – hybrid texts with visual devices, such as emoticons – reflective of students' outside school communicative practices. This supports Steinkuehler's (2010) assertion that students are engaging in a 'constellation of literacy practices' (p. 61) external to digital game play. The integration of multiple digital technologies in this study – *Minecraft*, video, Instagram and Facebook – and its focus on digital game literacy, highlights the value in adding to understandings of implementing digital technologies into the English teaching context.

Inviting students' out-of-school literacies use into the classroom is a way of validating and valuing students' cultural preferences (Apperley & Walsh, 2012; Alvermann, 2011). This is important when considering Gee and Hayes' (2010) opinion that many students engage in more complex, technology-based literacy practices at home than in school; a factor which risks alienating teenagers from literacy teaching that takes no account of students' lives.

### **Conclusion**

Beavis et al. (2009) argue that more action research into teachers' use of digital games in English is needed to add to understanding of how games can be practically applied in the classroom. This study attempts to address this issue in relation to female students' literacy learning. Like many other digital games, *Minecraft's* educational appeal lies in its ability to capture students' attention, challenge and encourage them to venture into new design territory. *Minecraft* can also provide a springboard for game-based communications and expanded literacies via social media platforms, such as Instagram or Facebook. Our study suggested that girls engaged willingly in sustained strategic and creative work necessary to negotiate the design grammar of the game, as well as the social dynamics of the Gee's 'affinity space'. Girls collaborated in ways that shared and extended the learning amongst the class, thus further consolidating learning identities. *Minecraft* worked

as a promising resource with these young female learners, particularly when complemented by social media dimensions. Its inclusion in English curriculum validates youth culture, challenging aspects of gender stereotypes and mobilising significant learning processes.

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# Teachers' Perceptions of the Influence of Assessment on their Teaching of Year 9 English

*Leanne Portelli and Kerry-Ann O'Sullivan, Macquarie University*

**Abstract:** This article draws from a Masters research study investigating the early implementation of the NSW English K–10 Syllabus in Year 9 with a focus on, teachers' perceptions of the various forms and purposes of assessment and the role these play in the classroom. The five participants were drawn from one English faculty in a single sex school in the Sydney metropolitan area. In this case study it is evident that systemic policy and an external national testing agenda constrain both classroom and assessment practices consequently narrowing teacher assessment literacy. It appears that the challenge ahead for educators is to balance the demands of external testing with professional agency to develop meaningful assessment strategies that capture the learning occurring in the classroom.

## Introduction

An important focus for school-based education is to improve student learning and assessment is one method used by teachers to achieve this. Improvement in student learning is governed by the ways we assess how students have achieved the learning outcomes of a particular course of study. Learning outcomes in New South Wales, Australia are mandated through a state syllabus for each content area and its specific requirements for the ways that students can be assessed. Because of the inextricable relationship between teaching, learning, and assessment, the nature of this relationship in practice is worth investigating.

Assessment, according to the Board of Studies New South Wales can be defined as 'the broad name for the collection and evaluation of evidence of a student's learning' (Board of Studies, NSW, 2012, p. 104). This definition provides the frame for this investigation into teachers' perceptions of the influence of assessment on their teaching of Year 9 English.

## Rationale for this study

The aim of this study was to establish the teachers' perceptions of the influence of assessment practices around their teaching of Year 9 English because of the different purposes that these can fulfil. Assessment can be used to judge the effectiveness of a program of study and to guide the direction teaching and learning will take. Assessment can be used for certification and it can be used to evaluate how students have achieved the learning outcomes. In addition, assessment can be used as a form of accountability, such as the use of standardised tests to measure how students are meeting benchmarks. The impact of these different types of assessment are relevant to the implementation of the NSW English K–10 Syllabus for the Australian Curriculum: English (Board of Studies, NSW, 2012) with the mandated inclusion of the three distinct types of assessment: assessment 'for', 'as', and 'of' learning.

The NSW English K–10 Syllabus separates the broad concept of assessment in the following ways. 'Assessment for learning' is defined as enabling, 'teachers to use information about students' knowledge, understanding and skills to inform their teaching. Teachers

provide feedback to students about their learning and how to improve' (Board of Studies NSW, 2012, p. 104). 'Assessment as learning', 'involves students in the learning process where they monitor their own progress, ask questions and practice skills. Students use self-assessment and teacher feedback to reflect on their learning, consolidate their understanding and work towards learning goals' (Board of Studies NSW, 2012, p. 104). The inclusion of setting goals and developing in students a stronger sense of their own learning journey reflects new theories of learning and potentially addresses a growing concern regarding student engagement, particularly around the middle years of schooling (Tadich, Deed, Campbell & Prain, 2007). Finally, assessment of learning is defined as assisting, 'teachers to use evidence of student learning to assess student achievement against learning goals and standards' (Board of Studies, NSW, p. 104). This last type of assessment maintains the importance of measuring students' learning gains. However, the role of summative assessment as the primary way for teachers to monitor students' progress and learning appears to be reduced when it is used with formative assessment strategies like assessment 'for' learning and assessment 'as' learning.

If these three types of assessment included in the new NSW English K-10 Syllabus (Board of Studies, NSW, 2012) are to be used effectively and cohesively by teachers and students they must form a key part of the conceptual framework around the delivery of the curriculum. If they are used in isolation or if the assessment literacy of teachers and students does not include a clear understanding of the purposes and relationships between these three types of assessment it is possible that student learning may be limited. In addition, external assessment measures such as standardised tests have the potential to influence and narrow the delivery of curriculum. Thus, how practicing teachers are familiar with, and are implementing these three types of assessment as part of their regular practice forms the focus of this investigation. It was guided by the question: What are teachers' perceptions of the influence of assessment on the teaching of Year 9 English?

## Review of the Literature

### *The Nature of Formative Assessment*

Scriven (1967) is credited with the first conceptualisation of assessment as a formative process, by coining the term 'formative' (Perry, 2013, p. 95) when

describing the evaluation of educational programs. The definition was expanded by Sadler (1989) to include the qualitative appraisal of student outcomes by using more than one type of criteria, feedback and exemplars. The importance for students to understand the criteria by which they were being judged was emphasised so as to free them from their reliance on the teacher and instead to be able to evaluate their own work objectively. Bloom expanded the concept by including the word 'assessment' (Perry, 2013, p. 95) as part of educational evaluation. From these beginnings, formative assessment is now used rather than evaluation when referring to 'student learning in the classroom' (Allal & Lopez, 2005, p. 2) and the term has gained clarity around its function and processes, in particular, as a way of responding to the needs of the learner (Taras & Davis, 2012).

Thus formative assessment is the ongoing, reflective modification of practice by teachers with the inclusion of students in assessing their own learning by articulating goals using feedback so as to provide future directions within a constructivist classroom. Allal and Lopez (2005) in a report published by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) outline the subtle yet significant difference around the conceptualisation of formative assessment between French language literature influenced by Cardinet (1977) who saw formative assessment as the 'regulation of learning' and English language literature influenced by Bloom (1968) who saw formative assessment as the 'remediation of learning difficulties (Allal & Lopez, 2005, p. 6). This distinction reflects the common call in the French and English language literature on formative assessment to link theories of learning more clearly to practice and the frequent argument for more controlled experimental research on formative assessment. (Allal & Lopez, 2005; Torrance, 2006; Wiliam, 2011).

To illustrate this point, Taras and Davies (2012) examined the role of the learner around assessment and were motivated by the limited amount of theory linked to practice that exists in the literature. They acknowledge that one of the most challenging aspects of assessment is to create environments and practices where students can take an active role. A questionnaire was delivered to 50 lecturers in health and life sciences in a science faculty at an English university in 2010. The results found the participants lacked a clear understanding about the role and purpose of assessment. This finding, like Hargreaves (2005), demonstrates the

need for teachers to be able to clearly link their assessment practices to their learning goals.

When there is a relationship between the purposes of assessment, teaching and learning in the classroom then teachers and students gain greater agency than that afforded to both in a testing culture (Gipps, 1994). Black and Wiliam (1998) extended this claim about the purposes of testing by addressing the limited value of a test if the information obtained from the test is not used to give feedback about learning and if it is used for summative purposes only.

According to Black and Wiliam (1998) formative assessment is the 'feedback' provided to 'modify'(p. 10) both the teaching and learning activities occurring in a classroom. They believe this feedback needs to guide students towards an improvement in their abilities and should be differentiated, by targeting individual student need. Students are not seen as 'passive recipients' (Black & Wiliam, 1998, p. 21) instead they become motivated by the feedback they receive to improve their own learning. Motivation itself is a complex concept and Black and Wiliam (1998) discuss this within the context of mastery and performance orientation and they suggest motivation is linked to students' perceptions about their ability to succeed.

Hargreaves (2005) found six specific definitions of assessment by surveying 83 teachers and head teachers in England, extrapolating two meanings for assessment, 'assessment as measurement and assessment as inquiry' (p. 218). The majority of teachers saw assessment from a measurement perspective and Hargreaves linked this perspective to behaviourist theories of learning and contextually to the adoption of a National Curriculum in the UK in 1988, arguing that a National Curriculum involves both 'conformity and standardisation' (p. 223). These findings demonstrate the significant influence policy decisions can have on teachers' thinking about the purpose for assessing student learning.

Wiliam (2011) reiterates the active role students must play around any formative assessment strategy by shaping their own learning goals. Teacher assessment literacy, as defined by Willis, Adie and Klenowski (2013) is the 'social practice that involves teachers articulating and negotiating classroom and cultural knowledges with one another and with learners'(p. 242), and this is also crucial if formative assessment is to be implemented into classroom practice (Price, 2010; Willis, Adie & Klenowski, 2013). Hume and Coll (2009) present their findings from two case studies

into 'student-experienced curriculum' (p. 271) in New Zealand. The study examined inquiry based learning of science and explored its ability to contribute to scientific literacy goals as part of the national educational and curriculum reforms in New Zealand. The results indicated students' attitudes towards formative assessment were 'ambivalent' (p. 280). They were unable to successfully evaluate their own learning and were more concerned with completing the task than with the learning process undertaken. Teachers were concerned about time constraints associated with completing the unit and were unable to adapt programs to meet the 'emerging learning needs' (p. 284).

Formative assessment is predicated on the belief that teaching, learning and assessment are integrated into everyday classroom practice in order to guide and improve student learning. The challenge is to ensure teachers and students have the necessary assessment literacy to enable such practices. The scope and complexity of the requirements for assessment provided by the New South Wales Board of Studies supports this view. However, there are few studies in New South Wales that have investigated secondary English teachers' perceptions of the role and influence of assessment on their teaching practice.

### **Implementation of English syllabus in Australia**

Subject English cannot be easily defined, it is not simply about facts to be learned, memorised and retrieved, it is more than just skill development and content knowledge (Peel & Hargreaves, 1995; Peel et al., 2000; Sawyer, 2008; Macken-Horarik, 2010; Moni, 2012; Dixon, 2012). Patterson (2000) suggests the difficulty around defining subject English is because from 'its emergence, it has represented a curriculum territory that is not solely, or even importantly, linked to a knowledge content ...[and] does not readily lend itself to "testing"' (Peel, Patterson & Gerlach, 2000, p. 238).

Watson's (1994) study in 1978 of the implementation of the 1971 English Syllabus in NSW, found it had only been partially implemented and he attributed this to a criticism of declining standards of literacy and a rise in support for a basic skills model. Sawyer (2008) cites a research study of highly successful English faculties during the transition from the 1987 to the 2002 English syllabus in NSW and found the implementation was based on 'shared and deliberate intellectual work'(p. 332) based on meeting the needs of students. Demonstrably absent from these two studies was not the presence of external testing, which included

the School Certificate and Higher School Certificate examinations, being administered by an external body across all schools around New South Wales. But rather, the presence of the publication of the results of these exams, which could then be used by both the public and school systems to impact the delivery of the curriculum.

More recently, Albright and Knezevic (2013) investigated the way the national English and mathematics curricula have been interpreted and enacted by systems and schools. While assessment was not directly addressed in the survey, the researchers noted the teachers who participated in the study consistently identified assessment as an aspect of their thinking about implementing the new syllabus based on the Australian Curriculum and specifically, the ways they need to link their practice to assessment.

Before the introduction of a national curriculum in Australia, a national standardised test known as the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy or NAPLAN was introduced in 2008 and is held for students in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 in May every year. Since 2010, the results are published on a website known as the MySchool website. The purpose of the test is to 'provide education authorities, schools, parents and the local community with quality data' (Senate Report, 2014, p. 8). The introduction of national standardised testing and a national curriculum in Australia reflects policy decisions around other parts of the world such as the United Kingdom where it has been shown to influence teaching practice (Hargreaves, 2005). Prior to the introduction of a national standardised testing program in Australia, New South Wales already had a program of external benchmarked assessment in literacy and numeracy for years 3 and 5, known as The Basic Skills Test and in Year 7 known as the English Language and Literacy Assessment or ELLA. According to the National Report on Schooling in Australia (1998) 'almost 200,000 students in Years 3 and 5' completed the Basic Skills Test and 'all government and 35 non-government schools participated in the English Language and Literacy Assessment' in 1998 (p. 102). In the same year schools released annual reports and these included extensive information on the results of the literacy and numeracy tests and how the schools were meeting the needs of their students.

The creation of a national curriculum and the introduction of national standardised testing in literacy in Australia have been the subject of much discussion in the literature (see for example, Cumming, Kimber

& Wyatt-Smith, 2011; Ditchburn, 2012; Fehring & Nyland, 2012; Thompson, 2013). Peel, Patterson and Gerlach (2000) provide the most succinct argument about these debates by explaining that, 'one of the fears of English teachers is that a state or national testing agenda will begin to drive curriculum and syllabus development, thus jeopardising the freedom of individual teachers to tailor their programs to the needs of their students' (p. 239). This fear has direct links back to some of the issues surrounding the implementation of formative assessment, such as teacher and student efficacy when selecting learning goals. Cumming, Kimber and Wyatt-Smith (2011) cite a 2006 study they conducted about the impact of testing on the delivery of curriculum where they found that 'teachers' judgments reflected the narrow focus of the test measuring national literacy benchmark performance (Cumming, Kimber & Wyatt-Smith, 2011, p. 47). The teachers' perspective limited their agency to explore broader conceptualisations of literacy that include multimodal, digital, visual and listening texts.

The nature of student learning will be influenced by the dominant assessment practices adopted by schools and teachers' perceptions about assessment will influence the types of assessment practices adopted within their classrooms. Formative assessment operates ideally when students are involved in constructing their knowledge and understanding, and this requires some agency on the part of both the teacher and the student to determine the learning goals and the motivation needed by students to want to achieve them. The complexity and plurality of the subject of English and the various ways in which it seems it can be interpreted by scholars and by teachers makes it more difficult to adopt one approach to assessment or to implement widespread curriculum change. To include a new view of assessment in a new syllabus creates additional complexities for teachers already experiencing a time of change.

### **Approach to the study**

This research project was designed to identify the participants' feelings and attitudes towards a significant change (new syllabus) to their practice at the time this change was being implemented. The framework of assessment 'for/as/of' learning existed in the previous Board of Studies NSW English Years 7–10 Syllabus (2002). However, the chapter on assessment in this document provides a more integrated, cyclical model where assessment is regarded as a feature of

the teaching and learning. Section 10.2 'Assessment for Learning' describes strategies that also include 'assessment as learning' such as goal setting and self and peer assessment and 'planned assessment events' which reflect assessment of learning, as described in the new NSW English K–10 Syllabus for the Australian Curriculum (Board of Studies, NSW, 2012, p. 72). The main difference between the two documents is the separation of the three assessment strategies in the new syllabus. The small sample size and the subjective potential of the responses meant that interpretation focused on the lived experience of the five individuals in order to identify their feelings and attitudes. The participants were drawn from one English faculty in a suburban Sydney school, four were female and one was male. Their teaching experience ranged from 3 to 30 years. The school is located in a low to middle class area in the greater west of Sydney, a comprehensive single sex Catholic girls school with approximately 1000 students. In 2013 the school introduced the Progressive Achievement Test – Reading or PAT-R developed by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) as part of a systemic wide initiative to measure student reading and the test is completed by all students in Years 1 to 10 in every school within the diocese.

The research was developed as a small case study involving one English faculty, specifically targeting teachers of Year 9 English who are responsible for implementing the NSW English K–10 Syllabus for the Australian Curriculum: English. The participants completed an online survey of 30 minutes duration asking them both closed and open-ended questions. They were interviewed individually for 20 minutes with questions developed from responses to the survey. Questions were designed to elicit participants' perceptions of the influence of assessment on their teaching practice with Year 9 English and the ways they are implementing assessment 'for', 'as', and 'of' learning.

By including one-to-one interviews, participants are provided with the opportunity to share their views in their own words about the phenomena under investigation. While the reliability and validity of the data may be impeded by the small sample size, the inclusion of both quantitative and qualitative data addressed this issue with the inclusion of multiple sources of data allowing for 'thick description' (Stake, 1995, p. 102) of the ways teachers perceive the influence of assessment on their teaching. This is offered with an eye to future directions of inquiry rather than broad generalisations

or translatability into other contexts (Yin, 2003).

Ethical protocols were in place for this study. Approval to conduct research with human subjects was obtained through the Ethics Review Committee at Macquarie University. Permission to conduct research in a Catholic school was also granted through the relevant Catholic Education administration. Additionally, the Principal of the site was contacted directly and permission was received to invite teachers of Year 9 English to participate. The Head of English was contacted through email including a copy of the participant consent form requesting permission to deliver participant consent forms to all teachers of Year 9 English.

### Methodology

The purpose was to give voice to the views of practitioners who were dealing with syllabus change and the external pressures of standardised testing. The ways teachers perceive the role of assessment influences their pedagogical choices and the research suggests this reflects underlying theories of learning. A survey was used to 'develop pertinent hypotheses and propositions for future enquiry' (Yin, 2003, p. 6) leading to the creation of a semi-structured interview. Interviews enabled the participants to share their thoughts about their world providing rich descriptive detail about their unique circumstances.

### Survey

The survey questionnaire was constructed using the format provided by Johnson and Christensen (2008) with both closed and open questions, it was self-administered using Google forms to create an online questionnaire. It was structured into four parts. The survey was piloted with three people who were invited to participate and offer feedback and adjustments were made by either eliminating or collapsing some questions to reduce the time it took to complete.

Part A included demographic questions about the participants' experience as an English teacher. The questions were about how many classes the respondents teach, the average number of students in each class, the number of free periods, the amount of marking they do and where they mark to gauge an understanding of their current workload and teaching commitments.

Part B included questions specific to the teaching of Year 9 English such as their priorities for their class, aspects of the new NSW English K–10 Syllabus

(Board of Studies, NSW, 2012) and any skills specifically targeted around the area of literacy and how those skills were being targeted. These questions were designed to establish the way the respondents interpreted the new NSW English K–10 Syllabus document as well as to provide information about the specific local context of the teaching of Year 9 English at the school.

Part C required respondents to explain what types of assessment ‘for’, ‘as’, and ‘of’ learning they conducted in their classes, and elicited their views about the external assessment measure of NAPLAN. The three types of assessment outlined in the syllabus document were separated into three separate questions. Two specific questions about what respondents believe to be the purpose of NAPLAN and how the respondents agree to some researchers claims that NAPLAN has a negative impact on curriculum, were taken from another survey instrument to provide valuable comparable data to the original survey by Dulfer, Polesel and Rice (2012). These two questions were closed and used a Likert scale. Seven open questions were created regarding NAPLAN testing about the respondents’ views on its timing and the ways they use the results in their teaching practice.

Part D was designed to provide demographic information such as respondents’ age range, gender, qualifications, years teaching and any other roles or responsibilities held by them at their school (Johnson & Christensen, 2008; Neiderhauser & Mattheus, 2010; Jones, 1999). An opportunity was provided at the end for respondents to add any other information they felt was relevant.

### *Interview*

An interview guide was used with open-ended questions and the same questions were posed to all five participants. The interview began by explaining to the participants the researcher was interested in their opinions about assessment and the new English syllabus. The first question asked the participants to describe the kind of teaching strategies they like to use with their Year 9 English class. This question provided the participants with some context and entry into the interview. The additional questions were then explored when appropriate. The interviews were audio taped and audio file and transcript of the interview were provided to the participants to ensure ‘truth value’ (Appleton, 1995, p. 995) and for their checking. These were returned without change.

### *Interpreting the data*

The survey results were individually collated and a summary of all responses for each question was created. Each open-ended response was coded and each closed-ended response was converted to a column graph using excel. The interview transcripts were divided into the responses provided by all participants for each question separately and the researcher looked for patterns by highlighting repeated words and phrases. These were cross-referenced with the data collected from the survey and broader patterns were grouped according to perceptions linked to assessment, learning and teaching English around Year 9 and the new English syllabus. A contact summary sheet was completed (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p. 53) and this data was compared and contrasted with the data gathered from the online survey.

### **Results**

The five teachers from the one English faculty provided similar responses for their teaching priorities, the literacy skills targeted and their reasons for the targeting of these in Year 9. The participants revealed a superficial knowledge of the NSW English K–10 Syllabus and their views of the curriculum changes for implementation were limited to the identification of content in the form of text selections, in particular, ‘Asian’ texts. The five teachers shared similar views about the role of assessment ‘of’ learning but differed in their understandings of assessment ‘for’, and assessment ‘as’ learning.

During the interviews ‘Asian’ texts were specifically identified by four participants as one of the main changes they recognised in the new NSW English K–10 Syllabus and consequently, they were using ‘Asian’ texts as the main novels for Literature Circles. A Literature Circle is a collaborative reading strategy similar to a book club but with greater structure, expectations and specific roles allocated to all group members. This suggests a limitation is being placed on student agency around the selection of reading material.

When asked about why they believed English was an important subject for students to learn, four of the participants directly identified ‘skills’ as a high priority. These skills were not specified during the interview. However, for the survey a similar open-ended question was asked and the skills identified by the four respondents included: ‘reading’, ‘writing’, ‘comprehension’, ‘language’ and ‘literacy’. An open-ended survey question asked respondents about their teaching priorities for their Year 9 class in 2014 and all

five responses included the words 'skill', 'improve' or 'develop' suggesting the teaching priorities of these five teachers are similar and they share a common purpose. Taken together with an emphasis on Asian novels it would appear the skills were related to print-based reading skills.

The stated priorities for Year 9 English appear to be based around a traditional view of English teaching as measurable improvement in literacy skills with particular emphasis on reading. These are predominantly print based and suggest the teachers' perceptions about their students' ability requires them to be focusing on the specific targeting of basic literacy skills. All five participants identified the target literacy skill as reading and four participants identified 'results' derived specifically from 'NAPLAN' as the reason for this target area.

They were also asked about what types of teaching strategies they like to use with their Year 9 English class and two purposes emerged. The first was to engage students in activities and the second was to prepare them for summative assessment tasks. These responses align with the participants' views about the role of assessment in Year 9 English and their understanding of the three types of assessment outlined in the syllabus.

Three separate items were included in the survey to establish teachers' perceptions about the three types of classroom assessment included in the NSW English K-10 Syllabus. Two patterns emerged, firstly the similarity in understanding provided in the responses for 'assessment of learning', and secondly, a lack of cohesion between the purposes of the three types of assessment.

The most frequently used term when referring to 'assessment for learning' was 'feedback' by four participants. This feedback was generally described as information about students' work provided by the teacher and received by the student passively rather than a recursive process of modification to practice in response to knowledge gained about the students' needs.

Participants' responses about the types of assessment as learning they use in their Year 9 class were categorised into three distinct types. Firstly, two described it as preparation for formal assessment tasks. Secondly, two described it as part of normal teaching practice, and thirdly, one participant described it as strategies to promote student engagement. The variety of these responses, indicate a lack of cohesion and

limited understanding of a mandated innovation to the syllabus amongst the teachers of this faculty.

Participants' responses about the types of assessment of learning they use with their Year 9 class were significantly similar in the ways they were described. Four participants referred to an official assessment task that was completed by the Year 9 cohort. The use of terms such as 'formal' and 'official' reveals the participants perceive this type of assessment as legitimate and a shared understanding is clear from the uniformity of the responses provided. There was no mention of differentiation for this task and a linear rather than a recursive teaching, learning and assessment process appeared evident where the students complete the same task under the same conditions using the same criteria derived from the same outcomes.

Participants were asked through both instruments about their views on the role of assessment. The dominant view indicated the participants perceived the role of assessment as a form of measurement, a form of data collection, and an indication of the level of student progression. One participant referred to 'marks' twelve times in her response to the question. However, two other participants expressed dissatisfaction with the dominant view of assessment stemming from a belief it was a distraction and disconnected from classroom work. Additional views by two participants also perceived assessment as an ongoing investigation into student learning. These two views support the findings of Hargreaves (2005) who extrapolated six definitions for formative assessment. The least common of these six definitions is described as 'turning assessment into a learning event' (p. 217) and this reflects the views of the two participants in this study.

### Discussion of findings

'Assessment for learning' requires teachers to establish procedures to identify students' learning needs and as a consequence, to modify their teaching practices. 'Assessment as learning' is an innovation in the NSW English K-10 syllabus and requires students to be involved in their own learning by enabling them to be part of the process of identifying their own needs and developing their own criteria for success. The overall purpose of this type of formative assessment is to free the student from their reliance on the teacher and to become better at objectively evaluating their own work. This has broader implications including improved self-efficacy and student engagement (Marks, 2000) with the potential of creating life-long learners.

### *Assessment 'for', 'as', and 'of' learning in teaching practice*

This one sample faculty of Year 9 English teachers revealed differing perceptions about what assessment 'for', and assessment 'as' learning are but the results showed similar perceptions about the assessment 'of' learning. They had similar negative opinions about the role and influence of NAPLAN on their teaching. The five teachers who participated in this investigation also lacked a cohesive and detailed understanding of the new NSW English K–10 Syllabus. The findings reveal that the external pressures of national standardised testing, summative assessment and internal school goals around literacy, rather than learning, in the subject are driving the taught curriculum in this context.

### *Discourse of Traditional English and basic literacy skills*

The focus on skills and measurable improvement around reading print based texts as a consequence of systemic and school policy, reveals a model of English that reduces the flexibility of the pedagogical choices of individual teachers limiting their professional agency, and thus potentially, reducing the opportunities to address the diverse learning needs of their students. This reflects the tensions expressed in the literature when macro assessment strategies are used to improve outcomes and teacher quality at the expense of local contexts (Cumming, Kimber & Wyatt-Smith, 2011; Fehring & Nyland, 2012; Thompson, 2013). This is reflected in the repetition of terms in both the survey and interview data. A discourse where 'skills' and 'literacy' and 'official' assessment in the form of internal summative tasks and external standardised testing typified by 'marks', 'grades' and 'reports' are being used to establish the teaching priorities. The introduction of using another standardised test known as PAT-R, since 2013, for all students in years 1 through to 10 in this diocese to measure if students' reading skills are improving supports the finding that this emerges from a broader systemic discourse where measurable improvement around basic literacy skills are being targeted across schools in the diocese. The influence of standardised tests on the pedagogical choices being made by teachers in this sample has the potential to interfere with a broader conceptualisation of teaching, learning and assessment as a cyclical, co-constructed process.

This appears to be in competition with a broader personalised conceptualisation of English as expressed

in the way the participants spoke about their own practices and it can be seen in their emotive responses to the impact of NAPLAN testing on their classrooms. It seems that generally the participants felt disempowered by the way summative assessment has influenced their practice. The tension between the need to provide measurable improvement in outcomes and the need for teachers to cater to the diverse needs of their students and the local context reflects concerns in the literature about the impact of using standardised testing to increase accountability and transparency (Thompson, 2013; Ditchburn, 2011).

However, none of the participants made an explicit connection between teaching, learning and assessment. There was no explicit connection made between a teaching strategy used and the reason for using it or their intended learning goal in selecting this approach. Many used an example to illustrate what they meant. A conceptualisation of practice where broader links are articulated between theories of learning, pedagogy and assessment procedures are needed. One participant described a strategy that encouraged students to think aloud about what unfamiliar words within a text might mean as a way of encouraging students to think critically when they read. However, in this example, no explicit connection appears to be established to broader learning goals or assessment.

The main tensions to emerge from the data of this investigation, were around the teachers' perceptions of formative and summative assessment practices as separate and distinct from one another rather than as a cohesive and recursive process of teaching and learning. Additionally, while there were broader attitudes towards assessment articulated on the part of some faculty members, there was a distinct lack of perceived agency to bring this about.

### **Conclusions**

The results of this study revealed that teachers of Year 9 English from one English faculty had similar teaching priorities related to the improvement of students' skills. They shared the same literacy skills target of reading and four out of the five participants identified results derived from NAPLAN as the reason. Taken together, these results suggest a traditional print based literacy skills curriculum is being delivered driven by the influence of standardised testing where assessment is regarded as the measurement of student progress thus potentially limiting the agency of both teachers and students to determine the teaching and learning goals.

It would appear from this small case study that the teachers' perceptions of the influence of assessment in the teaching of Year 9 English reflect the literature that suggests implementing authentic formative assessment practices are restricted by the presence of standardised testing. There was evidence to support the conclusion that respondents have a clearer understanding of assessment 'of' learning as an end point or a summary of work, rather than assessment 'for' and 'as' learning.

This project raises a number of avenues for future research investigations including an examination of how teachers perceive assessment as measurement or inquiry. More empirical evidence is required for the ways teachers and students can develop reciprocal assessment practices that will respond to the learning needs of all students. Finally, what has not been investigated is whether students feel they have agency around the direction that the teaching and their learning is taking under this current paradigm of assessment.

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# Creating Subjects: The Language of the Stage 6 English Syllabus

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**Abstract:** This paper investigates the language of the 2009 NSW Stage 6 English Syllabus. I argue that the language of the syllabus aims to create two distinct subjects: Subject English, that is, what students learn; and the subject position of its students, that is, what students are expected to become. Analysis reveals themes of personal development and moral regulation are deeply embedded within the subject and have an important influence on how the subject positions itself and its students. Systemic Functional Linguistics is used to examine six pages of the Syllabus, focusing in particular on the document's Rationale section. A *transitivity* and *appraisal* analysis reveal that the syllabus document assigns the subject a difficult set of goals; ranging from developing communicative competence and literary knowledge, to creating a sensitive, aesthetically appreciative, reflective individual. An analysis of Commands within the syllabus shows that the language places much of the responsibility with the students. The implications of this analysis for teaching and learning are then discussed; in particular, the need for teachers of English to cognisant of the values and aims that are embedded within the syllabus and the subject.

## Introduction

Subject English, the sole mandatory subject in New South Wales (NSW) for senior secondary students, plays a central role in the lives of young Australian students. It has been argued that the subject is a means for the state to control its population (Christie, 1999; Eagleton, 1985; Rosser, 2000); and that academic writing in secondary English is the means by which schools, and by extension, the governments that control them, regulate students and enforce specific subject positions (Christie, 1999; Rosser, 2002). Historical work by Patterson (2000) shows that subject English is uniquely positioned to fulfil the function of inculcating students into accepting particular values and attitudes. Despite extensive work examining the nature of subject English syllabus and curriculum documents (Brock, 1996; Green & Hodgins, 1996; Jogie, 2015; Macken-Horarik, 2006; Michaels, 2001; Patterson, 2000, 2008; Rosser, 2000); there is little literature examining the 2009 syllabus, which is current at the time of writing. What is also often missing is an analysis of how language is functioning with the syllabus. In this paper, I will argue that a focus on personal development and moral regulation, is deeply embedded within the Stage 6 English syllabus, and examine how this is achieved language of the syllabus. In a country dominated by high stakes exit examinations (Australasian Curriculum, Assessment and Certification Authorities, 2016), interrogating the nature of the syllabus and examining which ways of thinking and using language are privileged is vital to understanding how subject English interacts with the diversity of students in the state. Each student brings with them their own dispositions and ways of thinking, or capital (Bourdieu, 1986), which may or may not be oriented towards the discursive practices of schooling (Gibbons, 2009).

In NSW, primary and secondary curriculum and syllabus development is overseen by the Board of Studies, Teaching & Educational Standards NSW (BOSTES); the state authority for regulating schooling in NSW. The development process is divided into four stages: (1) a review of existing syllabi and curriculum, which outlines a timeline and a consultation protocol

for syllabus development; (2) the development of a brief which reports on the initial review phase to the Minister of Education; (3) the preparation of a draft syllabus; and (4) the implementation of this syllabus, with data collected to help inform future reviews. The development of syllabi is a collaborative process, during which consultation with key stakeholders such as teachers, schools, professional associations, is used to shape and revise the syllabus. Before implementation, teacher training and school briefings are typically used to facilitate the transition into a new syllabus (BOSTES, 2016).

The English Stage 6 Syllabus (Board of Studies [BOS], 2009) outlines the structure and sequence of the course studied by NSW students during years 11 and 12. However, this is not its only role. The text also acts to establish subject English as a specialised, discrete subject with a specific set of goals and aims. In doing so, the text acts to create two subjects: it differentiates *subject English* from English as a language; and it establishes 'preferred' subject positions for its students, strongly reminiscent of Western hegemonic values and a Leavisite approach to literature. Of course, the syllabus is not a static object; it is interpreted and deployed by teachers, and represents just one of many influences on students' progression through school. The issue at stake here is twofold: the values and discourses embedded within the syllabus may remain cryptic to students (and perhaps even beginning teachers) because of their implicit nature; and students without the capital and access to the middle-class discourse the syllabus privileges may be unable to adopt the views necessary for success in the subject.

### Theoretical framework

The analysis presented here draws on Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). SFL is a method of describing language uses through grammatical systems and functions. It provides a way of comprehensively and systematically describing how language is used to create meaning. In the analysis below, recourse has been made to two of these systems: transitivity and appraisal. This analysis is complemented with an examination of Commands in the syllabus.

Transitivity 'is the overall grammatical resource for construing our experience of goings on' (Martin, Matthiessen, & Painter, 2010, p. 98). Transitivity is realised through processes, which are similar to verbs in traditional grammars. These processes are material, mental, relational (more specifically, identifying or

attributing), behavioural, verbal, and existential; of particular relevance to the present analysis are the first three: relational, material, and mental (cf. Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014; Martin et al., 2010 for a more thorough treatment of these process types). Relational processes allow us to give information about what things are (e.g. subject English is the study of ...); material processes relate what is happening or being done (e.g. students will develop their knowledge ...); and mental processes let us describe what is being thought, understood or felt (e.g. students understand how to apply ...).

Each process contains a set of frequently occurring participants, that is, things which relate to the process in some way. Relational processes frequently feature Carriers or Tokens (that is, the thing being identified) and Attributes or Values (that is, the description of the thing). Material processes typically include Actors (things performing the process) and Goals (the things that are affected by the process); another important element, Circumstances, gives information on how the process is performed. Also contained within the syllabus is a much less common participant, the Initiator role. An Initiator is an agent who causes another participant to do something (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014); here it is typically subject English causing students to do something; such as create a text or understand language. Finally, mental processes include the Senser (the person experiencing or understanding) and the Phenomenon (the thing experienced or understood); as well as an Inducer role, which acts like the Initiator, causing participants to understand or feel something (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014; Martin et al., 2010).

While transitivity allows language users to describe what is happening, appraisal gives us the resources to describe how we feel and think about things. The syllabus uses two key resources to establish its purpose as one of moral instruction and language development. These resources are intensifiers, which specify degree; and attitudinal lexis, which have emotional content tied to their meaning (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014; Martin et al., 2010). For example, students are exposed to 'higher-order social, aesthetic and cultural literacy', which semantically appear more valuable than just 'regular social, aesthetic and cultural literacy' or 'lower-order literacy'.

Aside from considering ideational meaning, that is, how language is used to express ideas; the analysis also considers interpersonal meaning, or how language is used to negotiate relationships. Drawing on Iedema's

(1997) work on language in institutions, the interpersonal resources used by the syllabus to provide directions are investigated. These interpersonal resources are grammatical options that allow language users to interact with others, even though the interaction may be removed in time and space, as with the syllabus (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). In particular, attention is given to the Command, which is used to issue orders, and typical of institutional texts like the syllabus (Iedema, 1997).

Since SFL is concerned with how language users deploy various linguistic strategies to create meaning; and to achieve effects in the world, such as buying and selling, negotiating relationships, it is readily reconciled with sociological approaches to language use within institutions like schools, especially the work of Bernstein (Bernstein, 1996; Hasan, 1999). Bernstein's work on Code Theory provides a means to describe classification; that is how clearly demarcated a particular subject or discipline is from other subjects. Extending on this sociological view I draw on Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital. Cultural capital is a set of dispositions and cultural knowledge that are given value and prestige within society. Overall a combination of linguistic and sociological approaches offers a means to describe language usage and institutional access and power within the syllabus and the subject it creates.

## Method

Owing to the large size of the syllabus document (exactly 100 pages), analysis focused on pages 6 to 12 in order to facilitate detailed linguistic analysis. In particular, special attention was given to the 'Rationale for English in Stage 6 Curriculum' and 'Continuum of Learning for English Stage 6 Students ... Stage 6' (BOS, 2009, pp. 6, 11–12), as these sections focus on establishing the purpose and aims of the subject.

Analysis was performed by examining these pages sentence by sentence, as dividing the text into individual clauses would distort its meaning. These sentences were then analysed for transitivity. Where two or more processes were present, it was necessary to group them under one category. Since English clauses tend to place thematic information at the front (Martin & Rose, 2007), preference was given to the first process type when grouping sentences.

Appraisal analysis was then conducted by revisiting these pages and examining clauses that reveal opinions, even if the appraiser themselves may be effaced

from the text. For example, 'The study of English enables students to ... deal effectively with change' (BOS, 2009, p. 6) suggests that subject English allows students to not only deal with change, but to do so effectively; and further assumes that change is actually happening and is inevitable.

The analysis concludes by examining how the text establishes its authority over teachers and students through Command. Whilst many of the key stakeholders who operationalise the syllabus are involved in the text's production, it is important to note that the text functions as a government mandated set of instructions to implement the subject. The text must therefore ensure that instructions are understood as imperatives, rather than suggestions.

The transitivity and appraisal analysis deals with how subject English interacts with students; however, teachers are the ones who deliver the content. For this reason, the text was examined for instructions directed towards *educators*. The entire document was searched for 'teacher', of which there were 25 instances, in order to examine explicit instructions given to teachers.

## What is subject English? Transitivity in the syllabus

Overall, the Rationale section is populated by three main process types: relational, material, and mental. This means that the syllabus frequently describes itself as allowing students to achieve some kind of mental activity, like *understanding, recognising, or appreciating*; as allowing students to achieve 'real world' activities, like *taking their place, composing texts, or applying their English language skills*; and that the syllabus describes its design and function, like *English is the study of x*. It is important to interrogate what kind of mental and material processes are expected of students; embedded within these processes are certain ideological assumptions and values which have the potential to advantage some students and alienate others. Each process type is reviewed in more detail below, beginning with a tabular analysis of sentences drawn from the text and followed by an explanation of this analysis (Table 1). Sections unnecessary for analysis have been greyed out.

Relational process types act to create what Bernstein names strong classification, or  $C^+$ . This allows the subject to be distinguished from other courses, and, in particular, to separate *subject* English from the *English language*. Clearly marked within this language is a focus on development, not only of their knowledge and competence of language and literature, but also

**Table 1. Personal development in English**

The study of English	is	central to the learning and development of students						
Carrier	Process: relational: attributive	Attribute						
English	involves	the study and use of language in its various textual forms, encompassing written, spoken and visual texts of varying complexity, including the language systems of English through which meaning is conveyed, interpreted and reflected						
Token	Process: relational: identifying	Value						
This study	is	designed to promote a sound knowledge to promote a sound knowledge of the structure and function of the English language	and	to develop	effective English communication skills			
Token	Process: relational: identifying	Value			Process: material	Goal		
The English Stage 6 syllabus	is	designed to develop in students the faculty to perceive and understand their world from a variety of perspectives	and	it	enables	them	to appreciate	the richness of Australia's cultural diversity
Carrier	Pr: Attributive	Attribute		Inducer	Process:...	Senser	... mental	Phenomenon
The syllabus	is	designed to develop enjoyment of English and an appreciation of its value and role in learning						
Carrier	Pr: attributive	Attribute						

of less measurable, but presumably, at least, from the syllabus writers' perspective no less important character traits; like 'the faculty to perceive and understand their world from a variety of perspectives' and 'enjoyment of English and an appreciation of its value and role in learning' (BOS, 2009, p. 6). The relational processes in the text allow the syllabus to help clearly define subject English and establish its importance. This is frequently accomplished through an *English is x* (Relational: Identifying) structure. The Rationale's first sentence, 'English is central to the learning and development of students', acts to immediately establish the subject's dominance and importance. Historically, English has occupied a prestigious position in primary and secondary contexts, but early in its history the roles of personal development were also assigned to history and geography (Patterson, 2000). However, by 1965, English had secured its position as the supreme subject (Brock, 1996); by the time the 2009 syllabus was published there is no need to justify why English is central to the development of students; it is just stated as fact.

The syllabus also essentially mandates an appreciation of the subject itself. Encouraging students to actively appreciate English and the texts they study is not a new phenomenon (Rosser, 2002); although it suggests that those students without the cultural knowledge to *enjoy* the texts are disadvantaged. This view of English is consistent with Patterson's (1993) analysis of earlier syllabi, where she argued that subject

English is 'the site of quite specific strategies for the surveillance and control of populations whose morals and values are the object of 'governmental' scrutiny and correction' (p. 2); and that those who do not align with these subject positions 'are assumed to be insensitive, unimaginative, unresponsive, unsympathetic' (p. 13). As with the other processes represented in the text, the subject also clearly sets itself the role of developing students' knowledge of English and their communication skills. Just one year before the new syllabus was introduced, Patterson (2008) noted that in order for English to be counted as a serious intellectual subject ... it will need to re-introduce an emphasis on the missing pedagogical elements: rhetoric and aesthetics [as opposed to just ethical development of students]' (pp. 313–314). She argued that feedback from HSC examiners indicated the need for a focus on aesthetics, that is, students needed to be able to comment appreciatively on the textual features of the texts they were writing about Rosser, (2002), provides a more thorough overview of earlier HSC examination practices. I argue that the syllabus indeed introduces a focus on language use and aesthetics, and combines this with an ethical/ personal development approach. Evidence for this can be seen by considering the kind of development the syllabus refers to. Semantically, the 'development' of students is tied to character traits, such as 'an enjoyment of English', rather than physical development, or development of some other kind.

Also evident is the idea that subject English does

**Table 2. Personal empowerment in English**

Proficiency in English	enables	students	to take	their place	as confident, articulate communicators, critical and imaginative thinkers and active participants in society		
Initiator	Process:...	Actor	... material	Scope	Circumstance: Role: guise		
The English Stage 6 courses	develop	in students	an understanding of literary expression		and	nurture	an appreciation of aesthetic values
Actor	Process: material	Circumstance: Location: place	Goal			Process: material	Goal
Through reading, writing, listening, speaking, viewing and representing experience, ideas and values		students	are encouraged to adopt	a critical approach to all texts	and	to distinguish	the qualities of texts
Initiator		Actor	Process: material	Goal		Process: mental	Phenomenon
Students	also	develop	[English language skills	to support	their study	at stage 6 and beyond]	
Actor		Process: material	Goal				
				Process: material	Goal	Circumstance: Location: place	
Students	develop	a strong sense of themselves		as autonomous, reflective & creative learners			
Actor	Process: material	Goal		Circumstance: Role: guise			

not encourage just *any* kind of personal development; rather it reinforced particular world views. Students are expected to ‘understand the world from a variety of perspectives’ and ‘appreciate the richness of Australia’s cultural diversity’ (BOS, 2009, p. 6). As Christie (1999, p. 178) suggests, the ideal subject position for students is one that is ‘informed by a concern for social justice [and] a disapproval of racial prejudice’, and I argue that the 2009 syllabus is actively suggesting these kinds of views. That the syllabus would endorse the production of these kinds of individuals, ones who appreciate cultural diversity, is consistent with arguments by Eagleton (1985) and Patterson (2000); a major function of subject English is to inculcate students into subject positions appropriate for society.

Overall, the relational processes in the syllabus suggest that it is following the historical trends of subject *English in Australia’s* history; one which combines explicit instruction in language with implicit instruction in values and ethics.

These themes of personal development are continued in the material processes which serve to show how English empowers students (Table 2). The material processes, like *students take their place* or *students also develop English language skills* act to conflate two separate functions of subject English: explicit language instruction, and personal development. They do this by allowing students to realise the more abstract goals of the syllabus in more concrete ways; for example, personal development is now ‘students develop a strong sense of themselves as autonomous, reflective & creative learners’ (BOS, 2009, p. 6). In particular, reference is made

to post-secondary contexts; subject English therefore does not only afford students an opportunity to think about themselves, but also to *take their place in society*, both as aesthetically minded individuals and also as competent communicators. Subject English typically assumes the Initiator role. This means that subject English is the participant *causing* other participants (students) to do something. Introducing a focus on language development in the syllabus was suggested by Patterson (2008), and it appears the syllabus goes further and introduces the development of a skill of ‘transference’. This tripartite focus of the current syllabus appears to be a new development; historically tensions have only been between a focus on personal development and language/ rhetoric instruction, but considering how students *transfer* these skills to different contexts has not been a concern.

English is also responsible for *nurturing* an appreciation of aesthetic values. The idea of the subject adopting a pastoral approach to students can be traced to its 1885 origins in Australia. It does, however, raise some troubling questions: Just whose aesthetic values are being cultured here? What kind of sense of self are we aiming to develop in our students? I suggest it is the values and sensibilities of the middle-class that are privileged and enforced through the syllabus and assessment. This argument is congruent with research appraising earlier syllabi (Patterson, 2000; Rosser 2000) and the teaching of literature in general (Eagleton, 1985). In her informal surveys of training English teachers, Patterson (2000) noted that the majority of her students indeed identified the role of

**Table 3. Intellectual development in English**

The study of English		enables	students	to recognise	and	use	a diversity of approaches and texts	[[to meet	the growing array of literacy demands]]	Goal		
Inducer/ Initiator	Process:...	Process:...	Agent	... mental/...		... material	Phenomenon/ Goal	Process: material	Goal			
In Stage 6	students	come to understand	the complexity of meaning	, to compose and respond to	texts	according to their form, content, and purpose, and audience	and	to appreciate	the personal, social, historical, cultural and workplace contexts	[[that produce	value	them]]
Circumstance: Location: time	Senser	Process: mental	Phenomenon	Process: material	Goal	Circumstance: Manner: quality		Process: mental	Phenomenon			
The study of English	enables	students	to make sense of	and	to enrich,	their lives	in personal, social and professional situations	and	to deal	effectively	with	change
Inducer/ Initiator	Process:...	Agent	...mental/...		... material	Phenomenon/ Goal	Circumstance: Location: time/ place		Process: material	Circumstance: Manner: quality		Range
Students	reflect	on their reading and learning	and	understand	that	[[these processes	are shaped by	the contexts	[[in which	they	respond to and compose	texts]]]]
Behavior	Process: behavioural	Circumstance: Manner: quality		Process: mental		Medium	Phenomenon	Agent	Actor	Process: material		Goal

English on 'personal development'; however these were framed as emancipatory and exploratory, that is, the English teacher's role is to allow students to come to their own understanding of themselves and the world. However, teachers often promote particular reading practices and responses, either unintentionally (Nicolson-Setz, 2007) or in response to a perceived lack in the student's ability to generate a genuine response (Patterson, 1993).

Evidence for the nature of hegemonic values can be found in the HSC text prescriptions: prose fiction, drama, including Shakespeare for Advanced, poetry, and nonfiction/ film/ media/ multimedia are mandated for study. Many of these texts are very removed from our everyday communicative purposes, but are privileged by particular institutions; universities in particular. I argue that the 2009 syllabus therefore continues the elitism noted in syllabi as early as 1965 (Brock, 1996; Rosser, 2000), when the HSC was initially introduced with pressure in particular coming from the University of Sydney and the University of New South Wales. The texts prescribed in the highest level of English 'could be found in the undergraduate English courses at the University of Sydney between 1964 and 1966' (Brock, 1996, p. 3), pre-empting some of the texts that were privileged in the sandstone universities.

Street (1985) has also noted that hegemonic views are enforced in assessment, that is, examinations tend to privilege students who can correctly anticipate the tester's expectations, and these students are those who share similar values and experiences. The need to comply or feign compliance with particular marker expectations has been noted in NSW HSC assessment (Patterson, 1993; Rosser, 2002). In this way the structure and the content of the syllabus combine to assume that students are already on the way to developing particular sensibilities favoured by elite, tertiary institutions, and that this development will continue. This, together with evidence of the restrictive nature of the type of subject positions that have been endorsed in previous syllabi (Christie, 1999; Patterson 1993, 2000; Rosser, 2002) suggests that not only does the current syllabus continue the history of personal development, but also the history of subject English acting as a moral technology.

Finally, mental processes point towards the kind of cognitive activities that subject English encourages; included also is a behavioural process, which functions here in a very similar way to other mental processes.

There are two typical structures for mental processes represented here (Table 3). The first is *subject English*

*enables students to do x*; the second is *students come to understand x*. The phenomena students experience or understand are also varied, but tend to be things like understanding the diversity of texts and the influence of context on texts. Therefore, along with attention paid to personal and moral development, the 2009 syllabus establishes itself with an explicit focus on understanding language use. This varied focus combines to contribute to the complexity of subject English – it is not just learning about language, or learning about morals, or any particular one thing; instead it is a conglomeration of various skills and attitudes that are to be cultivated through exposure to the subject.

### Why subject English? Appraisal in the syllabus

The syllabus deploys a number of linguistic features in order to establish the benefits of subject English. It suggests that these benefits are two-fold: endowing students with the ability to increase their English language skills, and affording the opportunity for personal development and reflection.

Unsurprisingly the text does not express any emotions, which is exactly as one would expect for a government document mandating the structure of a secondary subject. It does, however, frequently feature language which acts to allow the subject to assert its usefulness. Some textual examples are given below:

- Intensifiers and attitudinal lexis (marked in italics) used to show how English encourages personal development:
  - deal *effectively* with change
  - a *strong* sense of themselves
  - their *growing* independence as learners
  - *increased* awareness
  - *greater* self-direction
  - a *range* of perspectives and experiences
  - appreciate *the richness* of Australia's cultural diversity
- Intensifiers and attitudinal lexis (marked in italics) used to show how English increases language skills:
  - *various* textual forms
  - *varying* complexity
  - the *growing* array of literacy demands
  - *more* specific and articulate
  - *increasingly* complex texts
  - their skills in composition are *further* developed
  - *more* complex texts, as well as simple texts in *more* complex ways
  - the *diversity* of language and literature

- *critically* evaluate
  - a *wide variety* of texts of Australian and other societies
  - The study of English is *central* to the learning and development of students
    - *confident, articulate* communicators, *critical* and *imaginative* thinkers and *active* participants in society
    - *higher-order* social, aesthetic and cultural literacy
    - a *critical* approach
    - *autonomous, reflective* and *creative* learners
    - *thoughtful, imaginative* and *effective* communicators in a *diverse* and *changing* society
    - *specific* and *articulate*
    - *imaginative* and *interpretive* skills
    - *analytical* abilities
- (BOS, 2009, pp. 6–12)

These language choices suggest that subject English is not just about students' personal development, or English language training, but *both*. I suggest that the 2009 syllabus therefore represents a synthesis of the competing tensions that have characterised subject English's history. This synthesis is evident in groups such as 'thoughtful, imaginative and effective communicators'; which suggests that the ideal English candidate can combine language skills and personal sensitivity in order to interact with society.

#### Establishing authority and control: Command in the syllabus

The text relies heavily on what Iedema (1997) calls 'the language of administration' (p. 73). This means that many of its linguistic features are targeted towards establishing authority and hierarchical relations. Below I consider some of the language resources mobilised by the syllabus to assert its position of dominance and power.

As Iedema notes, authority and hierarchy are established through the use of the Command. In particular, workplace texts tend to feature Commands in reported and depersonalised ways. This means that instead of clauses like *all of us here at the Board require you to do this*, instructions such as 'Students analyse the ways in which the medium itself influences the shape and nature of meaning' are employed (BOS, 2009, p. 11). The text therefore asserts an authoritative position which is 'less negotiable and contestable' (Iedema, 1997, p. 74).

However, this text differs from typical workplace directives in that it is not actually *directed* towards anyone in particular. The document features no preamble, except copyright information, and therefore the purpose of the document is only evident to those with contextual knowledge of the text's purpose; that is to say teachers. 'Teachers' are, surprisingly, mentioned infrequently in the text; in exactly 100 pages of text, the word 'teacher' arises 25 times. At first, this seems a reasonable number, an average of a mention every four pages. However, it is necessary to examine the usage of the word in order to understand why this is a misleading figure. The first two mentions of teacher refer to copyright restrictions, not actually *teaching*. Next, a series of mentions refer only to teachers developing electives; the course content for year 11. Since the instructions are repeated verbatim throughout the descriptions of English courses; Standard, Advanced and ESL English, the actual number of mentions becomes artificially inflated. There are just six, unique mentions of teachers providing explicit instructions on the actual delivery of the courses. Of the six, three refer to a non-HSC course, Fundamentals of English. Fundamentals of English is a preliminary course studied by year 11 students; and cannot be taken as a HSC subject and designed for students who need extra support; typically those from ESL backgrounds or with minor intellectual disabilities. The Commands in this course are therefore not targeted towards the majority of students; in 2015, for example, only 3,034 students studied a Fundamentals of English course, compared to 76,461 total candidates for the HSC. A further two instructions to teachers refer to Commands for teachers to be aware of post-school opportunities, and to refer to the HSC/TAFE Credit Transfer Guide, which allows students to have some of their English studies credited towards TAFE modules. This leaves us with one unique mention of teachers, referring specifically to *teaching*:

Wherever possible, teachers should incorporate students' cultural and language experiences as resources for addressing the objectives of the courses (BOS, 2009, p. 54).

In contrast to the explicit directives aimed at students, this Command is modulated through 'whenever possible' and 'should', present a much 'gentler' instruction. The syllabus therefore is much more explicitly focused on the actions and requirements of *students*; which, as I have argued, are essentially personal development and language skill acquisition. I

suggest that the syllabus therefore places considerable demands on students and shifts away responsibility from teachers, whose only explicitly stated responsibilities are to develop course content, ensure that students study the mandated texts, and incorporate students' cultural and language experiences wherever possible.

### Discussion and Conclusion

The analysis presented here reveals that the 2009 syllabus continues the trends of HSC English since its introduction; and of subject English in Australia since the 19th century – historically the subject has been dominated by tensions between an explicit focus on language, and an explicit focus on personal development, and the current syllabus manifests this tension in its language. This yields important implications for the teaching and learning of the subject. Overall, the syllabus is concerned with three distinct goals for the teaching of English: the development of linguistic competence, including a knowledge and appreciation of literature; the development of the student as a moral, culturally sensitive individual; and the ability of students to apply their knowledge and skills to outside contexts, allowing them to become active participants of society. Teachers should therefore be aware that they are not only teachers of English as a language and a literature, but that they are also responsible for the personal development of their students. Whilst this view of schooling is probably unsurprising to many teachers, what may be less conspicuous to teachers is just what kind of subject positions English aims to inculcate in students. Students are expected to be culturally sensitive and appreciative of subject English, and these expectations have historically been obligatory in assessments. The cultural capital required to satisfy these requirements, or at least to feign compliance in examination responses, is the kind that is congruent with Western, middle-class discourse and values, and one which is likely to be out of reach for the many students from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds that populate NSW schools. Subject English is, unfortunately, not just about teaching students *how* to think, but also *what* to think; and this *what* to think is a hidden set of values and discourse practices valued by the cultural elite of Australia. These values and discourse practices should and must be interrogated with a critical eye, and it is hoped that the analysis presented above will show that the problems of earlier syllabi are alive and well in the still current 2009 syllabus.

Particularly striking was the degree of responsibility placed on students and, as a corollary, the effacement of teachers from the syllabus; but this can be attributed again to the aim of the syllabus to create appreciative learners. The syllabus suggests that the ideal student is not only one who is knowledgeable about literature, *and* appreciative of it, but who also relishes the opportunity to learn such texts; including highbrow Canonical texts, like the works of Shakespeare, which are often removed from the concerns and interests of many students. English teachers therefore need to be aware of the personal disposition that is encouraged for students to adopt. In his analysis of HSC English marking criteria since 1965, Rosser (2002) argued that 'a good workmanlike analysis of the text *is not enough* to attain a high grade ... the HSC English Exam has produced a particular kind of knowledge and has given preference to *a particular kind of individual*' (p. 103). This quality is strongly manifested in the current syllabus; again it is evident that effective English teaching must address the middle-class discourse and styles that are valued by the subject.

Future syllabus design should therefore consider which kinds of discourses and values the subject offers. It may be that the values in the current syllabus are the best to develop students' knowledge and sensitivities to create competent users of English and active members of society; the point is that some of these values and discourses practices may be hidden or removed from students' own background, beliefs, and ways of using language.

The analysis and discussion here represent only a preliminary investigation into the language of the syllabus, considering a limited number of pages and working with a particular set of grammatical systems. The syllabus is only one part of many that contributes to the interaction between the subject, teachers, and students; future research should consider examination and teaching practices in order to investigate how the subject is realised within schools. Research examining the syllabi of the subject at different stages, from Kindergarten to Year 10, and in other Australian states, is also necessary in order to develop a more global understanding of how the subject is functioning across students' lives and across the country.

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# *Sustaining Hope and Possibility:* Early-Career English Teachers' Perspectives on Their First Years of Teaching

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**Abstract:** This paper reports on the findings from a study with 22 early-career secondary school English teachers in New South Wales, Australia. Against the backdrop of increased attention to the patterns of teacher recruitment, retention and attrition, the present research sought beginning teachers' perspectives on the extent to which their initial motivations for entering the profession had been sustained, affirmed, challenged or modified by their teaching experience. A questionnaire was utilised to gather data on initial motivations to teach; beliefs and values informing the decision to teach; the challenges and rewards of early-career teaching experiences; attitudes to the current official state English curriculum; levels of personal and professional satisfaction with the role; and career intentions. An analysis of the questionnaire responses identified the primacy of altruistic and intrinsic factors in the initial decision to become a teacher. Responses to questions about their early-career experiences revealed that for a significant proportion of teachers, their initial aspirations, expectations and goals had been disrupted to a greater or lesser degree by a range of contextually-contingent forces. Half of the sample indicated that their sense of professional agency had been undermined by the pressures associated with preparing students for high-stakes external examinations and their marginalisation from decision-making processes that impact upon their classroom practice. More than a third of the sample disagreed or were 'unsure' that they would be teaching for another five years. Given the reported rates of early-career teacher attrition of between 20 and 50%, the findings from the present study offer additional evidence of the factors that can influence early-career teachers' decisions about their career futures and are therefore of value to ongoing revisions of teacher recruitment and retention policies and practice.

## **Introduction**

For many individuals, the decision to teach is driven by altruistic and intrinsic motivations that are emblematic of hope and possibility. Commonly, these motivations cohere around a set of interdependent beliefs and values about the transformative potential of education and the agency of the teacher in shaping the quality of young people's lives (cf. Brookhart & Freeman, 1992; Bullough & Hall-Kenyon, 2011; Flores & Day, 2006; Heinz, 2015; Kyriacou, Kunc, Stephens & Hultgren, 2003; Manuel, 2003; Manuel & Hughes, 2006). For prospective teachers of English, the most consistently reported motivations for pursuing the 'call to teach' (Bullough & Hall-Kenyon, 2011) include a passion for the subject; a love of literature; a deeply-felt desire to 'make a difference', and the realisation of a dream (cf. Davies, 1996; Goodwyn, 2012; Heinz, 2015; Manuel & Brindley, 2005; Protherough & Atkinson, 1991). Indeed, aspiring teachers of English tend to invoke the qualities of 'passion', 'love' and 'desire', along with allusions to 'dreams', to describe their goals and give form to their ideations of teaching. They may enter Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programs carrying an internalised set of 'epistemic

assumptions' (Reid, 1996, p. 32) about the purpose and significance of the subject in their own lives and its anticipated impact on the selfhood and life chances of the students they will teach. If, as Palmer maintains, we are drawn to teach a certain subject because 'it shed light on our identity as well as on the world' and it 'evoked a sense of self that was only dormant in us before we encountered the subject's way of naming and framing life' (Palmer, 1998, p. 25), then the decision to teach English is indivisible from an individual's subjectivities, ideals and envisioned future.

What is striking then, is the disparity between the 'optimistic value-seeking spirit' (Badhwar, 2005, p. 53) of those who commit to becoming a teacher and the adverse patterns of early-career teacher attrition. From the available research it is estimated that between 20 and 50% of teachers resign during their first three to five years of teaching, depending on the particular jurisdiction (Ingersoll, 2004; Lindqvist, Nordanger & Carlsson, 2014; OECD 2004; Skillbeck & Connell, 2003). Given the trends in early-career foreclosure and the ramifications of this, employing authorities have shifted their policy focus and retention strategies in recent decades in an attempt to stem the tide of beginning teachers leaving the profession (Clandinin et al., 2015). After all, any system beset with this kind of 'revolving door' dynamic cannot thrive if its freshest recruits are unable or unwilling to adapt their ideals and envisioned future in the fledgling years of their working lives.

While we now understand a great deal about initial teacher motivation, the reasons for early-career teacher attrition are less well defined. Empirical research in the field has sought to shed light on the reasons for early-career wastage by exploring the relationship between initial career motivations, early-career experience, levels of professional and personal satisfaction with the role, and the durability of the commitment to teach (Heinz, 2015). The findings from such inquiries suggest that the degree of dissonance or coherence between initial motivations and the early-career experience is a crucial variable in teacher resilience, retention and attrition (Heinz, 2015). It follows that unless policy is informed by research-based evidence of the situational, institutional, cultural and relational conditions which can lead a new teacher to question their original career intentions and hopefulness, then no amount of policy reform will adequately redress the implications of a 'revolving door' profession.

### **The researchers' context and the research questions**

As former secondary English teachers who are now English teacher educators and researchers in universities in New South Wales (NSW), Australia, we are invested in preparing pre-service English teachers with the craft knowledge, theoretical understandings, pedagogical repertoire and attributes to begin their career as capable, confident and resilient professionals. Our ITE programs engage pre-service teachers in processes of modelled self-inquiry, critical reflection and understandings of the historical contingency of the English teacher as a specific 'type' (Hunter, 1988, 1990, 1991, 1994). The ITE programs encourage them to bring to the fore, critique, problematise and theorise the often untested assumptions, apparently natural dispositions and romantic conception of teaching that impelled their original motivation to teach. Importantly, pre-service teachers are prompted to assay their personal motivations and desires with a recognition of the exigencies of an education system that encodes certain 'technologies of the self' (Foucault, 1988) that integrate the personal, bureaucratic and political dimensions of teaching. Our research encompasses the collection and analysis of data during key moments of an ITE program and during the first years of teaching in order to extend an understanding of the complex dynamics and potential relationships between initial motivations and early-career experiences.

The purpose of this paper is to report on the findings of one strand of our ongoing research: a small-scale study with 22 secondary English teachers in NSW who have been teaching for between one and four years. A questionnaire developed for the study was designed to capture early-career English teachers' perspectives on their first years of work in schools. Our interest lies in exploring whether or not secondary English teachers in their early years maintain, re-evaluate or question their values and their expectations of teaching, and if so, why? How and to what extent has the early-career experience affirmed or challenged their initial career choice? What are the implications of this for the new teacher's sense of professional agency, resilience and career plans and, in turn, for teacher recruitment and retention policies and practice?

Since early-career teachers' voices are generally under-represented in the corpus of research in the field, paralleling their often marginalised and even invisible status as novice teachers in schools and in curriculum and policy formation more broadly (Buchanan et al., 2013; Schaefer, 2013), our paper is intended to

foreground their views. The modest sample size of this study, along with the recognised limitations of an instrument such as a questionnaire, means that the findings reported here are not presumed to be generalisable. The findings do, however, offer provisional interpretations that chime with those evinced from analogous national and international research in the fields of English teacher motivation (cf. Goodwyn, 2012; Manuel & Brindley, 2006); early-career teacher development (cf. Britzman, 1992; Bullough, 1997; Goddard & Foster, 2001; Lortie, 1975); and teacher recruitment, retention and attrition (cf. Ewing & Manuel, 2005; Gold, 1996; Skillbeck & Connell, 2003). The findings from the present study therefore contribute additional empirical evidence of worth to the larger agendas around teacher quality, recruitment, retention and attrition.

### Background for the present study

On average, five hundred people each year are accepted into NSW university ITE programs to become English teachers.<sup>1</sup> As the largest educational jurisdiction in the southern hemisphere, NSW schools are responsible for the education of more than one million students in any one year. There is a steady demand for secondary English teachers across the State (NSW Department of Education, 2015). In the face of consistent negative media and dissuasive public attitudes towards teachers and their work, coupled with the burgeoning administrative workload, political interventionist agendas and constraining accountability regimes operating in schools, ITE programs in many universities in NSW continue to attract healthy numbers of high-calibre potential English teachers. At first glance, this trend may seem counter-intuitive. On further reflection, however, it is suggestive of the potency of an individual's motivations to enter teaching. This trend in fact reinforces Hunt and Carroll's point that:

the conventional wisdom is that we lack enough good teachers. But the conventional wisdom is wrong. The real school staffing problem is teacher retention ... the teacher retention/turnover issue has deep roots and far reaching consequences (2003, p. 10).

As the chief employing authority for teachers in NSW, the State Government Department of Education recently released a 'blueprint for action' – 'Great Teaching, Inspired Learning' – to 'improve the quality of teaching in schools' (2013, p. 3). More than two thirds of its recommendations 'for a set of reforms and

desired actions' (p. 3) directly address the ITE, entry into the profession and early-career phases of teacher development. In its synopsis of the 'current state' of education in NSW, however, there is a noticeable absence of attention to the significance of altruistic and intrinsic factors that motivate individuals in their decision to teach and influence their continued commitment to the profession, or to the patterns of early-career teacher attrition. Instead, attention is squarely focused on 'outcomes and actions'; 'entry benchmarks'; 'content requirements' (p. 7); qualification pathways; regulatory standards; and centralised accreditation processes. Similarly, the rhetoric of the recommendations for recruiting and supporting new teachers lays emphasis on the development of craft knowledge, technical skills, and management capacities with no acknowledgement of the important dimensions of teacher welfare and wellbeing during and after their initiation into the profession. Recommendation 7.1, for example, proposes that

beginning teachers have access to professional learning that focuses on classroom and behaviour management, strategies to build student engagement, collaborative professional practices within the school and productive relationships with parents and care givers (p. 13).

While the directions for reform set out in 'Great Teaching, Inspired Learning' are necessary and commendable, they do not adequately account for the less visible and therefore less measurable influence of teacher motivation, desire, passion and hopefulness in 'improving the quality of teaching in schools' (p. 3).

### The present study: Participants and method

At the end of 2015 and the beginning of 2016, data were gathered via a questionnaire from 22 secondary English teachers who have been teaching for between one and four years. Each participant successfully completed a two-year graduate-entry Master of Teaching (Secondary) degree in the year immediately prior to taking up employment. Those who gained entry to undergraduate study through an Australian Tertiary Admission Rank reported ATARS ranging between 86 and 99.75. Each entered the ITE program having attained a degree with either a double major, major, minor or Honours in English, with a minimum of four semesters of undergraduate study in literature-based courses.<sup>2</sup> Each specialised in teaching secondary English and one other school subject (e.g. History; Drama; Teaching English to Speakers of other

Languages – TESOL; or subjects under the umbrella of Human Society and its Environment – HSIE).

Participants were recruited through invitations to complete an online questionnaire distributed on teacher education alumni networked communities. From a pool of 56 early-career English teachers, 22 completed the questionnaire, representing a return rate of 39%. The questionnaire contained 24 items with a series of multiple choice questions, many of which were based on a Likert scale with an open field, and short-answer items. Collated responses to all multiple choice items were initially analysed to ascertain any general trends. Questions requiring a written comment were coded for thematic agreement and differences. Each participant’s full set of responses was then individually analysed to identify participant-specific data and potential correlations between, for example, a participant’s reported levels of career satisfaction, the extent to which their sense of self as a teacher has shifted, and their future career intentions.

In the research sample of 22 early-career secondary English teachers, 20 were female and 2 were male. The average age of this sample was 31 years. Of the 22 participants:

- 18 were teaching in full-time positions in a secondary school; one was teaching in a full-time temporary position; and three were working in a casual (supply) capacity. No participants were teaching part-time.
- 11 were in their first year of teaching; eight in their second year of teaching; two in their third year of teaching; and one was in their fourth year of teaching.
- 21 were teaching English, including one casual who was regularly teaching out-of-field.

Four participants were teaching in full-time positions in remote or rural areas of NSW. The remainder of participants were teaching in metropolitan schools.

The slightly higher than expected average age of the sample can be attributed to the inclusion of participants who were mature-age entrants into teaching. There was an over-representation of female teachers in this sample, reflecting to some extent the national data on female to male ratios in secondary teaching of 3:1 (Weldon, 2015).

**The findings: questionnaire responses**

The limitations of space in this paper preclude a more detailed analysis of all questionnaire items. In

the following discussion, we report on the findings from selected items that are directly pertinent to the early-career English teachers’ experiences of classroom teaching; administration; and collegial interactions and their levels of job satisfaction.

**Motivational factors that influenced the initial decision to teach**

Participants were asked to rank the motivational factors that influenced their initial decision to become a teacher, specialising in secondary English. The question listed a series of options, including an open field of ‘other’. Responses were on a scale from ‘very important’, ‘important’, ‘somewhat important’, ‘not sure’, and ‘not important’. All options required a response. The motivational factors rated as ‘very important’ are shown in descending order in Table 2 below.

**Table 2: Motivational factors influencing the decision to teach**

Rank	Factor influencing the initial decision to teach
1	Making a difference in people’s lives
2	Love of literature
3	Love of a wide range of texts
4	Love of English as a subject
5	Making a difference to social and other types of disadvantage
6	Personal goal/dream
7	Working with young people
8	Looking for a career change
9	Quality of professional life
10	Further career opportunities in the teaching profession
11	Salary and working conditions
12	Portability of degree and skills for other kinds of work

The highest ranked seven out of twelve factors listed in Table 2 are altruistic (factors 1, 5 and 7) and intrinsic (factors 2, 3, 4 and 6). The intrinsic motivations – emerging from the individual’s values and subjectivities and therefore ‘rooted in personality and experience’ (Kagan, 1992, p. 163) – are invested with a socially-oriented purpose through the altruistic, ‘service theme’ (Lortie, 1975/2002) motivations: ‘making a difference in people’s lives’ and ‘making a difference to social and other types of disadvantage’. Tacit in these motivations is the importance of inter-relational and social justice dimensions of teaching. Taken together, the altruistic and intrinsic motivations ‘represent[s] a distinctive and deep service ethic’ (Bullough & Hall-Kenyon, 2011, p. 128) commensurate

with an optimistic belief in the transformative power of individual and collective agency. In relation to this service theme, and bound up with the view of teaching as a vocation, Heinz notes that 'from the perspective of a social justice agenda, teachers are ... expected to be social activists who are committed to diminishing educational disadvantage as well as broader inequities of society (Gay, 1990; Sleeter, 1996; Villegas and Lucas, 2001)' (Heinz, 2015, p. 258).

In the present study, the predominance of motivations based on a love of the subject and its substance and the goal of making a difference can be further understood if we consider Elliot's view that: '[t]eachers share with and initiate their students into the love they have for the truth that resides in the subjects or topics they teach, which if contemplated sufficiently, is capable of 'nourishing the soul'' (1974, p. 147).

The altruistic and intrinsic motivational factors identified by participants strongly correlate with the findings of previous studies in the field of secondary English teacher motivation (cf. Goodwyn, 2004, 2012; Manuel, 2003; Manuel & Brindley, 2005) and teacher motivation more broadly (cf. Heinz, 2015). As early as 1934, for example, Valentine's study of teachers in Britain reported that the chief attractions to teaching were the opportunity to sustain a meaningful engagement with a subject they loved and a 'fondness for children' (quoted in Heinz, 2015, p. 266): a finding echoed in Tudehope's UK study conducted in 1944. Similarly, Lortie's (1975/2002) landmark sociological study of teachers identified the 'desire to work with young people' (what he describes as the 'interpersonal theme') in conjunction with the goal of making a difference to individual lives and contributing to the betterment of society ('service theme') as the most important motivations cited by teachers: a finding replicated in later European, British and Australian studies of teacher motivation (cf. Heinz, 2015).

When it comes to extrinsic motivations, the participants' responses in the present study were consistent with those reported in similar international studies in which extrinsic factors – such as, for instance, material rewards, working conditions and qualification portability – were ranked as the least important set of initial motivations to teach (cf. Heinz, 2015). Prospective teachers may report extrinsic motivations as less influential in their decision to teach for a number of reasons. Lortie proposed that teachers may 'underplay the role of material rewards as a result of normative pressures, which require teachers to emphasise more

their dedication and service role' (1975/2002, p. 30). These normative pressures have a deep historical and culturally-contingent source: teaching is typically constructed as a 'knowing and caring profession' (Delores et al., 1996), attracting people who are assumed to be driven by interpersonal, intrapersonal and elevated ideals that do not immediately accord with or accommodate more material, commercial and pragmatic motivations. This constructed paradigm of teaching as a service-oriented profession can militate against prospective teachers' prioritising of extrinsic motivational factors: a pattern repeatedly reflected in the research findings and one that bears out Lortie's argument.

Prospective teachers' low ranking of extrinsic motivations, however, can also operate as a powerful political lever to regulate teachers' salaries and working conditions. Further, these extrinsic factors may account for why people do not choose to teach, or do not teach once they are qualified, or resign from teaching after a period of time (Manuel & Hughes, 2006, p. 11).

#### *The status and relevance of initial motivations to teach in the light of early-career teaching experience*

We sought to draw out the extent to which the participants' original motivations to teach have retained their currency and cogency after one, two, three or four years of teaching. Research in the field of work motivation theory has found that 'salient motivations trigger, sustain, and concentrate behaviour (Locke & Latham, 2004; Steers, Mowday, & Shapiro, 2004). They are, thus, closely linked to and impact on individuals' work commitment (retention, concentration)' (Heinz, 2015, p. 259).

In response to a question about the continued relevance of their initial motivations, three-quarters of the participants in the present study stated that their initial motivations to teach have been generally affirmed in their daily working lives. Interestingly, of the three-quarters who responded positively to this question, a majority were teachers in their first one, two and three years of teaching. Those who were more equivocal about the durability of their initial motivations were in their third or fourth years of teaching. This suggests the potential for a diluting of teachers' original motivations proportional to the length of time teaching. Bullough & Hall-Kenyon's research, for example, found that 'teachers who have 6–10 years of experience reported having a lower sense of calling compared to any of the other groups' (2011, p. 134),

supporting Yee's (1990) conclusion that altruistic and intrinsic motivations to teach may diminish over time.

*Greatest challenges as a teacher and impediments to the realisation of teachers' motivational goals*

In order to probe the forces which may put at risk early-career teachers' motivations, participants were asked to identify their greatest challenges as a teacher and to then nominate the aspects of teaching that most threatened their motivational goals. The most consistent themes in response to the question of 'greatest challenges' were: time management (professional and personal); teacher wellbeing; concerns about the tension between the ideals of generating a love of literature and the subject and the constraints imposed by a content-heavy and assessment-driven curriculum; and challenges around differentiation in teaching, student engagement, motivation, and behaviour. The stated challenges can be seen to be interdependent. Taken together, they foreground the intensity and often all-consuming nature of teachers' work, reinforcing the impact of this on their personal lives and professional goals, especially for the beginning teacher (Buchanan et al., 2013). Many responses to this question alluded to the challenge of having to recalibrate the internalised expectations of the self-as-teacher through a more context-based consideration of managing workload demands. Representative responses to this question included:

- Finding enough time in the day for everything a teacher is expected to do.
- Being politically correct in the classroom.
- Reconciling the wonder and passion for exploring literature for pure enjoyment whilst balancing the need for rigorous assessment in the classroom.
- Perfectionism/balance! Knowing when to stop. My to-do list could be never-ending and thus I must simply decide where it ends.
- Time management, keeping up with and encouraging wide reading, promoting language skills, classroom management, work-life balance.
- Making time for myself – trying to switch off thinking about school and the students.

The new teacher's initial altruistic goals and intrinsic hopes, particularly in relation to their 'love of literature', were disturbed by the exigencies of real classrooms and school systems. On this point, some research has warned that 'a growing awareness of the less exciting realities of teaching ... can be followed

by feelings of ineffectiveness, loneliness, and alienation from the profession' (Schlichte, Yssel, & Merbler 2005, p. 38), leading to teacher attrition, especially in the early-career phase (Clandinin et al., 2015; Ewing & Manuel, 2005). In addition, there is a growing body of research addressing the serious issue of teacher burnout which has been theorised in relation to new teacher motivation and teacher goals:

Teacher wellbeing and mental health have become professional issues as evidenced in programs focusing on teachers' mental health, such as the 'Staff Mental Health and Wellbeing at Work' (Commonwealth of Australia, 2010). Research from occupational literature has shown organisational goals are associated with low burnout, whereas wellbeing and job change goals are associated with higher burnout and lower work engagement (Hyvonen, Feldt, Salmela-Aro, Kinnunen, and Makikangas, 2009)' (Mansfield, Wotniza & Beltman, 2012, p. 24).

The participants' comments about their greatest challenges revealed their cognisance of the need to adapt their expectations and their envisioned personal and professional goals (manifesting for some in their self-expectations of 'perfectionism') if they were to manage the practical challenges they confronted. As one participant stated, 'I must simply decide where it ends', implicitly recognising the markers for potential burnout and the imperative to deliberately reconfigure her praxis to ensure her wellbeing and continued efficacy as a teacher.

For English teachers in the present study, one of the greatest challenges involved 'reconciling the wonder and passion for exploring literature for pure enjoyment whilst balancing the need for rigorous assessment in the classroom'. On this theme, Halpin has observed that:

far too many of the most salient features of current educational practice in schools entail modes of negative technocratic hyper-rationality that requires pupils and their teachers increasingly to relate uninvitingly and at a distance from one another through the medium of official targets and associated modes of formal assessment (2006, p. 332).

When asked to list the aspects of their work that they regarded as the most palpable threats to the realisation of their motivational goals, the responses echoed those identified as the 'greatest challenges':

1. Dealing with constraints on time due to syllabus content.
2. Preparing students for the Higher School Certificate (HSC) exams.<sup>3</sup>

3. Classroom management.
4. Relationships with colleagues.

Of these major concerns, the first and second were named by more than 90% of participants, suggesting the extent to which the prescriptive demands of syllabus content and the omnipresence of external, high-stakes examinations and testing regimes have had a limiting effect on their daily work as teachers, often inhibiting their pursuit of the more holistic goals of making a difference in students' lives and inspiring a love of literature and texts, especially at the senior secondary level. Goodwyn's (2012) research with English teachers in England reported comparable major concerns about the distorting impact of instrumentalist testing and examination programs on the teaching of literature, student engagement and students' attitudes to literary study. Many teachers in Goodwyn's study expressed 'extreme frustrations' (p. 220) at the ever-widening gulf between their beliefs about the purpose of teaching English and the 'subject paradigm' and 'subject pedagogy' (Ball, 1982; Ball & Lacey, 1995), manifested in official curriculum documents. The latter can be seen to constitute a direct challenge to teachers' 'badges of the faithful' (Brooks, 1983, p. 39) and as a consequence, to their ideals and goals. Liston and Garrison (2004) remind us that 'teachers have loving, caring and connecting reasons for doing things that mere instrumental rationality will never know' (p. 10). For participants in the present study, the tension between their beliefs about the purpose of teaching English and the pragmatic need to prepare their students for tests and matriculation examinations was particularly striking.

#### **The purpose of English as a subject in the curriculum based on teacher beliefs and values**

Integral to the decision to teach a particular subject are beliefs about that subject's purpose in the curriculum. We reported earlier that more than 90% of early-career teachers in this study identified a 'love of English as a subject' and 'making a difference in people's lives' as key motivational factors in their decision to teach. When asked about the purpose of English as a subject, the following statements attracted the strongest responses (between 50% and 75% rated each statement as 'very important'), and are listed in descending order of preference.

- Build students' knowledge and understanding of themselves and the world.
- Teach for critical thinking.

- Develop students' social and interpersonal skills.
- Develop students' empathy.
- Encourage students' self-expression through language.
- Develop capacities for reflection.
- Articulate personal values, beliefs and ethics and recognise others'.
- Teach basic skills.
- Inspire a love of learning.
- Develop students' creative and imaginative capacities.
- Support self-realisation through using language and the study of literature.
- Develop principles of social justice.
- Develop students' autonomy and self-direction.

Immediately evident is the theme of individual student agency and 'growth' as a defining purpose of the subject. There are clear resonances here with the discourses associated with the Personal Growth, Critical Literacy and Cultural Analysis models of English. That is, through fostering the individual student's sense of self – to think, act and reflect as a rational, critical, creative and empathic being with the ability to use and respond to language encounters thoughtfully, analytically and powerfully – the student is potentially equipped with the capacity for 'natural learning', imagination, self-expression and personal growth' (Reid, 2002, p. 15).

#### **'Models' of English and their relevance to teachers' 'subject paradigm'**

Given the focus of the present study on early-career English teachers' motivations, beliefs and values, we were interested in gauging the significance and relevance of a range of models to teachers' conceptualisation of the subject and their pedagogy. The *Cox Report* (DES, 1989) set out five 'models' that were considered to be instantiated to a greater or lesser degree in the range of theoretical and pedagogical approaches to English as a subject in schools, namely: Personal Growth, Cultural Heritage, Cultural Analysis, Adult Needs and Cross-Curricular. Although the *Cox Report* was produced in the context of curriculum reforms in England at the time, the models identified in the *Report* have since gained more widespread attention and are frequently adapted and cited in research in the fields of English teacher education and curriculum in England and Australia (cf. Goodwyn & Findlay, 1999; Goodwyn, 2004; Goodwyn, 2012; Goodwyn, 2015).

For the present study, we adapted the Cox models to reflect the emphases in English curriculum in NSW by omitting Cross-Curricular and adding Critical Literacy to the list of five models that have been influential in NSW English syllabus documents for the past four to five decades. All participants, as a result of their ITE, were familiar with the orientations of each model vis-à-vis the purpose of English as a subject. We asked participants to rank the models according to:

- each model’s significance to their philosophy of teaching;
- the perceived presence of the model in the senior secondary English syllabus; and
- the prominence of each model in their classroom teaching.

As a means of highlighting the disparities in the responses to these three questions, Table 3 below provides a snapshot of the rank order of the models in each question category.

Particularly worthy of attention is the positioning of Personal Growth. 100% of participants identified this model as the most ‘highly relevant’ and ‘relevant’ to their philosophy of teaching. This finding is not surprising, considering the principles of valuing a student’s language and experiences and the study of literature and other texts have been imbued in NSW junior secondary English syllabuses since the 1970s (cf. Brock, 1996; Sawyer, 2009a, 2009b). Similarly, the high priority given to Critical Literacy and Cultural Analysis models reflects the presence of these in NSW English syllabuses since the late 1990s.

The Cultural Heritage model was viewed as the least relevant to the participants’ philosophy, yet it was registered as ‘clearly prominent’ and ‘prominent’ in the senior secondary syllabus by more than 83% of participants. The obvious differences in the ranking of the models points to some divergence between the participants’ internalised ‘subject paradigm’ and that

perceived to be encoded in the senior secondary syllabus. Interestingly, the Personal Growth model was not seen to be as prominent in the senior syllabus, again reflecting the more tightly-regulated, exam-driven and prescriptive nature of teaching and learning in the senior years (cf. Manuel & Brock, 2003; Manuel & Carter, 2016). In addition, because the senior syllabus mandates the study of traditional canonic literary forms, a Cultural Heritage model was seen to be more distinctly relevant in this context.

When asked about the models reflected in their classroom teaching, however, the Personal Growth model was elevated in the rank order. This may in part be accounted for by the fact that the participants would also be teaching the junior secondary syllabus in which, historically, Growth principles have been far more robustly represented than in the senior syllabus.

Of note in this comparison of responses was the consistently low ranking of the Skills and Adult Needs model. Participants did not view this model as being of high relevance to their teaching, nor clearly prominent in the senior syllabus or in their classroom teaching. While participants identified the need to ‘teach basic skills’ as one of the purposes of the subject, this model was appreciably less significant in their ‘subject paradigm’ and ‘subject pedagogy’ than each of the other models listed in this question.

Two key observations emerged from responses to these items. First, early-career English teachers in this sample did not assign equal value and significance to each model in their own philosophies of teaching. Second, their responses revealed a tension between their altruistic beliefs about the subject and the requirements of official curricula and assessment programs.

*Teachers’ views of the current senior secondary English syllabus and their sense of agency*

At the time of completing the questionnaire, all

**Table 3: Comparison of ranking of models**

Rank	Rank according to how relevant teachers see the model to their teaching philosophy	Rank according to how teachers see the model reflected in the official senior secondary English syllabus	Rank according to how teachers see the model reflected in their classroom teaching
1	Personal Growth	Critical Literacy	Critical Literacy
2	Critical Literacy	Cultural Heritage	Personal Growth
3	Cultural Analysis	Cultural Analysis	Cultural Heritage
4	Skills and Adult Needs	Personal Growth	Cultural Analysis
5	Cultural Heritage	Skills and Adult Needs	Skills and Adult Needs

participants in this study had recently taught, or were teaching, senior secondary (HSC) English. In these questions, we sought additional evidence of teachers' views of the current NSW senior secondary English syllabus and their sense of agency in teaching in this context. We were curious about the degree of symmetry – or discord – between their beliefs, values and goals (expressed in their responses to earlier questions) and their experiences of teaching English in the 'outcomes' intensive crucible of the HSC.

In response to this question, 100% of participants 'strongly agreed' and 'agreed' that 'the external HSC examination drives the way teaching occurs in HSC English'. More than 90% believed that their 'approach to teaching literature is determined by the need to prepare students for the examination', with more than 80% agreeing that 'if there were not a HSC exam, I would approach the teaching of literature differently'. Fewer than half of the respondents agreed that they 'participate in decision-making that impacts on [their] teaching'. Encoded in these responses are clear indicators of the extent to which extrinsic forces – in this case, the HSC examinations, external regulatory demands and marginalisation from curricular and other decision-making processes – can erode a teacher's sense of professional agency.

In recent times, a renewed research focus on teacher agency in relation to career motivation, satisfaction, retention and attrition has revived an awareness of the deep continuities between teacher beliefs, teacher effectiveness, a teacher's constructed sense of agency and the 'factors that contribute to its promotion' (Biesta, Priestley & Robinson, 2015, p. 624). 'The notion of teacher agency has emerged in research to describe teachers' active efforts to make choices and intentional action in a way that makes a significant difference' (Toom, Pyhältö & O'Connell Rust, 2015, p. 615). This recent research has also explored the deleterious impact of constraining institutionalised measurement cultures on teacher motivation.

Collectively, participants' responses to these questions disclosed a tension between the 'subject paradigm' and 'subject pedagogy' of 'teaching to the test' in senior English and their conceptualisations of the purpose of English in students' lives. These teachers' sense of professional agency – their 'active contribution to shaping their work and its conditions' (Biesta, Priestley & Robinson, 2015, p. 624) – was attenuated by the performative expectations that accompany the teaching of English in the senior secondary years.

### *Participants' current view of and level of satisfaction with teaching English*

The culminating questions in this study were designed to synthesise key aspects of the previous questions and to invite a more holistic consideration of the overall quality of the early-career teacher's experience: have the participant's motivations, values, beliefs and goals shifted, remained stable, been affirmed or challenged; do they believe they are 'making a difference'; have they maintained their ideals; is teaching rewarding; and have they felt supported by colleagues and the educational system within which they work?

The collated responses to the first of these questions about participants' views of teaching English paint a somewhat variegated picture of the early-career experience for this sample of teachers:

1. 'I feel I am making a difference as a teacher'
  - 40% of participants strongly agreed and agreed; 42% somewhat agreed; 18% disagreed
2. 'My teaching experience has been more challenging than I had expected'
  - 58% strongly agreed and agreed; 18% somewhat agreed; 24% disagreed
3. 'My beliefs about myself as a teacher are affirmed in my work'
  - 50% strongly agreed and agreed; 25% somewhat agreed; 25% disagreed
4. 'I am well supported by my colleagues'
  - 58% strongly agreed and agreed; 25% somewhat agreed; 17% disagreed
5. 'I find teaching more rewarding than I had expected to'
  - 33% strongly agreed and agreed; 59% somewhat agreed; 8% disagreed
6. 'My values as a teacher have not been challenged by colleagues or the system I work in'
  - 0.0% strongly agreed; 42% agreed; 8% somewhat agreed; 50% disagreed
7. 'I have been able to maintain my ideals as a teacher'
  - 0.0% strongly agreed; 25% agreed; 42% somewhat agreed; 33% disagreed.
8. 'I see myself in the teaching profession for at least another 5 years'
  - 67% strongly agreed and agreed; 25% unsure; 8% disagreed

While a majority of participants responded positively to statements related to their professional agency; self-efficacy; ability to maintain their values,

ideals and beliefs; collegial support and the rewards and satisfactions of teaching; a considerable proportion of responses evinced ambivalent or adverse views about the overall quality of the teaching experience. Of specific concern was the number of participants who reported that they do not feel they are making a difference as a teacher (18%); that their beliefs about themselves as a teacher have not been affirmed (25%); that they have not been able to maintain their ideals as a teacher (33%); and that their values have been challenged by colleagues or the system (50%).

Of the range of motivations that influenced the participants' initial decision to enter teaching, 'making a difference in people's lives' was the top ranked factor for more than 90% of this sample. Clearly, this altruistic, service and socially-oriented motivation was deeply-felt by most of the participants, forming part of their 'badges of the faithful' (Brooks, 1983, p. 39). Around one in four to five teachers in this study – after one or more years of teaching – felt that they were not fulfilling this significant desire to make a difference. Of these, a majority indicated that they were 'unsure' about or could not see themselves teaching in five years from now. The proportion of participants who expressed doubt about their future career broadly aligns with the research figures on early-career teacher attrition: that is, between 20 and 50% of teachers will leave the profession within their first five years of teaching (Ingersoll, 2004; Lindqvist, Nordanger & Carlsson, 2014; Skillbeck & Connell, 2003).

Research studies that have examined the discrepancies between new teachers' initial altruistic and intrinsic motivations to teach and their subsequent teaching experiences have argued that where 'teaching motivations cannot be realised, it is likely that professional satisfaction and fulfilment will deteriorate and that teachers will experience burnout or leave the profession (Heinz, 2011; Lin, Shi, Wang, Zhang, and Hui, 2012; Manuel and Hughes, 2006; Priyadharshini and Robinson-Pant, 2003; Watt and Richardson, 2002)' (Heinz, 2015, p. 271).

In the light of these understandings from research in the fields of teacher motivation, retention and attrition the responses to the question of 'professional satisfaction' disclosed a degree of discontent. Of the sample, 17% reported that they were 'very satisfied' with teaching English; one third were 'satisfied'; and the remaining 50% were 'unsure'. If levels of professional satisfaction can be taken as one of the predictors of teacher burnout and potential attrition, then the

responses gleaned from the present study are cause for concern. Importantly, of the 50% who were 'unsure' about their level of satisfaction, more than two thirds were teaching in public secondary schools. In the context of current national debates about the funding of public schools, there is a pressing need to include in these debates the perspectives of early-career teachers to ascertain the possible correlations between the resourcing (or under-resourcing) of these schools and patterns of teacher attrition.

### Concluding reflections

This small-scale study set out to explore early-career teachers' views of their first years of teaching. What emerged from the data is a range of findings that corroborate those from other similar empirical studies nationally and internationally. Foremost amongst these are the consistencies in the altruistic and intrinsic motivational factors influencing the decision to teach.

While a proportion of teachers in this study believed that their initial motivations, beliefs, values and ideals had been affirmed in their work, a significant proportion identified a dissonance between their 'subject paradigm' and 'subject pedagogy' and that apparent in the syllabus documents and assessment programs they were required to implement as part of their professional role. These teachers' initial motivations and goals were vulnerable to the challenges posed by an intense workload, time-management and divergent views of the purpose of the subject in the senior years. Those who indicated that their beliefs about the subject did not cohere with the conceptualisations evident in official curriculum documents were those who also expressed:

- greater levels of dissatisfaction with their work;
- concerns about the constraining impact of syllabus requirements and examination; imperatives on their teaching of literature;
- uncertain or equivocal views about their efficacy and professional agency; and
- strong reservations about their career futures.

Of note in the data was the correspondence between the length of time teaching, a decline in the vitality of initial motivations, and a waning of a sense of professional agency. For some teachers in this study, the demands of teaching in a high-stakes examination-driven context impaired the overall quality of their early-career experience and their attitudes to the sustainability of their role.

These findings have a number of implications. Firstly, it is necessary to conduct larger-scale inquiries to collect more substantial and representative data about early-career English teachers' experiences. Research in the field of teacher retention and attrition more generally has stressed the need to further understand the complex factors and conditions that contribute to new teachers' work satisfaction, wellbeing and continued motivation to teach (cf. Buchanan et al., 2013; Heinz, 2015). Day's (2004) insight into a teacher's life is a salient reminder that:

it takes courage not to be discouraged when teaching practices must be changed, new curricula observed, new rules of conduct met ... Teaching well, over time, is a struggle and it takes courage to continue to encourage the self and others to learn in changing personal, professional, social, and organisational contexts (p. 31).

Secondly, the findings prompt a reconsideration of the ways pre-service English teachers are initiated into the profession with 'capacities for resilience and empowerment' (Johnson et al., 2010 cited in Buchanan et al., 2013). As new teachers journey through the liminal phase of ITE, they can be supported more effectively to cross the threshold from imagined teacher to fully-fledged professional, equipped with 'badges of the faithful' and 'truths' (Brooks, 1983, p. 39) that are no longer taken as 'self-evident' (p. 39) or 'natural', but have been tested and validated by critical reflection and sustained periods of practical teaching experience.

Thirdly, it is clear from this study that early-career English teachers encounter significant workload pressures, particularly in relation to teaching senior secondary English and preparing students for high-stakes examinations. Team-teaching with expert teachers of HSC English, coupled with effective mentoring programs and schemes that provide for a reduced teaching load in the first years of teaching (such as those that operate in NSW) can potentially ameliorate the commonly identified adverse conditions and experiences of early-career teachers.

The participants in this study entered teaching to maintain their engagement with the cognate discipline of English and were stirred by motivations that encompassed deeply-felt personal, intellectual and social aspirations. School systems and cultures that do not create cultural and intellectual spaces for new teachers to engage these altruistic and intrinsic motivations put at risk the 'long-term resilience and commitment' (Manuel & Hughes, 2006, p. 21) of the early-career professional.

Fourthly, and closely connected with these issues of teacher retention and attrition, it is incumbent upon those who work with early-career teachers to more consciously orchestrate their greater participation in decision-making processes that inevitably impact upon their classroom practice, their beliefs and values, their levels of satisfaction and their professional agency.

Finally, the evidence gathered in this study has underlined the extent to which those who decided to teach English were impelled by beliefs and ideals that proved to be at once robust but at the same time susceptible to being disturbed by situational forces that they could not readily or simply alter or overcome. The perspectives presented here have offered a window into the aspirations, convictions and lived experiences of one group of early-career English teachers in NSW. Research in the field must continue to address the processes of their identity formation as teachers and the range of contextual forces and conditions that may ultimately imperil their altruistic commitment to 'making a difference' through 'great teaching' and 'inspired learning' (NSW Department of Education, 2013, p. 3).

#### Notes

- 1 The model of ITE in Australia is typically 70% university-based, with in-school professional experience or practicum comprising around 30% of the program (in both undergraduate double degrees and graduate-entry degrees).
- 2 The teacher accreditation authority, the Board of Studies, Teaching and Educational Standards (BoSTES), requires entrants to English ITE programs to have a minimum number of 'literature-based' undergraduate units as pre-requisites for study.
- 3 The Higher School Certificate is undertaken in the final year of senior secondary schooling. It is the exit credential and matriculation requirement for a majority of students in NSW.

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# & READING VIEWING

with Deb McPherson

Plays are wonderful texts to use in the classroom but great plays can often seem hard to find. Below you will find two excellent drama scripts to consider for your students. For one I am grateful to Helen Sykes, a Life Member of NSW ETA. Helen has always been an inspiration for me and has been reading and reviewing books for teachers and students for a lifetime. Her review of David Hare's *Behind the Beautiful Forevers* makes for compelling reading. Another standout play is the adaptation of Craig Silvey's much-loved *Jasper Jones* by Kate Mulvany. In addition Taika Waititi's *The Hunt for the Wilderpeople* may prove to be a classic film for the Year 8 or 9 classroom.

## Fiction for Years 7 and 8



**Liquidator** Andy Mulligan (2015)

David Fickling Books 390 pp

Andy Mulligan, the author of *Trash*, has combined ethics, corporate corruption, work experience and clever kids to produce another thrilling text for Year 7 students.

The biggest selling soft drink in the world is Liquidator. Everyone drinks it. Vicky, a British school student, gets the worst choice for work experience as a sandwich maker at a PR firm that handles the Liquidator account. While there she accidentally stumbles on a terrible secret. The soft drink is dangerous, it is highly addictive, is being tested on unknowing African children and one boy is close to death.

Vicki has to call for help from her friends and classmates. Leela, the twins, Kat Kat and Spud have to use all their skills to expose the company while evading the enforcers that are sent after them. The action is fast, mad and often funny, the threat is clear and the climax at Africa's Weeping, the globally televised charity concert is improbable but highly satisfying. Mulligan employs multiple narrators and the reader can enjoy

the different perspectives these voices bring in this race against time and greed. *Liquidator* asks what would you do if you found out someone was doing something bad and Vicky and friends have a resounding answer.

## Fiction for Years 9 and 10

**Zeroes** Scott Westerfeld, Margo Lanagan & Deborah Biancotti (2015)

Allen & Unwin 485 pp.

Scott Westerfeld and Margo Lanagan have wonderful reputations as YA writers (I haven't come across Deborah Biancotti before) and they don't disappoint with this first book in a promised series.

What I liked about *Zeroes* is that these Californian teenagers with superhuman powers often find their talents a burden rather than a help, and they definitely have some personality issues. There is nothing super-human about their likability.

There are five Zeroes at the beginning of the novel. Ethan, aka Scam, (who lost the friendship of the group when he abused them all last summer) has a 'voice' that tells people whatever will get Ethan out of trouble at any difficult moment. The voice seems to see into people's minds and lie or tell truths accordingly. However for each immediate solution there can be greater problems ahead. When Ethan finds himself mixed up in a bungled bank robbery he calls for help from Nate, the charismatic 'glorious leader' of the Zeroes. The other members of the group include blind Riley who can see through other people's eyes and Thibault who is the forgettable one, the one no-one remembers; peoples' eyes slide off him as if he is 'visual oil'. Then there is Chizara whose head hurts when she comes near technology but when she can control the pain she can make the most protected systems crash spectacularly. Ethan's predicament gets them working together again. When he finds Kelsie, who has psychic



mob control powers, they become a formidable team. But they are up against some very dangerous criminals and the thrills and spills really start to build as the gangsters come after Ethan and his friends.

Of course subtlety is not the standout characteristic of this genre but the action, word play, camaraderie and suspense are terrific and will have wide appeal for Year 9 readers. I'm hoping they take on more than gangsters in the next book.

### MARTians Blythe Woolston (2015)

Walker Books 223 pp

The Martians in Blythe Woolston's riveting novel are closer to M.T. Anderson's *Feed* than to the red planet. This book is about a future where consumerism has really gone mad and fifteen-year-old Zoe Zindleman and her classmates have just been given early graduation from their school as it's being closed down. The descriptions of class time and the curriculum are stomach churning! Zoe is (initially) a naïve narrator and this savage satire uses her innocence to highlight the corrupt exploitation of this horrible future society. The students' job referrals are for All-MART or Q-MART or it's straight to prison. Zoe's mum has left to find a job and Zoe is alone in a cul de sac of houses where no one lives any more and the electricity is about to be turned off. Zoe gets a job at All-MART where her badge label calls her Zero, (it's an easier name for customers to complain about). As in *Feed*, news and cheery commercial chatter are scattered through the text and lifelong learning is offered through Unicorn University an affiliate of ...you guessed it: AllMART. The training orientation is suitably sickening including this little gem:

*I may be just a little part,  
But I pledge my beating heart  
To AllMART.*

Zoe's days are bleak and dispiriting and there is no money in her account on payday as the cost of her shapeless uniform has to be paid for. She ends up living in an abandoned mall with Timmer, a young man who befriends her, and some other adolescents who are trying to look after each other. She discovers

her mother has abandoned her and the implant behind her ear delivers drugs designed to keep her passive and controlled. When she digs it out the withdrawal is debilitating; she feels 'like jagged glass crawls inside' of her.

This dystopia is disturbingly real and the humour is deeply black. There is so much in this novel for Year 9 and 10 students to recoil from, discover and discuss. They can consider the Vote Bundling Services where you can sell your vote, or the mind-blowing childcare at AllMART. The drones and surveillance cameras are everywhere and the vice-like grip of the human resources manager, Dawna Day, belies her fixed-on smile. *MARTians* is an unnerving and compelling read which is highly recommended. As Zoe learnt in Retail Psychology 101, you will want to know the end of this story.

### Digital

*Inanimate Alice*

<http://www.inanimatealice.com>

[http://devblog.inanimatealice.info/buy-the-teachers-edition-suite/?inf\\_contact\\_key=cb3eaaca8ba0cab3613541aac06f04e2f34fb707e9733328d0d131ee2928e5](http://devblog.inanimatealice.info/buy-the-teachers-edition-suite/?inf_contact_key=cb3eaaca8ba0cab3613541aac06f04e2f34fb707e9733328d0d131ee2928e5)

*Inanimate Alice* recently became available in an offline format and I have updated my previous review from 2011 to reflect the changes that using the offline edition offers.

*Inanimate Alice* was created as a story that unfolds over time and on multiple platforms. As the website says, it 'uses text, images, music, sound effects, puzzles and games to illustrate and enhance the narrative'.

*Inanimate Alice* is the story of Alice at different times in her life as she travels with her parents around the world. Her story is told over five increasingly interactive and complex episodes. As Alice grows older the story duration becomes longer and more sophisticated and the interactivity becomes more demanding. In episode one, set in China, Alice is eight and the episode lasts five minutes. Alice's father has gone missing and she and her mother set out to find him. In those five minutes you share Alice's anxiety about her father, you travel in the four wheel drive with her mother through confusing and intimidating landscapes, your sense of time is challenged and you too can seek refuge in the games and puzzles Alice plays as the journey continues. In episode two, set in Italy, Alice is ten and the viewing time is longer. In episode three, in Russia,

Alice is growing up. She is thirteen and hiding in an apartment from some sinister figures who are making trouble for her father. It feels like you are in the closet with her. It takes at least fifteen minutes to participate in this episode. In episode four, Hometown 1, Alice is fourteen and the reader/viewer finds her in Great Britain. In this thirty-minute episode Alice is settled in a school and delighted that her school has boys, lots and lots of boys! In episode five, Hometown 2 Alice is sixteen years old and spends time hanging out with friends and going to nightclubs as well as exploring the city in which she lives. She is doing well at school in art and tech but not much else. While her father is trying to get back into the oil and gas business without much success, her mother is doing well. There is an episode six about Alice's gap year but it is not available with this new downloadable package. Individual use licenses (\$19.90) for both PC and Mac and classroom licenses (for up to 35 students and a teacher for \$199) are available.

*Inanimate Alice* is a sure-fire way to engage and stimulate students. Students will enjoy and be challenged by the text, which will also support their literary, cinematic and artistic literacies. With really edgy music, mesmerising video and graphics, embedded puzzles and games, and an invitation to participate in the story, how could it miss?

With the new offline editions teachers and students can avoid slow connections and the story is available immediately. Viewers can go to a desired scene and jump forward or backwards in the story. Wizards put all five episodes on your desktop (I have them sitting there now) and you can navigate across the whole story. Students can investigate the story more deeply and progress at their own pace. This digital text comes with extensive teaching ideas and materials that are freely available online. Set aside some time to read, view and experience *Inanimate Alice* and you won't be disappointed. Neither will your students.

## Drama

### **Behind the Beautiful Forevers** David Hare (2014)

Faber & Faber, 129 pp.

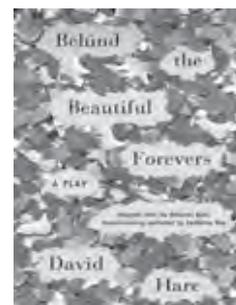
This playscript is based on journalist Katherine Boo's compulsively readable non-fiction text, *Behind the Beautiful Forevers: Life, death and hope in a Mumbai slum* (Scribe Publications, 2012. 288 pp. Reviewed in *English in Australia* Vol. 48, No.2, 2013). Boo is an American journalist and the book is based on years of first-hand

research in the Annawadi slum that is adjacent to the Sahar International airport in Mumbai. The slum is hidden from the airport by a wall of advertising for expensive Italian floor tiles that promise to remain 'beautiful forever'. The juxtaposition between the extravagant lifestyle promised by the advertising and the fragile shacks of the slum, with their dirt floors, in many ways sums up the Mumbai Boo is reporting on.

Boo chose to present her research by telling the story of three families who live in the slum. The first is the family of Abdul, who is possibly sixteen, possibly nineteen, and the family breadwinner; Abdul has become a skilled recycler, scavenging through 'the things that richer people threw away'. The second is the family of the ambitious and ruthless Asha, who aspires to be the next slumlord; her daughter, Manju, is the only college-going girl in Annawadi, but regrettably (from Asha's viewpoint) does not share her mother's pursuit of material gain at all costs. The third is that of Fatima, universally known as One Leg, who is desperately jealous of Abdul's family's relative prosperity. In a self-destructive rage, Fatima burns herself grievously in a fire and blames Abdul. Much of the narrative of the book centres on this incident and its consequences.

David Hare follows Boo's book closely, focusing too on the story of the three families and giving them a vivid presence on stage. Both Boo and Hare supplement the main characters with a large supporting cast, especially of road boys, scavengers that Abdul knows, and corrupt officials. In the world that Boo and Hare present, corruption is endemic at every level, especially amongst the police, lawyers and court workers, from the highest to the lowest. Innocence is useless in the justice system; money and influence are everything. The conditions in gaol are even worse than those of slum existence.

It is not surprising that Hare was attracted to Boo's text: he has written for years about globalisation, inequality and injustice. But even such a skilled dramatist must have been daunted by the task of adapting Boo's huge canvas for the stage. Hare has risen magnificently to the challenge. While the cast is huge and at first confusing, Hare gives us a clear narrative that allows us to share in the fragility of this makeshift world. He seems, too, to have picked up on Boo's comment about goodness. One of the highlights of the play is the moment when Abdul reacts with rage



to yet another corrupt government official demanding a bribe:

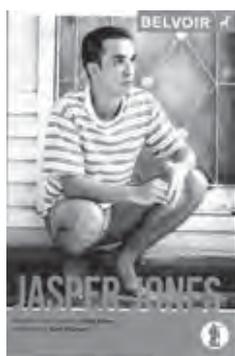
Look at us. You're like dogs. Licking at us, taking what's left of our blood. You've already taken our lives. All right, so we let you do it. But there's a limit. And my mother's reached it. Do you understand? She's paid the police, the people in the prison, in the courts, the neighbours, anyone who held out their hand. And tell you what? This is a great day. Because this is the day we stop. We stop.

There is violence in the play: the scene, for example, in which street boy Kalu is tortured and killed by two dealers is distressing. There is bad language, especially – and amusingly – from the mouth of Abdul's mother Zehrunisa, who is constantly being berated by her children for her swearing. There is the uncomfortable exposure that for many life is cheap; like the people in the hotels near the slum who complain that 'every night the ash from our cow-dung fires drifts across and lands on the swimming pools', we would really prefer not to know. But Hare has also given us humanity at its best, especially in the young people, Abdul and Manju.

This is obviously a suitable text for Asia and Australia's Engagement with Asia. It is a sophisticated text that you probably won't use with students younger than Year 10. Even then, you will use it with top stream classes. It would also be a great text for Year 11. If you can find a suitable class, it is wonderfully rewarding: an unforgettable insight into the lives of the poor in contemporary India. The issues that are raised, both in the book and in the play, are hugely relevant.

You could use the playscript on its own with a class, or alongside Boo's book. The play had a triumphant season in London in 2015. The National Theatre Live program filmed one of the performances. – Helen Sykes

*Jasper Jones* adapted by Kate Mulvany  
from the original novel by Craig Silvey (2016)  
Currency Press 79 pp.



What a joy it was to see the Belvoir production of this wonderful dramatisation of an Australian classic novel. And for those who might be worried that Jeffrey Lu's glorious cricket debut was left out – it was not!

Kate Mulvany's skilful adaptation retains the freshness and wisdom of the novel. It is still 1965 and Charlie is

still fourteen and living in a small Australian town. The Vietnam War is on, the draft is happening, racism and fear of the unknown permeate the place and Charlie finds himself very out of his depth when Jasper Jones comes calling at his window. Jasper is in trouble and he needs Charlie's help. Laura Wishart is dead and Jasper knows he will be blamed, as he always is for anything that goes wrong in Corrigan. He is Aboriginal and as the play unfolds we learn more about him, his family and the truth about Laura's death.

Charlie's best friend Jeffrey remains optimistic, ebullient and undefeated, even by the ignorant racism he encounters. In the Sydney production I saw the cricket match is a cause for rejoicing and a triumph of staging, with much of the bowling whistling down between two sections of the audience. People in the audience could be heard shouting out 'Go Jeffrey', such was their involvement and excitement.

The play would be perfect for Years 9 and 10 and would be fascinating to study in conjunction with the novel so students could see the clever act of adaptation of prose to drama script.

## Graphic novels

Graphic novels are proving to be a great success in the classroom. Thanks again to Helen Sykes, our guest reviewer, for this insightful review of *Kidglovz*.

*Kidglovz* Julie Hunt, illustrated by Dale Newman.  
(2015)

Allen & Unwin, 271 pp.

This is an intriguing graphic novel about a child prodigy known as Kidglovz whose passion and talent for music become a curse; he is imprisoned by a harsh guardian named Dr Spin who is interested only in the child's capacity to make money. Dr Spin advertises himself as a musical impresario, although there is a rumour that he was once a snake-oil salesman. Dr Spin even starves the child, so that he will remain small: child prodigies need to be children, the smaller and cuter the better. Kidglovz's music teacher, Lovegrove, loves him and wants him to live a normal life but she is Dr Spin's sister and powerless against him. Life changes when a child thief, Shoestring, breaks into Kidglovz's room. A plot to rescue Kidglovz is hatched but things go badly



wrong and both Kidglovz and Shoestring face strange and terrifying ordeals.

The setting is never specified but it is European and probably nineteenth century. The black and white drawings are harshly realistic but there is a framework of mystery and magic. The introductory page sets the scene:

There is a town in the mountains not far from here where people lock their pianos on the night of the full moon. It makes no difference – the keys move up and down and the air is filled with wild music.

This is followed by eight pages of wordless images telling a story about a young woman who is robbed of something precious by a travelling salesman. The story does not make much sense at this stage; it is only much later that we realise that it is a flashback, providing vital information about Kidglovz's origins. These eight pages precede the title page, which is followed by the first of five parts telling the story in graphic-novel format.

Like most graphic novels, the illustrator uses a variety of frames. No two pages are alike, and much of the detail is very satisfying: an unframed image reaches up the page to accommodate a boy climbing a ladder; a series of six frames of different sizes shows the two boys following a dog, Hugo, through a scary underground tunnel, with the first frame almost filled with the dog's head as he sniffs out a trail; a double-spread has four rounded frames (and no text) summing up peasant life in the mountains during winter, like glimpses through a window. The written text is at all times minimal; it is the pictures that mostly tell the story.

This is well worth studying as a class text, probably in Years 8 or 9. It will be hugely popular with students who are already fans of the graphic-novel format, but the narrative is so compelling and the characters so interesting that most will be won over. Make up a wide reading selection of graphic novels, including Brian Selznick's *The Invention of Hugo Cabret*, which has some similarities to *Kidglovz*. Encourage students to read more than one and to compare the different storytelling techniques, including the different use of images. – Helen Sykes

## Film

*The Hunt for the Wilderpeople* directed by Taika Waititi (2016)

PG (DVD distribution still to be advised)

Ricky (Julian Dennison) is a city kid with a few problems (he says he wants to be a rapper, a drug dealer and die in a blaze of glory) and when he is fostered out to the farm of an older couple no one expects him to last very long. But when 'Aunt' Bella unexpectedly dies the authorities want to take Ricky away from his reclusive foster uncle (Sam Neill). Ricky runs away and a reluctant Hector follows. When Hec hurts his ankle and the pair 'go bush' in the wild New Zealand high country the authorities believe Hector has abducted Ricky and launch a massive manhunt. The two must work together to survive and outrun their pursuers. Paula, the dictatorial social worker, and Andy, the police officer, provide great comic relief as Hec and Ricky become unlikely rebels in a fight against an authoritarian and unthinking state.

By turns hilariously funny, serious and wry, this film will work well in the Year 8 or 9 classroom. As the antithesis of the Hollywood formulaic film *The Hunt for the Wilderpeople* offers opportunities for laugh-out-loudness as it deploys fresh dialogue and off-kilter roles. Students can consider comic devices, soundtrack impact, and generational defying relationships.

*The Hunt for the Wilderpeople* (as in wildebeest) became the highest grossing locally produced film in NZ and has enjoyed considerable success in Australia. The pig-killing scene is violent and yet decidedly comic, especially when Ricky's response is considered. The director, Taika Waititi, has crafted a film that is very easy to love.

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Wishing you happy, inspiring and engaging reading and viewing and a reminder that film versions of *Trash* and *A Monster Calls* are due out soon.



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