Literary Experience and Literature Teaching Since the Growth Model

Ian Reid, University of Western Australia

Abstract: By the late 70s the ‘growth through English’ slogan, derived from John Dixon’s account of the Dartmouth conference, had become popular around Australia. In 1980 the Sydney IFTE conference featured several Dartmouth veterans; but during that conference, Dartmouth-linked ideas from overseas mingled with lines of local influence, especially in the Literature Commission. British post-Dartmouth thinking had given only superficial attention to the role of literature in English, but by 1980 this topic was being subjected to serious critical enquiry in Australia, and innovative ideas about literature teaching emerged at the Sydney conference.

In the years since then, while mainstream teaching practice in Australia has largely subsumed some aspects of the ‘growth’ enterprise, there has also been a reframing of literature in many classrooms, bringing fuller appreciation of the diverse relationships between written language and experience than that which informed Dixon’s work. Australian classrooms now take a much more inclusive view of kinds of texts worth studying, and of how to engage with them, than was usual 50 years ago. With this comes a recognition that what Dixon dismissed as a ‘cultural heritage’ model is redeemable through a more politically aware understanding of culture and heritage.

In a characteristically reflective way, Brenton Doecke (2016) sums up a large part of the Dartmouth influence with his remark that it was significant not so much in providing answers as in ‘setting a powerful example of inquiry’ grounded in professional practice. For my own part, when I reread what John Dixon and other exponents of the ‘growth model’ have written, particularly about the teaching of literature, I do not always agree with their views; but I remain grateful for the stimulus they provide to my own thinking, not only through their body of published work but also through their generous personal interactions with me in years gone by.

Brenton reminds us that, as we look back over the last five decades of English teaching, we should be wary of simplification and ‘try to cultivate a sensitivity to details that do not fit standard accounts of the period’. It would be convenient to picture that little gathering in a northeastern US college half a century ago as a dramatic collision between two contingents from opposite sides of the Atlantic. A simplified version of what happened at Dartmouth might represent the British participants as unanimously advocating student-centred experiential language-based learning, with a strong emphasis on classroom talk, and American participants as championing the cause of traditional literary scholarship, with a strong emphasis on formal skills. This dichotomy is broadly valid but ignores important exceptions (see Weisser, 2002, pp. 4–6). A few British attendees, such as David Holbrook and Glyn Lewis, spoke eloquently about the value of traditional literary studies, while a few of the Americans, especially James Moffett, concurred with the idea that individual development and authentically personal language should be a major focus of classroom activity. (On Holbrook, see...
Mathieson, 1975, p. 198; on Glyn Lewis, see Muller 1967, pp. 89–91; on Moffett, see Muller, pp. 108–111.)

Nobody can now say definitively, on the basis of first-hand knowledge, what the precise balance of views was on that legendary occasion. Even those of us who are almost old enough to have been there didn’t receive an invitation. Participation was confined to select groups from Britain and North America. Anything we know or think we know about the significance of Dartmouth comes to us filtered through reports by people who took part – reports in the form of books, conference papers, and other impure residues of their subjective experiences. The most influential residue (perhaps a more apt metaphor would be refractive medium) was undoubtedly John Dixon’s account in Growth Through English, though the event did produce another direct publication outcome: Herbert Muller’s book The Uses of English (1967) gives a fuller picture of proceedings from an American point of view.

The ‘consensus’ supposedly discovered at Dartmouth (Dixon, 1967, p. xi) has long been familiar to us. It was a conviction that English teaching should engage primarily with a student’s own world of personal experience, superseding earlier models of English that had a more limited focus on literacy skills or on cultural heritage. The problem with undue attention to skills, according to Dixon, is that what ought to be the means becomes the end, while the problem with the cultural heritage model is that, taking ‘culture as a given’, it tends to ‘ignore culture as the pupil knows it, a network of attitudes to experience and personal evaluations that he develops in a living response to his family and neighbourhood’ (Dixon, 1967, p. 3).

English in schools, says Dixon, is not something about which students acquire knowledge; it is a place where they ‘meet to share their encounters with life’, so that each ‘learns to use language to build his own representational world and works to make this fit reality as he experiences it’ (p. 13). The kind of classroom practice Dixon envisages is chiefly concerned with ‘the development of an individual’s personality and view of reality’ (p. 108).

An expanded edition of Growth Through English came out in 1975, subtitled Set in the Perspective of the Seventies. Dixon added a new chapter and there was a Foreword by James Britton and James Squire, which stated: ‘It is unlikely that any other book in the past decade has had more influence upon English work in classrooms’ (Dixon, 1975, p. vii). That may be true, though it would be incorrect to assume that Dixon’s gospel was immediately embraced by most practitioners, even in his own country. Some explicitly rejected it; some simply disregarded it. In 1971 Geoffrey Summerfield (himself a Dartmouth participant) edited a book called English in Practice: Secondary English Departments at Work in which teachers from a range of British schools discuss their approach to the subject – and make no reference to Dixon or Dartmouth (Summerfield, 1971). So too with Margaret Mathieson’s 1975 book The Preachers of Culture: A Study of English and its Teachers – nothing at all on Dartmouth or Dixon, though the title of his book gets a passing mention. David Allen’s 1980 book English Teaching Since 1965: How Much Growth? does address Dartmouth and its aftermath explicitly, but only to argue that Dixon’s emphasis on student-centred learning had encouraged a neglect of literature in British schools – a concern anticipated in 1969 by Squire and Applebee (1969), who saw the personalist crusade as ‘intolerant and neglectful of many literary values’ (p. 99) and contributing to a situation in which ‘too many lessons lack closure, direction, or planning … and time passed in the classroom is not easily distinguishable from time out of school’ (p. 177).

On Australian schools the influence of Dartmouth was by no means widespread in the early to mid 70s, though a few educators (most notably Garth Boomer) began to acquire and disseminate some familiarity with the ideas of a handful of British contributors to the Dartmouth deliberations – in particular, Douglas Barnes, James Britton, John Dixon and Harold Rosen – along with the ideas of a like-minded American participant, James Moffett. Interest in their work strengthened through the 1971 sequel to Dartmouth, an international conference in York, though this again was a fairly restricted get-together of British and North American participants. However, by the end of the 70s the slogan of ‘growth through English’ was becoming popular around Australia, not always accompanied by a detailed knowledge of what it supposedly meant (Reid, 2003).

A fuller Australian response to Dartmouth came in 1980, when a third (much larger) conference, under the banner of what was by now the International Federation of the Teaching of English, was hosted in Sydney by the AATE. About 800 attended, three-quarters of them Australian. Featured speakers from the UK included Dixon and several other Dartmouth veterans (Eagleson, 1980), plus colleagues such as Margaret Meek-Spencer and Nancy Martin from the University of London’s Institute of Education.
Yet while there was plenty of positive reference to Growth Through English (and related publications by James Britton and others), it’s important to note that during the Sydney conference the Dartmouth-linked ideas propounded by gurus from overseas mingled with lines of local influence, which ensured that not everyone chanted the ‘growth’ chorus. Noteworthy within Australia at this time, and visible in the deliberations of the Sydney conference’s ‘Literature Commission,’ were the following three trends, which in different ways directed spotlights onto the problematic status of literature in English studies – something that had been given relatively superficial attention in British post-Dartmouth thinking.

1 An increasing recognition that English teachers needed opportunities for professional development to be informed by independent research rather than subordinated to educational agencies and government bureaucracies. For example Garth Boomer, who had studied at the London Institute of Education in the early 70s and assimilated the work done there by Nancy Martin and others, became in 1980 Director of the Wattle Park Teachers Centre, the site of professional development for the South Australian system; he would soon be elected President of AATE and go on to Canberra as Director of the Curriculum Development Centre, among other leading roles. As the AATE website remarks, his impact on teaching and learning was profound and longlasting. The title of Boomer’s paper at the Sydney conference was ‘The English Teacher: Research and Change, 1966–80’ (Boomer, 1982, pp. 134–45). He observes that ‘advisory networks’ comprising such things as subject committees, course consultants and professional development opportunities, unknown in the mid-60s, had become well established by the mid-70s. Within the profession of English education there remained, in his view, a disjunction between the habits of most teachers and the innovative work of researchers and theorists, but he saw grounds for optimism in some areas, especially as Moss and his colleague Higgins were not only arguing that English should encompass popular media; they were also adamant that TV, advertising, movies and news photography must be subjected to intense critical scrutiny because by their nature they often present form without substance, sentiment without thought, superficial images without depth. A student, they argued provocatively, should be helped to understand that literature can offer something that producers to the proceedings of the Literature Commission, influenced by the pioneering work of Richard Hoggart (1957) in Cultural Studies, posed a challenge that went beyond the Dartmouth framework: in his view, English teachers were tending ‘to lose sight of the culture that produced the literature they are dealing with’ and so it was necessary ‘to look very closely at this increasingly fast-paced, technological, mass-produced culture we inhabit and for which we are preparing our students’ (Moss & Higgins, 1982, p. 214). In 1980 this was a more disruptive message than it may seem today, especially as Moss and his colleague Higgins were not only arguing that English should encompass popular media; they were also adamant that TV, advertising, movies and news photography must be subjected to intense critical scrutiny because by their nature they often present form without substance, sentiment without thought, superficial images without depth. A student, they argued provocatively, should be helped to understand that literature can offer something that these characteristic products of post-industrial society cannot:

Whereas the media scale down and simplify, literature provides the complexity and the concreteness of experience; the media offer surfaces, literature invites contemplation of dense layers of meaning. Whereas the media are hostile to the past (because they wish to tempt their consumers to live in a pseudo-world of a constant present), literature requires an historical perspective, a consciousness of past and present, a narrative progression, of cause and effect – indeed fully embodies a sense of cultural continuity because it recreates, imaginatively, human affairs developing and changing and responding in historical contexts. (Moss & Higgins, 1982, p. 214)

In another paper in the same post-conference volume, Moss observed that consumerism creates ‘a need for drama-in-everyday-life’, and that we see this in a range of quasi-theatrical forms, from ‘newspaper headline billboards which litter the streets, coughed...
unchangingly in the language of resounding extremes’ to ‘the seductive imperatives of shop-front advertising’, ‘debates between political opponents’ and the manipulative tensions of TV ‘soap operas and thrillers’. In short, ‘experience … is fixed by the dramatic imperative’, rendering insignificant the personal feelings and words of individuals (Moss 1982, p. 105–106).

3

An increasing impatience with the rigidity of traditional university English courses in this country, particularly in evading the implications of fundamental questions raised by literary theorists during the previous decade.

My own paper to the Literature Commission argued (among other things) that reading should be integrated more closely with writing in classroom practice, and I illustrated this with examples from the innovative teaching and learning methods that my colleagues and I had recently established at Deakin University. As we conceived it, the study of literature involved ‘not only learning versatility as a reader but also experimenting creatively with various sorts of writing’ (Reid, 1982a, p. 146). This was at a time when no other Australian university regarded creative writing as a suitable part of the curriculum. How things have changed! My paper explained that, at Deakin, writing was not mere self-expression; it was done in direct relation to what the students were asked to read, so that they could ‘experience processes of literary creation from the inside[,] … learning that creation and criticism go hand in hand, that good reading and good writing are two sides of the same coin’ (p. 147). As a companion piece to that paper in Sydney I presented another one in the same year, 1980, to a conference of the Australasian Universities Languages and Literature Association. Bearing the melodramatic title ‘The Crisis in English Studies,’ it was subsequently published in English in Australia (Reid, 1982b), which also reprinted it a couple of years ago with a retrospective editorial comment by Margaret Gill that in this article and other writings such as The Making of Literature I had ‘initiated a revolution in the teaching of literature’ (Gill, 2014, p. 35). Too grand a claim, and I wouldn’t make it; but at least my timing appears to have been propitious. Views that I put forward chime with the fact that, as we moved into the early 1980s, many English teachers around the country were recognising that the gospel of growth left a number of questions unsettled, especially with regard to literature in the English classroom.

Since 1980, the process of reframing literary experience and literature teaching in Australia has continued in various ways, not least through curriculum reform (Reid, forthcoming). For the most part, this has happened independently of any British or American post-Dartmouth influence, because growth evangelists generally did not manage to articulate a clear or cogent argument about the place of literature in English studies.

Near the beginning of Growth Through English Dixon states, promisingly enough, that ‘What is vital is the interplay between [the pupil’s] personal world and the world of the writer’, and the English teacher’s role is to ‘help bring the two into a fruitful relationship’. But he immediately casts a shadow over this ideal by asserting that the textual focus of traditional literary analysis puts it into the domain of the teacher’s main strength, the heritage-oriented written word, ‘as against the spoken word (the pupil’s strength)’ (Dixon, 1967, p. 3). This, in Dixon’s eyes, is an unsatisfactory imbalance, though he does not show why it need be a problem. Again at the end of his first chapter he touches briefly on a possible role for literary learning with this formulation:

In English, pupils meet to share their encounters with life, and to do this effectively they move freely between dialogue and monologue – between talk, drama and writing; and literature, by bringing new voices into the classroom, adds to the store of experience. (p. 13)

Yet this gesture towards literature remains somewhat vague and perfunctory, and is not explicated further. Significantly, it implies that any literary text is just an additional ‘voice’ in the class’s conversation.

Giving voice was for Dixon the most important activity in English teaching and learning situations. Through the 70s and 80s this continued to be his priority. His prospectus for the commission he chaired at the 1971 York conference states that it will focus (using tape-recordings of class sessions) on ‘examples of the talk that goes on in typical learning situations’ (ERIC, 1971). His 1975 contribution to a book edited by Harold Rosen has the characteristic title ‘Talk and Collaborative Learning’ (Dixon, 1975b). Even an essay called ‘English Literature,’ which he wrote for the 1983 Australian publication Timely Voices, states at the outset that ‘written response to literature … is only the surface show … How we talk together in class precedes and guides the writing’ (Dixon, 1983, p. 52). Dixon’s impulse is to turn printed texts into gregarious
performances whenever possible: for him, the way to engage students with anything literary is to read it aloud with them, discuss it at length, debate it, sing it, stage it. Valuable though this dialogic learning can undoubtedly be in eliciting some qualities of some texts, it hardly seems adequate to the variety of potential literary experiences.

In his new final chapter for the 1975 edition of Growth, Dixon notes regretfully that his initial response to Dartmouth had ‘tended to narrow the definition of literature’ because of an undue attachment to James Britton’s spectator vs participant distinction, according to which the former is associated with literary experience, restrictively understood as represented by ‘works of fiction – in poetic, dramatic, or prose narrative forms’ (Dixon, 1975a, pp. 128–29). Dixon says he now recognises the need to extend the scope of literary study to a much wider range that incorporates non-fictional texts. Personally I think Britton’s spectator/participant binary pair is dubious, at least in its application to literature, and my critique of it is on the record (Reid, 1992, pp. 197–201). However, the significant thing is that Dixon acknowledges, albeit belatedly, that the category of literature should go beyond the belletristic.

In the years since the appearance and reappearance of his book, we have certainly seen in our classrooms a much more inclusive view of kinds of texts worth studying. While this was not something that Dartmouth initiated, we shouldn’t underrate the importance of the fact that literature chosen for study now encompasses a considerably broader range than it did a few decades ago and, in doing so, draws much more fully on the work of numerous Australian authors. This is most clearly shown in the exemplary Reading Australia project (http://readingaustralia.com.au/), which has been funded by the Copyright Agency and developed in consultation with teachers to produce a rich variety of well-designed practical teaching resources at all learning levels. Matched to the national curriculum guidelines and readily available online, these resources support the study of a large number of Australian books, covering not only traditional literary genres such as poetry, the novel and drama but also memoirs, essays, biographies, short fiction, graphic texts, and histories. Reinforcing the assorted resources is the Reading Australia BookPros scheme, through which schools can arrange workshop visits by experienced authors to promote Australian literature in all its forms and provide expert insights into the writing process (https://www.asauthors.org/reading-australia-bookpros).

Compared with the situation in the 1960s or 1980s, the Reading Australia project and the associated Reading Australia BookPros scheme reflect a better understanding that ‘literature’ worth studying should cover a wide range of genres, that the processes of reading and writing can be symbiotic, and that the focus of study can include not just literary products but also their cultural production.

This widening of text selection is welcome to a large extent, but perhaps not entirely. I’ll mention just one development about which I have some reservations. There has been a huge growth in the publication and uptake of Young Adult stories, some of them powerfully written, and in many respects it may seem a cause for celebration that these often figure now in what is studied in secondary English courses. My reason for hesitating to give this an unqualified endorsement is just that it may tend to push aside encounters between youthful readers and adult books. Often in the world of most present-day teenagers there is too much that reinforces the preoccupations of their own here-and-now milieu. No doubt some stories written and marketed specifically for them, stories that usually mirror everyday experiences and topical tribulations in which the young are already immersed, may help to clarify what they feel, alleviate their worries, free their imaginations. But surely it’s at least equally important for a teenage reader to enter richly imagined worlds elsewhere through the doorway of well-crafted narrative fiction that is not set in their own time and place. I’m not thinking primarily of fantasy, which too often tends to be formulaic, derivative and escapist, but rather of serious historical fiction that is grounded in certain past social realities out of which our own world has emerged. I’ll return to this point shortly.

What else has changed, since the advent of the Growth model, in the way we view literary experience and literature teaching?

The processes of reading and writing are now commonly seen as symbiotic, and the ways of integrating them that I argued for in The Making of Literature (Reid, 1984) are generally espoused in classroom practice. However, I should note that, just as the influence of Dixon’s growth model has been curtailed (as Harris remarks) by ‘pressures of uniform tests and curricula’ (Harris, 2012, p. 3), so too the incorporation of creative writing into literary studies has tended to become compromised by externally imposed frameworks.
Instead of being part of a carefully planned process of learning activities that integrate reading, discussion, drafting, revising etc., creative writing is too often now (according to the ACARA national curriculum guidelines) something to be done in a hurry under the pressure of public examinations. This is not necessarily a disaster: I’ve found in conducting writing workshops recently with Year 12 English teachers and students that it’s still possible to extract considerable enjoyment and practical value from inventive, imaginative work with an eye to exam preparation. Nevertheless that kind of assessment framework is an irksome constraint.

Finally I want to return to a foreshadowed point: that what Dixon dismissed as a ‘cultural heritage’ model is not beyond redemption if literature teaching can bring to it a more politically aware understanding of culture and heritage. Having written about this at some length in a recent article (Reid, 2016) for the UK journal Changing English, I offer here the merest digest of my thoughts.

What John Dixon calls ‘culture as the pupil knows it’ may often be, as he argues, something to cherish and nurture in the classroom. On the other hand some features of contemporary life, such as an obsessive immersion in social media, can tend to confine adolescents narrowly within their own present attitudes, knowledge, interests and idioms. I believe that as a matter of principle we should challenge students, through some of their reading, to move beyond the small world of the here and now. The senior English curriculum should engage, and is beginning to engage, with uncomfortable and even traumatic historical realities. What I have in mind is quite different from the reverential attitude associated with a ‘Gallery’ approach to literary studies (Reid 1984) and with the inflexible legacy that the term ‘cultural heritage’ usually connotes. Instead, I envisage an insistence on remembering matters that our contemporary culture tends to overlook or repress: painful episodes and periods from the past that are difficult to confront, ‘haunting the periphery of our safe and protected world like death at the door’ (Chambers, 2004, p. 32).

Our ‘cultural heritage’ includes times of dramatic large-scale social and economic transformation, bringing hard-earned improvements to some people and great suffering to others, which ought to be actively remembered through literature. Having been drawn to such periods myself as a writer, I’ll illustrate briefly what I mean by cultural memory with reference to one of my own historical novels, The Mind’s Own Place (Reid, 2015).

What did the tremendous upheaval that we now call the ‘Industrial Revolution’ mean in human terms? Our senior students may be vaguely aware that its birthplace, Britain, underwent profound changes through innovative large-scale forms of manufacturing, mass production in textile mills and potteries and iron foundries and building construction, and so on. They may have an inkling that during the nineteenth century huge civil engineering projects revolutionised transport, architecture, communications, urban planning and much else. But how well do they understand that the price of economic progress was widespread social and individual misery – disease, disruption, desperation, deracination? Can they recognise, in fully imagined human detail, how one consequence of those profound changes was that many people displaced by Britain’s industrial turmoil came to Australian colonies as migrants (some willingly, some unwillingly) and then, experiencing and sometimes inflicting much hardship, began collectively to convert the initial sprinkling of marginal settlements into what would eventually cohere as a new nation?

In writing The Mind’s Own Place I wanted to bring some of this to life. I’ve braided together the stories of five mid-nineteenth-century migrants, each narrative strand being drawn in part from the experiences of real historical figures: convicts and free settlers, men and women. The early chapters locate these characters in separate regions of England, from which they are ejected as a direct or indirect consequence of industrial upheavals, eventually finding themselves in the nearly pre-industrial Swan River Colony of Western Australia, where, as their paths converge, some will thrive and others will be diminished or defeated.

The culture to which we belong is haunted by ghosts. They are part of our heritage, linking past with present. Through the reading of certain durable literary works written in earlier times, and of some historical fiction produced more recently, students can come to see the lingering consequences of imperialism and colonialism, for instance. I think of Kate Grenville’s The Secret River, David Malouf’s Remembering Babylon, Patrick White’s Voss, Peter Carey’s True History of the Kelly Gang, Anna Funder’s All That I Am, and many other examples. Seen in this light, literary experience and literature teaching can be more resourceful than the Growth model was ever able to acknowledge.
References
Doecke, B. (2016). History • Autobiography • Growth (Fifty Years since Dartmouth), English in Australia, this volume.
Gill, M. (2014). 'Introduction to 'The Crisis in English Studies.' English in Australia 49(2) 35.
Reid I. ((1982b) 2014). 'The Crisis in English Studies.' English in Australia no. 60, pp. 8–18; reprinted English in Australia 49(2), 36–42.
Ian Reid is the author of a dozen books — fiction, non-fiction and poetry. His writings on English education include *The Making of Literature* (AATE), and among his most recent publications are three historical novels, *The End of Longing*, *That Untravelled World*, and *The Mind’s Own Place*. Ian is an Adjunct Professor in English and Cultural Studies at the University of Western Australia. His website is at http://ianreid-author.com


English in Australia has moved to an online submission and review process, via Scholastica. The new author guidelines are on the AATE website. Please check guidelines before submitting to the Scholastica site. Authors should now submit manuscripts to https://english-in-australia.scholasticahq.com/.

The next issue of English in Australia, Vol. 52, No. 1, 2017, will be special issue dedicated to themes emerging from the work of two luminaries in the field of English Education: the late Professor Annette Patterson and the late Paul Brock. Deadline for contributions is 30 November, 2016.

For Annette Patterson papers could respond to: 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, historical investigation of early reading pedagogy, the figure of the teacher and literacy education.

For Paul Brock papers could respond to: 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.

Articles outside this theme are welcome at any time and will appear in subsequent open issues in 2017. Deadline for papers for Vol. 52, No. 2 is 30 April 2017. Please check the AATE website for further advice on publication dates, issues, themes and deadlines for copy.

Anita Jetnikoff