As the final stages of the development of a national curriculum for English approach, it is timely to look back over the last three years to consider how English in Australia has contributed to the debates about what might constitute English in this new national context, and the role that English might play in the education of Australia’s youth.

Michael Fullan, the eminent Canadian scholar of organisational change has argued that leading and responding to changes such as the move to a national curriculum requires opportunities for:

- multiple perspectives to be heard,
- implementers to work out their own meaning through interactions with others
- recognition of ambiguity, ambivalence, and uncertainty, and therefore the inevitability of conflict
- reflective practice
- discussions to develop over time
- valuing past and current achievements as well as aspirations
- understanding the context in which change is occurring

(Fullan, 2001; 2008)

These opportunities to lead and respond to the complexities of the change are evident in contributions to both of the previous editions of English in Australia around the development of the national curriculum (43:3; 44:3), and the current edition which continues to ask questions about the nature of English within a national curriculum framework, and the implications of the implementation of such a curriculum for teaching, learning and assessment (44:2).

At the end of 2008, the editorial team of the first themed edition of English in Australia (43: 3) around the national curriculum asked the contributors ‘to imagine a national curriculum for Australia … [to] articulate their imaginings in language accessible to a wide audience …’ in order ‘to open up a conversation about the National English Curriculum beyond a dialogue of like minded people talking to themselves’ (Doecke & Parr, 2008, p. 6). In this edition, national and international scholars and practitioners imagined a range of possibilities for English including: exploring different kinds of relationships between individuals, texts and society, enhancing creativity, redressing inequities for disadvantaged students, learning from overseas experiences of the national curriculum, particularly those of UK teachers, and calling for the voices of the profession to be heard. This edition went to print at approximately the time of the consultation period around two key documents – The shape of the national curriculum (NCB, 2008) and the National Curriculum: Framing paper (NCB, 2008) and highlights the efforts of the profession to provide visions for English at the early stages of the design process that were based on compelling accounts of curriculum development, implementation and English teaching and learning in Australia and overseas.

In 2009, the emphasis shifted to a more specific aspect of the curriculum design – the area of inclusivity paying particular consideration to ‘representing groups that might otherwise be vulnerable to exclusionary pressures in visible and positive ways’ (ACARA, 2009, p. 11–12).

The Editorial posed two questions ‘What does it mean to pay “considerable attention” to one or any of these groups, and once this has been done, what are the implications for teaching and learning in English?’ (Moni, 2009, p. 2). The contributors to the edition considered issues in English for indigenous students arguing for a more nuanced understanding of the complexities around academic failure, challenged notions of failures in the literacy development, achievement and engagement of boys and reported significant successes when school literacy practices were changed to meet the needs of boys in disadvantaged contexts.
more directly, and argued for the role of aesthetic and literary texts – poetry, fiction, drama, and visual images in providing students from low socio-economic backgrounds with opportunities to write themselves into the world. Again, the articles were a powerful mix of research and reflective practice providing strong support and evidence for visions for English that value the past and current achievements of teachers in addressing the complexities of students’ need and lives, as well as aspiring to do better – evidence, valuing and vision perhaps, that has been sadly lacking in much of the media commentary on the profession.

The current edition focuses on issues in the draft curriculum documents, and in Pope’s terms, ask us to re-vision, re-create, challenge and extend the draft curriculum as part of an ongoing process (Pope, 2008).

Catherine Beavis and Jane Mills provide different perspectives and visions for English in the 21st century that build on how our usage and relationships with digital texts have grown and changed with the evolution of new technologies that enable us to both see and participate in the world in new, exciting and different ways. Catherine Beavis examines the place of digital and multimodal texts and literacies within the draft paper for the Australian English curriculum, and the possibilities offered by a national curriculum, for exploring and imagining an English for the Digital Age. In a complementary article Jane Mills makes a strong case for including screen literacy within a broader conceptualisation of literacy, suggesting that moving-image literacy learning could be a powerful tool in building a multicultural society that does not perpetuate cultural difference and separateness.

The article by Eve Mayes continues the focus on new texts and new pedagogies, with an account of introducing hip-hop pedagogy into a Year 11 Standard English Area of Study in a comprehensive public high school in a low socio-economic area in NSW. In her report she argues that texts that draw on students’ popular cultures can be used in a manner that makes ‘explicit connections between students’ everyday knowledge and the demands of subject-matter learning’ (Lee, Spencer & Harpalani, 2003, p.7) and describes how strategies she used with Eminem’s song Stan in particular were found to improve students’ engagement, independent inquiry and the quality of their written responses.

Watson and Sawyer take different approaches to addressing some of the limitations in the most recent drafts of the English curriculum documents. Watson’s article draws on the history of thinking about language and grammar from the Greek writers of the fifth century BC to the present day to argue that the National English Curriculum fails to take heed of both the research into early language development, and of the extensive body of research on the limited relationship between developing effective English skills and developing explicit knowledge of a grammatical system. Wayne Sawyer frames his discussion about the current dis-integration of English through the three strands of the national curriculum through re-visiting of the work of James Moffett. He calls for a re-focusing on rhetoric and style in their broadest sense and for actively teaching towards ‘surprise’. In both of these articles there is a sense that we need to learn and build on the valuable lessons of the past and to understand the history of English in order to move forwards.

The final article provides somewhat of a wake-up call with its focus on an aspect of the national curriculum development process that has been relatively silent – this is the impact of the curriculum on assessment in the senior years of schooling, with a particular emphasis on Year 12. Doug McCurry provides an analysis of examination questions in different states. Arguing that while the national curriculum English courses in Year 12 must specify content in terms of a text list for pragmatic reasons, examination candidates should be given choice among texts and choice about how they respond to those texts. Themes should not be specified in senior English courses, and candidates should be able to choose to make more conceptual or more substantive responses to texts. His discussion not only asks us to think about what and how we teach English in the senior years, but also how we teach students to prepare for examinations. He concludes that the English teaching community should think more critically about the kinds of questions posed in English examinations, and warns us that national consistency or uniformity in examination questions (rather than aims/objectives/outcomes, content, skills or achievement standards) could have the greatest impact on what happens in senior English courses in the future.

And so, where to from here? Well, it is inevitable that debates and discussions will continue as the imple-
mendment of the national curriculum draws closer, and that there will be multiple perspectives regarding issues of implementation for English education as the profession continues to engage with the documents and their translation into classroom practice. In its role as a forum for debates and discussions among English educators, there will be a focused edition of *English in Australia* in 2011 which will provide opportunities to carry the discussion forward.

References


The 10th IFTE (*The International Federation for the Teaching of English*) Conference is to be held at the University of Auckland, New Zealand, from April 18–21, 2011.

Entitled ‘*Much Ado About English*’, the conference promises to be an exciting event. The conference themes are:

- Literacies and literature: Creative possibilities
- Diversity and voice: Inclusion and representation
- English teachers @ work: Tensions, pressures, opportunities
- New Technologies, New Practices

**Keynote speakers** include: Glenn Colquhoun, Barbara Comber, Peter Freebody, Pam Grossman, Hilary Janks, Carol D Lee, Stuart McNaughton, Debra Myhill.

We look forward to receiving your submission of a paper, workshop or seminar for this conference. Full details on the IFTE website www.IFTE.net and click on the conference page. Start planning now to be at IFTE in Auckland next April. You can be assured of a very warm welcome and a great conference.

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